



# Romancing the Thief

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THE MAGUIRE BROTHERS BOOK 1  
**CINDY IRELAND**

# ROMANCING THE THIEF

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**THE MAGUIRE BROTHERS**

**BOOK 1**

**CINDY IRELAND**

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## **Dedication**

To my mom and dad, who taught me to reach for my dreams.

To my husband, who supports all of my dreams.

To our sons, daughters, and grandchildren, who are the best  
part of my dreams.

Dedication

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# Chapter One

## Colin

Colin smiled as he placed the rotten eggs throughout his brother's Jeep. Since his brother didn't listen to logic, this might get him to quit taking Colin's car. The Jeep didn't have air conditioning, and with the midday sun, sweat trickled down Colin's back as he squashed a few more of them.

He suddenly felt a prickling sensation on the back of his neck as if he was being watched. Turning slowly towards the other parking spaces, he found himself gazing into beautiful, deep brown eyes. Colin blinked, taking in the oval-shaped face and smooth, creamy skin before registering they were also suspicious deep brown eyes.

"Hi! I bet you're wondering what I'm doing with these," he said, motioning with the egg carton in his hand.

As Colin waved the carton in the woman's direction, it was evident that the small eggs were spoiled by the horrid odor that drifted in the air.

"No, not at all. None of my business." She nodded at him and opened her car door.

"I'm paying my brother back for stealing my car. He keeps taking mine, and then I have to drive his, praying it doesn't break down again, so I'm hiding these under the seats as payback."

"And the smashed ones?"

"They're going into the vents. He'll find the others, but he will never get them out of there." He smiled at her, willing her to understand his reasoning.

"So, for revenge, you're filling his Jeep with nasty-smelling eggs. But aren't you still driving it?" She raised one eyebrow quizzically.

"Well, after I hotwire it again. And only for a couple of blocks. Trust me, it's worth the pain. My name's Colin, by the



way. I'm glad you understand."

"Oh, of course I do. Good luck with that." She ducked into her car, and he heard the door locks clicking into place.

*Brilliant, just brilliant,* he berated himself. She was probably afraid he would toss eggs into her window for kicks. Nothing like scaring off a beautiful woman. He shook his head. *Now, if I can reach the house before I smell as bad as the Jeep.*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Colin turned into his parents' estate, noting that his 1960 Corvette was there and making him happy with his decision to surprise his brother. Bounding up the broad stone steps, he heard a long, piercing scream. Shoving the front door open, heart racing, Colin ran in, staring at the woman who appeared in the hall.

"Aunt Bebe, what on earth are you doing?" He took a deep breath and tried to calm his heartbeat.

Bebe, her snowy white hair flying behind her, managed a beautiful twirl on her roller skates before coming to an abrupt stop beside him. "If I have to explain what I'm doing, then you are not nearly as bright as I thought you were." She pushed off with her right foot and glided across the open entryway.

"I know what you're doing, but *why* are you doing it?" Colin asked, rolling his eyes at his aunt's back as she skated away from him.

Bebe executed another perfect spin so that she was facing him. "Obviously, you need to work on your communication skills because I can assure you that is not what you asked."

Colin groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose before looking at her for a response.

"Now, to answer the why question, while I was at the ashram, I realized I have unsettled business from my childhood. So, to clear my energy fields, I'm dedicating the next several months to doing all the things I could never do as a child. Roller skating in the house seemed like the best place

to start. This magnificent hardwood floor is begging to be used.” She smiled at the look on her great-nephew’s face.

“We do use it, but only for walking,” Colin’s dad, Rory, said with a grin as he came to stand by Colin.

Bebe shot Rory her best lady-of-the-manor expression. “That’s only because you are so staid and proper. It’s difficult to believe we’re related.”

Rory laughed and hugged her. “While I understand that wasn’t meant as a compliment, I’m taking it as one. At least a few members of this family need to keep both feet on the ground.” Rory focused meaningfully on Bebe’s roller skates. “And I mean that literally.”

She put her fists on her hips and slowly spun around him and Colin. “Be careful. Remember, I know all the stories from when you were young and had no feet on the ground. I can entertain your sons for hours.”

Rory lifted his hands in the air in surrender. “You win.”

Bebe threw a smirk at him over her shoulder as she skated toward the living room.

“Wait, a minute.” Colin stopped her before she could complete her dramatic exit. “So, if you’re fine, why did you scream?”

She shook her head and gifted him with her I’m-explaining-this-to-a-five-year-old smile. “Because it was exciting, and I was expressing myself.”

“Of course. I should’ve known.” Colin lowered his eyes to his shoes and nodded.

“That’s what I thought, too, but I was trying to be polite and not point that out.” Bebe smiled as she rolled away.

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Colin scanned his family scattered about on the leather couches facing the large stone fireplace. His three younger brothers sat talking with their cousins, and across from them, his mother, Elizabeth, was chatting with his aunt and uncle. From where they sat, they could enjoy a fire or the view of the

patio and gardens through the French doors. The doors were open, letting the scent of roses and lavender travel into the room with the breeze.

Colin walked over to his mom. “You missed the floor show.”

His mother stood up on her toes to hug him and kiss his cheek. “Don’t worry about us. We’ve been catching it all week.” Her sea-green eyes lit up with laughter. “Though I didn’t think about how it might seem, walking in on the scream. Sorry.” She tried to disguise the laugh with a cough.

“You need to work on your *sorry*. It wasn’t even close to being convincing. I thought something was really wrong.”

“Relax, bro. You are not in charge of protecting all of us,” Dylan, Colin’s younger brother, joked.

“You say that now. But who always gets the calls to come rescue one of you?” Colin lifted one eyebrow and dared one of them to contradict him. “And I am relaxed and fun, except when I hear someone screaming.”

“Don’t act like you’re all innocent, son. It took us forever to restore the pool to normal after your bubble bath *experiment*,” Elizabeth reminded him, lifting her fingers to make air quotes.

“I only did that on a dare from Aunt Bebe, and I was still in high school. Now that I’m an older, wiser twenty-six-year-old, I spend most of my time working and saving this motley crew from themselves and the rest of the world, or at least Ohio.”

“You work too much,” Bebe said as she skated by. “What you should be doing is dating. How are you ever going to have children for me to play with if you don’t even date?” She sat on the arm of a chair and stretched out her short legs to gaze down at her new skates.

*Here we go again*, Colin thought to himself, sighing. “Aunt Bebe, I do date. I’m seeing Vicki, and you will meet her at the anniversary party. Besides, I’m working this much so I’ll be ready to take over the construction company when Dad decides to retire.”

His aunt waved a hand. “At the moment, I don’t have it in me to point out the flaw in your thinking. I’m starving. Let me just say that going out two or three times with someone is not dating with the intent of having a relationship. It may be intent for something, but we won’t talk about that right now, what with your parents in the room and all.”

His dad glanced at him sympathetically and cleared his throat. “So, we’ve got one week left until the big celebration,” He smiled at Elizabeth. “Only five more days, and we’ll have been married thirty years.”

Colin felt the strength of his parents’ love, the same as he had growing up. He took in the happiness on their faces before shifting his gaze to the floor, reminding himself he had everything he needed in life.

Elizabeth walked over to the side table where her lists lay. “Well, we still need to hire a cleaning crew and check with the caterer, the florist, and the band.”

“Let us take care of the cleaning company,” offered her sister-in-law, Marie. “Our firm hired a new one about two months ago, and they’ve been excellent. The same people handled the Winner’s annual event and Oberly’s reception.”

“That would be a huge help. Thanks. After that, we’re down to a few phone calls.”

“Okay. We’re all done. Let’s eat!” Bebe said as she skated out of the room.

Laughing, Rory turned to the rest of the group. “Who’s ready for dinner?”

“Does anybody smell sulfur, like bad eggs?” Marie wrinkled her nose in question.

Colin simply smiled.

## Chapter Two

### Rachel

Rachel couldn't believe the guy had actually placed rotten eggs in his brother's Jeep. *Why do I even care?* she wondered as she drove to the office.

A sneaky voice inside her head chimed in, *Because it's the first time in ages that you've encountered a man who's made you even consider breaking your no-dating rule.*

She mentally rolled her eyes. "Okay, let's clarify that it's a no-dating-rich-guys'-rule, and this guy doesn't seem rich, judging by his ripped jeans and T-shirt."

*And...* it persisted playfully.

Rachel defended her thoughts, "And? So, what if he was over six feet tall with huge muscles? It's just further confirmation that he's a regular working guy. Wealthy men aren't built like that. They're all smooth and slick. Nothing was slick about Bad Egg dude, in any sense of the word, especially his method of revenge. Rancid eggs? Who does that? Wealthy men slice people into little ribbons with their words. They'd never do anything where they might end up with dirty hands."

The sly voice again said, *That's the point, isn't it? He's not wealthy, yet he was handsome with his gorgeous blue eyes and thick mahogany hair. It's proof that your assumptions can be wrong. There are good-looking, regular men out there for you.*

Rachel felt like the voice was taunting her. "All right, I'll give you that he was attractive. But he was also clearly unhinged. That's where rule number two comes in: no dating crazy guys, no matter how good-looking they are. And now, rule number three: I need to stop having full-blown conversations in my own head, or I'll be the one labeled crazy."

She pulled into the parking space and gazed up at the "Murray's Maids" sign marking their office. It had been a little

over two years since she'd opened the housecleaning business with her twin sisters, and she still got a little thrill every time she saw it.

And this is what she should be concentrating on, how they could grow, not some rotten egg weirdo with fabulous blue eyes. Rachel chastised herself as she strode into the little reception area. She paused and took a deep breath of the office's fresh, citrus-scented air.

Rachel walked around the white counter and found her little sister, Casey, staring at the ceiling with her feet on the desk. She promptly went over and knocked them off. "That desk is not even paid for, and you're going to scuff it all up!"

"Well, it'll be paid for soon enough if the business keeps up this pace." Casey flipped her reddish-blond hair over her shoulder and smiled up at Rachel. "I finished reviewing this quarter's accounts, and we're making money. I think we should call Mom and Dad have a little celebratory get-together tonight at Dark Head Brewery."

Rachel sat on the chair across from Casey and frowned at her sister. "You can't just call everybody and expect them to meet for dinner at the last minute."

"Give me a break. Our family enjoys doing things on the spur of the moment—especially fun celebrations that involve food we don't have to cook. Not everyone has to have their entire life planned out in a spreadsheet."

Before Rachel responded, the desk phone rang, and she picked it up. "Murray's Maids. This is Rachel. May I help you?"

"This is Marie Maguire. You clean our law office."

"Yes, of course, Mrs. Maguire. Is there a problem?" Rachel crossed her fingers and tried to remain calm. They needed that contract to keep doing well.

"Oh, no! Everyone's very pleased with the job you've been doing. In fact, I'm calling about another job. My brother and sister-in-law are celebrating their 30th wedding anniversary on

Saturday. I hope it's not too short notice, but we're wondering if you could handle the cleaning beforehand on Friday?"

"I'm sure we can take care of that for you."

"That's what I hoped you would say. Thank you." Marie rattled off the address and phone number before hanging up.

Casey smirked. "I texted everyone while you were on the phone. We're all meeting at the Brewery at six p.m., and Nathan will have our table waiting for us on the patio."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

*This house is beautiful*, Rachel thought once again as she pulled into her driveway. It was an old Craftsman-style home with a broad front porch and magnificent hardwood floors. Casey had found the house and convinced Emily, her twin, that it was perfect for them, and then they had both ganged up on Rachel. It had three bedrooms, and by splitting the rent three ways, it was affordable. At twenty-four, Rachel was happy to have her own place. That was one of the things Scum Bob had chided her about when he'd broken it off—that she'd still lived at home while attending college. That she hadn't been able to afford an apartment, stating it was further proof that she was too far below his social standing for them to continue seeing each other. Of course, his initial outrage had been that she'd wanted to have a housekeeping business, something so ordinary, something his family would hire a "regular" person to do.

Well, she would rather be a regular, decent person than a snob. At least it had helped her realize she didn't want a relationship. She wanted to concentrate on making their business a huge success. She had planned to research marketing options for that goal this evening, but she had to shower and go out to a family meal, which was definitely not part of her plans for the evening. Rachel scowled as she remembered how neatly Casey had arranged the spontaneous gathering, not giving Rachel a chance to decline without seeming like a grump.

Rachel let herself into the foyer and could tell by the rich scent of coffee that Emily was already home. “Hi, Emily. I see you’ve been home long enough to make coffee and get ready. How close is our princess?”

“Casey’s been in the bathroom for over an hour, so she’ll be out soon. I am so happy! I knew we’d do well.”

When Rachel had started her own company after college, her twin sisters had joined in, both to support her and to make some extra money. Emily now had her first year of teaching under her belt. Since teachers made little money, she enjoyed the extra income. Casey had her business degree and was taking a year or two off before beginning an MBA program. In the meantime, starting her own business and being involved in every detail was perfect for hands-on learning. Unless her grandiose schemes and Rachel’s common sense butted up against each other. Like the time Casey had wanted to buy a hot-air balloon shaped like a giant vacuum cleaner to float over the city or to hire a plane to pull a banner streaming behind it with the slogan, “Your home was made to be cleaned by Murray’s Maids.”

After Rachel had suggested Casey should get her own pilot’s license and go fly herself, Casey had stomped off and never mentioned either idea again.

Rachel chose one of her favorite sundresses and blue strappy heels to bump her five-foot height up by a couple of inches. When Casey finally emerged, Rachel went in for a quick shower. After applying a bit of makeup and getting dressed, she spun in front of the full-length mirror and smiled at her curvy reflection. When she’d been with Scum Bob, he’d always made little remarks about her needing to be thin like her sisters. After they’d broken up, she’d not only worked on starting a business but also on becoming herself again and embracing her body’s natural curves. So now, she had her family, her business, and a full-skirted, butter-yellow sundress with tiny blue flowers that made her happy. Who needed a guy?

~ ~ ~ ~ ~



Rachel's dad, Jonathan, opened the door to the Dark Head Brewery and stepped into the cool, air-conditioned space. The pub was filled with the sounds of happy customers, and the yeasty aroma of excellent beer competed with the amazing scents wafting from the kitchen. Nathan, the oldest Murray sibling and Rachel's only brother, co-owned Dark Head Brewery with his best friend in downtown Dublin, Ohio.

Nathan greeted them at the door and reached over to hug his mom, Anna, before leading them to their table on the patio. "I wanted to tell you congratulations, and everything is on the house."

"You don't have to do that. We appreciate it, but we're celebrating our business making a solid profit, and we should pay for it," Rachel said.

"Not on my watch, little sister," Nathan said as he approached the table. Tall, with light brown hair, hazel-colored eyes, and a chiseled jawline, his appealing looks helped him as a pub owner, increasing their sales by bringing in single women attracted by both his looks and personality.

"Besides," Nathan said, "we have Natalie fixing all of your favorite dishes. Your appetizers will be out in ten. What would you like to drink?"

"Okay, but on one condition...that you join us," Rachel said.

"Deal," Nathan smiled and pulled another chair up to the table.

When the appetizers and drinks arrived, Emily was in the midst of a story about cleaning a house when the homeowner's cousin walked in and was certain Emily was robbing the place. "Well, by the time I convinced her I wasn't breaking and entering, that I was there to clean the house, the police arrived, and I had to tell my story all over again."

"You would think the 'Murray's Maids' decal on the van and the uniform would've been a clue." Nathan shook his head.

“Right. But no, this lady swore it was all a coverup if anyone caught me breaking into the house.”

“That’s an elaborate coverup. Didn’t she think it was weird that you also had a vacuum and the other supplies?” Anna asked.

“I said that, too, but she said that happens all the time on her TV shows. It didn’t matter what I said; she was catching a thief, and it would be on the news.”

“I can see the publicity now, ‘Murray’s Maids cleans your home while they clean you out!’ Exactly what we don’t need.” Rachel said as she spread hot artichoke spinach dip on a toasted crostino.

“Worried it would ruin your plans for world domination?” Nathan asked.

“Absolutely,” Rachel said. “I’m planning to rule the world, scrubbing one house at a time.”

“Aw, come on, Rach, one day, you’re going to get married and raise the family you always wanted,” Casey said between bites of her humongous bacon cheeseburger.

“No, seriously, that’s the old Rachel. Now, I’m going to build a mega cleaning company and spoil all of my nieces and nephews whenever you all decide to settle down.”

Casey started to reply, but Anna squeezed her arm. “Casey, put that cheeseburger in your mouth and chew.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Rachel stood in the morning sunshine with two of their part-time employees, Kaitlyn and Jada, and waited for someone to open the front door of the Maguire home. As she was about to ring again, the door swung open, and she was being given the once-over by a small, elderly woman with bright green streaks in her pretty white hair, holding a pair of scissors.

“Well, don’t just stand there. Come on in.” She motioned with the scissors. “Rachel, I’m Bebe. We met before when you

were cleaning Sean's law offices. I'm his aunt, Bridget O'Brien."

Rachel extended her hand. "It's nice to see you again, Mrs. O'Brien."

Bebe smiled and shook her hand. "Let me tell Elizabeth. I'll be right back."

Rachel watched in amazement as Bebe skated out of the room still holding the scissors, the wheels shining in the light that filtered through the windows.

A few minutes later, Bebe returned with a slender, amber-haired woman in tow. "I'm glad to meet you. I'm Elizabeth Maguire." Elizabeth extended her hand out to Rachel, who stood slightly in front of her two assistants.

"We're glad to be here, Mrs. Maguire. I'm Rachel, and this is Jada," she said, turning to the tall brunette wearing black slacks and a white polo, "and this is Kaitlyn," gesturing to the blonde, also attired in black slacks, with a white top. "Please show us the rooms you'd like to have cleaned."

"First, please call me Elizabeth, and it's the same as Marie mentioned on the phone—a thorough cleaning of the primary rooms on this floor. If you would start in the kitchen, that would be helpful. The caterer is coming this afternoon, and that way, it will be ready for him. Other than that, it doesn't matter in what order you clean the rooms. Aunt Bebe, would you please show them the way? I need to make some phone calls. Oh, and if you have questions, just ask me or Aunt Bebe." Elizabeth hurried off in the opposite direction.

"Okay, girls, follow me." Bebe turned and rolled to the back of the house.

Rachel glanced at her two assistants and, doing her best not to laugh, picked up her supplies and motioned for them to follow her.

"Why is she roller skating?" Kaitlyn whispered to Jada, the mop bucket banging Kaitlyn on the shins since she was concentrating more on Bebe than herself.

“Maybe she’s eccentric or something. She can afford to be with this kind of money.” Jada was paying attention to the paintings and sculptures they were passing. “My professors would love this place. It’s like an art and antiques explosion.”

Rachel turned and arched one eyebrow, shooting them her one-more-word-and-you’re-toast stare that always stopped her sisters in their tracks. “You two be quiet. She’s our client also, and I don’t care if she turns cartwheels all the way to the kitchen. You will show her respect.” Their embarrassed faces pleased Rachel, and she turned back before they saw her grin.

Bebe stopped and waited for the last two to close the distance. “Here’s the kitchen. I’ll be in the library if you have any questions.” She smiled and pointed her scissors toward the west side of the house.

“Thank you, Mrs. O’Brien,” Rachel said.

Bebe continued to smile as she skated into the library.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Rachel was washing windows when Bebe found her in the living room. Jada was dusting a side table, and Kaitlyn had moved into the bathroom. Bebe walked across the room so that she stood facing both of them. “You have gotten quite a lot done. There are only a few more rooms to go. Would you like to take a break and have something to drink?”

Rachel rubbed the last spot on her window and turned to Bebe. “I appreciate your offering, Mrs. O’Brien, but we bring our own drinks so we can continue with the cleaning. Jada, while you finish, I’m going to help Kaitlyn.” Rachel picked up her supplies and walked out the door.

Bebe smiled at Jada and followed Rachel into the hallway. “Miss Murray?”

Rachel looked at Bebe. “Please call me Rachel, Mrs. O’Brien.”

Bebe placed her hand on Rachel’s arm and smiled. “Only if you’ll call me Bebe. Whenever I hear Mrs. O’Brien, I still think of my mother-in-law, and if that happens too many times

in a day, my nerves act up.” At Rachel’s surprised expression, Bebe laughed and patted Rachel’s arm again. “It’s okay, dear. Would you come with me into the library for a moment?”

Rachel nodded, her hair bouncing in the ponytail she’d pulled it into for practicality, and walked with Bebe down the hall. Bebe slid open the two beautifully crafted pocket doors, before stepping into the room. After Rachel entered, the older woman closed the doors again. Rachel admired the room, breathing in the smell of books and the roses on the table. Even though it was stately, the room felt inviting and comfortable, a place to relax in front of the fire and put your feet up while you enjoyed your book.

Every room she’d been in seemed the same. *It was wonderful*, she thought, *to take what could have been coldly beautiful and make it warm and welcoming.*

Bebe threw her arms out, taking in the room with the gesture. “This is a very special room for me. My late husband and I spent most of our time here, reading and talking. It needs cleaning, of course, and I was hoping you, being the head of the company, would do it yourself. The other two can finish up the rest while you handle this room.”

*Perhaps I misjudged her*, thought Rachel. Maybe Jada was right; perhaps she was eccentric. “Of course, if that’s what you’d like. It’s no problem at all. I just need to tell Jada and Kaitlyn. Please excuse me for a minute.” Rachel let herself out and walked to the bathroom where Kaitlyn was cleaning.

Rachel walked in to find Jada and Kaitlyn lying on their backs, staring at the ceiling. “What are you doing? Has everyone gone nuts on me?”

Kaitlyn pointed up toward the ceiling. “Rachel, look at it. Isn’t it beautiful?”

Rachel looked up. “I’ll admit that is the prettiest ceiling I’ve ever seen. Now, would you two pay attention to me? Please.” There was a stunning scene of the Madonna surrounded by angels on the ceiling, painted in the softest pastels. It was beautiful. But she was not used to finding her help laid out on the floor. She also had never been asked to

clean a room herself simply because she ran the business, but she always wanted satisfied clients, so she would do it.

“Kaitlyn, stick your head in the toilet. Jada, you stick your head in the tub, and when you finish, go on to the next room. Mrs. O’Brien asked me to handle the library myself, so I’ll join you when I can. And I better not find the two of you on the floor again, got it?” Rachel gave them a scorching glare and walked out. Pleased with the reactions on their faces, she brushed off her crisp white blouse and returned to Bebe.

When Rachel walked in, Bebe peered at her over a stack of books she carried to the bookshelves.

“I hope you don’t mind if I flutter around while you work, dear. I promise I won’t be in your way.”

Rachel took out her furniture polish and cloth and began working her way through the room. Bebe kept taking books off the desk and putting them back on the shelves. Once she accomplished that task, she started pulling others off the shelves and creating new stacks on the desk, all the while asking Rachel questions about her favorite foods, movies, and hobbies. Rachel answered each question, asking Bebe the same questions in return.

Rachel dusted the last end table and faced Bebe, tucking her cloth into her apron. “I’m sorry, Mrs...., um, Bebe, but I’m ready to start on the carpet.”

“That’s fine, dear. I’ve just finished re-shelving the books, so I’m done in here and want to see what else my niece needs.” Bebe headed out the door while Rachel plugged in the vacuum cleaner.

After she finished, Rachel found Bebe talking with Jada and Kaitlyn in the hallway. “Are you two finished?” she asked.

Jada nodded. “We already packed the cleaning equipment into the SUV.”

“Perfect,” Rachel said. “Then, we’re ready to head back to the office.”

Bebe smiled at them. “Thank you so much for all your hard work. We appreciate it.”

“Absolutely, Mrs., um...Bebe.” Rachel corrected herself in response to Bebe’s arched eyebrow. “Let me know if you ever need anything else.” Rachel smiled and headed to the SUV.

Bebe stood on the front steps and waved as they drove off.

# Chapter Three

## Colin

The next afternoon, Colin and his mom ushered Colin's cousin Katie, Katie's boyfriend Tyler, and another young man into the house. "Katie, I'm so glad you all came to help us out with the party." His mom grinned and hugged Katie and Tyler.

"Me too," Colin said. "We need all the help we can get."

Tyler returned Elizabeth's hug before gesturing to the man standing beside him. "This is my cousin, Adam. He's the one I mentioned earlier that was coming out to visit. I wanted a chance to introduce him to everyone before the party tonight."

Colin nodded. "Welcome."

"Oh, I remember, from Indiana, right?" Elizabeth reached out to shake the young man's hand. His hazel eyes warmed, giving his stern features a more friendly demeanor.

"Yes, Mrs. Maguire, that's right, close to Indianapolis. I wanted a change of scenery and thought seeing the world through Tyler's viewpoint might be fun. You have a beautiful home." Adam smiled at Elizabeth.

"Thank you, and welcome to the nuthouse, Adam. I hope you're staying for the celebration."

"Yes, of course. After everything I've heard, I wouldn't miss it."

"It sounds like you all are taking a break from decorating," said Katie, referring to the loud voices coming from the rear of the house. "Let's go on and introduce you. The sooner you meet everyone, the more time you'll have to sort them out. Not a simple task with this crowd."

"Everyone's in the kitchen," Colin said, as he followed them down the hall.

They walked toward the kitchen, Katie and Tyler talking about the preparations and Adam looking at the very expensive artwork decorating the walls.



“Hi,” Dylan said as they walked into the room. “Have you come to help us with this production?”

Tyler smiled, his grey eyes lighting up. “It doesn’t appear you need any help since you’re all sitting around the table drinking iced tea. Besides, I wanted to introduce my cousin to everyone before the crowd descends.”

With lots of handshaking, Tyler introduced Adam to the younger generation of the Maguire family.

Colin gestured toward chairs, inviting Tyler, Katie, and Adam to join them. Tyler and Katie went around the side of the table to the empty seats, but Adam turned to Colin. “Can I use the bathroom?” he asked.

“Certainly. Go down that hallway, and it’s the third door on your left,” Colin watched him leave the kitchen. Something was off about Tyler’s cousin. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but something wasn’t quite right. He’d definitely have to talk to Tyler.

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Bebe walked down the stairs, one step at a time, gazing out the windows. She reached the main floor and turned towards the library. As she came into the room, she saw Adam putting a stack of books back on a shelf.

Adam turned toward her, charming smile in place. “Oh, hello. I’m...” That was as far as he got.

Bebe grabbed the couch pillows and began swinging. “Who are you? What do you think you’re doing? You thief! How dare you!”

Adam tried to dodge the pillows, but she connected more often than not.

Bebe hit the man with such force that feathers flew everywhere. She dropped the now-empty pillows and got another one from the chair. The blows were louder with a full pillow, a solid whack. Once the feathers started flying, the impact lessened with each blow.

Now that she was down to half a pillow and losing more feathers with each smack, Bebe yelled, "Help! Fire! Help!"

Adam kept backing up, warding off as many blows as he could. Every time he tried to talk, he got a mouthful of feathers.

Colin was the first to hear the screaming as he left the kitchen. He ran back to the kitchen doorway. "Aunt Bebe's screaming fire! Hurry!" Colin ran down the hall and threw open the library doors. "Where's the fire?" He paused at the sight of his great aunt pounding on Adam while feathers danced around the room. There was a crush of Maguires as everyone had to stop suddenly behind Colin, who stood staring at the scene in front of him.

"Thank goodness you're here! I caught this hoodlum ransacking the library!" Bebe stood poised for another hit in case the hoodlum should try to escape.

Adam looked at the group still in the doorway and shrugged his shoulders with an expression of incredibility on his face. "I only wanted the bathroom."

Elizabeth sighed and glanced heavenward. "Aunt Bebe, this is Tyler's cousin, Adam. He is not a hoodlum. He is a guest!"

Bebe turned and regarded Elizabeth. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely positive."

"Oh, well, in that case..." Bebe turned back to Adam and smiled. "I am sorry about this. Naturally, when I walked in and discovered a complete stranger here, I had to act. If someone had bothered to introduce you to me, this certainly would not have happened, I'm sure." Bebe gave Elizabeth a reproachful glare.

Adam, shaking feathers out of his hair, tried to explain. "I'm sorry, too. I walked in here by mistake, but instead of leaving, I started looking through your book selection. You have an impressive library."

"Thank you," answered Bebe and Elizabeth together.

Everyone was in the room, staring at the mess of feathers and dust coating every surface.

“Aunt Bebe, why were you yelling fire when there wasn’t one?” asked Colin.

“Because they have proven through meticulous research that people respond to a call of ‘fire’ quicker than any other danger.”

“And if we had called the fire department before discovering it was a false alarm?”

“Then you would’ve had a lot of explaining to do.” Bebe smiled. “I’ve always wanted to ride on one of those trucks. Besides, it would’ve added some excitement and hunky fireman to the mix.”

“Aunt Bebe,” Elizabeth said, “don’t you think having two hundred people here in a few hours is enough excitement? And now, on top of everything else, the room is covered in white dust and feathers. How are we going to get it cleaned before the party starts?”

“Don’t you worry about that, dear. I’ll take care of everything. Adam, turn around and let me get those feathers out of the back of your hair. Elizabeth, would you help me here, please? As soon as Adam’s okay, I’ll change clothes and take care of this room.”

