

## Excerpt Once You Know

Colleen scrutinized her husband, but his ingrained optimism made it hard to know whether she should trust the unworried look on his face. “Do you still have a job?”

His eyes widened. “Sure I do. You don’t have to worry about that, Col. Tony’s letting all the Arizona hires go, but me and Cynthia are coming back to Chicago. There’s no question of me losing my job. If he had to, Tony would find a place for me in one of the other offices. Michigan or Indiana. Or, God forbid, Iowa.” His fingers did a quick tap dance on the tray. “But it would be good if we could get the Arizona house on the market right away. Eliminate that mortgage payment. That would give us a cushion.”

A coldness crept over Colleen, and she hugged her bare arms. “What aren’t you telling me?”

He rested a warm palm on her shoulder in a tender gesture. “I might have to take a cut in my base pay. But maybe not. We’ll see.” He gulped down more coffee. “It’ll be fine,” he assured her. “And you’re a whiz at organizing stuff. You’ll have us back home before we know it.”

A jumble of images from last August crowded Colleen’s mind: hours spent searching realtor.com, arranging for movers, packing, signing agreements with the agency to rent their house in the Chicago suburb of Wilmington. And the work she’d need to do now to get the Arizona house ready to sell. In their haste last fall, they’d ignored features that they’d need to fix now to have a quick sale. Izzy’s bedroom needed to be painted for sure, there were cracks in the stucco wall surrounding the yard, and they should probably have the patio doors replaced. And after all that work, she’d be back home in Wilmington, unpacking the same boxes she had packed less than a year ago. Dismay and fear about the future churned inside her, a dangerous brew. “This time you have to help.”

Derek kept his gaze straight ahead, but his profile revealed the thin, tight line of his pursed lips.

“This time,” Colleen insisted, “I’m not doing everything myself. Even if all you do is take Izzy off my hands so I can get stuff done.”

“I’ll do what I can, Col. This week. But after that, Tony wants me back in Chicago. Jim said I can stay at his condo until our renters move out.”

Colleen slammed her cup on its saucer with a satisfying bang. “So, I’ll be alone in Arizona? Moving will all fall on me, just like last summer?” She turned narrowed eyes toward her husband. “I don’t think you have any idea how hard that was. And for what? For nothing, apparently.”

Derek stopped drumming on the tray. “I begged you to stay here. I told you, ‘Let me rent an apartment in Phoenix and see how things go.’ You were the one who insisted on moving. And not even just moving, but buying a house.”

Colleen raised a stubborn chin to her husband. “I was trying to keep our family together.” She flushed. Even at the time, she’d known it was crazy to insist that they buy a home. But how could she explain the dread she’d felt when Derek had talked about living in Arizona without her? With Rachel at college and Derek two thousand miles away, her family would unravel. She had needed to be with her husband, in a home that bound her and Izzy and Derek together with a permanence that renting couldn’t provide.

“You’ve never really understood,” Colleen accused him now, “how terrible last summer was for me. You traveled more than you had since Izzy was a baby. Only she wasn’t a baby anymore, was she? She turned eight; she was old enough to *notice*.” Her face grew warm. “You know Izzy. It was the end of the world every time you cancelled a trip to the beach, every time

you missed her gymnastics or couldn't find the time to take her to a Sunday movie." Another thought seized her, and her voice shook with anger. "It was your last chance to spend time with Rachel before she left us, our last chance to be a *family*, and where were you?" Her rage grew with every word. "Not home! And then, out of the blue, you tell me about this Arizona deal? You want to go to Arizona—*alone*." Her heart pounded with a fury that spoiled for release. "See us once or twice a *month*?" With a jerk, Colleen upended the breakfast tray. The eggs and toast spilled off, and the strawberry jam dribbled onto the sheet. Derek tried to right it, but Colleen knocked it over again when she swung her legs to the side of the bed and hurtled off. She stuck her arms through the sleeves of her robe, pulling it tight around her, and paced, barefoot, at the foot of the bed. She felt out of control, not caring what she said or did. It felt great. She approached the vase of pink roses, her hands itching to pitch it.

