

# SWINDLER'S REVENGE by Ellen Buler

## EXCERPT

The knock, or I should say pounding, on my door startled me out of the rainy Saturday morning HGTV home renovation coma I'd slipped into. The clock read half past ten, and I realized I'd been watching back-to-back shows for over three hours. I picked up my coffee to finish it, but the half inch at the bottom of the mug had gone cold and skimmed over.

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

I clicked off the show. "I'm coming! Keep your pants on!"

The knocking likely came from one of my fellow condo neighbors. Winding my auburn hair into a bun and tightening the knot on my chenille robe, I shuffled to the foyer.

"Who is it?" I asked, peeking through the peephole.

The man on the other side wore a long overcoat opened to reveal a barrel chest in a dark suit, white shirt, and striped tie. He had gray-brown hair and a bulbous nose. Not a neighbor.

"If you're peddling your religion, you can move along. I'm quite happy with my own beliefs. Thank you!" I hollered.

"FBI. Open the door, Ms. Cardinal. I have a warrant to search the premises." He held his badge in front of the peephole. It read "Gerald Newcomb".

*Warrant?* I turned off the security system, unlocked the deadbolt and the floor bolt, and pulled it open. "May I see the warrant, please?"

The agent, a little shorter than my five-foot-nine height, invaded my personal space as he laid the piece of paper onto my open palm. "We're looking for Michael Finnegan."

"Mike?" I glanced over the sheet. "Your information is out-of-date. We broke up a few months ago, but feel free to search away." I pulled the door wide, and two other agents wearing Men's Warehouse suits followed Newcomb into my tiny foyer. The first guy was in his late twenties, with freckles and reddish blond hair. I held out a hand to stop him. "Your ID, please."

"He's with me," Newcomb snapped.

My mouth flattened and I delivered him a side-eye. "It wasn't a request. *Identification, please.*"

"Brandon Keller, IRS, fraud division." The freckled fellow held out his card.

The olive-skinned, black-haired man following Agent Keller held up his badge as he entered, but he needn't have. I recognized Amir from the last time he'd been in my home more than a year ago. "What?" I mouthed. Ever so slightly, Amir shook his head. Something slammed in my kitchen. Newcomb and Keller had already begun their search of my two bedroom, two bath condo. Abandoning Amir, my fluffy pink slippers and I shambled over to investigate.

My kitchen was U-shaped with an island in the center. Newcomb opened and closed each cabinet, needlessly slamming them shut with a bang. However, he had no such luck with the soft-close drawers that were put in when I updated my fifty-year-old condo a few years ago.

"Wow, it's ten thirty on a Saturday. Judge—let's see . . ." I scanned the paper in my hand. "Here it is—Judge Robinson must really love you."

The agent didn't respond and started with the lower cabinets along the back wall.

I leaned against the island and drawled, "Mike is six foot tall and a solid 185 pounds. Do you really think he's going to fit in the cabinetry?"

"Please stand back, Ms. Cardinal, and let us do our job," Newcomb stated.

Crossing my arms, I moved aside to allow him to check out the island cabinet behind me. "I'm telling you—you're barking up the wrong tree. We broke up over two months ago." My volley didn't receive a response. "Agent Newcomb, what division of the FBI did you say you worked in?"

"White Collar," Newcomb replied in a clipped tone as he pulled open the cabinets beneath the sink.

*White Collar? Hm, did I just fall down a rabbit hole with Alice?* Mike worked in the Cybercrime division. Newcomb opened the tiny microwave above my stove, and I rolled my eyes.

"You know, Mike once told me that they found an entire safe inside the dishwasher. Maybe I've stuffed him in there." I pulled it open and whipped out the racks. Dirty dishes rattled and clanked. Newcomb jerked upright, putting a hand to his hip in an action I'd seen from Mike. Amir hustled in from the other room.

"Nope, not in there. Don't forget to check the fridge. Oh, and there's a washer and dryer in the pantry." I pointed. "Maybe he's hiding in there."

Newcomb was not amused. "Ms. Cardinal, I can arrest you for interfering in an investigation, or you can go sit down and wait until we're finished," he said in a menacing voice.

"Interfering? Why, darlin', I'm just tryin' to help," I explained in my sweetest southern debutant accent.

Amir cleared his throat and caught my eye. His silent message was clear: "Don't."

“Okay, fine.” I threw up my hands. “I’ll leave you to it. Let’s see what the tax man is up to.”

I discovered that Keller had moved from the living room on to my bedroom, and he was searching my dresser drawers.

“Is fingering my lingerie part of the warrant, Mr. Keller?”

His freckled face bloomed like the red tide.

“Then I suggest you get your mitts out of my panty drawers and check places where an adult male might hide. Under the bed, closet, bathroom. You get the picture,” I snapped.

He slammed the drawer shut.

“Leave my shoeboxes alone, too. He’s not hiding in them, either!” I delivered the parting shot and strolled across the living room and down the hall to my guest room, where I found Amir searching the walk-in closet.

“Amir,” I whispered, “what the hell is going on? Is Mike in trouble? What are you doing with White Collar? I thought you worked in Cybercrime.”

Amir put a finger to his lips to shush me. “Ms. Cardinal, I believe Agent Newcomb asked you to take a seat while we finish the search,” he said in a normal tone. Then he took my hand and placed a tiny, folded piece of paper in my palm.

Shoving the paper deep into my robe pocket, I harrumphed, “Fine. I’ll go wait in the living room.” I stomped to the living room, plopped down onto the sofa, and flicked the TV back on to the home renovation show.

A few minutes later, Newcomb came into the living room. I turned up the volume.

Keller also joined us in the living room. “The bedroom is clean.”

“Did you check under the dining table?” I snarked, then caught Newcomb staring at the sofa. “Oh, for the love of Pete!” I muted my show, stood, and picked up the cushions one at a time. “He is *not* in my velvet couch. And if he did dare to try and crawl in there, *you* would be the least of his worries!”

Newcomb didn’t seem convinced and continued to stare.

“What? Do you need to check behind the couch?” I yanked the armrest and it moved about six inches.

Keller trotted over to give the backside a gander. He pulled it out farther and shook his head. “Nothing back here.”

Shoving my favorite piece of furniture back in place, I collapsed down and put my fluffy feet on the coffee table.

Newcomb pulled up the safety bar and unlocked the slider.

I sighed as he spotted the door on the far-right side of the deck. “You’ll need the key for the utility closet.”

“Please open the closet, Ms. Cardinal,” Newcomb requested in a very nice way.

Amir joined us in the living room. “All clear in the guest bedroom and bath.”

“Agent Amir, would you please retrieve my car keys from the glass bowl by the front door?” I asked sweetly, copying Newcomb’s tone.

When Amir returned, Newcomb indicated I should open the door for them. Instead, I plucked out the key to the closet and held it between two fingers. “I prefer to keep my distance from the creepy closet. Last fall, a copperhead slithered in there while I was replacing the furnace filter. I locked that sucker tight and haven’t been in since.” I wiggled the key. “It’s all you.”

With interest, Newcomb took the key. All three men piled onto my tiny deck, standing tense and at the ready, as if waiting for Mike to jump out of the closet like a jack-in-the-box.

“Be careful. That deck gets slippery when wet!” I hollered from the comfort of my couch. I considered shouting “boo!” when they opened the door, but I decided I might get shot.