## Chapter Four

### Rachel

Rachel pulled into the Maguire's drive and parked between a new Mercedes and an older Jeep with its windows down. She walked to the front door, wrinkling her nose at a strange aroma as she rang the doorbell.

A man opened the door and stared at her but didn't say anything or even move to let her into the house.

"Hello, I'm Rachel Murray from Murray's Maids. Mrs. O'Brien called for an emergency cleanup. Something about a pillow fight." Rachel paused as the man continued to stare at her. Rachel cleared her throat, but when that got no response from the hunk at the door, she asked, "May I please come in?"

He blinked. "Huh? What? I mean, yes, of course. Please come in." He stepped back to let her inside. "I'm sorry I was staring at you. But I feel like I know you from somewhere."

Rachel focused on him. "You do look kind of familiar now that you mention it."

He studied her, taking in the long silky, brown hair and big brown eyes with a fantastic, if hesitant, smile. "I never forget a beautiful woman, so I know it will come to me."

Rachel rolled her eyes. "Do lines like that really work for you?"

He smiled. "Yep, usually. But apparently, not today."

Rachel smiled back. "You...oh, there it is again. Do you smell that?"

"What?"

"That nasty odor. I noticed it as soon as I got out of my SUV."

He closed the front door, stopping the breeze that carried the scent of rotten eggs. "Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine."

“Why are you quoting Bogart from *Casablanca*?”

“It’s the rotten eggs. They smell like sulfur.”

Rachel’s eyes widened. “You’re the guy from the parking lot.”

“Guilty, as charged. I’m Colin, by the way, Mrs. O’Brien’s nephew.

“I’ve got to ask, what did your brother think about the eggs in his Jeep?”

“For some reason, he didn’t see the humor in it.” He shrugged and grinned. “But he hasn’t taken my car since. Here, let me show you to the scene of the crime.” Colin picked up the vacuum at Rachel’s side and turned toward the library.

Rachel, carrying the rest of her supplies, followed him down the hall, appreciating the view and wondering why all the cute guys were crazy.

“I’m warning you; this is a gigantic mess. There are feathers and dust everywhere. It’s the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen.” Colin opened the pocket doors with his free hand, and Rachel stepped in, then stopped abruptly as she took in the scene. Every surface was covered. She could actually see footprints where people had walked, disturbing the white, snow-like coating.

“Oh, no. What happened?” she asked, forgetting all the politeness she would have normally used with a client. “I’m sorry. I hadn’t expected anything this...”

“Horrible? Horrendous?” Colin finished for her. His smile broadened, and Rachel grinned in response.

“Rachel, I’m so thankful you’re here!” gushed Bebe as she came into the room. “Look at what a mess I made. I didn’t mean to. I thought that young man was a burglar, and I picked up the closest thing to me and started smacking him with it. And the next thing I knew, there were feathers everywhere. I’m so sorry. I appreciate you coming so quickly.” Bebe took a deep breath and smiled adoringly at Rachel.

“Hi, Mrs. O’Brien. It’s nice to see you again.”

Colin glanced from Rachel to Bebe. “Wait, how do you two know each other?”

“Rachel cleans your uncle’s law office. We met several months ago. And she cleaned this house yesterday. I knew I could count on her to take care of this disaster.” Bebe smiled at Rachel again.

“Thank you for the compliment. But I’d better start if I’m going to have it done before your guests arrive.”

Colin glanced at his watch and back at Rachel. “You have under four hours. Is that going to be enough time?”

“I’m sure it is. I’ll let you know when I’m done,” she said, smiling widely and looking into his dark blue eyes.

“Good, dear. And please make sure you leave enough time to go home and change. I want you to attend, especially since you’re helping me out of a mess,” Bebe added.

Rachel broke eye contact with Colin and took a deep breath. “Mrs. O’Brien, you don’t need to invite me. I appreciate the thought, but I really can’t attend.”

“Rachel, please call me Bebe. You’d have such a wonderful time, and there will be a lot of handsome young men. That is unless you already have a boyfriend?”

“Um, no. No, I don’t.” Rachel felt the blush on her face.

“Then you absolutely must come. Who knows? You might meet your future husband.” Bebe winked at her and grinned widely.

“Aunt Bebe, stop trying to fix her up with some guy. Come on, we should leave so she can get started.” Colin gave Rachel a dazzling smile before leading his aunt out of the room.

Rachel watched them walk out, then scanned the room, shaking her head in amazement. She couldn’t believe one little old lady had done all this. She walked to the feather-covered draperies and began vacuuming. But her mind kept thinking about Colin and wishing he wasn’t so charming. It was so much easier to ignore a handsome guy if they had the personality of a trout. But no, he had to be all sweet and funny.

*What was she thinking?* Rachel smacked herself on the forehead while continuing to suck up feathers with the vacuum. He was a Maguire, which meant he was as wealthy as he was crazy. So, all of her rules were in effect. She understood how rich men operated. Scum Bob had taught her all she ever had to know about that world. They'd lie, telling you they loved you and how they'd never met anyone like you, just to get in your pants. You were likable enough for some little fling, but sooner or later they'd decide you weren't good enough for more because you refused to be a fling, because you didn't have as much money as they did, and didn't run in the same circles as the rest of their friends.

Dating rule #1—no dating rich guys—was definitely in effect. Plus, rule #2—no dating crazy guys—even if they were sweet and funny. But she needed to remember the most important rule of them all: she was not going out with anyone, she was not falling in love, and she did not want a relationship. She was concentrating on this company. Which she supposed meant she should stop thinking about those gorgeous blue eyes and focus instead on feathers.

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A few hours later, Bebe walked into the library already dressed for the party. “Rachel, you’ve made excellent progress in here. It looks so much better. It even smells better, less like a dust factory and more like lemons.”

“Thank you. It’s the furniture polish. And I’m almost done.”

“Could you help me with something?” Bebe asked.

“Of course. What do you need?”

“Come over here, dear.”

Rachel walked over to a bookcase behind and to the side of the desk where Bebe was taking down books, revealing a safe set back into the wall.

“I want to wear my sapphire necklace, but I’ve left my glasses upstairs. Could you dial the combination, as I say the

numbers?”

“I’m not sure about this, Mrs., um, Bebe,” Rachel corrected in response to Bebe’s arched eyebrow. “Perhaps I can find another family member to help you.”

“No, no. They’re all so busy with the preparations now. I hate to bother them. There’s no reason you can’t open it. It will only take a moment.” At which point, Bebe shot Rachel a pleading look that gave a layer of fragility to her.

Rachel sighed inwardly, remembering the company rules about not putting oneself in compromising positions. Outwardly, she smiled and walked toward the safe. “Okay, Bebe, what’s the first number?”

“25 right, yes, that’s it. Now, 10 left and then 32 right. Now try the handle.”

Rachel turned the cool metal handle, and the door swung open.

“Thank you, Dear. I do hate to bother the children when they’re so busy. Let me show you my jewelry.” Bebe took out an exquisite sapphire and diamond necklace with matching earrings and a bracelet. “This is what I’m wearing tonight. Isn’t it beautiful?” Sparks of colors shot from three delicate strands of white gold, dripping with diamonds that circled each brilliant sapphire. The bracelet and earrings mimicked the necklace with its strands of sapphires encased in diamonds,

“Yes, it is.” *It must also be worth a fortune with all those stones,* Rachel thought to herself.

“I keep all of my favorites in here. I have several unique pieces, each worth at least \$50,000. That’s how I invested my money after my husband, Patrick, died. He was always so stuffy, investing in stocks, mutual funds, bonds, that sort of thing. What fun can you have with a bunch of papers, I always asked, but he never budged an inch. So, when the money was all mine, I turned most of it into necklaces, earrings, and such. I kept some of his papers, shares of this and that, in his honor, so to speak. But they’re in the safe deposit box at the bank. Gives me more room for the fun stuff.” With that, Bebe shut



the safe door and spun the lock. “My, it is getting late. I need to run. Would you be a dear and put those books back in the bookshelf for me?” she asked as she walked toward the door, carrying her gems out with her.

“Of course, Bebe.” Rachel began re-shelving the books.

“Thank you, dear,” Bebe called as she skipped down the hall.

Smiling, Rachel finished stacking them and resumed her dusting.

# Chapter Five

## Colin

Colin's mom smiled as she watched the band set up on the stage. "Everything's coming together. Marie, would you please go back to the kitchen and see how things are progressing? Colin, you'd better check on Aunt Bebe and make sure she's staying out of trouble. We do not have enough time to clean up any more disasters."

"Yeah, sure, give Aunt Marie the simple assignment and send your own son off to deal with the family fruitcake!"

"Colin! Your Aunt Bebe is a caring, kind, and intelligent woman who loves her family more than anything in this world. Just because she's a tad eccentric does not mean she's a fruitcake—a little fruity maybe, but she's far from an entire cake!" his mother said, laughing.

"Okay, Mom." Colin hugged her and kissed her on the forehead. "I'll remember that fine line when you are Aunt Bebe's age and attacking guests with feather pillows."

After fifteen minutes of searching and asking everyone if they'd seen Bebe, Colin was beginning to worry. *Maybe he would buy her a GPS tracker for Christmas, he thought. At least she'd be easier to find.*

Colin finally found her on the front steps, waving goodbye to Rachel. Rachel smiled and waved in return as she pulled her SUV through the circular drive. When Colin caught her eye, an almost imperceptible frown passed over her face but disappeared quickly.

"Isn't she the nicest person you've ever met?"

"I guess." Colin wondered why Rachel would frown at him. Then he wondered why he was wondering. It wasn't as if he cared what she thought of him. He barely knew her. He squashed the quick flash of desire that told him exactly why. He had more important things to worry about, like making sure Aunt Bebe wasn't wearing roller skates under her gown.

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The air was warm and sweet with the scent of the flowers that seemed to be everywhere, turning the lawn into an oasis. Tiny white lights twinkled in the old maple and oak trees surrounding the festivities, and the band played softly in the background.

The guests finished their meals of steak and shrimp with wild rice and sautéed vegetables, and the dishes were cleared.

Rory stood and faced his wife. “Thirty years ago, we said our vows, and I thought I couldn’t love you more than I did that day. I thought you couldn’t look more beautiful than you did at that moment. I was wrong. I love you more today than I ever dreamed possible. A love that fills my soul and my heart and makes me happy just by thinking of you. You are infinitely more beautiful today. You grew more beautiful with each child that you carried, each difficulty we worked through, and each time you quietly held my hand when I was worried. I look at you and I see my entire world in your eyes. I’m so grateful you said yes, all those years ago. To another thirty years.” Rory raised his champagne flute high in the air.

Everyone drank to the toast as Elizabeth rose, with tears shining on her cheeks. “I’m so grateful you asked me all those years ago. It’s been an amazing life. I wouldn’t want to change a thing.”

Rory drew Elizabeth into his arms and the band began playing as they walked onto the oak floor to lead the first dance.

Colin turned to his date, Vicki, and smiled, “Well, what do you think of our party?”

Her blue eyes lit up as she scanned the crowd, “It’s wonderful! The mayor and his wife are here, the district attorney, and our district representative with her husband. Oh, look! There’s Daron Gould, the CEO of Ohio Industries.” Vicki gave a brief wave, catching Daron’s eye, and he headed in their direction. Without turning back to Colin, Vicki asked, “Don’t you think we should mingle with our guests?”

“Actually, I was thinking it was time for us to dance.” But she wasn’t listening and never heard his reply.

Vicki rose, the lights catching the sequins on the teal blue dress that fit her so tightly Colin wondered how she could breathe. She neatly cut Daron off so that she was speaking alone with him. Colin saw a look of surprise and distress pass over Daron’s features.

Colin grinned to himself, “Our guests?”

Katie and Tyler came up beside Colin and sat down.

Katie smiled, “You sure can pick them cuz’.”

“We saw her maneuver that one from across the dance floor,” Tyler added. “Katie thought we should come to see if your heart was breaking.”

“After three dates, hardly.”

“Colin’s known far and wide for his ability to choose the ones least likely to be good for him.” Katie hugged him and kissed his cheek to soften her words. “But don’t worry. When you reach old age with no wife and children to care for you, Tyler and I will come and take you out for a walk once a week. Won’t we, Tyler?”

“Absolutely. Anything to help a lonely, old bachelor.” Tyler grinned. “Katie, do you want to dance again? Then we can look for Adam. I haven’t seen him since dinner.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Colin noticed Katie was staring at Tyler like his mom looked at his dad. *Well, at least Katie’s found her happily ever after; he thought to himself. And she’s right about my knack for finding the wrong someone.* He used to want what his mom and dad had, but he knew better now. As soon as a woman found out his name, her eyes lit up with dollar signs. And if he’d had any doubt about Vicki, she’d shown her true self. *This could be a tad more difficult than usual,* Colin admitted to himself. *She seems more tenacious, more like an octopus,* he thought as the picture sprung into his mind.

Maybe he shouldn't have invited her. That it was a family affair seemed to have elevated this from a normal third date to a more significant status. Colin winced as this thought passed through his mind. Maybe he could find someone else to take her home. That would send an obvious message. *Something to consider*, he thought. His mind wandered to Rachel and the instant attraction he'd felt for her. Colin shook his head; there he went again. The more attracted he was, the worse the woman turned out to be. What did it matter at this point, anyway? It was much more important for him to focus on his career.

Colin turned as Bebe approached his table.

"What's this world coming to when the old decrepit aunt has to come over to ask her nephew to dance?"

"Old? Decrepit? Really? When I find that aunt, I'll let you know. By the way, you look beautiful, Aunt Bebe."

"Thank you, dear, but do you want to dance or not?" Bebe put her hand on her hip and glared at him. "I haven't got all night."

"Of course, I do. But I'm wondering if I should connect with Vicki first." Colin scanned the area and spotted her attempting to arrive at the bar simultaneously with the mayor.

"I wouldn't worry about her. I'm sure the mayor is used to dealing with barracudas," Aunt Bebe said, following Colin's gaze.

"I wouldn't call her a barracuda. She's not that bad. Is she?" Colin watched as Vicki stepped in front of his cousin in order to stand beside the mayor. He saw her flip her long blonde hair, laughing and smiling flirtatiously. On second thought, he wasn't sure that was a fair comparison to barracudas. As he pondered this, he led Aunt Bebe onto the dance floor.

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A little after one a.m., all the guests were gone, and the caterers and band had packed up and left. Even the bar was

unmanned. The family was sitting around a couple of tables they had pulled together, enjoying one last glass of champagne, not quite ready to give up the fairytale scene that had taken so long to create.

“Colin, that was some smooth operating you did, getting Rick to drop Vicki off on his way home.” Dylan nodded to him.

“Thanks. I couldn’t take it anymore. Hopefully, this gives her the right impression—that we are done.” Colin crossed his fingers in his head.

Dylan snickered. “Yeah, good luck with that bro.”

Rory stood up and stretched. “This was amazing, but I’m calling it a night.”

Elizabeth got up. “Everyone grab your glasses and put them on the kitchen counter, as you go in. It’ll save a lot of time in the morning.”

Rory hugged her and smiled. “Thank you all for your work getting this celebration together. I appreciate it.”

Colin smiled at his parents hugging as he and Dylan trailed behind them into the kitchen. “I think whoever gets up first tomorrow is in charge of coffee,” Colin said, just as they heard the first scream.

They all ran toward the sound, growing more panicked as they neared the source. They burst into the library, with the entire household on their heels, for the second time that day.

Aunt Bebe stood in the middle of the room, screaming. Rory reached her first and took hold of her arms. She looked at him as if through a fog and collapsed into his arms.

“Help me get her onto the sofa.”

Dylan and Colin came up on each side of her and between the three of them maneuvered her onto the couch. Elizabeth poured a brandy from the small bar by the desk and brought it over to them.

“Look!” Katie pointed to the wall where the safe was open and empty.

A wave of incredibility went through the room. For a moment, no one moved. Then Sean went to the phone and dialed the police, while Colin went to the safe. Their movement broke the spell of disbelief, and reality started to sink in.

“Aunt Bebe, are you okay?” When Bebe did not respond, Elizabeth looked at Marie, “I think we need a cold cloth.”

“I’ll grab one,” Marie said as she hurried out the door.

Sean hung up the phone and turned to face the room. “The police are on their way. They asked for all of us to stay until they arrive.”

Rory nodded toward Sean. “I think we need to find out what else is missing. Everyone spread out and take a room. I doubt the person would’ve had much chance to get to some rooms because of the guests wandering in and out all evening. So, it shouldn’t take too long. Colin and Katie, would you stay here with Aunt Bebe and call us when the police arrive?”

They each nodded their assent.

“Let’s do it. And to make it easier, after you’ve gone through a room, leave the lights on. That way we can spot what rooms we’ve cleared and which still need to be checked,” added Sean.

Colin stared at the safe, his hands clenched at his sides. *I can’t believe someone did this.*

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Katie knelt beside Aunt Bebe, who was beginning to make small movements. “Colin, I think she’s starting to wake up.”

Colin walked over to stand beside Katie.

“Aunt Bebe, it’s Katie. It’s okay. Everything is going to be fine.” She adjusted the cloth on Bebe’s forehead and softly patted her hand, urging her back to full consciousness.

Bebe’s eyes fluttered open, and Katie’s face relaxed into its normal soft smile.

“Aunt Bebe, honey, it’s Katie. You need to wake up now.

Bebe blinked several times, and finally, Colin saw Bebe focus on Katie’s face and recognition dawn.

“Why of course you’re Katie. Who else do you think you might be?” Bebe said, staring at her great-niece in concern.

Katie smiled and hugged her. “You gave us quite the scare. No, don’t sit up yet. Lie there for a few more minutes.”

Bebe smiled and relaxed back into the cushions. “I think I should have a brandy for medicinal purposes. Don’t you?”

“Of course.” Colin picked up the brandy from the side table and brought it to Bebe’s lips.

Bebe snatched it from his hand and took a healthy drink, while glaring at Colin over the rim. “I’m not an invalid, you know.”

“I was only trying to help.”

“If you want to help, pour yourself a large brandy and sip it. You look like death warmed over. I think you need it more than I do.”

“I’m fine, but thanks for the concern...I think?” Colin turned as family members began trailing into the room.

Each person asked Bebe how she was doing as they entered. Bebe answered the first four, stating she was feeling much better.

Elizabeth bent and kissed Bebe’s cheek. “Are you okay, Aunt Bebe?”

“I discovered a robbery, not a body. Stop asking me if I’m okay.” Bebe glared at everyone, daring them to contradict her.

Rory raised one eyebrow in Bebe’s direction. “I promise not to show I care about how you’re doing at all.”

“Thank goodness! Finally, someone with some sense. Though I wouldn’t mind if someone wanted to freshen my brandy.” Bebe held her glass up in invitation.



Rory scanned the room. “Did anyone find anything else missing? I checked our suite, and it seemed fine.”

Everyone shook their heads “no,” looking quizzically at each other.

Bebe kept her glass in the air and cleared her throat.

“Sean, did you notice anything in the living room?” Rory asked, ignoring Bebe’s gesturing.

“No, it looks normal.” Sean turned his head more towards Rory to hide his smile, as no one was responding to Bebe’s signaling.

“Okay. I guess I have to get it myself.” She swung her legs off the couch and sat up, looking around the room with narrowed eyes. “I can’t believe no one is even offering to refresh my brandy. I might still be a little wobbly on my feet.”

“I would help you, Aunt Bebe,” Rory said, “but since it wasn’t a body, I wasn’t sure...”

Rory stopped speaking as Dylan entered the room with four police officers following behind him.

“Mr. Maguire?” The first man glanced around the room.

“Yes, I’m Rory Maguire.” Rory rose and approached the police officer.

“Mr. Maguire, I’m Detective Harding. This is my partner, Detective Garcia, and officers Epstein and Rodgers.”

Rory nodded at them.

Colin sized up Detective Harding. He was a little over six foot, with broad shoulders and a muscular physique. His face was pleasant, with piercing steel-gray eyes that radiated intelligence and a bumpy nose that had obviously been broken at some point.

Rory turned to his family and introduced Elizabeth, Aunt Bebe, Sean, and Marie.

“I will not introduce you to all of us. There are too many to remember, but we are all family.” Rory spread out his arms,

encompassing everyone in the room, including the cook and housekeeper, who had walked in behind the officers.

“Can you tell us what happened?” Detective Garcia spoke for the first time. She was slightly shorter than her partner and appeared quite fit in her navy suit. Her long black hair was pulled back into a sleek tail.

Colin took in Garcia’s discerning yet friendly brown eyes. His mind automatically recalling Rachel’s beautiful brown eyes and friendly smile when she’d been talking with Aunt Bebe. *Why am I even thinking about her?* he wondered. *She thinks I’m nuts, and really, who can blame her for that?* Although, now that he wouldn’t be seeing Vicki anymore, maybe he should call her and try to convince her otherwise... Colin jerked his attention back to the present as Bebe addressed the detectives.

Aunt Bebe eyed the detectives. “I think I should begin since I was the first one at the scene of the crime.”

Both detectives shifted toward her, and Garcia took out a small notebook.

“The kids’ anniversary party was over, so I decided to get ready for bed. I came in here to put my jewelry away. I keep it in the wall safe behind those books.” She pointed towards the wall where the door hung open, and books were scattered on the floor. “I saw the mess and ran to the door.”

“So, the safe door was closed. Was it locked?” Detective Harding interrupted.

“No, I pulled on the handle, and it swung right open. When I realized everything was gone, I started screaming.” Bebe gazed at the safe and blinked rapidly, keeping back the tears.

Colin, casting a worried glance in her direction, stepped forward and resumed the story, not wanting her to be upset any further. “The rest of the family was in various parts of the house. We all came running when we heard the screams. We had just come into the library when Aunt Bebe fainted. Of course, once we understood what had happened, Uncle Sean called you, and we checked the rest of the house.”

“And what did you find?” Detective Garcia glanced up from her notebook.

“We haven’t gotten to talk much about it yet. Everyone had just returned to the library right before you arrived. But it seems as if this is it.” Colin waved his hand, taking in the mess on one side of the room.

“Did anyone find anything else?” Garcia asked, addressing the entire group. Her brows lifted in question.

Everyone shook their heads no.

“Were all the rooms checked?” Harding turned to Rory.

“Most of them, but I’m not entirely sure. We did it rather quickly,” he said.

“Okay. Here’s what we’ll do,” Harding said. “You, Mrs. Maguire, and the two officers begin upstairs and work your way through the rooms, looking for any missing items or even things out of place. We’ll need a detailed list of the safe’s contents and a complete guest list for this evening’s party: names of the caterers, etc. I must also ask that no one touches or disturbs anything in this room. Garcia and I will be here for a bit. Is there another room where everyone can wait?”

“Yes, of course,” Elizabeth rose. “Why don’t we all move into the living room and perhaps brew some fresh coffee...?”

“We can make the coffee and put together some snacks as well. But first, Rosalee and I want to tell the detectives,” Hazel peered across to Elizabeth, who nodded for Hazel to go on, “that we checked the dining room, kitchen, pantry, and our quarters, and there isn’t so much as a teaspoon missing.”

“Thanks, Hazel.” Elizabeth nodded to them and started down the hall.

Everyone followed her out, except Harding and Garcia, who now stood alone in the room.

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With Rosalee’s help, Hazel brought the coffee to the living room and began serving. She situated two silver trays laden

with finger foods left over from the party in the middle of the massive coffee table.

Colin watched Bebe, who was loading her plate with bite-size goodies.

“What can I say? All that screaming made me hungry,” she said in response to Colin’s eyeing her with raised brows.

Colin let out a sigh of relief that she had recovered so quickly from the shock and helped himself to the coffee, appreciating the strong, freshly brewed aroma.

“It had to be someone who came in for the party,” Katie said, interrupting Colin’s thoughts. Her blue eyes darting back and forth between Bebe and Marie as she popped a chilled shrimp in her mouth.

“One of the hired help would be my guess,” offered Hazel. Having made sure that everyone was served, she settled into one of the overstuffed chairs with her coffee and a full plate, putting her feet up on the ottoman.

“Unfortunately, you’re probably right, Hazel. Obviously, it was not any of our friends. That doesn’t leave many options.” Marie sipped her coffee, leaning her head on her husband’s shoulder. “It’s such an awful thing to have happened. What a way to end their anniversary.”

Sean put his arm around her and drew her nearer, his eyes grim, his mouth frowning. “Did any of you spot anything out of the ordinary tonight? Someone acting peculiarly, a server spending too much time in the house, or one of the chefs out of the kitchen for a significant length of time?”

There was silence as they thought back through the night.

Marie answered first, the combination of exhaustion and sadness plain in the deepening shadows around her eyes. “I doubt any of us did. We were all so busy, between trying to make sure everything ran smoothly and trying to enjoy ourselves, too. My attention always seemed scattered in a hundred different directions.”

“I think she’s right, Uncle Sean,” Colin said. “There were so many people and so much going on, it would’ve been

impossible to notice one person missing for such a short time.”

“True enough. I suppose that’s what the thief was counting on.”

“You can bet on it, Mr. Maguire,” responded Garcia as both detectives entered the room.

“Help yourselves to the coffee and snacks,” Hazel said from her comfortable position in the chair.

Marie pointed towards the table. “Yes, please do. Make yourselves at home.”

Rory and Elizabeth entered the room with the other two police officers behind them. “Well, we’ve gone through every room, and nothing else is missing. It doesn’t even look like they touched any other room,” Rory reported, looking expectantly at the detectives.

Both officers nodded in agreement. Elizabeth walked further into the room, her worried expression fading into a smile when she saw the coffee and snacks. “Why don’t we all sit down and have some coffee, and you can tell us what happens next.”

“Excellent idea, sweetheart.” Rory took the cup she held out to him. “I am relieved that nothing else was stolen.”

Marie passed coffee to each officer, motioning them to the snacks and a seat.

“So, what we’re basically looking at here is someone who knew about the safe and recognized the party would provide the perfect cover for the job.” Harding raised his thick eyebrows high. “Does that bring anyone to mind?” He scanned their faces but only saw blank expressions. “Is there anything or anybody that stands out to you from tonight? Think about it for a minute.” He sipped his coffee and nodded to Garcia.

She sat her cup down and lifted her chin at him in acknowledgment. “Is anything coming to mind?”

Everyone shook their head “no.”

“Okay. How about this?” Garcia said. “Let’s call it a night. You folks can go to bed. Harding and I can file the report.

We'll all meet back here in the morning, say about 9 a.m. We can get the list of the safe's items then." She and Harding rose, and he returned his coffee to the silver tray.

Rory stood also, a weary expression in his blue eyes. "Does that mean all of us or only those who live here?"

"All of you. If some of you cannot make it due to job responsibilities, please call the station and tell us when you'll be available for a quick interview. One of you must have seen the burglar; you're just not aware of it. So, it's critical that we speak with everyone. We'll also want those complete lists of all the guests and hired help that were here. Our thief is probably on one of those lists."

"Fine, Detective. I'll show you to the door." Rory paused at the living room entrance, allowing the four officers to precede him out into the hallway.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Colin followed the scent of coffee into the kitchen. With his brothers right behind him, they were the last to drag themselves in, bleary-eyed and ready for caffeine. The family had agreed to reconvene for breakfast and speculation before the Detectives arrived at 9 a.m. For the Maguires, it was a subdued breakfast.

"Everyone is here now but Aunt Bebe," Elizabeth said. "I know she's awake, but I have yet to see her this morning. I'm still worried about her. All her best jewelry was stolen. I'm sure it's hitting her hard."

Rory put his hand over his wife's. "If she's not down in five minutes, I'll run up and check on her." He kissed Elizabeth's cheek, and she smiled for the first time.

"I know it will all be all right, but I can't believe someone we invited into our home did this to us," Elizabeth said with a sigh. Her eyes brightened when Bebe walked through the doorway.

Bebe sashayed into the breakfast room, dazzling everyone in her sunshine yellow jumpsuit with rhinestones lining the

neckline and breast pocket. Colin looked at her feet, half expecting to find yellow roller skates, but instead, he saw yellow sneakers with more rhinestones.

“Good morning, my wonderful family! Isn’t it a beautiful day! The sun is shining, the flowers are blooming, and we are all here together for breakfast. What a perfect way to begin the day!”

As the family members stole worried glances at each other, Rory cleared his throat, “Aunt Bebe, do you feel well?”

Elizabeth laughed into her napkin as Bebe shot Rory a questioning look.

“Aunt Bebe, we’re just amazed at your chipper mood after what happened last night,” Colin said.

“Oh, that. It was just a little bit of jewelry. It’s not like anyone died. For heaven’s sake, people, don’t let that worry you.”

“Just a little quarter of a million bit,” grumbled Rory under his breath.

“What, dear? I wish you wouldn’t mumble so. It’s such an unpleasant habit. But no worries, it is going to be a fantastic day.”

“If your idea of a fantastic day is meeting with the police to finger one of your friends as a burglar,” Colin muttered.

“That’s the problem with this entire family—negative thinking. I’m surrounded by pessimists. How often do you get the chance to be on the inside of a criminal investigation to learn how the police work firsthand? If you ask me, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. You should all be grateful. I guess some people simply don’t understand.” Bebe sank into a white wood chair at the end of the table with a heavy sigh.

“If it is just once in a lifetime, then I will be grateful, Aunt Bebe,” Colin said, then shook his head, chuckling.

