

Sample Chapter from *The Reunion* by Marina Martindale

Rosemary McGee had the next traffic light perfectly timed until a car from the other lane suddenly cut in front of her minivan. She slammed on the brakes, narrowly avoiding a collision as the light turned yellow. Rosemary kept her foot on the brake pedal, coming to a stop as the signal turned red. Her knees were shaking a little as she looked at the woman sitting in the passenger seat.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she replied.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“I sure hope that wasn’t a bad sign. It’s your opening night and I want everything to be perfect for you.”

“It’s not a bad sign, Rosemary,” she said, trying to reassure her. “These things happen, especially in rush-hour traffic. Don’t worry. We’re okay. We’ll get there in plenty of time, so try to relax. You’ve been on edge ever since we left the hotel. You’re about to give yourself an ulcer, and me a screaming headache to go along with it.”

“Sorry, Gillian. It’s not like I know my way around Denver, and these idiots on the road certainly don’t help.”

“That’s why we have a GPS device. Like I just said, everything is fine.”

They waited for the light to change. Once it turned green, the minivan lurched forward.

“You know,” said Gillian, “just before that happened, I was thinking about my father, and how convinced he was that I’d have no future whatsoever if I became an artist.”

“And when I first met you, I knew you were much too talented to be wasting your time laying out ads for weekly supermarket specials. You’ve come a long way, Gillian. I’m sure your father would have been proud of you.”

“I hope so.”

Gillian Matthews was becoming famous in the art world, and now she had a new gallery to add to her collection. All the risks she’d taken to get herself where she wanted to be were finally paying off.

“Right turn ahead,” chimed the electronic voice.

“Thank you, Bill,” replied both women in unison. Bill was the name they’d given the GPS device.

“It’s too bad you never got to meet my father, Rosemary. I’m sure you and he would have found one another--interesting.”

“I met your mother.”

“Only once or twice, and that was after she had gotten so sick that she really wasn’t herself anymore. Trust me, there was no way my parents were ever going to allow any daughter of theirs to become an artist. That was way too beneath them. I’ll always remember when Cynthia first went off to college. She was studying to be an elementary school teacher. As far as they were concerned, that was an appropriate career, and I was to follow in her footsteps.”

Rosemary let out a sigh as she turned the minivan to the right at the next stoplight.

“I don’t know why, Gillian, but for some strange reason I’ve had a bad feeling about tonight’s show. It started about the time we drove over Raton Pass and crossed the Colorado border.”

“I don’t know why you’d feel that way. It’s not like this is my first time having an opening. You brought all our paperwork, didn’t you?”

“It’s in my briefcase.”

“And we already know my paintings arrived safely. When did you last speak to the people at the gallery?”

“About an hour ago,” replied Rosemary. “They said everything was just about ready to go.”

“Have you spoken to your family today?”

“Lou called this morning. He and the kids are managing just fine.”

“Then I’d say we have all our bases covered. You’ve probably just have a case of opening-night jitters, that’s all.”

“I hope you’re right, Gillian, but for some reason I just can’t shake this feeling.”

A few seconds later, Bill announced that they had reached their destination. The minivan turned into the gallery parking lot. Anthony Sorenson Fine Art resided in a large, single-story office building that had been converted into an art gallery. They noticed a catering truck parked nearby with its crew busily unloading boxes and taking them into the rear entrance.

“See, Oh Worried One, we have arrived. In one piece, and in plenty of time,” chided Gillian.

Rosemary put the minivan into park, shut down the engine, and the two women emerged. They stopped for a moment to smooth the wrinkles from their dresses before Rosemary reached for her briefcase and pressed the remote to lock the doors. As they walked toward the front door a passing car honked at them.

“You’ve still got it, girlfriend,” teased Rosemary as she opened the door for Gillian. “I told you that yellow outfit would make you look hot.”

Entering the art gallery, they came upon a reception area in the foyer. Beyond it, the building was divided into two sections. The main gallery was on the right, with the smaller changing exhibit gallery on the left, where final preparations were being made for Gillian’s opening. At the back was a hallway leading to the administrative offices.

Rosemary stepped up to the receptionist’s desk and introduced herself. A minute later Tony Sorenson, the gallery’s owner, entered from the hallway and greeted them. For a moment, he appeared to be a bit out of character. He looked uncomfortable in the stiff, three-piece suit he was wearing, and his thinning, curly gray hair appeared as though it had been very hastily pulled back into a ponytail. Gillian guessed his typical work attire was probably a well-worn pair of blue jeans with a tie-dyed shirt. As they made their introductions, a harried-looking young man, whom Tony introduced as Paul, his assistant, quickly joined them.

“What we need to do now,” said Tony, “is take a little tour and make sure everything is absolutely correct.”

“Of course,” replied Gillian. “Rosemary, do you have copies of our inventory sheets?”

“Right here,” she said as she retrieved them from her briefcase.

They stepped into the gallery and proceeded to go over every detail, inch by inch. Gillian’s favorite subject matter was architectural and outdoor scenes as well as the occasional still life. She worked mostly in acrylic and watercolor, and she was known for using big, bold, brightly colored shapes. Mounted next to each painting was a small descriptive paper plaque, but they discovered one plaque with a minor error. Paul ran back to his office, quickly printed out a corrected copy, and remounted it next to the painting. Once everything passed inspection, they went to Tony’s office to go over the last-minute details.