"Colleen," Derek pleaded. "Please. Calm down."

But Colleen was not the sort of woman who stuffed her anger down into some dark place. Get it out! That was her philosophy. She lifted the vase and slammed it on the carpet. After a single bounce on the rug, it landed sideways, spilling roses and water. A stream ran toward Derek's pants, which he'd let fall to the floor the night before. Colleen kicked his clothes out of the way. "That's not a family, Derek. We wouldn't have been a family. I *had* to move us to Arizona. I had to. And after all that, we got there, and you disappeared. We would have seen more of you if I *had* stayed here and let you fly home twice a month." Her face was on fire; even the tips of her ears burned. "You know, every time you went looking for new clients, Izzy and I baked your favorite double-chocolate brownies for when you got back. Put the oven on, in that Arizona heat. And you wondered why our air conditioning bill was sky-high! But the brownies dried out before you got home, because you kept adding days to your trips." She lifted her chin,

daring him to deny that. Derek stayed silent. Colleen stormed on. “Even when you were home, you weren’t. You were like a cardboard figure sitting at the kitchen table.” She mimicked Derek’s perfunctory responses to her every remark or question. “‘Mm hm.’ ‘Oh, yeah?’ ‘Sure, hon.’ You were a million miles away. So, don’t you dare blame me, Derek. This is not on me.”

Having made the circuit of the room once again, Colleen now faced the mirror that hung on the back of the bathroom door. She stood there, following Derek’s movements in the mirror. He ran his fingers through his hair. Then he assessed the damage on the bed. He righted an overturned cup, sopped up coffee with a napkin, straightened the breakfast tray and smoothed the crumpled sheet.

Her flow of adrenaline slowing, Colleen watched the changes in her own face in the mirror. First, her flaming skin toned down to pink, then faded to a blush, and finally neutralized into her normal pale coloring with a sprinkling of freckles across her nose. In the mirror, Derek moved the tray half-way down the bed to make room at his side. Watching him prop her pillows up and fold the bedding back like an invitation, Colleen exhaled deeply. The pot had boiled over, the volcano had erupted, and Derek remained steadfast as ever. He patted the empty spot next to him. “Col. Come here.”

She picked up Derek’s socks from the floor and rolled each of them into a ball.

Derek smiled.

She aimed for his head.

He caught the socks easily, gave her a considered look, and then tossed them back at her. One of them bounced off the top of her head. The skirmish only lasted a minute. Colleen hurled the socks, and Derek batted them back, that boyish grin on his face. Then she drifted back to the bed, slipped out of her robe, and climbed in. Derek put his arm around her. “Feel better?”

A chuckle escaped her. “You know I do.”

“Yeah.” He embraced her so closely that the hairs on his chest tickled her cheek. “I’m sorry you’ve had so much to deal with. I’ve been under a lot of pressure in Arizona. Things will be better when we’re back here. And I will help you with the move. As much as I can. I promise.” He kissed the top of her head. “And Rachel can forget this nonsense about getting an apartment. She’ll be home with us for the summer.”

“Yeah.” Colleen took a deep breath. “And we won’t be in that Arizona heat. We’ll be near my brother and Bea and Amber. Izzy can go with them on vacation again, and back to Mrs. Anderson for violin.” Her forehead scrunched. “I’ll have to contact the realtor as soon as we get back.” She opened the notepad feature on her phone and tapped the keys. “And call a plumber about that leaky faucet.”

“I can fix that, Col.” At her skeptical look, Derek nodded firmly. “I promise.”

But would he? A spark of anger at everything he hadn’t done this past year ignited. Colleen squelched it, and instead looked into her husband’s dark eyes. “I wanted this weekend to be a new beginning for us.” Her voice hitched.

Derek put his tanned arm across her pale shoulder and drew her to him. “I know you did. And it could be. It still could be, couldn’t it?”