## Chapter Six

### Detective Harding

Detectives Harding and Garcia followed Rosalee into the Maguire's sunny yellow kitchen.

"Good morning, detectives. Coffee?" Elizabeth asked.

"Isn't this where we left off last night?" Rory smiled, easing the tension somewhat. "Can we talk here, or do you need a more private room?"

Harding spoke first. "We need a private room, and, so you know, we have our technicians at work in the library." While he lacked sleep, a hot shower, fresh clothes, and a lot of coffee had done wonders for his outlook this morning.

"But we would be happy to take some coffee with us," Garcia quickly added to Harding's answer.

They set up in Rory's office, just down the hall. It held an enormous mahogany desk with chocolate-colored leather chairs and two matching couches. Rory cleared off the desk's surface for the detective's use and left the room. Harding requested that they start the interviews with the younger family members, so Rory sent Colin in first. After talking with Colin, Dylan, and Brandon, Harding's instincts told him this was not about the insurance money. They seemed squeaky clean. It helped, too, that the background search showed them all to be financially healthy.

Katie walked in, and Garcia waved her to the unoccupied leather chair facing the desk. Her demeanor differed from her cousins'.

"Well, Miss Maguire, is there anything or anyone that struck you as unusual the night of the party? We want you to tell us everything, even if it seems trivial to you. It could be important." Harding held her gaze, silently willing her to spill any information she might have.

Katie smoothed the skirt of her mint-green sundress over her lap. She continued looking down instead of meeting



Harding's eyes. "Well, Detectives, it's probably nothing. I don't want to get anyone in trouble."

"Don't worry, Miss Maguire. You can't cause that for anyone. If it turns out to be nothing, the person will never know. But if something comes of it, you wouldn't have gotten them into difficulty, they would have done it to themselves. Please, Miss Maguire, tell us what has you concerned."

"Well, Tyler, my boyfriend, has a cousin, Adam. Adam is staying with Tyler's family for a while. He had some problems back home, and his folks thought some distance might be beneficial. So, they sent him out here to stay with relatives. Of course, when Tyler came over to help us prepare, Adam came along." Katie exhaled and took a deep breath after rushing through the explanation. Now, her breathing was more measured, but her forehead was creased with worry and her blue eyes troubled.

Garcia and Harding waited patiently, knowing there was more to the story.

Katie gazed out the window, then looked from one detective to the other, and began again. "So, Tyler and Adam were here in the afternoon before the party. Adam went to use the restroom but accidentally wandered into the library. Aunt Bebe found him there, looking through the books on that wall. I don't know if he found the safe, but he was close to it."

"What happened when Mrs. O'Brien discovered him there?" Garcia leaned forward as she asked, looking intently at Katie.

"Aunt Bebe had not met Adam yet, so, to her, he was some stranger going through the shelves. She yelled for help and beat him with the couch pillows until we got there. There were feathers everywhere."

Garcia's face remained blank. "Did anyone question Adam or check the safe at that point?"

"No. He was a guest in our home—a guest who took a wrong turn in a house he had never been in before that day." Katie's voice held a slightly icy tone to it now. "And

obviously, since Aunt Bebe's jewelry was there when she dressed, Adam did not steal it on his way to the bathroom."

"Miss Maguire, why hasn't anyone else mentioned this incident to us?" Harding stared down at his shoes before lifting his gaze to Katie.

"Probably because I am the only one aware of why Adam is staying with Tyler's family. Everyone thinks he is just here on vacation." Katie sighed again. "I suppose now I have to tell them, and I promised Tyler I wouldn't say anything. He was concerned people would treat Adam differently if they knew his background." She shook her head, staring at her lap.

"Miss Maguire, is there any more you want to tell us?" Harding asked gently.

"No. Well, just that I hope it's not Adam. That's all." Katie stood and looked at them, her mouth drawn in a tight line. "I really hope it's not him."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"I think we had better interview Mrs. O'Brien next," Garcia said as Katie left the room.

"My thoughts exactly," said Harding as he wrote more notes on his paper.

"Detectives," Bebe smiled and nodded toward each of them as she waltzed into the room.

"Mrs. O'Brien, please have a seat." Harding waved at the chairs in front of her.

"Please call me Bebe; everyone does. So, Detectives, have you learned anything so far?" Bebe smiled as she settled herself in the chair.

"Mrs. O'Brien," Harding started.

"Bebe," she interrupted.

"I'm sorry, Bebe. First, we would like to hear your version of what happened yesterday afternoon when you found Adam in the library."

“Certainly, Detective Harding. I walked in and saw him looking through the books on the right wall.”

“In the same area as the safe?” asked Garcia.

“Yes. He was quite close to discovering it.”

“Could he have found it before you entered?”

“Well, it’s always possible, but my initial thought was that he was still searching for it.”

“Okay. Then what happened?”

“I screamed, and he started coming toward me. At which point, I grabbed the closest thing I could and went after him. I was not about to let some little pipsqueak intimidate me.”

Garcia stared down at her notes, stifling a laugh.

“Not that I could do much damage with the couch pillows, but I could tell I surprised him, and he wasn’t sure what to do.”

Harding, trying to remain stoic, was almost successful at covering his laugh with a forced cough. Not many would consider Adam, with his reported 6’ 2” build, a pipsqueak, he thought.

“That gave me the upper hand, which was long enough for help to arrive. Of course, that’s when I learned he was Tyler’s cousin, and it was all a big misunderstanding. Obviously, the boy had nothing to do with it. He’d just taken a wrong turn.”

“Please tell us what happened after you discovered who he was,” Harding prompted.

“Well, of course, I apologized. I was never so embarrassed. He accepted my apology, and we all had a good laugh. The place was a disaster, as several of the pillows broke open during the fight. Everything was coated in feathers. So, I called the cleaning service, and Rachel came right over. She had it all taken care of before the guests began arriving.”

“What is the name of your cleaning service?”

“Murray’s Maids. The girl who runs it, Rachel, was the one who came. She is very efficient and helpful. She was kind

enough to stop her work and help me with my jewels, even though she was in the middle of the job.”

Garcia, in the middle of taking a sip of coffee, choked and sputtered, shaking her head. “Would you mind elaborating on that, Mrs. O’Brien, um, Bebe?”

“Well, she dusted everything first because there was that white dust and feathers all over the bookcases and the tables and such. I could tell she was doing an excellent job because she had even cleaned the pictures on the walls.” Bebe paused a moment and looked at Garcia. “I remember thinking that, because with the house in such an uproar, getting ready for the party, she could’ve skipped some things, and no one would have noticed. You get your money’s worth with that girl. I would recommend her to anyone. I think...”

“Bebe,” Garcia interrupted, “what I meant was, can you elaborate about her helping with your jewels?” Garcia exhaled heavily.

Harding glanced at Garcia and could tell she was close to having one of her tension headaches.

“Oh, yes, of course. I had dressed and walked downstairs. Naturally, I considered sliding down the banister, but I was concerned about what effect that would have on my sequins.”

“Naturally,” agreed Garcia. She smiled at Bebe as she began massaging small circles over her left temple.

“I walked into the library to select my accessories, only to realize my glasses were still upstairs. I didn’t want to go all the way back upstairs for them, so I asked Rachel if she would help me. I told her the combination, and she opened the door for me. She’s very helpful.”

Garcia began rubbing her temple faster. “Are you saying that you gave this cleaning woman the code to a safe full of jewels and other valuables?” Her voice rose in volume as she spoke.

Bebe glared at Garcia and turned all her attention to Detective Harding, completely ignoring Garcia.

“Yes, I told Rachel. I couldn’t read the numbers without my glasses. I believe I have already explained that fully.”

Harding picked up the questioning as Garcia switched to her right temple. “How long have you known this woman?” he asked with a soft tone in an attempt to encourage Bebe’s cooperation.

Bebe flashed him a brilliant I’m-so-happy-you-understand look and answered, “I’ve met her before at Sean’s law office and liked her immediately. Plus, it was her company that Elizabeth hired to clean the house in preparation for the event. That’s why I called her to do the room.”

Harding forced his voice to remain gentle. “Okay, Bebe. I think we get the complete picture now.” He almost succeeded in sounding supportive. “That’s all the questions we need you to answer for the time being. Thank you.”

Bebe stood and stared squarely at Detective Garcia. “It was not Rachel!” she said, then turned and stalked out of the room.

Garcia and Harding looked at each other before Harding pulled out his phone and called headquarters.

# Chapter Seven

## Rachel

Rachel sat behind the reception desk with her laptop open. She looked up and smiled in welcome as two people entered the office.

“Hi, welcome to Murray’s Maids. How may I help you?”

“Ms. Rachel Murray?” The woman lifted one eyebrow in question.

“Yes. I’m Rachel Murray. What’s going on?” Rachel studied the woman and man standing across from her and knew in her gut that something was wrong.

The woman displayed her badge. “I’m Detective Garcia, and this is Detective Harding. We’d like to ask you some questions.”

Rachel’s mind flashed through a dozen scenarios but could not come up with one reason the police would want to ask her anything. “Okay. What is this about?”

Garcia nodded toward the office behind Rachel, visible through the open door. “Perhaps we can speak in there, where it’s a little more private?”

Rachel stood and walked into the office, knowing the detectives would follow her without her specific invitation. She sat at the large table that substituted as a desk and waited for them as they sat down across from her. “Now, can you please tell me what’s going on?”

“There was a robbery at the Maguire’s the night of the party. We understand you were there in the afternoon and opened the safe for Mrs. O’Brien.” Garcia’s face remained impassive, waiting for Rachel’s response.

Rachel’s stared at them as she took in the information and the reason they wanted to talk to her. Only this morning, she’d been thinking how well her life was going. Now, here she was being questioned by two very grumpy-looking detectives. “Yes, I opened the safe for Mrs. O’Brien. She asked me to do

it, but I did not take anything. I have never even gotten a parking ticket.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Murry, but the lack of traffic violations does not exclude one from other more serious criminal activity.”

Rachel frowned. “Great. You’re basically accusing me of robbery, and I’ve got a sarcastic detective on my case.”

All three turned at the sound of the front door slamming against the wall as Colin barged into the front office. He saw them through the open doorway and charged at Rachel.

“I have known some lousy people in my time, but to take advantage of a naïve old woman—”

Detective Harding stood and walked toward Colin to block his advance. “Mr. Maguire, we are speaking with Ms. Murray, and you should not be here. Please leave immediately.”

“The hell I will. This woman stole my aunt’s jewelry, and I want it back now.”

Rachel shot up from her chair. “I stole nothing from your aunt or anyone else in your family.”

“Yeah, right. Tell it to the cops, sister. I’m just surprised you didn’t accept her invitation to the party so you could check out the guests’ necklaces and earrings for future jobs.”

Garcia stepped into the mix. “Sir, you need to leave now.”

“I’m going. I’m going. But, lady,” he said, pointing his finger at her, “I’m going to be watching you, and I’ll prove you did it.” Colin slammed his fist against the wall as Harding escorted him out of the office and into the bright sunshine.

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*There was no doubt about it, Rachel thought. This was officially the worst day in her entire twenty-four-year-old life. First, she was questioned by two detectives. Then Maguire’s son tracked her down, just to make sure that everyone in a five-block radius knew he thought she was as guilty as sin.*

Rachel pulled into her driveway and breathed a sigh of relief. She was so happy to be home. After the detectives had left, she'd spent the rest of the day waiting for them to come back and arrest her or for Colin to burst into the office again and demand she turn over the jewels, which meant the only man she had ever met, who'd given her butterflies just by looking at her thought she was a lower life form than pond scum. It didn't matter that he checked off all her no-dating rules; the man was hot. And to top it all off, she knew their business would go belly up just because she'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time. No one was going to want a suspected thief cleaning their homes and offices. It simply could not get any worse.

Rachel finally made herself get out of the car, but it seemed like just that little bit of movement took more energy than she had. She let herself into the empty house and went to change clothes. If there was ever a day that she deserved comfort food, it was today. So, she pulled a lasagna out of the freezer and stuck it in the oven. Opening a bottle of Merlot to breathe, Rachel began slicing a loaf of French bread for her famous buttery garlic bread and let the simple task soothe her mind.



# Chapter Eight

## Colin

“You want me to take you where?” Colin asked, staring in disbelief at his aunt.

Bebe repeated her request more slowly. “I want you to drive me over to Rachel’s house.” She scrutinized Colin. “You know, your generation really worries me sometimes. I shouldn’t have to repeat myself as much as I do,” she said, shaking her head at him.

“I can’t do it, Aunt Bebe. I just can’t.”

“You mean you won’t do it.”

“You’re right. I won’t. She stole your jewelry, and I just confronted her about it this morning at her office. I will not take you over there to apologize to her for the inconvenience of being a suspect in the crime she committed.”

“Colin James Maguire, you will apologize to your great aunt and do it this instant.” His mother stood in the doorway and stared at her son.

Colin rolled his eyes and said, “I am sorry for raising my voice to you, Aunt Bebe.”

“I thought I raised you better than this. Yelling at your aunt...” Elizabeth shook her head at her oldest son.

“Mom, Aunt Bebe wants me to drive her over to Rachel’s,” Colin said in his most plaintive, it’s-not-my-fault voice.

“I think that’s a fine idea. It’s a marvelous way to make up for yelling at her. If you leave now, you’ll be back in plenty of time for supper. Uncle Sean is grilling burgers, and we have all the fixings for strawberry margaritas.”

Colin glanced at his mom with her hands on her hips and then at Bebe’s smug smile. “Okay. Fine. Let’s go get this over with.” He turned and headed toward the front door.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Bebe and Colin stood on Rachel's front porch waiting for someone to answer the doorbell.

Rachel opened the door, her eyes wide. "Mrs. O'Brien?"

"Close your mouth, dear. It is not your most attractive look. May we come in?"

"Aunt Bebe, we are not entering this house," Colin said. "You can talk to her on the porch." He couldn't believe this was happening. Aunt Bebe had always been a tad eccentric, but this took it to a whole new level.

"That's fine, Colin. I'll go in, and you can stay out here and pout. He's always been stubborn." Bebe confided in Rachel. "Can I come in, dear?"

Rachel shrugged her shoulders and stepped aside, holding the door open for them.

Bebe walked into the living room, with its rose-colored walls and a large rose and blue area rug on the hardwood floors, and sat on the only chair. Rachel sat across from her on the sofa and gave her a timid smile.

Colin slowly followed Bebe in but only stood behind Bebe's chair and stared at Rachel.

"It smells amazing in here," Bebe said. "I hope we haven't interrupted your supper."

"No, I just set the lasagna on the counter to cool for a few minutes. Mrs. O'Brien, please—"

"No, dear," Bebe interrupted Rachel. "You don't need to say anything."

"Oh, yes, she does," Colin growled.

"Ignore him," Bebe said with a wave of her hand. "He's having a terrible day. And if he isn't careful, it's going to get worse," she said, giving him a glare over her shoulder.

Rachel's brows knitted in confusion, but she didn't say anything.

"Colin and I just stopped by to apologize for any inconvenience this whole robbery mess has caused you. The

police are just so insistent on questioning everyone who was there. Even though I assured them you could not have possibly done it. And when I heard they had gone to your office and questioned you, I felt awful and wanted you to know how sorry I was. Colin has something to say to you, too, don't you?" She paused, then looked back at him. "I said you had something to tell her, right, Colin?" Bebe's tone could have cut glass.

Colin nodded and moved to stand beside his aunt. *Two can play this game*, he thought to himself before his lips lifted in a soft smile.

"Yes, I did. I want to apologize for that horrible encounter at your office this morning. I am so sorry. I am very protective of my family. But then, once I thought about it, I understood you couldn't have done it. Please forgive me."

Rachel gazed into his dark blue eyes and then blinked rapidly. "That's okay, Mr. Maguire. I understand this situation has been hard on all of us."

"Please call me Colin," he said with a warm smile that lit up his face.

"Colin." Rachel lifted her right hand to her temple and rubbed.

"Would you let me take you out tomorrow to make it up to you?"

"That's really not necessary. I'm just glad you understand that I didn't do it." Rachel shifted her gaze from him to Bebe.

"I would feel so much better if you would let me buy you dinner. It's the least I can do." Colin shot her his most charming smile.

"Uh, well, okay. I guess." Rachel frowned slightly but then gave him a small smile.

"Great. I'll pick you up at 6 p.m. Does that work for you?"

"Sure, that's fine," Rachel said as she looked into his eyes.

Bebe glanced quizzically at Colin as they walked back to the car. "I'm glad you recognized what a mistake you made.

That's very nice of you to take her out to apologize."

Colin smiled at Bebe as he started the engine. "I thought so myself."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"So, you are going to cozy up to a woman you believe to be a thief, hoping she'll succumb to your charms and give you back Aunt Bebe's jewelry?" Colin's brother, Dylan, sat at the kitchen island in Colin's apartment. He watched as Colin stacked various cut meats on the sub buns.

"That's about the size of it, bro. There's some story behind all this. I can feel it. She's too nice of a person for this to be a regular habit. I've been asking around town, and she has a wonderful reputation. In fact, her entire family does. Everyone who knows them loves them. So, like I said, there's got to be a story, some reason for all this. Like someone is sick and needs help with medical bills. Or her cleaning business is in trouble."

"Or maybe she's innocent...?"

"Give me a break. Bebe told her the combination, and she had plenty of opportunities. Don't let those beautiful brown eyes fool you. She did it."

"I don't know. Remember Tyler's cousin, Adam? Well, apparently, he's high on the suspect list. Seems he's tangled with the law before. I guess that's the real reason he's here. His parents are hoping Tyler's folks can straighten the kid out."

Colin handed Dylan a sandwich with a tall glass of iced tea. "I don't care. I think Rachel's our thief, and soon, I'll be able to prove it."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Colin sniffed the yellow rosebuds as he rang the doorbell.

Rachel opened the door and quickly walked out. Unfortunately, Colin simultaneously stepped inside, and the roses, caught in the middle, were the ones who suffered.

“Oh, no. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.” Rachel peered at the mangled blossoms.

“No, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to either.” Colin held up the bouquet, several blooms now bent at awkward angles. “I brought roses.”

“Thanks. They are beautiful.” She took them from Colin’s extended hand, and a bud fell onto the porch. “Such a unique arrangement.” Her eyes were bright with amusement.

“Yes.” He nodded. “It took me a long time to find someone with such a flair for floral design.”

They looked up from the mangled flowers and burst into laughter.

Rachel spoke between laughs, “Perhaps I can save some of them.” Rachel led Colin into the kitchen and began separating the broken stems over the white farm sink.

Colin glanced around, taking in the bright, airy kitchen with sunshine-yellow walls and lacy white curtains at the windows. Colin couldn’t believe Rachel laughed about the roses and still wanted them. His mind went back to his ex-fiancée. She would have thrown them into the trash and expected him to bring her another dozen the very next day. Maybe coveting his family’s wealth was the only thing Marley and Rachel had in common. Rachel seemed kinder somehow, but then again, that was how they got you. He just needed to remember that women were always after his family’s money. Rachel had just figured out a quicker way to get it—straight old-fashioned robbery. It was certainly easier and quicker than waiting to become Mrs. Maguire. Thankfully, he had talked to Marley about the fact that they would be living on his income, not his family’s wealth. When she’d understood she would have to follow a budget and then wait years for any family money to come to them, she had handed him back his ring that same night, and he’d never seen her again.

“There, that’s better.” Rachel filled a short, clear glass vase with water and added the flowers. “Not too bad, considering.” She sat the vase in the middle of the kitchen table and admired them. “I’m sorry about the flowers.”

Rachel's voice jerked Colin back to the present moment. All that was important was that he proved Rachel was guilty, and he got Aunt Bebe's jewels back. Colin smiled charmingly at Rachel, sure in his ability to romance the truth from her. "Me, too. I guess it just means I'll need to bring you more to make up for it."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Colin pulled into the parking lot of his brother's townhouse, happy to see Dylan's truck in the lot. Colin had just dropped Rachel off and wanted to discuss his findings with Dylan. If Colin was honest about it, he wasn't sure exactly what his findings were. Were his findings that he'd discovered he kept having to remind himself of his true purpose because he so easily lost himself in her gorgeous eyes? Or were they the fact he knew he had never had quite such nice a time before... ever? Or that the longer Rachel and he had sat there talking, the more he'd wanted to pretend she wasn't a thief? Especially when she'd talked about her family. He could tell how much she loved them and how close they all were. The way those brown eyes sparkled when she spoke about her parents...

That's why he should discuss it with Dylan—to get his head straight. Even if Rachel could be someone he might fall for, that she would steal to solve her problems meant he could never pursue her. It was just his dumb luck that when he'd finally met someone he could go for, she was a thief.

Colin rang the doorbell and smiled to himself when he heard the Ohio State Buckeyes' fight song. Dylan had installed a customizable doorbell that he changed with his mood. He must be wanting Buckeye football, even though it was still the heart of summer.

Dylan opened the door and handed Colin a cold beer as he passed into the living room.

"What's this, curb service?" Colin asked.

"I figured after an evening of playing Columbo, you could use one."

“Columbo? I’m actually more the Bond type. Bond... Colin Bond.”

“You always were an optimist, bro.” Dylan chuckled. “So, did you find out anything?”

Colin was not about to admit to his younger brother that he liked their suspect; he *really* liked her. He knew he’d be ninety years old and still hearing about it. “I’m not sure I learned anything to help us. When I asked about her, there didn’t seem to be any red flags. She mentioned nothing that would need large amounts of cash. Everything sounded fine.”

“Okay.” Dylan sat, stretched his legs out, and put his feet up on the coffee table. “Then, either she knows what you’re up to, or it’s something super personal. You know, like a huge gambling debt or blackmail threats or money to hire a hit on her neighbor. Something like that.”

“I’ll go with the gambling, maybe even the blackmail, but hiring a hitman? Not happening.” Colin laughed and shook his head at the absurdity of it before taking a swallow of his beer.

“Well, at least you smiled. You’d think you’d attended a wake instead of taking a very beautiful lady to dinner.”

“A very beautiful thief, you mean. There’s a big difference.”

“So, now, what’s your next step?”

Colin leaned forward and smiled. “Don’t you mean, what’s our next step?”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Colin knew it was Casey’s day to be in the Murray’s Maids’ office. Rachel had explained that all three sisters rotated being there throughout the week, answering phones and taking care of paperwork.

“I’m pulling into a parking space by Rachel’s building now. You need to get a grip. I know what you want me to do. You’ve said it like five times now,” Dylan said.

“I know. I know. I just want to get this figured out ASAP and get Aunt Bebe’s jewels back.” Colin ran his free hand over his face before leaning back in his chair and staring at the ceiling.

Dylan laughed. “You don’t fool me, bro. You want to get Aunt Bebe’s stuff back, but you also want to know if you can spend more time with Rachel without wondering if you’re dating a thief.”

Colin closed his eyes before answering. “You’re full of bull, and you know it. I’m only trying to find the jewels.” Though Colin wondered if he was trying to convince Dylan or himself.

“Just keep telling yourself that.” Dylan chuckled. “I’ll meet you at the site office after I’m done.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Colin had a hard time keeping his mind on his work. He kept scanning the dusty construction site for Dylan. Finally, at almost two-thirty p.m, Dylan appeared, and they both moved to the on-site office trailer. Once Colin shut the door to the air-conditioned office, the construction noises were muffled, and he could interrogate Dylan.

“Spill,” Colin ordered as he snatched a cold bottle of water.

“She’s beautiful and sexy and funny and smart, and we have a date for Friday night.”

“You can’t date the suspect’s sister,” Colin glared at him.

Dylan just smiled and sat on a metal folding chair. “Why not? You went on a date with the suspect.”

“That was not a date. That was an undercover interrogation.”

“Right, and when you take her to bed, that will be undercover work, too.” Dylan smirked.

Colin smiled. “Only if absolutely necessary to crack the case. Now, did you find out anything?”



“Nothing. I told her the company was looking for a new cleaning service and she told me all about Murry’s Maids. Then I took her to lunch. Like you said, everyone is in good health, with no major life problems. When I brought up gambling, she said she knew nothing about it. That no one gambles. No problems with the law, nothing.”

“That means it’s got to be something really bad. Something no one else knows about and that only involves Rachel. What could be so bad that she couldn’t even tell her family about it? Something that would make her steal?”

## Chapter Nine

### Detective Harding

Harding and Garcia watched Adam through the windshield of the midnight blue sedan as he walked down the opposite side of the street.

“Looks like our guy is nervous.” Garcia nodded to Adam, who peeked over his shoulder and scanned the area.

“Definitely. I’m wondering who he’s talking to,” Harding said. “I think I’ll just stretch my legs.”

“That’s a fantastic idea,” Garcia said as Harding stepped out from the passenger’s seat onto the sidewalk. Harding jogged across the road and paused by a shop window before he got closer to Adam.

“No, man. I’m telling you, this time was different. I didn’t even have to plan it. Everything fell into place perfectly. I knew it would work, and it did. No one suspects a thing.”

Harding had his own phone by his ear and pretended to be on a call as he listened to Adam’s side of the conversation. There was a pause while Adam listened to whoever was on the other end of the phone.

“Yeah, I know this isn’t the best way to get cash, but I don’t have any connections here. And it lets me dump some of this stuff.”

Adam stopped and turned around to look behind him. “I’m here. I’ll talk to you later.”

Harding swore to himself, but he had no choice. He continued walking down the sidewalk, passing Adam. Adam’s gaze skimmed over him but without any sign of recognition. Harding crossed back to the other side of the street and went into a coffee shop. He was still able to see Adam through the window.

Adam hurried into the pawnshop.

Harding got into the inconspicuous vehicle that was now sitting silently in front of the coffee shop across from the building Adam had entered.

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Within minutes of Adam exiting the pawnshop, Detectives Harding and Garcia walked into the well-maintained store.

The old-fashioned bell above the door jingled, and the man behind the long glass counter looked up expectantly.

Harding noted the wooden shelves displaying various used goods and the slight musty scent combined with a whiff of cigarette smoke.

“What can you tell me about the kid that was just here?” Harding asked, simultaneously flashing his badge.

The man glanced at the badge and then up at Harding. “Not a lot really. He pawned some of his grandmother’s jewelry.”

Garcia moved forward, “Can you show it to us?”

# Chapter Ten

## Colin

Completely comfortable, at his aunt's and uncle's house, Colin opened the front door, when he heard the doorbell. "Tyler, perfect timing. Aunt Bebe is here, and we're all just sitting down to eat on the patio. Come on, there's plenty." He paused, looking more closely at him. "Are you okay?"

Tyler shook his head slightly. "Adam just called from the police station. As soon as I got off the phone, I came here.

Colin simply turned and led him through the house to the back patio.

Sean cast a questioning glance at Colin, who gave an imperceptible shrug. Sean and Bebe rose, but it was Katie who got to Tyler first.

"Tyler, what's happened? What's wrong?" She grasped his hands and searched his eyes for answers.

He looked down at her and then at her family. "It was Adam. My cousin stole your jewelry, Aunt Bebe. I swear I didn't know until today. I'm so sorry." Tyler turned to leave.

"Tyler, stop! Wait!" Katie tried to grab him, but he just kept walking.

"Come back here, now," Bebe commanded him.

Tyler stopped and drew a deep breath before he turned to face Katie's aunt. "I know it doesn't help, but I am sorry. I didn't know." Tyler focused directly on her.

Bebe moved forward and grasped Tyler by the arm, pulling him toward the glass patio table. "Of course, you didn't know. We know you well enough to know you wouldn't do that. That he's your cousin has nothing to do with it. If Adam did it, he is responsible for his own actions. It's nothing to get your panties in a twist about, that's for sure. Sit down here and have some lunch with us. Don't these grilled brats smell amazing! And look at Marie's homemade potato salad. I know you love it.

You need to relax and chill a bit with us before you go off and beat the crap out of your cousin.”

Tyler gaped at Bebe. “What?”

“I’m not senile, young man. You had the I’m-going-to-kill-him look written all over your face. You need to remember prison food sucks, and you won’t get to marry Katie if you’re doing hard time and already *married* to your cellmate. If you get my drift...”

Tyler looked wide-eyed at Bebe, then looked at Katie’s dad.

Sean gestured at an empty seat. “Have a seat, Tyler. I’m not sure I would’ve stated it quite that way, but Aunt Bebe is right. It might be best if you sit down and eat before you do anything else.”

Tyler turned to Katie. Before he could say anything, she rushed up and hugged him fiercely. Tyler let out an enormous sigh and held on. Then he glanced over her head at the rest of the family.

Katie took his hand and led him to the chair. “Tell us everything you know.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

It took less than an hour for Colin to show up at Dylan’s with the news.

“Man, have I got a news flash for you,” Colin said as soon as Dylan opened the door.

Dylan nodded. “Spill.” Colin opened the fridge, plucked two bottles of water from inside, and tossed one to his brother.

“About an hour ago...” Colin began.

“An hour ago? Why am I getting old info? What’s happening to our family?”

With one eyebrow raised, Colin shot him a disgusted look. “If you’d leave your cell on, we could get you these bulletins quicker. For now, just be grateful I was willing to deliver the news in person. Got it?”

“Yeah.” He was constantly forgetting to turn on his cell phone, so Colin had a point.

“Any more complaints?” Colin arched one eyebrow at Dylan.

“Only one. If you’re going to bring me news, why can’t you be cute, like some of the newscasters on TV?” Dylan smirked.