“Okay.” He seated himself behind his desk. “We sent out the media releases two weeks ago. There was a mention of you, Gillian, along with a photo, in last Sunday’s paper. And, as I already told Rosemary over the phone, a reporter and photographer from The Denver Centennial, one of our weekly papers, will be coming here tonight. They’ll want to interview you and take a few photos. They said they’d be here sometime between seven and seven-fifteen. Our friend, Paul, will position himself near the front door so he can watch for them, and he’ll let you and Rosemary know the minute they arrive. We don’t want to keep them waiting.”

“Understood,” said Rosemary. “I’ll keep an eye on the clock myself so I’ll know when to watch for Paul.”

“Good,” said Tony, “then it sounds like we’ve covered our bases on that one. We’ve sent announcements to all of our regulars and we’ve had a good response. We’ve also updated our website and Facebook page, so between that, and last Sunday’s paper, we hope to have good turn out from the general public as well. I have a feeling this is going to be a very good evening for all of us.”

Tony and Rosemary went over the rest of the last-minute details before the meeting broke up. As they stepped back into the gallery, they passed the caterers, who were almost finished setting up.

“See Rosemary, everything is fine. I expect tonight will go flawlessly,” assured Gillian. “Tony and his staff are pros. You have nothing to worry about.”

“I know, Gillian, but I still have a feeling that something’s about to go terribly wrong.”

“Well, I can’t imagine what it would be.” Gillian glanced at her watch. “The show starts in ten minutes. I’m going to go freshen up. I’ll be back in a sec.”

By the time she returned, people were beginning to arrive. One or two, here and there, trickled in at first. Then more began showing up. Before long the room was crowded. Gillian had her work cut out for her. She had to introduce herself to as many of the guests as she could and talk to them about her art. Unlike some artists, Gillian wasn’t shy. She genuinely enjoyed meeting new people and answering their questions. Once again, her knack for charming people paid off. Within forty-five minutes, several patrons had followed Tony down the hallway to open their checkbooks.

“How are we doing?” Gillian whispered to Rosemary as she took a short break at the bar to get a glass of water.

“Not bad, not bad at all. So far you’ve sold three acrylics and one watercolor. And the night is still young. We have another hour or so to go.”

Rosemary pointed out one of the paintings hanging near the back corner. It featured an abandoned tractor parked in front of a rustic old barn.

“There was a man standing there admiring that one for the longest time. Did you by chance go over and speak with him?”

“Not yet,” replied Gillian. “I’ve been so busy that I haven’t been able to work my way to that part of the room.”

Rosemary looked down the hallway toward Sorenson’s office.

“Well, I guess it didn’t matter. I see him coming back with Tony. Looks like you may have just sold painting number five. You’re doing well, Gillian. Keep it up.”

“See Rosemary, your worries were all for naught.”

As Gillian sipped her water she watched the two men coming back up the hallway. There was something familiar about the man who’d just purchased her painting. As he stepped back into the room she saw him more clearly. Her heart skipped a beat and she suddenly felt her entire body going limp. She was experiencing one of those freaky moments in time that sometimes happens to people just before they have a terrible accident. Everything around her seemed to be running in slow motion. She felt the water glass slipping from her hand. She somehow managed to snap out of it just in time to regain her grip, but as she did, the glass slammed down hard on the bar. She quickly turned her face away, hoping the man hadn’t seen her.

“Are you all right, ma’am?” asked the bartender.

“Yes. Yes, I’m fine.”

“What’s wrong?” asked Rosemary.

“Nothing, nothing at all. I just lost my grip for a moment.” She tried to regain her composure. “You know, I haven’t eaten very much today. I guess I must have gone too long without food. I’ll be glad when we’re finally done here and we can go grab a bite. Meantime, I think those reporters are coming soon, so I’m going to fix my makeup. Would you mind bringing me my purse, Rosemary? I don’t remember where we put it.”

Rosemary reluctantly did as she was asked. Gillian grabbed her purse and quickly headed down the hallway. As she rushed into the ladies’ room, she was relieved to find no one else there. Her entire body was shaking. She placed both hands on the vanity, bent her head down, and took several deep breaths. Many times over the years she’d wondered if he was still in Denver. Now she finally had her answer. But why did he have to come tonight? Her show would be on display for several weeks. He could have just as easily stopped by another night.

She remained at the vanity and kept breathing slowly and deeply. After a few minutes she felt her body start to relax. She thought about it again and realized it was perfectly innocent. She had a different last name now, and he couldn’t have known that. This would make his being here purely coincidental. He always had an appreciation for art. For all she knew, he was one of Tony’s regulars. Her hands were still a little shaky as she took one last deep breath, reached for a tissue, and gently patted the little beads of sweat that had popped up on her forehead. As she patted, she looked more closely at a face in the mirror.

Gillian looked a good ten years younger than her actual age. Despite all the time that had passed, she still looked much the same. About the only noticeable difference between then and now was that her long blonde hair was now a shoulder-length pageboy. She started to reminisce about the past and her mind suddenly filled with a whirlwind of images of all they had shared, the good times as well as the bad. It was like watching a movie, but the scenes were spliced together out of sequence.

“Calm down, Gillian,” she told her reflection. “You’ve got to pull yourself together.”

She took a few more deep breaths, and as she did, the events of one particular day began playing back in her mind with crystal clarity. It was the day she first laid eyes on Ian Palmer.