“Screw that.”

“You’re the one who asked.”

“Do you want to know or what?”

“Yes, sorry. Go ahead,” Dylan said putting his hands up in surrender.

“Tyler showed up at Aunt Marie’s, and Uncle Sean’s all freaked out. It seems Adam called him from the police station.” Colin said.

“That sounds promising.” Dylan said.

“The police are interrogating him about some necklaces he pawned.”

“That’s perfect. Did Tyler say it was Aunt Bebe’s?”

“No. He doesn’t know anything more than Adam’s being questioned,” Colin said. “Which means, we don’t know for sure.” He shrugged.

Dylan stared at Colin. “What is it with you? I’d think you’d be happier.”

“But I’m not.” Colin started pacing back and forth across the living room.

“Clearly.” Dylan moved his head left and right, watching Colin pace. “Look, Adam was in the library, too, and he has a history, remember? That’s why he’s here. His folks are hoping it’ll straighten him out. We know that Adam has taken off with a car or two that’s not his and some other burglary stuff. So maybe he’s hitched it up a notch, getting more bang for his buck.”

“But it’s not absolutely positive.” Colin stopped and looked at his brother.

Dylan looked down as he stretched out his long legs, crossed them at the ankles, and then fixed Colin with a piercing stare. “What I don’t get is why you have such a hard time believing a small-time burglar could go big time but not believe a sweet, honest woman could simply be a sweet, honest, innocent woman. Why do you need it proven beyond all doubt? What’s your problem?” Dylan stopped long enough to return Colin’s stare. “Shit! You’re falling in love with her. So, that’s the deal. You’re afraid you’re falling for a thief.”

“Exactly.” Colin dropped into the nearest chair and ran both his hands through his hair. “I don’t know what to do.”

Now, it was Dylan’s turn to pace. “Oh, man!” Suddenly, Dylan stopped and grinned. “Hey, maybe it’s just lust.”

Colin glared at him.

“Okay, not lust, definitely love. Wow!”

“Yeah, wow. Now what?”

“I don’t know. Do you think she’s falling for you?”

“Probably not, since I’m the one who busted into her office, making sure the detectives knew she was guilty.”

“True. Way to go, bro.”

“Well, it made sense at the time.”

“Oh, that’s a fantastic way to get her to forgive you. Just explain how it made perfect sense that she was some low-life criminal. Yeah, that’ll help.”

“Okay, smart mouth. She accepted my apology, and she thinks I believe she’s innocent. So, now, I mostly do believe she’s innocent. Now, instead of pretend dates to cover up my being an idiot, it’s a matter of real dates for her to get to know me better.”

“You want to get Rachel to fall for you? Sure, that might only take a decade or two.” Dylan ducked as the water bottle flew past his head.

# Chapter Eleven

## Rachel

Rachel scanned the appointment book. So far, they'd only had two cancellations, and she didn't know if they were connected to the theft accusations or not. She was doing her best not to panic. She had actually fallen asleep before 2 a.m. this morning, the earliest she had managed all week. It was going to be fine, she kept telling herself.

Colin and his family believed she was innocent. Surely, it would only be a matter of time before the police realized it. And looking on the bright side, it had gotten Colin to notice her. Okay, perhaps it wasn't the best way to start a potential relationship, being the number one suspect in a burglary, but she had enjoyed herself more than she'd expected during their meal. He was so gorgeous and kind, and most of all, honest.

The way he'd kept trying to make up for accusing her of the theft made her sigh. Her roses were still beautiful. She knew if he asked her out again, she would say yes. He seemed to be interested in every part of her life— her family, her interests, everything. Plus, he truly listened, as if every answer she gave mattered to him. That was also a sign. A guy didn't ask questions like that if he wasn't considering the possibilities. No, most wealthy men were just talkers, surface listeners, nothing real, nothing meaningful. Colin's interest was genuine, of that much, she was sure. And she was sure her heart had melted just a little when he'd apologized and brushed the dog hair off the car seat before she'd sat down. He'd explained he fostered dogs while their military owners were deployed overseas and had just taken a golden retriever back to her owner earlier that week but hadn't had time to get the car detailed. Anyone who did something like that must have a good heart. Maybe not all men with money were jerks.

Rachel looked up as the delivery man entered the office through the glass door.

“Is this Murray's Maids?” the young man asked.



She nodded while looking at the bouquet he was carrying and wondering which of her sisters was getting the wonderful arrangement. She dug a tip out of her purse, handed it to him, and took the stunning long-stemmed peach roses.

The man smiled his thanks as he walked out the door.

As soon as he left, Rachel buried her face in the sweet-smelling blossoms. She read the card, thrilled to see her name on the envelope before opening it. *These are the same color as the outfit you wore to dinner. They are beautiful, but not as beautiful as you! Colin.* Maybe it was time to rethink her no-dates rule.

Rachel sighed and answered the phone on the second ring. “Murray’s Maids, may I help you?”

“Rachel?”

“Yes.”

“This is Colin.”

“Good timing.” Rachel smiled at the flowers.

“Ah, I take it you got the delivery?” Colin asked.

“And the card. Thank you. I love them both.” Rachel twisted a lock of hair around her finger.

“Then I’m guessing this would be a perfect time to ask if you’ll go out on a real date with me.”

“I’d like that. But I would have said yes, even without the roses.”

“Well, in that case, you can send them back,” Colin teased.

“Not on your life, Maguire.”

“Okay. No need to get fierce over a bunch of petals. How about going out tonight? I can come get you at seven p.m.”

“Can’t wait. See you then.” Rachel went back to smelling her petals.

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Rachel, feeling gorgeous in a short red dress, opened the door when Colin arrived.

“You look beautiful.”

“Thanks. Do you want to come in?” Rachel asked since he seemed content to just stand on the porch and stare at her.

“Um, no. Actually, we should leave for the restaurant. We have reservations.”

Rachel walked out onto the porch, closing the door behind her. Rather than stepping back to allow her space, as she'd expected, Colin stood where he was, bringing them close enough for her to see the intensity in his eyes. Colin moved forward, closing the little distance between them, surprising Rachel when he placed his hands on her shoulders and his lips gently on hers. He shifted back to look in her eyes, then leaned in to brush a kiss across her lips again.

“I've been wanting to do that since the day I opened the door and saw you. I hope that's okay.”

Rachel, trying to calm her breathing, simply nodded and smiled at him. “Better than okay because I've wanted to do the same thing since the apology supper.”

“I wish you had said something. We could've kissed a whole lot sooner. Just let me know anytime you want to kiss again,” Colin said, smiling as he walked with her to the car and opened the door for her.

Rachel could feel the blush moving across her face and hoped her hair hid it from sight as she settled into the Corvette's lush leather seats. “Where are we going for dinner?”

“I see we're changing the subject.” Colin smiled as once again Rachel felt the heat of the blush on her cheeks. Colin squeezed her hand before putting the keys in the ignition. “I suppose discussing food is safer than talking about how much I want to kiss you,” he said with a long, sad sigh. When Rachel didn't respond but just gazed at him, Colin continued. “Okay. You win. We are going to Emeralds, that French restaurant in Columbus. I thought we would try something

more intimate since the other night was just to apologize, not to show you my romantic side.”

“I thought the flowers were to show me your romantic side.”

Colin smiled. “They were to help convince you to give me a chance.”

“I told you. I would’ve gone out with you even without them.” Rachel smoothed her hand over her skirt and enjoyed the warm summer air flowing through the window.

“You say that now, but we’ll never know for sure.” Colin smiled, and Rachel could tell he was teasing her.

“And since you said you really enjoy flowers and that they remind you of spending time in your grandmother’s gardens, it seemed like the safest route.” Colin shrugged.

“That’s true. They do remind me of her and her gardens.” Rachel studied Colin. “You know, it’s funny how much you know about me, from our conversations during the apology dinner and all the questions you asked me. Yet, I hardly know anything about you.”

“I just wanted to get to know you better,” he said, his tone light. “I still feel like there’s a lot to discover about you. Don’t be surprised if I end up asking a bunch more questions. But I promise to talk about myself a lot if that helps.”

Rachel smiled. “I’m sure that will help me not to feel so self-conscious.”

Colin pulled up to the valet and handed his keys over before he took Rachel’s arm. The restaurant was beautifully designed in an Old-World style with thick stone walls, heavy beams, and a stone fireplace. Rachel took in the scene, with its muted lighting and candlelit tables, both inside and out, on the flower-covered patio. The hostess walked them through the dining room, then out through French doors, seating them at a secluded table tucked into an alcove, hidden by a tangle of trumpet vine and wisteria.

“I hope you don’t mind me using flowers to my advantage again.” Colin smiled as Rachel took in the beautiful patio,

complete with an outdoor fireplace and tiny twinkling lights.

“I think you should continue with the flower theme. This is fantastic.” Rachel stopped looking at the amazing blossoms and stunning design to find Colin staring at her as if it was the first time he had ever seen her. She took a sip of water from the filled goblet and brushed her long swing of hair over her shoulder, proud that her fingers were almost steady.

Colin was startled at Rachel’s movement. “I’m sorry for staring. I can’t help it; you’re just so beautiful,” he said, softly touching Rachel’s cheek and leaning in to brush a kiss across her lips.

Rachel shook her head. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You could ask me to kiss you again.” Colin moved forward, but Rachel was saved from responding by the server arriving at their table.

“Would you like to begin with drinks and an appetizer?” The young blonde server smiled at them both.

Colin glanced at Rachel, who shrugged. “We haven’t read the menu yet,” he said.

Rachel returned the server’s smile and replied, “There’s so much to experience here, this gorgeous patio and the scent of the blossoms. We got caught up, just enjoying it.”

“Let me give you both a few minutes and then I’ll be back.” Her lips tipped up in a grin, as she walked away,

“Do any of the appetizers sound good?” Colin asked as he scanned the menu.

“It doesn’t matter to me. What are you in the mood for?” Rachel looked up and saw the desire flash in Colin’s eyes. “That’s not what I meant. What food are you in the mood for?” She breathed a sigh of relief as the heat in his gaze banked.

“I think you may need to be more specific when you ask me questions. I’m afraid I’m having a hard time concentrating on food right now.” The glint returned to his eyes.

“Focus on the meal. Trust me, you don’t want me to go hungry. I get grumpy when I’m starving.” Rachel smiled and

decided she needed to choose her words very carefully for the rest of the evening.

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“Wow! It sounds so romantic.” Casey gushed as Rachel filled her sisters in about her date with Colin. “And then to finish it with a walk and a brandy at the little sidewalk café... It’s got to be one of the best dates ever. Definitely better than anything Scum Bob came up with.”

Emily smacked Casey’s shoulder and gaped at her. Casey’s eyes grew wide. “Sorry, Rach. I didn’t mean to bring up the past.”

Rachel smiled at Casey and gave her a quick side hug. “It’s okay. I don’t even care about Robert anymore. I realize I let what happened take over my life. I’m no longer going to do that, starting now. Colin is an amazing man, and I’m not going to let what happened with Scum Bob taint it. I know that Colin is rich, but he’s also honest and trustworthy and from a good family. I’m going to relax and enjoy getting to know him better.”

“Don’t forget the best part. You said he was an excellent kisser, too!” Casey just laughed when both Emily and Rachel smacked her this time. “Hey, kissing is important.”

“She’s got a point, Rach,” Emily chimed in as she walked out of the room.

Rachel smiled and returned to packing the food for the picnic Colin and she were going on that afternoon. *Casey is right*, Rachel mused as she tucked the variety of cheeses beside the bread and crackers, *kissing is important*. And Colin was a wonderful kisser.

Rachel finished placing the rest of the food into the basket and carried it to the dining room table before heading to her room to change her clothes. She couldn’t believe it was their fourth date in two weeks, not even counting the apology dinner. Rachel opened the closet door and stared at her clothes as a sudden realization struck her. The way she felt when she was with him was almost like being in love. Of course, she

wasn't in love with him, she assured herself with a shake of her head. She was just enjoying spending time with a great guy who was kind, funny, sweet, and smart.

Rachel looked over at her dresser topped with the vase full of happy daisies that Colin had brought over after work one day. "Not because we are going out," he had said, "but because the bright, sunny petals made me think of you." So, he'd swung by to drop them off, and they'd spent ten minutes kissing goodbye on the porch before Casey and Emily started making oohing noises through the front windows.

Gazing at her reflection beyond the daisies in the dresser mirror, Rachel recognized that she could fall for him. As the thought popped into her mind, she realized she didn't feel scared or anxious. She felt happy and strong and excited.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"I don't care how many roses he sends you. This guy accused you of stealing, and you're going on a date with him?"

Nathan stood in the doorway to Rachel's kitchen with his arms firmly crossed over his chest. He was built like a linebacker, and at this moment, he appeared ready to flatten his opponent.

Rachel poured two glasses of iced tea, frantically trying to think of a way to get her brother out the door before Colin arrived for their date. "He's already apologized, remember?"

"Like that makes everything okay? Hardly!" Nathan walked over, took the tea pitcher from her hands, and set it on the counter. He put both hands on Rachel's shoulders and turned her to face him fully. "I don't want you hurt. This guy is clearly a nutcase. You cannot go out with him."

Rachel put her arms around his middle and gave him a quick hug. "I know you're worried about me, but I'm fine."

They both let go, and Rachel gave him a quick jab to the stomach.

"What was that for?"

“That’s for telling me I can’t go out with Colin. I’m an adult, and I make my own decisions. So, back off before I really hurt you.”

He snorted. “When pigs fly.”

“Here, drink your iced tea and be quiet.”

“Seriously, Rachel. It just isn’t smart to go out with this jerk.” Nathan took his tea and followed her into the living room.

Rachel sank onto the one chair and motioned Nathan to the couch. “Let’s just change the subject. We will never agree on this, and it’s my life. So, go get one of your own and lay off mine. Speaking of, what about that curvy redhead you were seeing?”

Nathan cleared his throat. “How did you hear about her?”

“Oh, news travels. Mom’s eager for grandkids, you know.”

“Yeah, well...” He cleared his throat again.

Rachel knew if she could keep the heat on his love life, Nathan would get so uncomfortable he’d leave. But she was running out of time. “So, when are you going to bring her to meet the family?”

“Look, Rach, I don’t know. I mean, she’s nice and all, but I don’t know if it’s meet-the-family serious. Well, you know what I mean, don’t you?” He paused and looked at her hopefully.

“You mean, you need more time to see where the relationship could go, to actually see if there is a relationship, before the family gets involved?” she asked, purposely making her eyes wide with innocence.

“Yes, exactly. I’m glad you...” His voice trailed off. “It’s not the same, Rach.” His voice grew a little rougher with the touch of anger. “She’s not some creep who reamed me out in front of police detectives, accusing me of stealing thousands of dollars’ worth of jewelry. She’s nice.”

“Nathan, he was just trying to protect his family.”

When the knock sounded at the front door, Rachel jumped. In her excitement at the chance of proving a point to her brother, she'd forgotten about the time crunch.

"You don't protect your family by attacking an innocent woman. Aren't you going to answer that?" He cocked his head and gazed at her quizzically.

Rachel was desperately trying to figure out how to handle the impending disaster, but her mind was a complete blank as she opened the door.

"Wow, you look amazing." Colin smiled.

But Rachel just stood there blocking the doorway.

"Um, Rachel can I come in?"

Rachel nodded and moved back to let him into the living room, where Nathan was standing and glaring at Colin as he entered the room.

"Let me guess, jerk face?"

"Yes. I mean, no. This is Colin Maguire." Rachel felt her face grow warm with embarrassment. "Colin, this is my brother, Nathan." As she made introductions, she maneuvered herself between the two men. "Nathan was just leaving." She hooked her arm through his and tried to pull him towards the door. It was like trying to move a refrigerator one-handed.

"No, I wasn't," her brother growled. "Colin and I are going to have a talk and then he's the one who is leaving."

Colin sized him up. Nathan was an inch or two shorter, but had a solid, broader build with anger pumping through it.

Nathan jabbed his finger into Colin's chest. "Keep away from my sister, jerk face! There, talk's over."

Nathan started to make a move, so Colin went in for a quick first jab before Nathan landed a right cross that connected squarely with Colin's jaw. Colin staggered back, tripped, and fell onto the couch.

Rachel just stood there; eyes narrowed. "Stop it! Both of you! Stop it!"



“Colin, are you okay?” Rachel knelt beside the couch and brushed the hair back from his eyes.

“I’ll be fine; just let me get up.” He started to smile at her, but ended up wincing.

Rachel stood up and turned to face her brother. “How dare you! How could you do this?”

“He hit me first.” Nathan reminded her.

“Don’t talk to me. I don’t want to hear it.” Rachel punched him in the stomach, putting all her weight behind it.

Nathan gasped in shock.

“I said, don’t talk to me. You deserve more than that, and you know it. I’m going to get Colin an ice pack. Scram.”

Rachel returned with a bag of frozen peas, handing them to Colin, who had righted himself on the couch.

“Do you punch your brother very often?” Colin asked, as he gently placed the peas on his jaw.

“Only when he deserves it. Like now.” Rachel glared at Nathan sitting in the chair opposite Colin.

“I didn’t deserve that. I’m trying to protect you.” Nathan said.

Colin held his hands up in question. “I’m guessing that was for me accusing your sister of being a thief?”

“Nailed it in one.” Nathan’s eyes narrowed at Colin.

“I am sorry. I was totally and absolutely wrong. And if the situation were reversed, I’d have done the same to you.”

Nathan grinned. “See Rachel, he gets it. She thinks I’m overprotective.” Nathan rolled his eyes.

“Does this mean we’re even?” Colin asked.

“Sure. You were good. You saw what was coming and got one in first. I gotta admire that.” Nathan stuck out his hand, and they shook.

“Okay, then.” Colin shifted back into the cushions. “I’ll explain the whole mess, but first, how many brothers does

Rachel have?”

Rachel just stood there, hands on her hips. “Men.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

“So, did you get any time alone with him at all?” Casey asked as she continued cleaning the glass fronts of the mahogany bookcases while Rachel dusted the antique cherry desk.

“Not even a second. One minute, Nathan’s got his fist in Colin’s face, and the next minute, Colin’s invited him to join us. We all rode together to the restaurant, and afterward when we got back to the house, Nathan stayed until after Colin left. Well, you know that; Nathan was still there when you and Emily got home from the movie.”

Casey stretched to reach to the very top of the glass front. “Em’s hosting her book club at the house tonight. But, how about if Em and I go out tomorrow, and you call and invite him over for a homecooked meal?”

Rachel paused as she considered the idea. “That doesn’t sound too pushy?” She glanced at Casey’s back, who responded without pause.

“No, because last night doesn’t count. It was more like a group of friends going out than a date. It wouldn’t rate as pushy.” Casey’s voice was confident. “And you said yourself, there’s something special about this guy.” Casey turned and put her hands on her hips. “You have his number, right?”

“Yes.”

“So, stop right now and call him,” Casey said, then gave her a pointed nod.

Rachel put down the cloth and reached for the cell in her back pocket. She took a deep breath and pulled up the number before she could chicken out.

“Hello!” Colin yelled above the construction noise.

“Colin? It’s Rachel.”

“Hold on. Let me get someplace where I can hear you.”

Rachel heard machinery noises and distant yelling for a couple of minutes, and then it was muffled.

“Okay,” Colin said. “That’s better. How’s it going?”

“Fine. I was just wondering if you were busy tomorrow? I mean, if you’d like to come over for supper, just the two of us. No, brothers, this time.” Rachel began chewing her nails on her free hand.

“I’d like to, but my family’s having a big family thing. I’ll be shot if I miss it.”

“That’s okay. We can do it another time.” Rachel’s voice sounded whiny even to herself, and she winced inwardly.

“Why don’t you come with me? It’ll be a lot of fun. I’d like you to come.”

“Um, I’m not sure that’s the best idea, um...considering the, um...robbery and all. How about sometime next week?” she asked, a hint of desperation in her voice.

“No, let’s make it tomorrow. There is no reason you shouldn’t meet the rest of my family now.” He uttered the last word with more than a little force. “Besides,” he added, his tone lighter, “I spent last night with your brother, and turnabout is fair play. I know he was only one person and there’ll be a bunch at the house, but I can promise none of them will hit you. Can I pick you up at 5:30 p.m.?”

Rachel, still hesitant and stunned over his invitation, agreed.

Casey stood watching as Rachel disconnected.

“Oh, sis, what’s wrong?” Casey took the phone from her hand.

“He’s taking me to his family’s. What if they still think I’m the burglar?” Rachel asked, biting her bottom lip.

Casey’s voice was firm and sure. “Colin wouldn’t take you there if anyone thought that. They’ve probably caught whoever did it.”

Rachel relaxed. “Of course, that makes sense. He said there was no reason not to.” Then she smiled. “He wants to introduce me to his family.”

“All right!” Casey yelled and hugged her.

“Hey, enough about me.” Rachel pulled away and picked up her dust cloth. “While we finish up in here, I want to hear everything about this guy who took you out to lunch.”

Casey smiled. “He’s so cute. And he called yesterday; we’re going out tonight.”

“Has he said anything more about his office’s contract?” Rachel teased.

Casey threw her paper towels at Rachel’s head. “Like I care.”

## Chapter Twelve

### Colin

Colin enjoyed the scents of sizzling bacon, fresh coffee, and pancakes as he sat at one of his favorite all-day breakfast diners.

The younger generation of Maguire men had met there, twice a month for Saturday brunch, since the oldest of them had started college. It let them compare notes about studies, work, life, and women, without parental or sisterly input.

Liam, the third of Rory and Elizabeth's four boys, was devouring the stack of blueberry pancakes in front of him. He paused in amazement, his fork stilled in mid-air, and gaped at his brother. "You mean after all of that, Nathan went to dinner with you and Rachel?"

"Yeah. Actually, I do like him," Colin said. Then his dark blue eyes narrowed. "Besides, it's a well-known fact, that if you can win over the lady's family, it's easier to win the lady."

"Ah, man, you're really serious about this one, aren't you?" Brandon, Colin's youngest brother, asked, as he poured syrup on his pancakes for the third time since being served the fluffy stack.

"As serious as it gets, bro." Colin smiled.

Kevin, Sean and Marie's oldest son, drained his coffee cup and placed it on the table, his face far more concerned. "When are you going to tell our folks? I mean, with her having been a suspect and all..." Kevin stopped talking when he looked up and saw Colin's face.

"She didn't do it," Colin said through gritted teeth.

Kevin pointed his fork at Colin. "Get a grip, dude. I'm not saying she did. I was just wondering how you were going to handle the family, considering the circumstances."

Colin ran his hand through his hair. "I've been thinking about the same thing. I had wanted to wait until after the

police completed the investigation. So, there's no question, no suspicion. Any news on that front, by the way?"

Dylan studied him for a moment, but then shook his head. "The police checked out the stuff. Adam pawned some earrings and a necklace, but they weren't Aunt Bebe's."

"In a way, isn't that even more suspicious?" Liam interrupted. "I mean, it was probably things he stole from someone else."

Everyone nodded in agreement, and Dylan finished. "That's what the police think, too. They're still looking into it."

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Later that day, Dylan found Colin snarling at the site's supervisor. "I don't care what Thompson said. I'm telling you I want it done today."

Dylan slapped Colin on the back in greeting. "Sorry to interrupt, but I need a minute."

Colin turned to his brother.

At the diversion, the supervisor hastily walked away, shaking his head.

Automatically, they walked toward the office, where the construction noise was at least a little muffled.

"What is it, Dylan?" Colin flung himself into a metal chair and guzzled some cold water.

"I noticed an interesting choice of words at brunch today, and your cheery mood tells me I'm onto something."

"Yeah. Sure. Whatever." Colin stared out the window.

"You said you had wanted to wait to invite her to meet the rest of the family. So, spill it." Dylan moved over to block the view of the site, forcing Colin to look at him.

"I invited Rachel to our family's get together tonight."

"Oh." Dylan nodded in understanding.

"Yeah. Oh."

Dylan rubbed his chin. “Think about it, dude. You were the only one who thought she was guilty, and you’ve changed your mind. Aunt Bebe apologized to her for even being questioned. As long as you’re okay with it, the family will be, too. They’ll be nosy and pushy about the two of you, but they won’t be suspicious of her.”

Colin took a deep breath and groaned as the reality of Dylan’s words reached him. “You’re right. The truth is, it’s been easier to worry about the whole theft thing than about whether everyone will like her. Not to mention, if she’ll like them.” Colin dropped his gaze to the floor before looking back to Dylan. “I’m afraid I’m moving too fast, and she’s going to be scared off.”

## Chapter Thirteen

### Rachel

“I didn’t hear about any tornado warnings,” Emily cracked as she walked into Rachel’s room and saw the clothes strewn in every direction, covering every conceivable surface.

“Very funny,” Rachel said, sticking her head out from the closet.

Emily carefully picked her way over the items on the floor and got to the bed. She swept some blouses onto the floor, clearing enough space to sit comfortably. “Casey said Colin was taking you to some family get-together tonight. I guess she’s right by the looks of this.” She said.

“Good deduction, Sherlock.” Rachel emerged with yet another dress in hand. She stopped and took a breath. “Sorry. I’m just a nervous wreck. Help me, please?”

“Casey, front and center!” Emily yelled. “We’ll have them eating out of your hand.”

When Colin rang the doorbell, Rachel was ready, fortified with her sisters’ love and a great outfit. She opened the door and saw Colin’s eyes widen and heard his sharp intake of breath. Her hair curled to frame her face, with the length of it falling softly down her shoulders. Her makeup highlighted her big chocolate-colored eyes and soft pink lips. The cream-colored silk tank and a flowy rose-and-cream flowered skirt showed off the right hint of curves.

Colin never said a word. He just put his hands on her shoulders, pulled her to him, and kissed her.

Rachel heard Casey’s and Emily’s loud sighs behind her.

Colin stepped back and took a slow breath.

Rachel grinned up at him. “Well, hello to you, too.”

“You just look so beautiful, and you smell amazing. Maybe we should do that again.”

Rachel smiled and headed to his car.



“Okay. I can take a hint.” Colin walked behind her and opened the passenger door before he got in. “How about I fill you in on the cast of characters.”

Rachel nodded, without saying anything. She was still trying to level out her breathing after that kiss.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Rachel sat in the passenger seat with butterflies performing circus routines in her stomach, as Colin pulled up to his parents’ home. Colin came around to her door, but she didn’t move. When he extended his hand, she looked up at him and took a deep breath, before taking his hand and standing.

As Rachel stood, Colin stayed where he was, so that they were only a breath apart. “You look a little nervous. I promise you; it’s going to be fine,” he assured her, before kissing her on the lips. “For luck,” he smiled. “That’s becoming a habit,” Colin added as he guided her to the front door of his childhood home.

Rachel stopped and turned to him. She went up on tip-toe and kissed him. “I think it’s a good habit to have,” she said with a sparkling smile.

“Oh, do you?” Colin wrapped his arms around her. Just as he was lowering his mouth to hers, the front door opened.

“Um, hello?” Liam stood, clearing his throat with just a hint of laughter.

Colin glared at his brother. “Go away.”

Rachel, caught in his embrace, felt herself turn bright red and struggled to break free. “Colin, let go,” she whispered frantically.

“No. We were here first. He has to leave.” He stared at Liam, who crossed his arms and leaned on the wide door frame, smiling broadly.

“Colin,” Rachel gritted out through clenched teeth.

“All right,” he grouched. Colin bent down and brushed his lips across Rachel’s before releasing her. Then he took her

hand and led her up to Liam. “Rachel, this is my obnoxious little brother, Liam. Liam, this is Rachel Murray.”

“Wait. Are you the brother with the Jeep?”

“Yes. How did you know?” Liam tilted his head, one brow arched.

“Um. It’s a long story, really... um...it’s the bad eggs.”

Liam bent his head and sniffed at his arm. “What? Do you smell something? I thought I got rid of it all” His eyes widened as he looked at Rachel.

“No. I swear I don’t smell anything now. I mean I did then, but not now.” Rachel felt her face grow warm.

“Don’t worry about it, bro. The smell is gone... mostly.” Colin started laughing and pulled Rachel through the doorway. As Colin passed Liam, he smacked Liam upside the head.

“He deserved it,” Colin said, as Rachel angled her head in question.

Liam laughed, rubbed the side of his head and followed them through the house, still sniffing himself.

“Come on let’s go meet the rest of the family.” Colin tugged her through the living room and then French doors, out to the back patio that ran the length of the house.

“It’s beautiful! I can smell the roses,” Rachel said.

Colin led her to the outdoor kitchen where his parents were preparing the meal. “Mom, Dad, you know Rachel Murray.”

“It’s nice to see you again, Rachel.” Colin’s mom smiled at her.

“I appreciate you having me, Mrs. Maguire.”

“Call me, Elizabeth, please.”

“We’re happy you could come, and please call me, Rory,” Colin’s father added.

“Whatever you’re grilling smells wonderful,” Rachel said.

“We’re having chicken with grilled peppers, mushrooms, and zucchini. I hope you like it.” Rory grinned.

“It sounds like a delicious summer meal.” Rachel returned his smile but watched for signs that Colin’s parents felt as awkward as she did in that moment.

“Marie, would you get Rachel a drink?” Elizabeth asked her sister-in-law.

“Of course.” Marie smiled, as Colin continued the introductions. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Yes, thank you.” Rachel took the goblet then sipped the straw-colored wine, giving herself a second to enjoy the apple and oak flavors, in an attempt to calm her stomach. She walked beside Colin to the huge stone fireplace where more of his family were enjoying the beautiful summer weather. She met his uncle and various siblings and cousins, and then they walked over to Aunt Bebe, who was relaxing on one of the couches that made up the outdoor living room.

“Rachel, it’s so nice to see you again. Come sit here with me awhile.” Bebe patted the couch, and Rachel sank into the cushions. “Colin, why don’t you see if your parents need help with dinner?”

He smiled at the thinly disguised order. “You used to bribe me with candy when you wanted me to leave.”

“I’ll get you some licorice tomorrow. Now, scram.”

“Yes, Aunt Bebe.” He smiled at Rachel and headed over toward the kitchen.

“Now, tell me how things are going between you two,” Bebe said, with a determined glint in her eyes.

“Ah...” Rachel looked helplessly at Colin’s back as he walked to his dad.

“I promise it’s okay, dear.” Bebe patted Rachel’s arm.

Rachel started hesitantly, but soon found herself telling the older woman everything.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Rachel, who had learned all types of things about Colin from Bebe, rejoined him and mingled with various relatives. Soon, they were sitting down at the two long outdoor dining tables that had been put together with more than enough space for them all. The grilled chicken with vegetables was as delicious as it smelled. Rachel relaxed with the warmth of the wine and Colin's family. She loved her big family and was happy to see Colin loved his, too.

After the dishes were cleared, the younger generation of females moved over to the living room area with bowls of fruit topped with freshly whipped cream. Rachel sat her fruit on the oversized coffee table and fell into easy conversation with them. She glanced up and saw Colin at the other end of the patio by the stone fireplace, gesturing earnestly to his brothers as he spoke. She observed as Rory came up, slapped Colin on the back, and joined the group. Soon, the men were laughing. Rachel watched, and as she watched, she understood she was in love. She had wondered, had thought perhaps, but at that moment, she knew, and the warmth of the feeling spread over her.

"Rachel?" Katie asked.

Rachel snapped back into the conversation, a faint blush heating her face. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"Forget that. Where were you? Your face went all soft and dreamy," Katie probed.

"Never mind. Now, what were you saying about that fifty percent-off sale?" Safely diverting their attention, Rachel tucked her newfound knowledge away to be savored later.

As the summer shadows grew longer, Sean and Marie decided it was time to head home. Soon, the others were leaving, and Colin asked Rachel if she was ready to go.

"I'm sorry you have to leave to take me home. I should've driven over myself."

Colin eased the red 'Vette onto the street. "I'm not sorry. I haven't gotten any time alone with you all evening. At least we've got the drive."

She could just make out the hint of a smile in the semi-darkness of the car. “I had a wonderful time. Thanks for inviting me. I like your family.”

“They liked you, too.”

The silence felt intense, as she watched the shadows cast by the streetlights, not sure what to say next.

“I still owe you that homecooked meal,” she ventured. “Are you interested?”

“Oh, I’m interested.” His voice was low and husky with meaning.

She shivered next to him in the darkness. “I meant,” she said as primly as she could, “in having supper.”

“Sure, that, too.” He couldn’t help laughing.

She joined him, lightening the mood and relaxing her nerves.

They discussed the different conversations they’d had the rest of the way to her house. Once there, he walked her to the door.

“Are there brothers hiding anywhere?”

“No. You’re safe, at least for now.” Her heart was humming as he kissed her goodnight.

Colin took her keys and opened the door, ushering her inside. He handed the keys back and simply gazed at her for a moment. “Good night, Rachel.”

“Good night.” Rachel stood in the doorway and watched as he pulled out of the drive. She stayed there, watching the taillights fade into the darkness, feeling the love in his kiss and in her heart.

## Chapter Fourteen

### Colin

Colin dropped his car keys into the little bowl on the entryway table and walked into the kitchen. His cell phone rang as he opened the cupboard and grabbed a glass. He hit answer, while filling the glass with cold water.

“She must be important to you.”

“Hello, to you, too, Mom.” Colin chuckled before taking a drink.

“Hello. She must be important to you.”

Colin didn't pretend to not understand his mother's statement. “Yes, she is.”

“And for her?”

“I'm not sure,” he stated truthfully.

“This is the first time you've ever brought anyone to a private family deal.”

“I had to know how she'd fit with all of us before I take this any further.” Colin thought back to seeing Rachel and Aunt Bebe side by side, deep in conversation, Bebe adding emphasis with her hands in an animated conversation.

Elizabeth sighed and said softly, “Honey, you know we'd love anyone if you loved them.”

“I know, Mom. I just wanted to see her there, to see how it felt. It's important.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Family's always been important to you, to all of us. Just so, there's no doubt, your dad and I both like her.”

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Unable to sleep, Colin planned and plotted the entire night. Any doubts he'd had previously had been blown away while watching Rachel with his family. It was like she'd always been

there, a part of it all. He was now totally and completely in love.

By courting Rachel—he liked the old-fashioned term—he was working on creating the rest of his life. Their love would be the foundation for everything to come. He knew how to build a structure from the beginning to a happy ending. It was a logical conclusion that the same meticulous planning would create the love, life, and family he'd always wanted, but had never believed could be his. By holding onto these thoughts, it helped keep the panicky fear of failure from overwhelming him.

Once he arrived at the construction site, Colin went straight to the office trailer and ordered a balloon bouquet to be delivered that afternoon, knowing Rachel would be manning the office. Later that week, he planned for a picnic at the zoo and a champagne brunch on Sunday. Monday, he would track her down on the job and leave a basket filled with something fun to surprise her.

# Chapter Fifteen

## Rachel

Rachel's mood was as bright and sunny as the morning. She stretched her arms over the covers and watched the oak leaves dancing in the sunshine over the top of her bedroom curtains. She dressed casually in cut-off jeans and an old, oversized T-shirt and decided it was a great morning for making blueberry pancakes and sausage.

Casey shuffled into the kitchen still in her pajamas and poured a hot cup of coffee, wrapping both hands around the mug. "Smells amazing," she mumbled as she plunked down at the kitchen table and took her first sip of coffee.

Rachel placed a full plate of food in front of her sister without a break in the song she was humming.

"What's got you so cheerful this early?" Casey squinted at her.

"Love," Rachel said simply.

"That's nice." Casey kept eating the light fluffy pancakes for almost another full minute. Then she jumped up, the chair falling backward with a loud bang, and gripped Rachel by both arms. "Love?"

"Uh, huh. I'm in love with him!" Rachel smiled, while Casey let out a scream and hugged her hard.

Emily walked in, rubbing her eyes. "What's all the noise about? Can't you two let a body get some sleep?"

Casey turned and grabbed Emily's arm, shaking her. "Rachel's in love!"

"Really?" This time, Emily ran over and stared at Rachel straight in the eyes. "Are you absolutely positive?"

"Definitely," Rachel sighed.

Emily gave her a ferocious hug. "Stop cooking and tell us everything."



~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The next day, Rachel and Emily completed their first job in time to have lunch with Casey.

“I already know what I’m ordering. I’m starving,” Emily said as they carried their equipment to the SUV.

“Me too. I’m getting the chicken slaw.” Rachel opened the driver’s door to discover a large wicker basket wrapped in light pink cellophane sitting on the front seat. “How in the world did this get here?” she said, aiming a slight glare at Emily. “This is what you really went out to the SUV for, wasn’t it?”

Emily grinned. “Well, I did leave my phone out here, but on purpose, so I could open the door for him.” She sighed. “I wish I could find a guy like him. He is so in love with you.”

Rachel untied the ribbon and took each item out, one at a time, reading the description and smelling the fragrance. She screwed the lid back on the shimmering vanilla body lotion and looked at her sister. “Do you think he loves me? Really?”

Emily raised both eyebrows in question. “Yes. I do,” she said in a solemn, quiet voice. “It’s not just all the romancing either. I can see it in his eyes every time he looks at you. Just like I see it in yours.”

Rachel’s eyes welled with tears.

“Oh, Rachel, what is it?” Emily put her hand on Rachel’s arm, her face full of concern.

“I’m all right.”

“I hate to tell you this, but you don’t look all right.”

“I know. I’m sorry. It’s just that I already love him so much, and I’ve been so scared that he didn’t love me. That he was just being nice.”

Emily handed her a tissue, leaned over, and gave her a one-armed hug. “Sweetheart, I’ve seen nice, and what he’s been doing blows nice clear out of the water.”

Rachel wiped her eyes and gave Emily a small, watery smile. “But he hasn’t said anything.”

Emily began sniffing bottles. “Maybe he’s waiting for you to say it first. Or maybe he wants to be sure he’s won you over before saying it. Whichever it is, I like his style. These smell fantastic.”

Rachel smiled. “They do, don’t they? And before you even ask, I’m not sharing.” Laughing, Rachel placed everything back in the basket. She backed the car out of the driveway, and they headed for the restaurant.

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They saw Casey already waiting at a table when they entered, the scents of cheeseburgers and crispy fried chicken competing for their attention.

Rachel placed her order without looking at the menu since their cold chicken slaw salad was one of her summer go-to meals. The three of them usually met there twice a week, giving them a nice break while supporting a neighborhood restaurant.

“Boy, Rachel, you look happy,” Casey said after the waitress left with their orders.

“With good reason,” Emily chimed.

“Let me guess...” Casey gave Rachel a knowing look. “Colin strikes again.”

“Bingo.” Emily nodded her head in agreement.

“What was it this time?” Casey asked.

“A big basket of lotions, creams, shower gels, scrubs and stuff,” Rachel answered.

The waitress returned with their lunches, and they dug into their meals.

“Well, we all know how Rachel’s romance is. What’s the latest news on that guy you were seeing, Casey?” Emily pointed her fork at the sister in question.

Casey played with her French fry in the ketchup, making little heart designs. “Well, we’ve only gone out three times. He’s really nice. Still, it’s too soon to tell. He has the same last name as Colin, so he might be some relation, but it’s also a fairly common name.”

Rachel finished her iced tea and nodded. “What’s his first name?”

“Redmond, after his grandfather. I asked because it’s such an unusual name,” Casey answered.

“I haven’t met a Redmond, but I’ll ask Colin. Right now, we’d all best get back at it.”

While Emily drove to the next house they were cleaning, Rachel used her cell to call Colin.

“Hi, Colin. I wanted to thank you for the surprise. That was so sweet! I like all of it.”

“I was hoping you would. Katie helped me pick it out. Do you like the fragrance?”

Colin’s voice was low, and she could tell he was smiling.

“They smell marvelous! Give Katie my thanks, then, too.”

“Why don’t you come over tonight to Aunt Marie and Uncle Sean’s? Then you can thank her yourself,” Colin said.

“Sure, I could do that. It can’t be a late night, though. I’ve got an early job tomorrow.”

“No problem. I’ll come over at 5:30?”

“Sounds fine. Thank you again for my surprise.” Rachel pushed “end” and smiled over at Emily. “He’s taking me over to his aunt and uncle’s. Who knows? Maybe he’ll say something tonight.” Rachel grinned.

## Chapter Sixteen

### Detective Harding

Detectives Harding and Garcia approached Chief Hobson's assistant. "Hi Charlene, Chief Hobson wanted to see us," Harding said.

"Detectives Garcia and Harding are here to see you, Chief Hobson," his assistant announced over the intercom.

"Send them in," Hobson buzzed back at her.

"Good luck you two," Charlene smiled at them.

Garcia moaned, glanced at Harding, and opened the door. Harding winked at Charlene and trailed Garcia into the room. They each took a seat in front of the desk.

"Well?" the Police Chief asked in his most sarcastic tone.

"Well, what?" Harding shot back. He knew this "hassle the detectives" game and was tired of playing it.

Hobson raised one bushy black eyebrow and stared pointedly at the detective.

Harding simply smiled and waited.

Finally, Hobson lifted his hands, palms up, in a "what's up" gesture and shifted back in his leather chair. This was something he rarely did for fear of wrinkling his expensive suits, and in doing so, Harding realized how upset Hobson was.

"I think you know what I'm asking. But since you're both being purposely obtuse this afternoon, I'll lay it out for you. I received a call from our mayor this morning, Detectives. Our very upset mayor. He wanted to know why the O'Brien jewelry hasn't been recovered. Bridget O'Brien and the Maguire family are very influential people in this city. They deserve answers. The mayor deserves answers. The mayor and his family are longtime friends of the Maguires. In fact, the mayor was at the party when the theft occurred. He feels personally responsible for having this matter cleared up as

quickly as possible, which makes me personally responsible for having this problem solved immediately.”

Harding slid a look at Garcia, who sat perfectly still except for the slight tensing of her jaw muscle. He knew she was working to keep her temper under control.

The police chief continued, smoothly transferring his problem to the detectives sitting in front of him. “And so, it is up to you to handle this mess with the utmost expediency.” He smiled and looked at them through narrowed eyes, steeping his fingers together in front of his chest.

Harding knew the chief had just effectively made them responsible, and if there were no happy ending, it would be their hides nailed to the wall.

“So, Detectives, now that we completely understand each other, tell me what you’ve got.”

Harding glanced at his partner and saw that Garcia’s jaw muscles were still clenched, so he spoke, knowing it would be safer than letting Garcia answer. “We’ve gone through the guest list and the hired help. We’ve checked bank accounts, and there have been no large deposits. Nothing’s showing up in the local pawnshops. However, we have two primary suspects, Adam Silvers and Rachel Murray. Both had the opportunity, but the male has a record and has been pawning jewelry, though nothing from this job.”

“Great. There’s your guy. Let’s get a search warrant.” Hobson smiled and leaned forward.

“The judge said it’s not enough to get a warrant, and you know it,” Garcia said through gritted teeth.

The chief glared at her. “What I know is that this needs to be solved immediately.”

Harding responded before Garcia could. “We’ve got him under surveillance. As soon as we have anything more substantial, we’ll be on it.”

“Unless you want to spend the rest of your summer job hunting, you’d better be on it now.”

“We’ve wasted enough time. Let’s get out of here,” Garcia growled as she stood and moved for the door.

Harding nodded and followed his partner into the hallway. “Sara, why do you let him get under your skin?” Harding pushed the down button for the elevator.

Garcia moved her head from side to side and rolled her shoulders. “I don’t know. He’s such a jerk.”

“Exactly my point. You don’t want a jerk crawling around under your skin. It’s worse than having lice or something.”

Garcia stepped into the elevator and turned to her partner. “Thanks. That’s a terrific visual to have stuck in my head. Now, I’ll be itchy all afternoon.”

Harding smiled. “Hey, anything to help, partner.”

## Chapter Seventeen

### Colin

Colin carried the tray of cookies into the living room and placed it on top of the coffee table. “Hazel just pulled these out of the oven and asked me to bring them in,” Colin said. “The chocolate’s still soft.”

His mom smiled at him. “You realize, she makes those when she knows you’ll be here, because they’re your favorites.”

“What can I say? I can’t help it, if I’m the most adorable of all your sons.” Colin leaned down and kissed his mom’s cheek and then grabbed another cookie. “I’m heading out. I’ll be back in a bit,” Colin said.

“Luckily, they’re my favorite cookie too,” his dad said. Rory finished pouring the drinks and came out from around the mahogany bar. “Any news on the robbery?”

Elizabeth took the cut crystal glass and sipped the cold drink. “Thanks, sweetheart.”

Rory smiled at her and grabbed a cookie, before turning his attention back to his brother.

“We’ve heard from everyone. The mayor feels badly, and the chief of police assures me we’ll have all of Bebe’s valuables back by Friday. Harding and Garcia say they’re following every lead.”

“Meaning Adam?”

Sean shifted in his chair, putting his long legs on the overstuffed ottoman. “That’s what I asked. And they said, ‘We’re following every possible lead.’ But it’s down to him. Or Rachel.”

Colin paused at the doorway, struck by how casually his uncle assumed that Rachel was still a suspect.

“Rachel didn’t do it,” Colin said as he walked back in to face them.

“I didn’t say she did,” Sean countered, “But you can’t argue that she’s a damn good suspect. You don’t have to be a detective to figure that out.”

“I was just leaving to pick her up and bring her over, but I think we should eat somewhere else—somewhere she’s not a suspect.”

Rory shifted forward to block Colin’s exit. “Son, cool down. No one’s saying Rachel did it. We’re just talking about how it looks. You’re the one that was so sure she was guilty that you accused her in front of the detectives while they were questioning her.”

Colin took a breath and tried to speak calmly. “Okay. I get it. You’re right. I still think it’s best if I take her somewhere else.”

Rory shook his head but moved aside and let Colin pass.

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On his way to pick up Rachel, Colin rolled his window down in the Corvette, hoping the wind might help blow the thoughts out of his head. He could call her and tell her something had come up. He was sure she would understand. But what would he say when she asked him what had changed? Oh, nothing. My family just reminded me that you’re still a prime suspect in the robbery and how, if I were being objective, I would still suspect you. And since I always fall for women who are only interested in my family’s money, you would fit right into that category. Oh, except you figured out how to get the cash without dating me first. Yeah, he definitely couldn’t say that. The real problem was that his family was right. He had stopped thinking impartially a while ago.

When Rachel opened the door, Colin smiled at her and drew her in for a kiss.

She sighed. “I love answering the door when you ring. It’s always such a fun hello.”

“Trust me. I love it, too,” Colin said as he led her to the car.



“So, tell me what’s happening at your family’s house.”

“Oh, nothing. In fact, I’ve decided I’m not in the mood to share you with them. So, I hope you don’t mind, but I thought we’d try that new steak house.”

“That’s fine with me.”

Colin stared at the road, concentrating on driving like he’d just gotten his license.

“Is anything wrong?”

“No, I just want to go out with you, not my whole family.” Colin glanced at Rachel and smiled. At least, he hoped it came off as a smile, not a grimace. Maybe it would have been better if he’d just canceled the date. He couldn’t feel more awkward than he did at that moment. “Plus, a big ribeye sounds delicious.”

“Ribeye is always fantastic. What is your family fixing tonight?” Rachel focused on him when there was a noticeable pause before he responded.

“Steak.”

“Okay...are you sure everything’s okay?”

“Everything’s fine. It’s just been a long day.” Colin pulled into the restaurant, sure of his ability to distract her and hopefully himself once they got inside.

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As soon as Colin dropped Rachel off at home, with more than a few good night kisses, he drove straight to Dylan’s.

He parked the Vette, appreciating the cooler night air as he walked up to Dylan’s townhouse. Colin rang the doorbell and heard the Ohio State fight song play. When Dylan didn’t answer, Colin glanced at his watch and saw it was later than he had realized. He pressed the bell again and again. He started laughing when Dylan opened the door in his boxers with his wavy black hair standing on end.

“What the hell, dude? It’s after midnight.”

“I’m glad to see you, too, bro.” Colin laughed and walked around Dylan, heading for the kitchen. “I want a beer. Do you want anything?” Colin could feel Dylan’s burning glare on his back as he dug in the fridge.

“I want to be sleeping.”

Colin turned with two beers in his hands, offering one to Dylan.

Dylan rolled his eyes. “Is this going to be a long visit?”

“It’s not going to be a short one.”

Dylan grabbed the cold beer bottle. “Okay. What’s got your panties in such a twist that you woke me up in the middle of the night to have a beer?”

“What if I’m wrong about Rachel?”

“You just got me out of a dead sleep. I need a few more clues. Wrong about what? That you love her? That she could ever love someone as bitchy as you? You not realizing she’s the best thing that ever happened to you? Narrow it down, dude.”

Colin swallowed a mouthful of the frosty light ale, eyeing Dylan over the top of the bottle. “Quit being an idiot. What if I’m mistaken, and Rachel really is the thief?”

Dylan shook his head, walked over to the couch, and sat before taking a long drink. “And you’re calling me an idiot. I can’t believe you got me out of bed for this. Rachel did not steal Aunt Bebe’s jewelry.”

“Just hear me out, okay?” Colin sat in the chair across from Dylan and bent forward, his arms on his knees.

“I guess I might as well. I’m awake now, and the beer is excellent.”

“So, I was at the house and Dad and Uncle Sean started discussing the robbery and saying how Rachel is still a prime suspect. I got pissed, but I realized they were right. She is.”

“Yeah, so? There’s a huge gap between being a suspect and being guilty.”

“But I’ve completely lost my ability to be objective. This is what I do. It’s what I always do. I choose the woman who wants my money. Rachel could just be the next one in the line.” Colin stared at the carpet and rubbed the cold bottle across the back of his neck.

“Colin, that’s what you did. Not what you do. Rachel is night and day from the ones you usually pick. If you can’t trust your own gut right now, I get that, but you can trust mine. You know I never thought Marley was right for you, no one did. But everyone likes Rachel, and no one believes she’s guilty. Quit worrying and enjoy being with an amazing woman.” Dylan sat his half-finished beer on the coffee table and walked to the door. “And. Go. Home.”

Colin stood, following Dylan to the door. “Thanks, man. I just needed to hear it.” He hugged Dylan and pressed the still-cold bottle against his brother’s bare back.

“Shit.” Dylan snatched the bottle and punched Colin in the shoulder as he walked out the door.

# Chapter Eighteen

## Rachel

“I swear he’s hiding something from me,” Rachel told Casey the following morning as they drove to their first job of the day.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s just as simple as he said. He wanted to spend some time with you, not the whole gang.” Casey sipped more minty green tea from her to-go mug and admired the plantings in people’s front yards as they drove past.

“It didn’t feel simple. It felt like he was hiding something. You know how I feel about being lied to. It’s what rich guys do to get what they want,” Rachel said, her tone grim.

Casey rubbed Rachel’s arm with her free hand. “Honey, he is not Scum Bob. Colin is an honest, great guy who wanted some time alone with you. That’s all.”

Rachel took a deep breath and let it out. “Maybe you’re right. I need to stop judging all men against Scum Bob. Just for that reminder, lunch is on me today.”

“In that case, I’m happy to be of service. So, you’re still going to go out with him tomorrow, right?” Casey smiled and lifted her tea in salute.

“Yes. I’ll see how he is. Maybe he did just want some time for the two of us since we’re going to his aunt and uncle’s house for pizza with everyone.” Rachel shrugged and decided to stop overanalyzing everything and just enjoy how she felt about him.

# Chapter Nineteen

## Colin

Colin saw that only part of the family had arrived when he pulled into the drive. He opened Rachel's door and helped her out of the car and straight into his arms. He brushed his lips across hers, then taking her hand in his, he steered her around to the side of the house.

He had been thinking about telling her how he felt, or at least strongly hinting at it, to see her reaction. This could be his opportunity. "We're a little early, so I thought it'd be nice to walk through the woods before we joined the crowd."

To the side of the tended yard stood a wooded area with well-worn paths cutting through it.

"Colin, this is beautiful."

"Yes. This place means a lot to me. We grew up playing out here, riding horses...necking when we were older."

"So, that's why you brought me out here, ulterior motives."

Colin tugged on her hand, pulling her over to sit beside him on a fallen log. "You're on to me. I confess I brought you out here so you could take advantage of me." Colin smiled and wiggled his eyebrows.

"Ah, at last, you're completely under my spell," Rachel smiled.

Colin didn't respond, he simply looked at her. Rachel stopped laughing and Colin could see the confusion and concern in her eyes.

"Colin?"

Colin laid his palm gently on the side of her face and gazed into her eyes. "You're right, you know. I am completely under your spell, and I like it."

Rachel didn't speak, just leaned forward and kissed him softly. Colin pulled back and took both her hands in his. He gazed down at their joined hands for several seconds, took a

long breath, and looked back up at her. “I’m serious, Rachel. I love you. I’ve been trying to take this slowly, but I can’t. I had to tell you where I’m at, what I’m feeling.”

Rachel smiled at him. “I’m so happy you did. I’ve been hoping I wasn’t the only one who was falling fast. I love you, too.”

Colin pulled her to him and held her close as if his life depended on it. Because he knew inside his heart that it did. “Hey, what’s this?” Colin wiped a tear from her cheek.

“I’m okay. I’m just so happy.” Rachel wiped at the tears with one hand.

“How about we walk a little, then head back to the house?” Colin suggested, afraid she’d start tearing up again.

“Sounds good,” Rachel said with a watery laugh.

They headed off through the old oaks and wildflowers, still hand-in-hand.

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Colin and Rachel strolled towards the patio, their faces glowing.

“Hi. We didn’t know you two were here,” Liam exclaimed, seemingly oblivious to the emotions dancing between the couple. Liam’s greeting brought Colin back to earth, and he took a moment to re-group. He did not need his entire family figuring out how fast things were moving with Rachel. He needed to be steadier inside himself before he had to deal with the avalanche of emotions the news would generate from his wonderful but nosy family.

“Uh, yeah. I just wanted to show Rachel how pretty the woods were this time of year with all of the wildflowers blooming.” Colin stared at Liam, daring him to comment further.

“Blooming wildflowers. Yeah, right. I’ve never heard it called that before, but... Hey!” Liam yelled as Colin socked him in the arm.

Colin would have kept squabbling with Liam, but he glanced up and thought he saw the sheen of tears in his mother's eyes. He walked to the fireplace where she was sitting with his Aunt Marie.

"Mom, are you alright?" Colin watched her and kept his tone gentle.

"Oh, sweetheart. I'm fine. Don't worry about me." Her smile reaching her eyes. "Go enjoy your evening with Rachel. I like her."

"Do you really?" His voice solemn.

Elizabeth took his hand, squeezed it, and looked him directly in the eyes. "You couldn't do any better. She's perfect."

He bent down, kissed her cheek, and whispered, "I love you, Mom."

He turned back to Rachel, who was in deep conversation with Katie.

Elizabeth's eyes filled again. "I love you, too, sweetheart."

Aunt Bebe struggled through the French doors, carrying a large box with various wires straggling behind her. "I could use some help here. With all these big, strapping nephews, you'd think a weak, elderly aunt wouldn't have to work so hard," Bebe said with her eyebrows arched in defiance.

Several of the aforementioned nephews rushed to her side as Rory shut the doors behind her. "Weak and elderly? Really?" he asked with a grin on his face.

"Don't be a smart mouth with me, young man. I was here when you were just a gleam in your daddy's eye."

"Yes, mam." Rory smirked.

"Why do you have a karaoke machine, Aunt Bebe?" asked Katie.

"I figured it would liven things up. Life's been dull around here lately."

“That’s true.” Sean broke in, “Personally, I’ve always found major robberies boring.”

Several people laughed, but Aunt Bebe regarded him with mild disdain. “In case you’ve forgotten, that was weeks ago. Since then, this family has just been the same old same old!”

“I’ll tell you what, Aunt Bebe, since you called me young man, I’ll offer to sing first.” Sean grinned and swung his arm across her shoulders.

“You’ll go second,” Bebe said, raising her chin. “I get to sing first!”

“Well, now that we’ve got that settled, how about some food?” Marie asked. She opened the cast iron door to the outdoor pizza oven. “I’ve got four that are ready.” She slipped the long handled wooden spatula under the closest sizzling pizza, drew it out and set it on the granite counter. She did the same with the next three, then put four more in the oven to bake.

Dylan came around to stand beside her. “I love your pizza, Aunt Marie. It smells so amazing. What kind did you make this time?”

“Thank you. I’ve got a pepperoni, sausage and black olive, a Canadian bacon and pineapple, a mushroom, olive, and roasted red peppers, and last, but not least, a Mexican pizza complete with jalapeños.”

“You’re the best!” Dylan said and started clapping. Soon, everyone was standing and applauding.

“Thank you. Thank you, my adoring public.” Marie curtsied left and then right.

Colin nabbed a piece for Rachel and himself and brought them to the table. Rachel smiled up at him and pushed out the chair next to hers.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Colin followed Tyler and Dylan through the side door into the house, while the others were happily singing a melody of



the Eagles' hits.

“Why all the secrecy? You'd think you were working for an international spy ring.” Colin looked at Tyler.

“Don't let Colin bother you, dude. He's just mad that you pulled him away from his lady.” Dylan smirked.

“At I least I have a lady,” Colin muttered.

“Do you two mind? I don't know how long we have before someone starts looking for one of us,” Tyler whispered. “Look, I wanted to tell you something before you become any more involved with the lady.”

“What are you talking about?” Colin turned to face Tyler, his hands already fisted.

“Just listen, would you? I happened to catch a phone conversation Adam was having with a friend of his from back home. Adam didn't know I could hear him, so he was talking plainly, using the speaker while he lifted some weights. It seems the robbery made some of the news feeds, and this guy thought Adam pulled it. He was asking for details and whether Adam wanted any help unloading the stuff, you know, offering to help for a cut of the money. Adam told him very clearly that he didn't do it but wished he had. He said he had been looking for a safe in there, because it was a perfect spot to hide one, but hadn't found it. Adam said the cleaning lady pulled the job, and the guy suggested that Adam approach her and see if she needed any assistance fencing the stuff. That way, they could both make some money. Adam said he would think about it and let him know. That's when I turned around and left the house so Adam wouldn't know I had been home.”

“Damn, bro. There goes our number one suspect.” Dylan watched Colin pace back and forth in the small space off the laundry room.

Colin couldn't believe it. Rachel couldn't be guilty, but what other answer was there? “Maybe Adam was lying to this dude because he didn't want to split the money,” Colin said, his jaw clenched, daring either of them to argue with him.

“Sure. That’s a possibility, bro.” Dylan’s eyes were wide as he watched Colin continue to pace.

Colin rounded on Dylan. “You’re the one who told me to trust her. You said she was just a nice, innocent woman.”

“Calm down, dude. We don’t really know. You need to get a grip. Your lady’s outside singing karaoke with Aunt Bebe.”

“Okay. Okay. You’re right.” Colin paused and took a breath. “Tyler, have you told anyone else about this?”

“No, man. I wanted to let you know first, because...well, because...” Tyler shrugged.

“I appreciate that. Would you please not tell anyone for a couple of days? Just give the detectives a few more days to see if they find anything.”

“No problem. I don’t blame you. Rachel’s something special.” Tyler put his hand on Colin’s arm in support. “I’m going to go back out, before Katie comes hunting for me.”

“I’m going to grab a beer from the kitchen and then follow Tyler. Why don’t you take a couple of minutes?” Dylan nodded to Colin and moved toward the kitchen.

“Wait.” Colin snagged Dylan’s arm as he started out of the room. “Dylan, what if I was right the first time? What if she is the thief?” Colin stared down at his own feet, not wanting to see whatever Dylan was thinking written across his face.

“It can’t be her, bro. It just doesn’t fit who she is, the person her own sister says she is. The person you know she is. Quit letting your old fears stop you from following your heart.”

Colin gaped at Dylan.

“Sorry. But you needed to hear that straight out. This isn’t about Rachel being innocent. This is about your old crap trying to drag you back down. It’s time to let that shit go.”

“Easy for you to say. You aren’t the one who almost married a gold-digger. I’m afraid I’m not being objective. That I’m making the same mistake. Again!”

“If you can tell me one trait that Rachel has in common with Marley then I might reconsider. But you can’t because they are total opposites.”

Colin looked out the laundry room’s little window. He could just make out part of Rachel’s face as Bebe hugged her. He took a slow breath and watched the laughter on Rachel’s face. “You’re right. Okay. This is scary as hell. But you’re right. I have to start trusting Rachel and myself.”

“It’s about time. If I have to go through this with you again, I’m going to begin charging by the hour. I don’t have time to keep playing therapist, at least not without getting paid for it. Now, can I go get another beer?”

“Yes. Go, go.” *There’s got to be another explanation, Colin thought to himself, as he resumed pacing. I just have to figure out what it is or who it is.*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Later that night, Rachel leaned over and watched the stars through the car window as Colin drove her home.

“You’re awfully quiet over there,” Rachel said. “I was just thinking about what a fun night it was. How much I enjoy your family. But it did make me realize something.” She shifted her gaze to him. “You haven’t met my family, and I’d like you to.”

He let out the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. It was important for him to remember why he’d started going out with Rachel in the first place. Had he lost all objectivity? Could his heart, that he was finally starting to trust again, be that wrong? What if, rather than proving she was guilty, he tried to prove her innocence? Maybe if he took a break from seeing her so much, maybe spent some time hanging out with Tyler and Adam, he could turn up information that would help. Out loud, Colin said, “I’ve already met your brother, remember?” He rubbed his jaw as he spoke.

“Oh, that’s right. Sorry, again.” Only one soft giggle escaped. “I was actually thinking about my folks. Eventually, it would be good for you to meet all of them.”

“Um, sure. I don’t know what my schedule’s like over the next couple of weeks, but sure.”

“You don’t have to. I understand if you’re not quite ready.” Rachel gazed at him in the light of the car’s dashboard. “Why don’t you check your calendar and let me know?”

“Okay.” Colin nodded as he pulled into her driveway.

Rachel opened the door as soon as Colin put the car into park.

“I’ll get the door for you.” Colin turned off the ignition.

“No, that’s okay. I’ve got it. It’s been a long day, and I just want to climb into bed.”

“I feel the same way. I’ll call you tomorrow.” Colin leaned over to kiss her goodnight, but he was already plotting how to prove her innocence and Rachel was halfway out of the car.

She bent back in the door. “Thank you for a lovely meal and time with your family. Night, Colin.”

# Chapter Twenty

## Rachel

Rachel walked into the house, happy to see Casey and Emily still up and talking over their day.

“How was your date, sis?” Emily asked as Rachel placed her purse on the entryway table.

“I thought it was wonderful. But, now...now, I’m just not sure.” Rachel sat in the chair across from her sisters, holding her palms up. “Everything started great. We went for a walk in the woods behind the house, and Colin told me he loved me.”

“Oh, wow! That’s fantastic, Rachel. I’m so happy for you.” Casey jumped up and threw her arms around Rachel, but Emily hung back.

“Then why don’t you seem happier?” Emily cocked her head and watched Rachel’s face.

“She’s right. You should be over the moon and walking on clouds. Not looking like somebody kicked your puppy.” Casey drew back from the hug and waited for Rachel’s response.

“Well, I told him I felt the same way, and we kissed a little and then walked back to the house where all the family was. I thought everything was perfect!”

“And then...” urged Emily.

“And then we got in the car to drive home, and he barely even talked to me. He didn’t walk me to the door or even kiss me goodnight.”

Emily grabbed a tissue and dried Rachel’s tears as they slowly slid down her face.

Casey wrapped her arms around Rachel again and gave her a softer hug before rubbing her hand up and down Rachel’s back in comfort.

“That’s not right. He always walks you to the door. He always kisses you and spends a long time kissing you.” Emily looked at Rachel in confusion.

“Do you remember the last time something like this happened?” Rachel angled her body to see both sisters’ faces at once. “Do you?” When neither of them responded, Rachel answered for them. “It was right before Scum Bob dumped me —after a dinner with some of his family where he realized, and I quote, ‘You are obviously not in the same class as me and the rest of my family, which you have proven not only by your decision to clean houses for a living but also by your behavior tonight,’ end quote.” Rachel’s tears came faster as she reminded them of that night.

“But, honey, Colin is an amazing guy. He’s not Scum Bob,” Casey said, her tone gentle.

“She’s right, Rachel. And he told you he loves you,” Emily added.

“Scum Bob said the same thing the week before he dumped me when he was trying to talk me into going away for the weekend.”

Emily stared wide-eyed at Casey and shrugged.

Casey took the hint. “We told you from the beginning that Scum Bob was, well, scum,” earning a glare from Emily. “But Colin’s different. He’s not another Scum Bob.”

Rachel shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. I’m not going through this again. He’s just another wealthy guy, slumming around with me before he settles down and gets married to some other rich lady.”

“Honey, it’s possible that he just had something else on his mind. Maybe there’s some problem at work or something that has him distracted.”

Rachel eyed Casey. “Do you really think that could be it?”

“Of course. He’s not the kinda person to take you home to his family, tell you he loves you, and then dump you.”

“She’s right, Rachel. We told you in the beginning that Scum Bob was bad. Colin’s different. He’s one of the good ones. Why don’t you call him tomorrow and plan something? Where it’s just the two of you. See what happens. Don’t condemn him for being distracted for one evening.”

“Okay. Okay. Maybe I am overreacting a bit. You’re right. I’ll call him tomorrow and see how things are. I’m so grateful that you’re both always here when I need you. I don’t know what I’d do without the two of you.” Rachel hugged both of them and went off to bed.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The next morning, Rachel kept herself busy at the office. During the night, she had decided to wait until later in the day to make the call. She wanted to give Colin time to call her first, as a sort of test. Surely, when a guy has just told you he loves you, he wants to talk to you and see you again as soon as possible, right? But now, it was late afternoon, and she still hadn’t heard from him.

*Should I go ahead and call him or wait until tomorrow? I don’t want to pressure him, especially if something is going on at work. Although, if he really loved me, wouldn’t he talk to me about work? This is nuts. I’m driving myself crazy. He said he loved me. I’m just going to call him and see what is going on,* Rachel thought to herself as she stalked over to the desk, picked up her cell phone, and tapped on Colin’s number.

After leaving three messages and not getting a return call or even a text, Rachel put her phone on vibrate and stuck it in the desk drawer. She then proceeded to clean the office from top to bottom.

When Emily walked into the back room, she found Rachel washing the floorboards.

“This is never a good sign. You only do this intense office cleaning when something’s wrong. What’s going on, sis?” Emily asked.

“I decided to wait and see if Colin called me today, but after I didn’t hear from him this morning, I called him, and he never answered. So, I left some voicemails but still haven’t heard from him.” Rachel shrugged as if it didn’t matter in the least but kept her back to Emily.

“It only means he’s busy, Rachel. That’s all. Nothing more. You have been spending tons of time together. Maybe he’s

trying to catch up at work or something.” Emily opened the closet and began restocking her cleaning supplies while Rachel stood and sulked behind her.

“I’m not calling him again.” Rachel crossed her arms and glared at Emily’s back, daring Emily to contradict her.

“I didn’t say you should. I think you should give him some time to be done with whatever he’s doing, listen to your voicemails, and then call you back. Since it’s barely 4:30 p.m., I’d say he hasn’t had time to do any of that yet.”

Rachel stalked across the room. “Okay. Fine. Be all reasonable and level-headed. See if I care. But listen here, sis. The next time you’re in love and having trouble, I’ll be all Ms. Logical on you and see how you like it.”

Emily pulled her head from the supply closet and nodded at Rachel. “Okay. You’re right. I get it. Colin is being horrible. How dare he keep working in the middle of the day? He should be answering your multiple phone calls. How could he be so cruel, so mean, so heartless? Maybe he should just quit his job so he can dedicate his time to you. Who needs a job when you can live on love?”

Rachel rolled her eyes and grinned. “Now, that’s more like it. That’s the kinda support I’m looking for.”

“So, now I understand. You just want me to agree with whatever you say and forget about being a reasonable, logical human being. I can do that,” Emily said while attempting to keep a straight face.

“Thanks. Just what I needed, someone to make me realize what a fool I’ve been.” Rachel took the first deep breath she’d had all day and felt her shoulders relax. “You’re right. I’m acting like an idiot. I’m sure I’ll hear from him later.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Rachel picked up her phone and smiled when she saw Colin’s name displayed across her screen.

“Hi there, stranger.” She winced at her greeting.



“Hi. I’m sorry I missed your calls earlier today. I had my phone on vibrate and didn’t realize you’d called.”

“That’s okay. I figured you must be super busy at work.” Rachel paused, mentally urging Colin to tell her what was going on. She heard a beep and some rattling noises through the phone.

“Um, yeah. Lots of stuff happening. Crap!”

“Colin, what’s wrong?”

“It’s just been a crazy day, and I wasn’t paying attention. I burned my fingers, grabbing the plate from the microwave without a hot pad. I’m sorry, Rachel. It’s just been one of those days. Did you figure out a day for us to see your parents?”

Rachel watched the hummingbird dart in and out of their backyard feeder. *I know something’s wrong, something’s changed, but I can’t force him to tell me.*

“Yes. We’re set to go there for dessert on Wednesday if that works for you?”

“That’s great! Why don’t I pick you up, and we can have supper and then go over?”

Rachel released the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding, half afraid he was going to find a way out of meeting them. “I’d love that.”

“Okay. It’s a date. I’m going to say goodnight. I still need to eat, and I have to return a few other calls.”

“Um, sure. Of course. Enjoy your meal.” Rachel ended the call. Turning, she went to her room. *Something is wrong. I don’t know what, but ever since I had dinner with his family, he’s different. This is just like the last time. This isn’t worth it. I can’t do this again.* Changing into her favorite worn cotton T-shirt and pajama shorts, she curled up under the covers on her bed and willed herself to sleep.

## Chapter Twenty-one

### Detective Harding

Detective Harding was going through all the notes on the O'Brien case. Garcia sat across from him on the other side of the desk, working on her third cup of strong, black coffee that morning.

"We're not getting anywhere, following this Adam guy," Harding muttered. "He hasn't done a damn thing to give us any link."

Garcia nodded and took another swig of coffee. Harding stared at her.

"If you keep living on that stuff, you won't have any stomach lining left. You know that."

Garcia smirked, nodded, and drank some more.

Harding cast his gaze heavenward. "Come on, Garcia, pretend you're a cop and join in the fun here."

Garcia burst out laughing. "Okay, the caffeine's beginning to kick in. So, I'm guessing you want me to ask if you have any other ideas?"

"Now, you're getting the swing of how this works."

Garcia lifted her coffee cup in a mock salute.

"Thank you." Harding bowed his head in acceptance. "I'm thinking we should check out this cleaning lady a little more. Have Stalder and her partner take over the tail on Adam, just in case. But maybe you and I can work this other angle and see if anything turns up."

Garcia put her empty mug down and stretched out her arms. "Sounds good. Adam's not going anywhere. At this point, I'm willing to put my money on Miss Clean."

## Chapter Twenty-two

### Rachel

Rachel opened the door when Colin knocked at precisely 5:30 p.m. on Wednesday.

“Hi, gorgeous.” Colin smiled when Rachel stepped back to let him inside. Before she could respond, the breath was being kissed out of her.

“I like how you say hello,” she murmured when he pulled away.

With his arms still around Rachel’s waist, Colin looked over her head into the living room. “I suppose I should’ve asked if anyone else was home first.”

Rachel smiled up at him. “Probably a good idea, but there’s a lot to be said for spontaneity. Anyway, you’re in luck. Casey’s out with her new boyfriend, and Em’s at a movie with friends.”

Colin squeezed her tighter. “This could be a fabulous night to eat in.”

“Uh-uh. You promised a meal out. I was thinking of that Chinese place we went to before.”

“They deliver,” Colin said, his eyes hopeful.

Rachel backed him onto the porch and closed the door behind them.

“Okay. Okay. I can take a hint.” Colin followed Rachel to the car and opened the car door for her.

“I was beginning to doubt that.” Rachel smiled innocently at him. She was so happy that he seemed to be back to his usual self. *Maybe I did overreact. Maybe Casey and Emily were right all along. I suppose it will take more time before I stop being suspicious when a guy seems to have such a quick personality change.*

They were still catching up on each other’s day when they pulled up to the restaurant. Colin held the door for her, and

they stood at the hostess's station. The mixture of garlic and ginger scented the air along with the aroma of sizzling meat.

"I've been wanting those crab wontons again," Rachel said.

"Those were great. I'm also thinking egg rolls and some Kung Pao Chicken over fried rice."

"Sounds as delicious as it smells in here," Rachel said as she turned to follow the hostess back to a booth.

They scanned the menu and were ready to order when the waitress arrived.

"I wanted to ask if I could come over every time you have Karaoke night. That was fun!" Rachel took her iced tea from the waitress and squeezed the lemon into it before dropping the wedge into the glass.

"That was our first, but sure, you've got a standing invitation. You have to promise to sing, though. I liked yours and Aunt Bebe's duet." Colin laughed.

"Yeah, that was hysterical. We sounded like The Rolling Stones on helium. Your aunt is funny. I like her."

Colin sipped his raspberry lemonade. "We like her, too. She's really taken with you. I'm always hearing about how incredible you are and how wonderful you'd be for me."

Rachel arched an eyebrow and gave him a pointed stare. "She's right, you know. From the first time I met her, I knew she was a woman of superior intellect. Or do you think she's wrong about me?"

Colin put out both hands as if to ward off an oncoming attack. "Absolutely not. I agree with her completely." Colin raised his glass in a toast and clinked it against Rachel's. "To us."

"To us," Rachel repeated and took a sip.

Their food was placed in front of them, and they busied themselves, adding rice and sauces to their plates.

Colin speared a piece of chicken with a hunk of broccoli. "Enough about my family; tell me more about yours, and

refresh me on names and such, please.”

Rachel nodded and held up one finger while she finished a shrimp. “Okay. Jonathan, my dad, is a history teacher at the high school.” She took another bite of her meal.

“Interesting job.”

“He loves it. My mom, Anna, stayed home to raise the four of us. Now that was a job.”

Colin chased rice across his plate with chopsticks. “She obviously was a great mother. Look at how wonderful you turned out to be.”

Rachel felt the blush washing over her cheeks. “You’ve met Nathan; he’s the oldest and into...”

“Colin! Rachel!” Casey came up to the booth with her new boyfriend behind her.

Rachel focused on Casey and then Dylan, her head tilted, and forehead creased in confusion.

“Casey, why are you here with Colin’s brother?”

Colin closed his eyes and sighed.

Casey pulled away from Dylan, put both hands on her hips, and glared at him. “What do you mean, Colin’s brother? His name is Redmond.”

Rachel narrowed her eyes as she pointed at the man standing beside her sister. “His name is Dylan. He’s Colin’s brother. Why are you with him?”

Casey turned to stare at her sister. “This is the guy I told you about. The one I’ve been seeing...Redmond,” Casey said.

Colin looked at Dylan and shook his head in disbelief. “You had to keep seeing her? You had to come to this restaurant?”

Dylan rolled his eyes, “You could’ve gone Italian or something.”

“We were here first. Didn’t you see my car in the parking lot?”

The men realized too late that the sisters had stopped talking and were instead listening to their conversation.

Rachel crossed her arms in front of her and, with ice in her tone, asked, “Care to explain, Mr. Maguire.”

“Um, no, not really,” Colin mumbled.

“I can,” offered Dylan.

“I didn’t ask you,” Rachel said through gritted teeth.

“You said, Mr. Maguire. Technically, I’m also Mr. Maguire,” Dylan said.

“Shut up, Dylan,” muttered Colin.

“Don’t tell him to shut up,” Casey interjected. “Wait a minute. Why am I defending you?” She resumed glaring at him.

Rachel smacked her hands down on the table. “I want some answers. Now!”

“Rachel, please, you’re making a scene.” Colin pleaded.

“A scene? This is nothing compared to what will happen if I don’t get an explanation.”

“You’ve really blown it, bro,” Dylan quipped.

“He’s not the only one, bro,” Casey said as she poked him in the ribs. “You told me your name is Redmond!”

“It is Redmond. Dylan Redmond Maguire. Like I explained before, Redmond was my grandfather’s name.”

Colin said quietly, “Why don’t you all sit down while we discuss this?”

They both turned to glare at him. “Please.” He quickly added.

Casey shrugged and scooted in next to Rachel. Dylan took the seat beside Colin.

“Talk fast. Otherwise, I’m outta here.” Rachel said.

“We need a moment here to confer,” Dylan said uneasily.

“And maybe our lawyer,” muttered Colin.

“Spill it. Or what you’ll need is the coroner,” Casey said matter-of-factly.

Rachel turned to her sister with pride. “Right. Maybe they’ll let us share a cell.”

Casey nodded.

“All right. It’s really very simple and funny, too, when you think about it.” Colin rubbed the back of his neck before looking back at Rachel.

“Terrific. I could use a good laugh.” Rachel rolled her eyes.

“Remember when I thought you had stolen the jewelry?”

Rachel’s jaw clenched.

“Well, I knew you wouldn’t have done that unless something was wrong and you desperately needed money. I was trying to find out what was wrong so I could help, but I couldn’t find anything. I thought maybe if Dylan took Casey out, he might learn something.”

Rachel stared at Colin and shook her head. “I can’t believe this. You were dating me because you thought I was a thief, and you’d recover the jewels?”

“Yes, uh, no. No. I was trying to help you. I knew you’d only steal if you had no other choice. Then I started falling for you, and we found out it was probably Adam anyway.”

“Yeah, until Tyler told us the other night that Adam didn’t do it,” Dylan added.

Colin dropped his gaze to the table and shook his head. “You’re not helping, Dylan.”

Rachel nodded at Casey to move, who slid out and backed away from the booth, with Rachel following her.

“So, that’s why you were acting so strange. Right after telling me you loved me, I was back to being your number one suspect. Instead of knowing I’m innocent, you decided I was guilty. Again.”

Colin stood and gripped her arm, but she jerked away.

“Don’t you dare touch me,” she said, her voice deadly calm.

“Rachel, please. If you just let me tell you everything, I’m sure you’ll understand,” Colin pleaded.

“You’re sure I’ll understand why you think I’m a thief? Why you’ve been lying to me this entire time?” Rachel planted both hands on the table and leaned in towards Colin. Her voice dipped below freezing. “I don’t ever want to see you again. Never.”

“I don’t think you did it. Now, I’m trying to prove you’re innocent.”

“By continuing to lie to me? How stupid do you think I am?” She stood back from the table. “Casey, are you coming with me?”

“No, I have more questions for Dumb and Dumber here.”

Rachel nodded, pulled out her cell and called for a ride as she walked to the exit.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The taxi dropped Rachel off at the house, and she was relieved to find it still empty. She went to her room and threw herself across the bed, sobbing, her breath hitching in her chest. Eventually, as the tears slowed, she remembered they were expected at her parents’ house. She dragged herself to the bathroom, turned the shower on full force, stripped out of her clothes, and stepped in. The hot water felt amazing, washing away the tears and a bit of her headache from the crying. She dressed quickly, pulled her hair back into a ponytail, and used eyedrops and makeup to erase the signs of her crying jag. Then she picked up her car keys and headed for home.

Exhausted from all the overwhelming emotions, she took a breath before she opened the front door and called out.

“We’re out here, honey,” her mom called from the back porch.



Rachel walked through the house and pushed open the screen door. Her mom was up and hugging her in a flash. Anna drew back and studied her daughter.

Rachel's gaze scanned the table behind her mom. Casey smiled up at her.

"Come have a seat, honey." Anna led her over to the padded chair. Her dad reached over the chair and gave her a hug.

"I take it Casey's filled you in on what happened?" Rachel asked tiredly.

Casey gave a small smile. "I thought it might be easier if you didn't have to explain everything."

Rachel sighed. "You're probably right."

"We were just discussing sending Nathan over to pay him a visit," Anna said, making Rachel laugh.

"Well, good. If you can still laugh, you're going to be all right," Anna added.

Casey lifted her glass of lemonade in tribute.

"Have some lemonade and apple pie, sweetheart." Anna passed her a glass and then a plate with a thick slice of pie.

"Thanks, Mom." Rachel took a small bite of the warm, sweet apples surrounded with flaky crust. "This is delicious, as always." She peered at Casey. "What happened after I left?"

"I gave Dylan hell."

"What about Colin?"

Casey cast her eyes down at her plate, then back to Rachel. "He looked like his world had just fallen apart, then he left."

Rachel gave her a small, tight smile. "Nice. Dad, how are classes this semester?"

Jonathan answered, changing the subject, which was exactly what Rachel wanted.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Emily was waiting in the living room when Rachel and Casey returned home.

“Hi. I don’t know what is happening, but Colin’s called five times. When I suggested he call you on your cell, he said you weren’t answering, so I told him to try Mom and Dad’s house. He said he’d just call back here until he can talk to you. So, please tell me what happened.” Emily ended out of breath.

Rachel sat cross-legged on the couch and proceeded to fill her in on the details. Casey came back from the kitchen with a box of Kleenex, a bottle of Merlot, and three long-stemmed wine glasses. Halfway through the story and the first glass of wine, the phone rang.

Emily flicked her hand at it. “Speak of the devil.”

Rachel reached over the arm of the couch and lifted the receiver. “Hello.”

“Rachel, it’s Colin. I need to talk to you, please.” Desperation laced his voice.

“Listen very carefully,” Rachel said slowly, without a trace of emotion. “You do not need to talk to me because nothing you say can make it okay. Do not call me again.” Rachel hung up the phone and burst into tears.

By the time, Rachel collapsed into bed. They had each had a second glass of wine, and Casey and Emily had figured out how to cover Rachel’s schedule so she wouldn’t have to work the next day.

Rachel stared at her bedroom ceiling, watching the shadows from the tree as they danced across it and thinking about what Colin had done. She couldn’t believe she had fallen for the same crap all over again. She had believed he loved her, that they would build a life together. That he was different. She was such an idiot. It proved she’d been right to start with. All rich guys were horrible and lied to get what they wanted. But this time, he hadn’t been after sex like Scum Bob. Colin had wanted to prove she was a thief.

Rachel snuggled deeper into her soft pillow. *It doesn’t really matter*, she thought. She’d said all along she didn’t want

a relationship; she'd just wanted to concentrate on the business. It was her fault she had broken her own rules and opened her heart.

Rachel closed her eyes and willed herself to sleep with only a few tears escaping and sliding down her cheeks.

## Chapter Twenty-three

### Colin

It had been two long days, and Colin didn't understand why he still felt lousy. He knew he was in the right. He was just trying to protect his family and help Rachel in the process. But, no, she wouldn't even talk to him when he tried to call. Now, even her sisters wouldn't talk to him. Colin rolled over and punched his pillow.

Colin tried to sleep, but the look on Rachel's face kept coming back to him. He tossed. He turned. At two a.m., he got up, had cold pizza and a beer, and watched an old monster movie. At five a.m., he paced and started the coffee. Four cups of coffee later, he was the first on the job site.

By eight a.m., Colin had already argued with two foremen and he knew the crew were avoiding him.

At ten a.m., Rory walked into the office trailer. "Colin."

"Dad. What are you doing here?" Colin looked up with tired eyes from the paper he had been pretending to study and gritted his teeth.

"I got a couple of calls."

"If it's about the specs change, don't worry. We handled it." Colin rolled his eyes.

"No. They were about you."

Colin's face grew hot, and he clenched his hands on the desk. "What the hell?"

"Easy, son. Word has it that you've got grown men quaking in their boots. Care to tell me about it?"

"Jack was putting the plumbing line in wrong, and Evan..."

Rory interrupted, "That's not what I meant. What's really wrong?"

Colin sighed and felt his shoulders slump.

“I thought Rachel was the thief,” Colin said. “So, I was dating her to prove it. But I realized she’d only steal if her world were falling apart, so then I was going out with her to figure out how to help her. When I couldn’t find out anything, I asked Dylan to talk with Rachel’s sister, Casey, to see if he could get some information. Then I recognized, too late, that she was innocent, so I began to try to prove that. Dylan kept seeing Casey, which he wasn’t supposed to do, and then we all ended up at the same restaurant for supper, and the whole story came out.”

“Son, I think that’s got to be the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. What were you thinking? How in the world could you even for one moment believe Rachel is capable of something like that?” Rory shook his head in disbelief.

“Because when you look at the facts, she’s a viable suspect. You know she is,” Colin said, anger stiffening his shoulders.

“But black-and-white facts are just those. Yes, it makes her a suspect. But you only have to be around her to know she’s not a criminal. That’s also why there’s the little saying, ‘Innocent until proven guilty,’ remember? And what about your feelings for her? There’s no doubt you’re in love with her.”

Colin rubbed his hand over his eyes and looked up at his dad. “There’s also no doubt that I’ve fallen for the wrong woman before, so I wanted to be sure.”

“Wow. I cannot believe the crap coming out of your mouth today. Okay, so you’ve chosen poorly in the past. So, what? Are any of the other women you’ve dated even in the same league as Rachel?”

Colin did not answer. He just shook his head no. “But by the time I realized that it was all blowing up in my face over wontons and eggrolls.”

“So, what are you going to do about it?” Rory considered Colin with arched brows. “I’m waiting for my normally intelligent son to return from this island of stupidity he’s currently living on.”

Colin focused on his dad, then rubbed both hands over his face. “I don’t know, Dad. Everything hurts so much.”

Rory smiled for the first time since walking into the office. “Good!”

“How is that good?” Colin asked.

“If you have any doubts, think about this—with your ex-fiancée, when the relationship ended, did you ever feel like you’re feeling right now?”

Colin paused, thinking back. “No, I felt relieved, not like a semi had run over me.”

“Exactly.”

“But still, Dad, I’ve messed this up bad.”

Rory nodded, “Well, you’ve got that right. You absolutely did.”

“Is just forgetting her and all this mess an option?” Colin looked up at his dad.

“I don’t think so. What you need is a plan of attack, mainly consisting of various forms of crawling.”

“Okay.” Colin rubbed the back of his neck and grimaced. “I need to get her back. What can I do?”

“Let’s figure that out before we lose half our crew because you’re being an ass.” Rory smiled at his oldest son.

Colin winced but nodded. Later, after his dad left, Colin felt better. He had his dad’s advice. He had a carefully worked plan, and maybe, just maybe, he had a chance.

## Chapter Twenty-four

### Rachel

The first card arrived Friday morning tucked into a gorgeous bouquet of butter-yellow roses. It was the best cardstock available, thick and glossy in a soft yellow. It was addressed to Rachel Murray, with no return address. She opened it, and tears sprung to her eyes. She read:

*I was so wrong.*

*I am so sorry.*

*I love the way you*

*Look in the moonlight.*

*I love you and always will.*

*Colin*

Rachel let the tears fall as she ripped the note into little pieces, which was annoyingly difficult as the stock was strong and didn't tear easily. She didn't sniff the roses; however, she did set the bouquet on her nightstand before she left for work.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

When Casey and Rachel were done with Mrs. Winchell's house that morning, they drove to the University to have lunch with Emily.

Rachel pulled open the door to the little café. "You know, Casey, it's the strangest thing, I swear, lately, I keep seeing the same dark blue car every place I go. Just like that one parked across the street."

Casey glanced over to the car. "There's got to be a gazillion of those cars. It's not like you're being followed around town," she laughed.

"Good point. I guess I still need to catch up on my sleep." Rachel shrugged and followed Casey to the table where Emily was waiting for them.

“I’ve already placed the orders for your regulars. Our food should be out any minute,” Emily said as her sisters sat down.

“Thanks, Em,” Rachel said.

“Rachel, that bouquet Colin sent is so pretty. What are you going to do?” Emily asked.

“Not a thing. If he wants to waste his money sending me expensive flowers, I don’t care. It’s not like it means anything. We already know all he does is lie. If he thinks roses will make me forget that, he’s stupider than I thought.”

“Here’s your food ladies. Enjoy.” The server said as he placed their meals on the table.

“Thank you. It looks great.” Emily said.

“I get it. Redmond, or should I call him Dylan, was lying to me the whole time, too.” Casey said spearing a piece of lettuce and grilled chicken on her fork with more force than necessary.

Rachel nodded while she pointed her spoon at Casey. “Exactly. Rich guys, rich brothers, same thought process. They lie to get what they want. Nothing else matters.”

Emily reached over and rubbed Rachel’s arm. “I’m not so sure. Colin seemed real, not like Scum Bob at all. I’m thinking maybe you should give him a chance to explain.”

“No. Now, can we talk about something else?” Rachel said through clenched teeth. “I want to enjoy my lunch.”

Casey shook her head at Emily. “Why don’t we all go see a movie this weekend? There’s a couple of comedies playing.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The next morning, Rachel found the second note tucked into a blooming lavender plant left on the doorstep. Again, the card stock matched the same soft purple color of the blossoms, but Rachel was a little more prepared. She debated briefly about opening it, but finally, curiosity won. Inside the note read:



*I was so wrong.*

*I am so sorry.*

*I love the way you laugh.*

*I love you and always will.*

*Colin*

Rachel tore up the note but lingered over the scent of the lavender before placing the plant by the windowsill.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Sunday morning arrived along with two dozen deep red roses and a third note, sitting atop a box. Three days, three notes. *At least he's consistent*, Rachel thought. Then she saw the package and, despite herself, was instantly excited. She stomped her foot to help herself calm down and remember why Colin was no longer a part of her life. Only then did she bend down and pick up the creamy white box with the beautiful gold ribbon. She returned to the kitchen and sat at the table, turning the card over in her hands. Finally, she opened the dark red envelope and read.

*I was so wrong.*

*I am so sorry.*

*I love how you love your family.*

*I love you and always will.*

*Colin*

She put the note down, slowly removed the gold ribbon from the box, and lifted the lid. She smelled the delicious, sweet scent of strawberries before she saw them. Inside were a dozen deep red, perfectly ripe strawberries partially dipped in dark chocolate. The stationary, the flowers, and the berries were all the same beautiful color. Rachel sat there, looking at everything, and willed herself not to cry, again.

Casey walked in, drinking her hazelnut coffee and saw the bouquet, the gift, the card, and Rachel sitting there with tears

in her eyes. She sat her coffee cup down, wrapped her arms around Rachel, and held her while she cried.

## Chapter Twenty-five

### Colin

Colin paced inside the office trailer as he talked with Dylan. “Haven’t you even talked to Casey on the phone?”

“Look, you handle Rachel your way. I’ll handle Casey my way. I’m giving her time to cool off.”

“Can’t you call her just to see how Rachel’s doing?”

“Asking me to spy on Rachel is how you got into this mess in the first place. You sure you want me to do it again?” Dylan asked.

“No. Not when you put it that way.” Colin sat down and ran his hand through his hair. “You’re right. I’ll give her some more time, see what happens.”

Dylan grinned, but then became earnest. “As much as I’d like to gloat over you admitting that, for once, I’m right, I want you to know it’s going to be all right. You’ll get Rachel back. You two are meant to be together.”

Colin smiled weakly at his brother. “Let’s hope that’s the second thing you’ll be right about. Of course, that’d only be twice in what, twenty-four years, but who’s counting?”

Dylan threw the pen he’d been twirling between his fingers, and it smacked Colin squarely in the chest. “In your dreams, bro.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Colin knew he had to do it. It was part of the plan, a crucial part, because of the person Rachel was. But that didn’t mean he had to like it. He figured it was best to start at the top and work his way down. That’s why he was on his way to see Rachel’s parents. He just hoped they would listen to him and try to understand. He pulled in front of their house and turned off the car. He sat there taking three long breaths, then made himself get out, walk to the front door, and knock.

Rachel's dad opened the door, and before Colin uttered a word, Jonathan said, "You broke her heart. Go away." Then he slammed the door in Colin's face.

Colin took another deep breath and knocked again. This time Rachel's mom opened the door and smiled at him. "Come in, Colin. I'm afraid I'll have to apologize for Rachel's father. He's a little upset."

Colin walked past Anna into the foyer. Jonathan was standing in the living room, glaring.

"I'm not a little upset," her father said. "I'm angry—and he is not welcome here."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Murray." Colin looked at the floor, then directly at the older man. "I understand why you're angry. I've come to apologize and to try to explain."

Anna patted his arm. "Why don't we talk on the back porch. The fresh air might help some of us calm down and listen with an open mind," she said, looking pointedly at her husband.

"No, it won't. But I will sit." Jonathan turned and led the way to the backyard.

Once they were seated around the patio table, Colin started at the beginning and told them everything, hoping they'd understand why he'd done the things he had. When he finished, there was complete silence. He wasn't sure if that was good or not, so he pressed on. "I want to apologize to both of you, for my suspicions, my actions and for hurting your daughter. I have tried to apologize to Rachel, but I knew because of how Rachel feels about her family, that I needed to make a personal apology to the both of you. I am sorry." Colin had to remind himself to continue to breathe through the ensuing silence. Their acceptance of his appeal was crucial. Even if Rachel forgave him, if her parents didn't, he wasn't sure Rachel would marry him. And suddenly, sitting there in the Murray's backyard, he knew that's what he wanted. That's why he was trying so hard to win her back, not just so they could have dinner and a movie. But so they could have everything. He'd known he loved her, but now he realized

what his heart had known all along, that he wanted Rachel to be his wife.

That's when he stopped breathing.

Anna focused on her husband, her forgiveness of Colin in her eyes.

Jonathan glanced at her, and she arched one eyebrow in response.

"If you ever hurt her again," Jonathan said, his voice roughening, "you won't be capable of apologizing. I guarantee it."

"I won't. I promise."

Jonathan smiled, reached over, and slapped Colin on the back. "Apology accepted."

Colin turned toward Anna.

She smiled. "Same here."

Then, finally, Colin remembered to exhale.

"Now, you just have to deal with Rachel and don't forget Nathan." Jonathan smiled.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Dylan was at the table when Casey walked in to have lunch with him. It had taken three phone calls to persuade her to see him.

"Casey, I'm glad you came." He pulled back the chair next to his, so she could sit.

"I'm still not sure about this, *Redmond*," she said pointedly, before turning away from him and looking through the menu.

Dylan took her hand, causing Casey to glance up at him. "I am sorry, Case. I never meant to hurt you."

"It wasn't me so much as Rachel." She pulled her hand out from under his and lifted her glass of water.

Dylan grimaced and asked warily, "How is Rachel?"

Casey's eyes turned sad, and she said softly, "She's operating totally on automatic pilot. Every time she tunes back in, she cries."

Dylan shifted in his seat and pushed his silverware around. "Do you think it's doing Colin any good to send the cards?"

Casey shrugged. "I honestly don't know."

The waitress appeared, and they stopped to place their order for a large pepperoni and mushroom pizza and sodas.

Dylan placed his hand on Casey's arm, his voice low and intense. "Do you think they should get back together?"

Casey paused before answering. "I do believe they were truly in love. Rachel is miserable. I know she'd be happy again. But, I'm not sure I want my sister with someone who would treat her that way."

"Colin's miserable, too. To be honest, I've never seen him like this—ever. I think they're meant to be together."

Dylan turned so he was fully facing Casey and laid his hand over hers a second time. "Please consider that family is everything to Colin, so his first reaction was to protect Aunt Bebe. But once he got to know Rachel, it didn't take him long to realize she couldn't be the burglar, and he stopped. As for hurting her again, I don't believe he ever would."

Casey didn't respond but pulled her hand out from under Dylan's and put it in her lap while their pizza and plates were placed in front of them. After the waitress left, she was silent for a moment while she took a drink of her soda. "Is this why you wanted to have lunch with me? You want me to help convince Rachel to give Colin another chance?" She stared at him coldly.

Dylan ran his hand through his hair and smiled weakly at her. "Yes," he blurted out.

"Good answer. If you'd lied to me, it'd be the last time any Maguire man ever saw a Murray woman again," Casey said adamantly.

Dylan took a deep breath, then asked, “Do you think you can get Rachel to talk to Colin, to at least see him...anything?”

“Let me give it some thought. Maybe we can figure something out.”

“And to be completely honest, it’s not the only reason I wanted to meet with you, Case. I miss you.”

Casey smiled for the first time since she had arrived at the restaurant.

## Chapter Twenty-six

### Rachel

When Rachel walked into her house after work, Casey was waiting on the living room couch. “Hi, sis. How was your day?”

“It was fine. I had the Cavanaugh’s and Lopez’s today.”

“Beautiful houses.” Casey gestured with her hand for Rachel to sit down and relax.

Rachel took the offer, slipping off her shoes and putting her feet up on the oversize ottoman. “Big houses, you mean. But this feels better.”

“Guess who I saw today?” Casey asked.

“Prince Harry?”

Casey laughed. “No, I turned Harry down. I wouldn’t want to make Meghan jealous. But I did share a pizza with Dylan.”

Rachel put her feet back on the floor and sat upright in her seat. “Why?” The question sounded harsh even to Rachel’s own ears.

“Because, I love you. Because, I’m tired of seeing you hurting. And because everyone, even Dylan and Colin, deserve a second chance.” Casey held her breath.

“Okay. I give up. What did slime junior have to say?” Rachel clasped her hands tightly together and tried to remain calm.

Casey took a long breath and plowed on, repeating her and Dylan’s conversation. “We both think the two of you are meant to be together. And you do have to admit the chances of all this happening again have got to be astronomical.” Casey gave Rachel a small smile.

Rachel studied Casey with tears in her eyes. “How can I ever trust him, believe him again?”



Casey moved over and wrapped her arms around her sister. “Because now, he knows you. He didn’t even know your last name when he was playing Columbo. Because now, he loves you.”

“He suspected me again, right after he told me he loved me.” Teardrops began flowing down Rachel’s face, even though she’d have sworn she was cried out.

“That’s what I said to Dylan. Colin told Dylan that he really was in love, and just got completely freaked out by the whole thing and was afraid to trust his heart.”

Rachel leaned back and closed her eyes. “I’ll think about it.”

Just then, Rachel’s cell phone rang.

“I’ll get it.” Casey walked toward the entryway table, where Rachel had dropped it with her keys. “It’s Mom.”

Rachel took the phone from Casey’s outstretched hand.

“Hi, honey. I wanted to talk to you about Colin. He came over to see us this morning...”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Rachel’s first thought was that it was way too bright and too early as she slapped the snooze button on her alarm for the third time, then rolled over and pulled the covers over her head to block out the light. She hadn’t fallen asleep until sometime after one a.m., and the sunshine streaming in the windows hurt her eyes. She couldn’t believe it was time to get up already. It was all his fault. If he hadn’t been an ass, she would be happy and sleeping every night. Rachel peeked out from under the sheet, glanced at her clock, and resigned herself to getting up. She stumbled out of bed and headed to the shower, only to realize, when she ran into a closed door, that by waking up thirty minutes late, she’d forfeited her shower time slot. That put her at the end of the line.

*This morning just gets better and better.* She veered off toward the kitchen, sure coffee would help. One of her sisters had set out her favorite cup, but had ruined the thoughtful

gesture by propping a peach-colored notecard in front of it—a notecard that matched the peach calla lilies forming the backdrop for the mug. Well, she shouldn't be surprised anymore, she decided. At this rate, she'd be begging for a Prozac prescription by noon. If nothing else, some flower store owner was extremely happy. Rachel poured as much caffeine as possible into the cup, took the card, and sat at the table.

It read:

*I was so wrong.*

*I am so sorry.*

*I love how you stand up for your beliefs.*

*I love you and always will.*

*Colin*

She drank her coffee while she stared out the window. The only thing she knew was that she was more confused than ever and that she didn't know anything for sure. Except, of course, that chocolate-dipped strawberries tasted awesome with coffee.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Later that day, Rachel came home to find her mom and Emily chatting on the porch, enjoying iced tea and warm raspberry cobbler.

“Hi, sweetheart,” Her mom said as she enveloped Rachel in a hug. “Your dad has a work thing, and I wasn't in the mood to stay home alone. So, I called to see if I could bring supper to my daughters, and then Emily was kind enough to invite me over for iced tea and the cobbler she just pulled out of the oven. As you can see, we're having dessert first. Why don't you change into some comfy clothes and join us?” Anna gave Rachel another squeeze and let her go as they walked into the house. Her mom saw the flowers and went from one stunning bouquet to the next, then to the lavender plant that sat in front of the living room window. “You know honey, these flowers are lovely,” she called out to Rachel who was already on her way into her room to change.

Rachel walked back into the sunny living room dressed in blue jean shorts and a T-shirt advertising Nathan's Dark Head Brewery. She'd left her hair in the sleek tail she had worn to work. "You know what's beautiful, Mom? You."

"Since you take after me, and you are absolutely beautiful, then I will accept your statement as a compliment to both of us." Anna smiled again at Rachel, then added, "However, since you also get your smarts from me, I know when you're trying to change the subject, sweetheart."

"It was worth a shot. And yes, they're all lovely," Rachel said.

"Do you realize the meaning behind them?" Anna looked at Rachel expectantly.

"Yes, that he doesn't know how to take no for an answer," Rachel said with a belligerent tilt of her chin.

"No. I mean, he's using the language of flowers to tell you how he feels."

"So, you're telling me that he's now lying to me using some flower language, in addition to the regular English language he lied to me with?"

"Rachel, you get your looks and brains from me, but your purposeful stubbornness comes directly from your father. Listen to me, okay? While Colin was a little clumsy in the beginning, he is perfect for you baby girl. Which ones did you get first?"

"A little clumsy? Clumsy is dropping a glass or tripping over a rug. Believing I was a thief is more than a little clumsy mom."

"You're right, sweetheart. But tell me, please, which came first?"

Rachel pointed to the butter-yellow roses, now fully opened, with their white ribbon tied around the clear glass vase, sitting in the middle of the dining room table.

Anna nodded. "Yellow roses represent friendship, joy, and caring and are often sent to strengthen the relationship during

difficult times.”

Rachel arched one perfectly shaped eyebrow at her mother.

“And the next bouquet was?”

“It wasn’t a bouquet. It was the lavender plant.”

“And doesn’t that smell amazing? You should put it in your bedroom. Lavender is supposed to help you sleep—which I must say, you look like you could use more of. Anyway, lavender means devotion and love.

“What was delivered next?”

Rachel didn’t speak, simply pointed to the red roses on the coffee table.

“Right.” Anna walked over and ran her hand softly over the red petals. “Dark red roses signify true love and passion and that he is ready for a commitment.”

“I’d agree that he needs to be committed.” Rachel smirked.

Her mom ignored her. “And I take it the calla lilies were the most recent then?”

“Yes, they came this morning.”

“They’re perfect. Calla lilies symbolize innocence, which in this case would mean he is affirming your innocence, plus they signify love and passion for the recipient.”

“Okay, Mom. Now that we have clearly established that he lies well in two languages, can I get some cobbler, please?” Rachel asked.

“Of course, sweetheart,” Anna said. Then wide-eyed and smiling sweetly, she followed Rachel into the kitchen.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

### Detective Harding

“Don’t bother to sit down,” Chief Hobson said in his harshest voice. He stared coldly at the two Detectives. “This won’t take that long.”

“Then why didn’t you just use the phone?” Garcia raised one eyebrow and smirked.

Hobson stood up so that he was face-to-face with the two detectives. “Because I wanted to impress upon the two of you how serious I am. I want an arrest in the O’Brien robbery by the end of this week. And I don’t want any crap. Got it?”

“Send us a memo with your name on it, then we’ll be happy to oblige,” Harding said, his voice confident. Harding put both hands flat on the desk and bent forward, within inches of Hobson’s face. “That way when there’s a harassment suit for arresting the wrong person, they’ll know who to file the charges against.”

The chief’s face grew red with anger. “If you haven’t booked anyone by Friday, I’ll be charging the two of you with insubordination. You can spend the rest of your careers handing out parking tickets. Now, get the hell out of my office.”

They walked out, not saying a word until they were in their car.

“Do you think we can sic Aunt Bebe on him?” Garcia asked with just a trace of laughter.

Harding grimaced. The pressure was on, and they weren’t getting anywhere. “Maybe we need to pull both of them, Rachel and Adam, in for an interrogation. If we rattle their cages enough, maybe some jewelry will fall out.”

Garcia smiled slyly. “I knew there was a reason I liked having you for a partner.”

## Chapter Twenty-eight

### Rachel

The next morning, Rachel checked the front porch before getting her first cup of coffee. *This isn't okay*, she thought to herself, as she walked to the door. Not only was she looking forward to seeing what he'd sent this morning, if there wasn't a new gift, she was going to be really disappointed.

Sure enough, she found a pale blue card nestled into a forget-me-not plant covered in blue blossoms, along with a small matching blue gift box. It didn't take any knowledge of flowers to understand what Colin was telling her by sending forget-me-nots. Rachel opened the box first. It held a DVD of the Harrison Ford re-make of the film *Sabrina*.

*Clever*, was Rachel's first thought. Of course, he would send her a movie where the hero lies to the heroine, then ends up falling in love with her. But while that heroine forgives him and they live happily ever after, she wasn't living in a movie with a guaranteed happy ending. She was living in the real world where broken hearts are harder to heal and the idea of trusting him was scary as hell. She wasn't sure she could do it. But damn if these flowers weren't getting to her.

Rachel poured herself some French vanilla coffee, took a sip, closed her eyes, and savored the intense flavor. Then she sat the mug down and picked up the small blue card.

The note was the same, except this time he loved her kindness. The blue forget-me-not blooms were beautiful, and she placed the plant in the middle of the kitchen table. Then she took the DVD and the card back to her bedroom and finished dressing for work. She wanted to get started a little early, hopefully giving her enough time to snag a shower between her last job and a command appearance at her folk's place. But before she left, she picked up the smooth blue note and read it one more time.

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Later that day, Casey pulled into their parent's driveway. All the sisters had ridden together, and Rachel was relaxed and happy. Her plan had worked, and she'd been able to freshen up before heading out again. The ride over had been fun, just the three of them catching up on the day's happenings, teasing here and there as usual. It promised to be a nice evening, no thinking about Colin, nothing but her mom's great cooking and family. Just what she'd been needing to shake off her blues.

Rachel walked into the house, and her stomach growled at the scent of roasted pork and smoked provolone. The long dining room table was set with pretty dishes, sparkling glasses, and a gorgeous bouquet picked from her mom's garden.

"Everybody, come on in and grab a plate," Her mom called from the kitchen. Rachel's mom had decided long ago that she liked setting a beautiful table, but not washing the extra dishes that came from setting out all the food. So, the food was always left in the kitchen, where everyone served themselves.

After they were seated, Rachel's dad said the blessing, and they began enjoying the pork tenderloin stuffed with green chilis and smoked provolone, along with the Spanish rice and beans.

Partway through the meal, Anna laid her hand on Jonathan's arm. He glanced at her, and she nodded. He cleared his throat, which brought on an abrupt and unusual silence.

Rachel scanned the table, wondering what was going to happen.

Her father cleared his throat for a second time. "Rachel, um, sweetheart, you know we all love you."

Rachel groaned and slid down in her chair.

"We have all been worried about you. We hate to see you hurt and unhappy."

Heads were nodding at this last statement.

"We want you to know that we understand why you broke up with Colin, and we fully back your decision." Jonathan

only flinched a little when Anna smacked him on the arm. “But we have all heard Colin’s side, and we empathize...”

Rachel closed her eyes and shook head.

“...not condone,” he added quickly. “But we do understand why he made the mistakes he made.”

Anna put her hand on Rachel’s arm, in an unspoken request for Rachel to listen.

Rachel opened her eyes and looked at her mom.

“Honey,” Anna said, “we just want you to know that we support whatever choice you make. But we also know that people make mistakes, and that while difficult to do, people should be forgiven and offered a second chance, especially when it’s someone that you love so much and who obviously feels the same way about you. We think you should consider giving Colin another opportunity.”

“Yeah, come on, Rachel, give the guy a chance,” Emily said, nodding her head in encouragement.

More heads nodded. Rachel thought idly that she’d been born into a family of bobble heads. She scanned the table, not knowing what to say. Finally, in a very low voice, so that only her mother heard her, Rachel said, “I’m afraid that if I let him in again, and if he were to hurt me a second time, that I might crumble into little pieces and never be able to put them all together again.”

Anna turned fully toward her daughter and clasped both Rachel’s hands firmly in hers. “And what if you don’t let him in, and you’re safe, but never find that kind of love again. You’d spend the rest of your life looking for it and wondering what might have been.”

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Rachel lingered over the morning’s bouquet, lightly touching the pale pink petals of the camellias in their milky white vase. Of course, the card was also a blush pink, tucked among the blooms. She reread the words to herself. They were the same, except for the “I love hearing you sing karaoke with



my family” line. Rachel pulled out the box she had been keeping the notes in, but this time, rather than adding this one to the pile, she took the others out and placed them all across the top of her dresser. *I wish I hadn't destroyed the first two notes*, she thought to herself. *At least I kept all of the vases, and the DVD*. She had to know what the pink camellias meant. She grabbed her phone and quickly read, “Pink camellias represent longing, and are the flowers to give to someone you miss.” Of course, once again he'd sent the perfect flower. He was certainly persistent, and she couldn't believe he'd talked to her folks. She hoped she was making the right choice.

She walked to the bathroom and started her shower and thought about the decision she'd made last night on the drive home from her folks', and about the plan she'd come up with during the night. She drank her coffee while she dressed. Then she went to the kitchen, dug out the picnic basket, and filled it with a pretty pastel-colored tablecloth, plates, silver, coffee cups, and two champagne goblets, carefully wrapped in cloth napkins. After loading everything in the car, she drove to the grocery store and bought a bottle of champagne and a variety of fresh fruit. Afterwards, she made two more stops. The first, for fresh baked croissants and cinnamon rolls, and the second, for the best coffee in town.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Colin walked into the site's office trailer, but stopped short when he saw Rachel sitting on the other side of his desk or what used to be a desk. It was now beautifully set as a table with plates of food, coffee cups, and champagne glasses. He stood still and simply stared at her.

Rachel clasped her hands together, looking at the floor instead of Colin. Then she took a deep breath, gathered her courage, and looked up at him.

“I've been thinking about everything that's happened. I believe I understand why you handled things the way you did. In fact, I might have reacted similarly if our positions had been reversed. I've missed you so much.” Little individual tears started sliding down her cheeks. She tried to hold them back,

to blink them away, but couldn't. "And...and I realized that my fear of being hurt again was nothing compared to the pain of not having you in my life."

Colin walked over and took her in his arms, gently wiping each drop away as it fell. He buried his face in her hair. "I was afraid you would never forgive me, that I had lost you forever." He held her even tighter. "I knew I'd never find anyone else that I love as much as I love you."

Rachel nodded into his shirt. "I know. I feel the same way." She relaxed into him for several minutes, while trying to calm her emotions. She finally drew back, spreading out her arm towards the table. "How about some breakfast?"

Colin kissed her gently, then let her go and pulled out the desk chair for her. He walked around and sat in the visitor's chair, but took her hand in his. "I don't want to let go of you."

"Just long enough to eat." Rachel squeezed his hand.

"This does look incredible."

Rachel beamed. "It's my way of paying you back for the cards and gifts. By the way, the flower language was a brilliant touch."

"I'm glad you liked them. Aunt Bebe helped me with the flower choices. She said the bouquets should say the right thing. I guess she was right." Colin raised his champagne, and Rachel did the same. "To forgiveness, to love, to us," he toasted.

Rachel felt her eyes welling once more, but she smiled. They began eating, happy just to be together.

Colin's brows knitted together, "This trailer was locked. How did you get in here?"

"I called Dylan this morning. He feels so guilty about his part in this, that he was thrilled to let me in here early. He even helped me get everything ready. Get this, right before he left, he asked if I would be okay with him asking Casey out."

"Really? What did you say?"

“That it didn’t matter to me, as long as he was actually dating Casey, not just using her to spy on me.”

Colin turned a light pink, and Rachel gave him a mock glare.

“That’s right, Sherlock,” she said. “First, I get a talking to from Dylan via Casey, then the same night, my mom calls. You were very busy. Though, I’ll admit, it was sweet of you to apologize to my parents. It won them over. Then to top it all off, my entire family told me I should give you a second chance.”

Colin raised his coffee in toast. “Here’s to your family.” He took a sip. “I liked them all from the beginning.”

Rachel laughed. “Even Nathan?”

He paused. “Well, after my chin stopped aching.”

## Chapter Twenty-nine

### Detective Harding

Harding and Garcia were sitting across an old, scarred desk from Adam.

Adam smirked. “You don’t have anything on me because I didn’t do it.”

“We have more than you think,” Garcia said.

“Where’d you get that stuff you pawned downtown?” interjected Harding.

Adam jerked in surprise, his body more rigid now, his eyes wary. Defiantly, he said, “That wasn’t from the Maguires.”

“Tell us something we don’t know. Like where Bebe O’Brien’s stuff is.”

Adam’s posture relaxed slightly. “How would I know? I’ve never laid eyes on the junk.”

Garcia picked up Adam’s list of priors. “You’ve got a long list of troubles here. If we nail you for this heist, you’ll do some real time, but if you were to cooperate, give us the jewels, then things would go easier on you. Think about it.” Both Detectives walked out, leaving him alone. A few minutes later, a policeman escorted him out of the station.

Harding watched Adam leave and turned to his partner. “And the next contestant is...”

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Adam angrily wadded up his clothes and stuffed them in the black duffel bag. “I can’t believe this. My own cousin thinks I did it. First, the cops are hassling me, now this.”

Tyler stood his ground. “I don’t think it’s an unreasonable question under the circumstances.”

Adam glared at him. “You sound like a lawyer.”

“Thank you.”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“I know,” Tyler said. “Katie’s Dad is a lawyer, and I have a lot of respect for him.”

“Get a life, cuz,”

“I have a life. You’re the one that needs a life. Or are you just going to take off and continue making these asinine choices?”

Adam shoved past him to grab some clothes off the dresser.

“Listen to me. Your family loves you. We love you. But I’m not going to ruin my relationship with Katie because of you.” Tyler grabbed Adam’s arm, making Adam stop packing for a second.

Adam looked squarely at his cousin. “I swear I didn’t steal the old lady’s jewelry.”

Tyler held his gaze, then nodded. “Okay.” Tyler dropped his hand from Adam’s arm. “You don’t have to leave, you know. In fact, it might make you look more suspicious to the police. They know you’re supposed to stay here for a while.”

Adam threw himself into the only chair in the guest room. “Maybe your right. Maybe I do need to get a life.”

Tyler grinned. “Well, at least a different life. You know, something that doesn’t involve police interrogations.”

# Chapter Thirty

## Rachel

That evening, Colin picked Rachel up as planned and headed over to his parents' home.

"Is there a special reason your whole family's getting together?" Rachel asked.

"No. Just for fun. It's going to be a great surprise for them to see us together. They love you almost as much as I do."

They parked, and Colin opened Rachel's car door. She reached up and brushed a kiss across his lips.

"Wait. Let's do that again." Colin leaned down and kissed Rachel until she pushed at him.

"Colin, stop. Someone could come out here any minute."

Colin put his forehead against hers and took a breath. "Okay. I get it. I can't say that I really care about that right now, but I understand." He stepped back and clasped her hand. "Everyone will be in the back. Let's just go around the side of the house."

Colin and Rachel appeared at the side of the patio. Once they were spotted, conversations ceased, and everyone started applauding. Colin's dad stood, still clapping, and soon the couple were receiving a standing ovation.

Rachel felt the color spread from her toes to the top of her head. Fortunately, she didn't have much time to dwell on it as the next thing she knew she was being hugged by Colin's parents. Colin just took it all in, grinning like a loon.

"Come on. Sit down and tell us what happened." His mom ushered them to the patio table. "Rory, why don't you pour them some wine."

Rory gave them each a glass and then topped off the others' glasses as well.

Colin and Rachel explained how they got back together, Elizabeth squeezing Rachel's hand in excitement as she

listened. As Rachel ended the story with her surprise champagne breakfast, the applause broke out again.

Aunt Bebe, who had the seat across from Rachel, tapped a spoon on her wine glass, quieting everyone. “As you can see, my dear, we show how we feel, and we’ve been rooting for the two of you. To celebrate this special occasion and to welcome you back in my own way, I’d like to give you this.” Bebe took off a beautiful gold brooch with one large ruby in the center, surrounded by small diamonds. She handed the brooch to Rachel across the table, but Rachel didn’t reach for it.

“I appreciate it. But I can’t accept it. Just being given such a welcome is enough.”

“Nonsense.” Bebe stood and walked around to Rachel’s chair. “I’m giving this to you because I want to. I’m hoping that soon someone else will be giving you a sparkly ring to welcome you to the family.”

Colin coughed and studied the ground intently. Several people laughed softly. Rachel felt her face turn red for the second time in less than ten minutes. Bebe used the moment to slip the brooch onto Rachel’s blouse.

Rory cleared his throat. “Why don’t we have dinner?”

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The next morning, Rachel was singing in the shower. She knew it was cliché, but she didn’t care. She was happy, head-over-heels in love happy.

Someone was pounding on the bathroom door and yelling. Rachel took it down to a hum and stuck her head out of the shower. “What?”

“I said, you’ve got to get out here. You won’t believe this. It’s amazing!” Emily yelled.

“Hold on,” Rachel called. “I’ll be right there.” She finished quickly, throwing on her robe and going out to see what all the commotion was about.

Both of her sisters stood in the living room in various stages of dress, fussing over six dozen long-stemmed roses in a variety of gorgeous colors. Emily stopped sniffing the velvety red blossoms long enough to hand Rachel a creamy white card. Already near tears, Rachel slowly peeled open the envelope.

*I was so right to love you.*

*I am so happy to have you back.*

*Please have dinner with me tonight.*

*(No family, I promise)*

*I love you and always will.*

*Colin*

With teardrops running down her face, she smiled at the reference to his family. She looked up to see her sisters staring at her.

“Okay. Here.” Rachel handed the card over.

She buried her face in the closest bouquet, breathing in the fragrant aroma and touching the fragile petals of the lush purple roses. Each arrangement was beautiful on its own, but having six, each a different color, all together in one room was incredible.

Casey quickly went to the kitchen and brought back filled coffee cups on a tray with three slices of peach pie left over from the night before. “Don’t look at me like that. We’d eat doughnuts if we had them. The only difference is the shape.”

Rachel took her first bite of the sweet peaches. “You got me there, sis. I totally would.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, with their morning coffee and pie amongst the indoor rose garden and enjoyed the fragrance.

“This is very serious, Rachel.” Emily raised her eyebrows and gestured to the bouquets with her coffee cup.

“I know.” Rachel didn’t look at Emily; she just kept taking it all in.



Casey's eyes were bright with excitement. "Do you think it means what I think it means?"

"That Rachel needs to buy a gorgeous outfit?" Emily asked.

"Exactly."

Rachel bit her bottom lip. "Do you really think he's going to ask me tonight?"

Emily nodded so hard it seemed as if she might jar something loose.

Casey merely spread out her arms to encompass all seventy-eight individual roses.

Rachel punched her right fist up into the air over her head. "Who can meet me at the mall at noon?"

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By 12:10 p.m., the Murray sisters had gathered in the midst of the dress section of their favored department store, shopping separately to make the most of their lunch hour. As soon as Rachel selected three dresses, she signaled the others and moved to the dressing rooms. They had already planned for her to stay there, while they each brought their favorite picks so she could keep trying on the dresses. When Rachel narrowed the choices down to the top four, she would model them for her sisters, and they would help ensure her final choice was the best. Rachel slipped the blouse she wore to the office over her head, making sure to be careful with the broach Bebe had given her the night before. She knew it was a little fancy for work, but couldn't resist it and the happiness she felt when she looked at it.

Rachel emerged wearing one of her favorites. It was an ivory lace dress with a square neckline that ended just above her knees. Both sisters declined it, with Casey voicing the common opinion that it would be fine for Easter, but not for this. Rachel shook her head, but went back in to try on another outfit. When she came back out, she was dressed in a dark blue, full skirt covered with tiny flowers and a silk tank the

color of a peach sunset that matched some of the flowers. This time, Casey voted no and Emily voted yes.

“It’s a beautiful outfit, Rach. Just not he-might-pop-the-question worthy,” Casey said.

“Okay. I can see that. But I do think I’ll buy it because it really is pretty.” Rachel smiled and returned to the dressing room.

“Put on the short red one I brought you,” Emily said.

“No, thank you. I want him to have a hard time taking his eyes off me, but I don’t want him to think I’m inviting him to breakfast in the morning.” Rachel laughed. “Look at this one. What do you think?” It was coral with tiny yellow flowers and stopped at mid-thigh, but with its long loose sleeves and slight V-neck, it was very flattering, without making her feel uncomfortable.

“I like it. This could be the one.” Casey said.

“You look gorgeous, sis.” Emily smiled. “And since we’re similar sizes, if you buy it, I’d get to wear it, too.”

“Focus, Em,” Casey said. “Besides, if she buys it, I get to wear it first because I’m older than you.”

“We’re twins, Casey. Three minutes does not make you the oldest. Talk about focusing.” Emily rolled her eyes.

Rachel smiled and went to put on the last outfit. This time when she emerged wearing a pale pink dress covered in delicate lace, both sisters sighed. It was sleeveless, with a scoop neckline and fitted top, that flared out into a flowing skirt hitting Rachel just above her knees.

“Wow, Rach. This is the one,” Casey said walking around Rachel to view it from all sides.

“She’s right. This is it,” Emily agreed.

Rachel turned again in front of the mirrors. “I think you’re right. I love it.”

Rachel bought the pink lace dress that had been the overall winner, along with the skirt and tank top. Casey had shoes that

would look fabulous with it, so Rachel did not have to do any further shopping. Emily walked out with a beautiful pale blue sundress she'd found on sale, and Casey purchased two tops. All in all, they decided it was a good haul. Emily loaded everything in the trunk of her car and went back to the office. Rachel and Casey got in the Murrays Maid's SUV to head to their next job.

Rachel glanced out the side window as Casey drove out of the parking lot. "There it is again. I swear that's the same car I keep seeing everywhere."

"You've been watching too many action movies, sis." Casey laughed as she pulled into traffic.

## Chapter Thirty-one

### Colin

Colin paced inside the small office trailer and ran one hand through his hair as he spoke to his brother on the phone.

“Dylan, I just need an hour. I’ll buy you a sandwich, and you can eat it in the car on your way back to work.”

“I was going to eat at my desk and try to get caught up on some stuff today,” Dylan complained.

“Please, bro.” Colin knew he was pushing the guilt button with that statement, but he seriously needed help.

“Okay. Where and when?” Dylan groaned loudly into the phone.

“Friedman’s Jewelry at 11:30. I’ll buy you a sandwich at the deli next door.”

“Two sandwiches and their potato salad.”

“Deal.” Colin ended the call, but kept pacing.

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Colin rushed home to shower and change into navy slacks and a cream-colored button-down shirt. He looked at the ring for the tenth time since picking it up that afternoon. It was a beautiful one-carat diamond in a traditional gold setting, surrounded by smaller diamonds. He hoped Rachel liked it.

As promised, Dylan had met him at the jewelry store, assured him he was doing the right thing and helped him sort through the insane amount of engagement rings the salesman was determined Colin should look at. After narrowing it down to three possibilities, Dylan suggested they go eat at the deli and give their eyes and brains a chance to recuperate. Dylan had been all in, once he understood Colin was sincere and had decided to propose immediately. Although there also had been mention of Colin stopping in next week on his lunch hour to help Dylan catch up with some paperwork.

After a quick meal, they returned to the store and considered the three rings again. Colin's choice was still the classic one-carat set in gold. They both thought Rachel would love it. Then, Colin had dropped by the house and showed it to his mom, wanting a third opinion. Elizabeth had hugged him fiercely and promptly began crying. He hadn't believed her when she'd claimed it was because she'd been overcome by the ring's beauty. But he had believed her when she'd said it was stunning. Of course, then she'd had a fresh bout of tears, and everything, including his brain, had gone soggy.

He was confident that Rachel would say, "Yes." He had never felt this way about anyone before. He knew deep in his heart that they would have an amazing life together. It was funny to think how, at first, he had believed her guilty of the robbery. Thankfully, it hadn't taken too long for him to realize she was innocent and then to recognize how much he loved her. The fact that he had almost lost her had only strengthened his knowledge that she was "the one." Then, when he'd walked in on the scene she had created in his office, his sense of relief had been so intense that it had taken everything he had not to just grab her and never let go. He had held her so tightly, he'd later wondered if he had left bruises.

He stood still staring at the ring as thoughts raced through his mind. He was dressed, ready to go, and nervous in a way he hadn't dreamed was even possible. This was it. If she said yes, the rest of his life would be spent with the woman he loved with all his heart. If she said no, well, he was not going to think about that right now. It would only make him more nervous, and he was already feeling slightly ill as it was.

Colin checked his watch. It was time. He took two long breaths, slipped on his jacket, closed the lid on the ring's box, and put it in his pocket. Then he picked up his car keys and went to see how the rest of his life would be.

## Chapter Thirty-two

### Rachel

Rachel slipped on her new dress and turned, looking over her shoulder, trying to see it from the back. She strapped on Casey's sandals, re-checked her makeup, and shifted back to view the overall look. The pale pink showed off her dark coloring, and the fit emphasized her curves in all the right places. She had about twenty minutes before Colin was due. She put a hand on her stomach in an attempt to calm the butterflies from the outside in. She fingered the brooch that Aunt Bebe had given her. It would look stunning with her outfit. She set the brooch down. She almost made it to the kitchen when she marched back to the bedroom, picked the brooch back up, and pinned it carefully to her new dress. It looked great, and she smiled at the reflection in the mirror.

Casey stood in the doorway. "Rachel, you look beautiful."

"Thanks. I wasn't sure about the brooch, but it looks so pretty with this dress." Rachel put her hand on her stomach and turned to face Casey. "Can a person die from too many butterflies?"

Casey giggled. "I think it's the cocoon hatching phase that's the most dangerous. Once they're capable of flight, I think you're fairly safe."

"I don't feel safe." Rachel grimaced.

"Follow me. I know exactly what you need."

Rachel went with her to the kitchen. Casey took out two glasses and a bottle of white wine. Casey handed Rachel a glass, filled her own, then lifted it in a toast. "To life, love, and happiness."

Rachel touched her glass to Casey's and added, "To sisters."

They both sipped the slightly sweet light-colored wine.

"You're right. This will help me not be crazy when he gets here."

They heard knocking at the front door. Rachel sat her wine down as she glanced at the clock. “He’s early.”

Casey gave her a quick hug. “For luck.”

Rachel went through the living room and opened the door. Detectives Harding and Garcia were standing on the porch. Rachel’s forehead creased, and she narrowed eyes.

“Miss Rachel Murray, we’re taking you to the station. We have several questions for you about the theft of Mrs. O’Brien’s jewelry.”

“You have got to be kidding. We’ve already been through this. I did not steal it.”

Detective Harding raised one eyebrow in total sarcasm. He pulled out a sheaf of photos and selected one, then held it up to Rachel. “Okay, then. Just for laughs, how do you explain that the broach you were wearing this afternoon, and have on now, is on the list of stolen items?”

Rachel stared at him in total disbelief. “What?”

“Miss Murray, you have the right to remain silent. You have the right to...”

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Rachel crossed her arms in front of her and scanned the interrogation room. “I can’t believe you think I did this.”

“Miss Murray, we are giving you one last chance to tell us what happened and where the rest of the gems are.” There was no friendliness in Detective Harding’s voice, just flat disapproval.

“Look, Detectives, I didn’t do it.” Rachel’s voice sounded weak, even to herself. She cleared her throat, attempting to imbue her next statement with confidence. “I didn’t do it. But if you insist on carrying out this charade, then I insist on a lawyer.” Rachel clamped her mouth shut into a hard line, daring them to ask her another question.

The detectives let the silence sink into the room, not changing the hard, disbelieving looks etched on their faces.

Garcia broke the quiet. “There are several officers on their way to your home and your office with search warrants. They may find the jewelry before your lawyer appears; in which case, you will have lost your chance to work a deal.”

Rachel smacked both palms down on the table and she stood face-to-face with the detectives. “The only thing you’ve got right, Detective, is that I am not going to be making a deal. I have never stolen anything in my life. And if you go through with this insanity, I will happily sue your butts off!” Rachel sat back down, arched one eyebrow, and smiled, waiting for their next move.



## Chapter Thirty-three

### Colin

Colin knocked on Rachel's door. He knew he was a few minutes early, but he'd been too excited to wait any longer.

Casey was talking on the phone as she opened the door. "It's okay. It's just Colin." Casey's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, no! It's Colin!" She cringed. "Mom. Dad. I need to tell him what happened. Call me back after you get a hold of the lawyer." She pushed the off button and stood, staring at him as if he was a door-to-door salesman she wasn't sure how to handle.

Colin stared back as fear began to curl in his stomach. He moved forward and gripped Casey's arm. "What is it? What's wrong?" He barely kept himself from shaking her.

Casey pried her arm from his grip, then crossed her arms in front of her chest and rubbed them. "The detectives came. They've arrested Rachel for the robbery. They took her away..." Casey dropped her eyes to the floor, unable to finish the explanation.

Colin stepped forward to bring her into a hug. "It'll be all right. We know she didn't do it. My uncle is a lawyer. I'll get him. She'll be out in an hour."

Casey worked to steady herself. She pulled back, and Colin dropped his arms. She smiled up at him through watery eyes. "I'm sorry. I just freaked for a minute. You get your uncle, and I'll call my folks back and let them know. We'll see you at the station."

Colin gave her a quick, reassuring smile. "Sounds like a plan."

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Colin hit the call button as he backed out of Rachel's driveway. If he told them the story now, they could contact

Sean, and he could be ready to leave as soon as Colin pulled up to the door.

“Mom, it’s Colin. Would you get Dad on the phone, too? I want to tell both of you what’s happened at the same time.”

Colin reached the house, but his uncle didn’t come out to join him. Instead, Sean was sitting behind the wheel of his SUV while his parents, Aunt Marie, and Aunt Bebe climbed in. Colin parked and walked over to them.

Bebe grabbed his arm. “Don’t just stand there, get in! We gotta go save Rachel from those people!”

Colin got in beside Aunt Bebe. “She was arrested, Aunt Bebe, not kidnapped by gangsters.”

Colin turned to look at the crowd. “Why are all of you coming?”

Sean glanced at his nephew through the rear-view mirror. “I tried to stop them, but I was outnumbered.”

Marie reached forward from the third row of seats and smacked Colin on the back of his head. “When one of us is in trouble, we all go. She’s one of the family.”

He couldn’t argue with that statement. “Got it. But you didn’t have to hit me.”

“Just trying to knock some sense into you. Obviously, you need it or you wouldn’t have asked such an idiotic question.”

“I appreciate you taking the time to help me with that,” he said, sarcasm in his tone.

“No problem. I’m happy to help whenever I can.”

## Chapter Thirty-four

### Rachel

Harding sighed and gave Rachel the it's-going-to-be-a-long-night look. "Since you're claiming to be innocent, perhaps you'd care to explain how you came to be wearing one of the stolen pieces of jewelry?" Harding raised an eyebrow.

"I explained that one on the way here. Mrs. O'Brien gave it to me."

"Mrs. O'Brien just handed you a broach worth over a few thousand bucks?" Harding asked with a voice that dripped sarcasm.

Rachel crossed her arms and struggled to maintain her newly acquired, anger-fueled bravado while she digested the monetary value of Bebe's gift. "It's obvious to anyone who spends time with Mrs. O'Brien that she is very generous. She wanted me to have it to celebrate a sentimental occasion. She isn't one to keep a ledger on the cost of the gift," Rachel said with as much disdain as possible.

Before either detective could respond, a loud commotion down the hall got their attention. They both turned toward the door as what sounded very much like a stampede came in their direction. Bebe was the first to enter the room, followed closely by Colin, Sean, Rachel's parents, Rory, Casey, and the rest of the gang. Directly on their heels was the mayor.

Harding cast his eyes heavenward.

Garcia groaned.

Everyone, except the mayor, crowded around Rachel. The women checking to see if she was all right, the men standing protectively near her.

Rachel's sense of relief was so big it took everything she had not to cry. She assured them all, especially her parents, that she was fine and just wanted to go home.

After the initial hubbub subsided, the mayor addressed the detectives. “Mrs. O’Brien called me *at home*,” putting extra emphasis on those last two words, “and asked me to meet her here. She said that a grave injustice was about to take place, and my help was critical. Of course, I could not refuse her request, and here I am. I’m hoping the two of you can help us understand this situation and answer any questions these two families may have.”

Sean stepped forward. “Detectives, I’m here as Ms. Murray’s attorney. Exactly what have you charged her with? And what’s your evidence?”

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“Sean,” Bebe laid her hand on his arm, “why don’t you let me explain first. I think it will save us all a lot of time and trouble.”

Sean stared at her, then whispered, “What have you done?”

She simply smiled at him and patted his arm. She beamed at the mayor. “It was so nice of you to come here, Lou. Is there perhaps a room with more space or a way we can get a few seats? I’m afraid this may take a while.”

The mayor turned to Harding, who nodded and walked out of the room. He returned with more officers and several chairs. The men placed them so that they all faced each other in a large semi-circle. The extra officers left, while everyone seated themselves. Rachel was sitting between her mom and dad to one side and Colin and Sean on the other. The detectives were opposite of them, and the mayor sat as neutrally as possible, halfway between them and Rachel.

Bebe refused to sit, instead standing in the open space at the top of the semi-circle. “Thank you, Detective.” Bebe smiled. “I can assure you both that Rachel did not steal my jewelry... because I did.” Bebe declared with a dramatic fling of her arms.

Stunned silence followed her announcement.

Marie was the first to speak. “Aunt Bebe, we all know how you feel about Rachel, but this isn’t the way to handle it. Sean will take care of everything. Won’t you?”

“Of course, I will,” he answered. “Tell us the truth, Aunt Bebe. This is important.”

Bebe smiled indulgently at both of them. “I am telling the truth. I stole it myself. I’ve got it in the safe deposit box at the bank.”

Rory shook his head in disbelief.

Casey whispered to her dad, “That little old lady is one taco short of a combination plate.”

The mayor kept his eyes on the floor, not looking at anyone.

Detective Garcia cleared her throat, then said calmly. “Was it for the insurance money, Ma’am?”

Bebe turned to her, astonishment clear on her face. “Heavens, no, Detective. I never thought of that. It was for love.”

Rory rubbed his hand back and forth across his forehead, his eyes closed. “Oh, Aunt Bebe. I can’t believe you did this.”

Bebe clapped her hands together, her eyes alight with joy. “Well, believe it. I found the perfect woman for Colin, your first born. That’s what I’ve done!”

Rachel jumped off her chair. “You set me up, didn’t you?”

Bebe turned to Rachel and took her hands. “Please understand, dear, I did it for your own good. Please, forgive me, but it did work.”

Bebe looked pleadingly at Rachel.

Rachel thought of everything she had been through because of this woman’s antics, then glanced at Colin and realized none of that mattered. What mattered was she had found love, and being interrogated seemed a small price to pay for the prize of a lifetime.

Rachel pulled Bebe to her, and they hugged. Bebe breathed a huge sigh of relief and kissed Rachel on the cheek.

“This was the only part that worried me—whether you would be able to forgive me. Thank you, dear. Thank you.”

Colin stood. “Well, I’m not forgiving you. There’s no excuse for what you’ve put us all through.”

## Chapter Thirty-five

### Colin

Rachel gripped Colin's hand and urged him back to his seat. "Please, Colin. It's okay."

"No. It's not. She just can't play with other people's lives like that."

Sean interrupted, "Let's finish this at home, Colin."

Colin sat down and put his head in his hands. He had just gotten Rachel back, and now her parents would probably get a restraining order against his entire family. Of course, it wouldn't matter, because after he murdered his aunt, he would be in jail anyway. Colin wondered if it would make for a simpler trial if he did Bebe in now with lots of witnesses. He figured he would have a fairly decent shot at an insanity plea, considering what he was having to live through.

Sean continued. "Right now, we have some very serious legal matters that need to be addressed. Isn't that right, Detectives?"

Harding blew out a breath, nodded and began listing them. "Obstructing justice, impeding a police investigation, fraud..."

Colin listened to the charges and wondered why he couldn't have an aunt who knitted, collected cats, or just fixed her nephews up with blind dates.

Bebe put out both hands as if to hold off the flow of bad news. "Wait. Just wait. Let me tell you everything. Then it will make more sense to you, and you'll understand why I'm not guilty of all these things."

Garcia laughed softly. "This should be entertaining." Then she shifted back in her chair, put her hands behind her head, and stretched out her legs.

"Well," Bebe began, "it all started the first time I met Rachel when I was at Sean's law office downtown. I knew in my gut that Rachel was right for Colin. I made a few phone calls to check her out, just to hedge my bet, but I knew she

was the one. I just needed to figure out how to get them to meet without them realizing I was behind it.” Bebe beamed at Rachel and Colin, who were holding hands.

“Excuse me for interrupting Bebe,” the mayor said, “but why burglary? Why not just set them up on a blind date?”

Colin smiled to himself, even the mayor got the blind date/elderly aunt scenario.

Bebe gave him an approving smile. “Excellent question, Lou. I did it because Colin would never, ever consent to a blind date. He had plenty of women around, but not the right woman. I needed something that would keep them in close, regular contact. Plus, it had to last long enough for both of them to realize they were meant for each other. Since Colin is very protective of his family, I knew if it involved some type of problem, he would stick to her like glue until it was handled.”

Colin glared at his aunt.

She smiled sweetly back at him. “I love you too, dear.” She turned back to the group. “Anyway, that’s when I walked in on Adam going through the books in the library, and the whole brilliant plan flashed through my mind.”

“More like a nuclear meltdown,” muttered Rory.

“So, I attacked Adam with the feather pillows, in the process, making a huge mess. Of course, I called Rachel for an emergency cleaning. This put her in the right place at the right time, making her a viable suspect. Having Adam around as a second suspect, and asking Rachel to open the safe for me, was simply icing on the cake.”

Rory quietly slipped out of the room his cell phone in hand. He was back beside Elizabeth in less than two minutes. She looked at him, but he put his finger to his lips and shook his head.

“So, the stage was set. You know the story from there. Colin responded the way I knew he would.”

Colin was trying to decide between poison, strangling, and a sharp blow to the head. Of course, her head was so hard the



latter probably wouldn't work.

"I'm sorry it took so much of your time, Detectives. I hadn't considered that part of it. And of course," she turned to address Rachel and her family, "I never dreamt Rachel would actually be arrested. I'm terribly sorry for that also. I kept a few of my favorite pieces at home, the rest I snuck to the bank the day after the heist. I was so elated when Rachel and Colin got back together that I gave her the broach to celebrate and help her remember the moment forever. I forgot I listed it as part of the stolen loot."

Colin couldn't stand it a moment longer. "We would not have broken up if you hadn't set her up as a suspect for a fake burglary. When she discovered part of our dating was spying, she broke it off. That was all your fault. You could have just come clean after we first got together. You didn't have to keep this whole charade going."

Bebe bent over and kissed him on the forehead. "But I did. It forced you to work through all your doubts and fears and realize that you truly loved Rachel. Otherwise, the smallest problem and you would have thrown it all away because it's too easy to listen to your fears. It takes courage to listen to your heart. And, you're looking at it all wrong. You wouldn't have gotten together at all if it wasn't for me. So, the only thing that's my fault is you finding the love of your life."

Colin massaged one temple. *Strangling*. Yes, that was definitely the best choice. Hands on and extremely satisfying.

Harding stretched his legs. "Mrs. O'Brien, this doesn't excuse any of the legal problems that now exist."

Bebe walked over to the mayor and placed her hand on his shoulder. "That's why I asked Lou to come. This is the grave injustice I told you about. I did this all for love, for family. There is no better reason than that. Nothing is more important than that." Bebe clutched her hands to her heart while biting her bottom lip and blinking until a sheen of tears shown in her eyes. "Surely, I can't be in trouble just for helping family?"

Elizabeth turned to Rory, "She could get in trouble just walking across the street."

Rory hid his laugh with a cough. It almost worked.

There was a quick rap on the door, and two officers walked in, loaded with pizza boxes and cans of soda.

Rory helped them unload everything onto the table. “I figured this would last awhile, so I ordered some food.”

“Well, I gotta commend your style. It isn’t every day that we get pizza delivered to go with an interrogation.” Harding said, as he loaded a paper plate with two thick cheesy slices.

Sean and the Mayor had been quietly talking, while everyone started eating. Now, the two of them joined the others around the table.

“Lou and I have come up with mutually acceptable terms to handle this problem. Hopefully, keeping my aunt from suffering too many consequences, though they would certainly be justified.”

Colin snickered, and his mother shot him a warning look.

Sean continued, “The mayor has agreed to a payment of \$50,000 dollars, to compensate the department for the many man hours used in trying to solve a nonexistent crime. You’ve cost the city a lot of money, Aunt Bebe, and you have to pay for it. And, listen carefully, if you ever pull a stunt like this again, you will be shown no mercy.”

Colin butted in, “If you ever do this again, I will personally deliver you to the police station.”

Bebe was busy writing out the check and didn’t respond to Colin’s comment.

The mayor addressed Harding and Garcia. “Don’t worry about any of it. I’ll make all the necessary calls in the morning and get it handled.”

Rory lifted his soda in salute to the Detectives. “We are so thankful for all of your hard work. We’re sorry you were put through this.”

The rest of the family repeated the toast in gratitude.

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Rachel had moved out of the group's earshot, and was talking with her parents.

Colin fingered the small velvet box in his jacket pocket. Would Rachel ever want to marry him after all of this? She had been interrogated and arrested because of his aunt. How much worse could it get? Rachel was keeping her back to him. Not a good sign. He didn't think he could survive her walking away again, and this time, she probably would not come back. And who could blame her?

Rachel turned and walked back toward the table with her mom and dad. Colin searched her face for the answers he so desperately needed but found none.

Rachel's father spoke to Bebe. "Mrs. O'Brien, I must say we are extremely upset to learn what you have done to Rachel." He held up his hand to silence Bebe when she started to speak. "We have just talked, and Rachel's convinced us that she's okay with what's transpired. She's asked us to let it go, and we've both agreed."

Bebe rushed over, throwing her arms around Jonathan and then turning to hug Anna. "Thank you very much."

Colin released the breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. Now that the last important piece had been given, a feeling of celebration settled over the room. Everyone began talking and laughing. Garcia suggested a psychological evaluation for Bebe. Colin took the opportunity to pull Rachel off to the side. He held her at arm's length for a moment. "You look stunning."

"You'd said a nice dinner, so I dressed up. It seems a bit fancy for pizza and soda at the police station. I think maybe orange would have been more appropriate."

Colin held both her hands and leaned forward until his lips just brushed hers. "I am so sorry for all this mess. I had no idea what she was up to."

Rachel smiled with her eyes full of love. "It's okay, Colin. Really, it is. I could've done without being arrested, but it

doesn't matter now. Besides, it worked. It did bring us together."

Colin was amazed everything was okay. Rachel still loved him, despite his nutso aunt. He made up his mind instantly that he was going to do it right here, right now, before anything else could happen to them. "I planned a very special evening. You and me, alone, in a fancy restaurant. We're not alone, and the food isn't fancy. Tonight, might not have happened as planned, but I can still pull off the best part." Colin dropped down on one knee, pulling the box out of his pocket. "Rachel, I love you more than anything in the whole world. I cannot imagine what my life would be like without you. I want to be with you forever. Please say that you'll marry me."

A teardrop slid down Rachel's cheek. The room had gone silent, watching this very special moment. Rachel took Colin's hand that held the ring up for her to see and urged him to his feet, so that they were standing face to face.

"Colin, I love you more than anything else in the world. And I don't want to imagine my life without you. I want us to grow old together. Yes, I will marry you."

With trembling fingers, Colin took the ring from the box and slipped it on Rachel's finger. Then he kissed her and held on, until the sound of applause brought him back to reality. They turned toward the audience Colin had forgotten was there. Everyone rushed forward to congratulate them, clapping Colin on the back and hugging Rachel in congratulations. Rory moved out from the crowd.

"Since I'm sure Colin hadn't planned to propose in an interrogation room, I think we should take this party to Gambino's Restaurant, so our surroundings are more proposal-appropriate, and have dessert. Elizabeth's and mine's treat. Mayor, Detectives, we would be honored if you would join us. You've played quite a big part in all this coming together. What do you say, Colin? Rachel?"

With their arms around each other, they nodded, then kissed again.

It had all started with a family celebration of love, so it was perfect to begin their new life together with another celebration of love.

## **About the Author**

Cindy lives in the mountains of New Mexico with her amazing husband, two entertaining dogs, two snobby cats, and mounds of books. Her husband was hopeful, that once Cindy discovered e-books, the mounds would stop growing, but so far, that has not been the case. Cindy and her husband have raised five wonderful sons and have the two best daughters-in-law possible, along with four amazing grandchildren. After being a school psychologist for many years, Cindy decided to follow her passion and write romantic comedies where she can ensure happy endings. When she is not writing, you will find her curled up with a cup of tea reading a happily ever after story or watching Hallmark movies. Cindy firmly believes that staying positive, even in difficult situations, can change a person's life.

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Please consider leaving a review! It means everything to a new author and I deeply appreciate it!

To find out about new releases and fun giveaways, please go to my website-

[www.cindyirelandauthor.com](http://www.cindyirelandauthor.com)

## **Author's Note**

Thank you for taking a chance on this book, I hope it made you smile and even laugh out loud.

My dream is that it gave you a happy space to be, no matter what else may be happening.

If you want, please leave a review, it can help others take a chance on my book. Thank you!

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