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Trading for Murder



Books by Angela Miller Curtis

Trading for Murder

Murder at Aunt B's

(Soon to be released)

A Mazie Harris Mystery

Book 1

Trading for Murder



Danger, Murder, and a Dash of Wit

Angela Miller Curtis

Trading for Murder

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For information, contact:

Angela Curtis • amcurtisbooks@gmail.com • AngelaMillerCurtis.com

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*To Rick
You make my life complete!*

Trading for Murder



ONE



Mazie Harris was used to her gut instinct closing seven-figure deals, but tonight, before the end of the evening, her instinct would scream her best friend was being framed for a crime he didn't commit.

She walked into the Marble Springs Hotel, wearing two-inch heels and a gold-sequined gown that highlighted her green eyes and light-brown hair. She hoped she looked more confident than she felt. With her heels clicking on the cream-colored marble floor, she passed under large crystal chandeliers and found the ballroom for the evening's festivities.

Michael, one of the firm's interns, sat at the check-in table and handed Mazie her name tag when she walked up. "Mazie, you and your team will be at table ten, on the right side of the room."

Mazie smiled. "Thank you, Michael. I'm waiting for a friend named Terry Cunningham. I'll wait a moment before going in."

Michael found his name tag. "I'll let him know."

Mazie nodded and stood aside, placing her name tag on her gown. She decided to wait just a moment and peeked into the ballroom.

Adams and Hudson, the marketing firm she worked for, had spared no expense. The room was elegant and beautiful. A beverage bar stood on one side of the room, and an appetizer and dessert station on the other, with round tables between.

Each table had fruit centerpieces resembling flower arrangements, gray and burgundy linens, polished silver, and crystal glasses. The room was full of smartly dressed people mingling inside.

Turning back to see if Terry had arrived, she decided to wait a few more minutes. She wanted him by her side tonight.

Mazie grew up determined to make a difference in the world, and at thirty-two, she'd turned that stubborn streak into a quiet certainty. Confident? Absolutely. Assured? People set their watches by her. Optimistic? She still believed most problems could be solved with a decent cup of coffee and good listening skills.

Spontaneity, however, was one of her weak spots. She was anything but.

Brandon, her ex-boyfriend, often reminded her that she scheduled her own whims in pencil, just in case something more useful came up. One day, he drawled on after she'd color-coded their weekend.

"Some of us," he said, "like to live dangerously—like eating dessert before seven p.m." Her color-coding that

weekend broke the camel's back, sending him running for the hills.

Since then, she'd worked on being more spontaneous and more willing to do things on a moment's notice. Slowly. Methodically. She'd even made a list titled "Spontaneity Practice," which rather proved his point, but at least the list was written in purple ink on a Tuesday when no one expected it. Baby steps, she reminded herself.

Mazie and Terry became friends in college. If it hadn't been for him, she never would have finished school. She'll never be able to repay him for getting her through the last semester.

Dad asked her one day why there wasn't a romantic connection between them. She explained that Terry was attractive, but she wasn't attracted to him. He was kind, but in a brotherly sort of way. Dad couldn't quite understand how a man and a woman could be just good friends. But that's what they were. Best friends.

As far as she was concerned, he wasn't marriage material. He was, however, someone she enjoyed spending time with. And he was very spontaneous. She hoped some of it would rub off on her eventually.

After ten minutes, she decided to go in. It would be like him to come in late, grinning, and cracking some dumb joke about lost cufflinks.

“He’d better show,” she said to herself, looking around for her team. She was counting on Terry to keep things light tonight in case they didn’t win.

The room was filled with co-workers hoping to win an award. Mazie was no different.

On more than one occasion, she’d been told she was ambitious, relentless, and had high expectations. It only made her laugh because she saw herself as controlled, passionate, and kind.

At least she tried to be kind.

She put everything into bringing her clients’ products successfully to market. And sometimes — she had to admit — it caused a little friction along the way.

Threading her way through forty or more of her co-workers and guests, she found her team in the front of the room, near the stage. They stood in a tight knot, programs folded and refolded in nervous hands.

She passed by four of the other account managers up for the same award, their laughter loud, their postures easy, as if somehow they knew they’d already won.

After thirty minutes of idle conversation, the chandeliers flickered and dimmed, signaling everyone to take their seats for dinner. Still no sign of Terry.

It wasn’t like him to be so late.

She gestured her team toward table ten. Jayna Jackson, Mazie’s assistant and best female friend, dropped her five feet eight inches into the chair on Mazie’s right with a soft rustle of

silk, crossing one long leg over the other, and flashing a slice of dark skin. Jayna was twenty-eight and known for her no-nonsense approach to almost everything.

She leaned toward Mazie. “Still no sign of Terry?” she murmured, low enough for only Mazie to hear. Her chocolate eyes flicked to the empty seat to Mazie’s left.

“I have no idea where he is. It isn’t like him to be this late.” She glanced again at her phone for a message.

From across the table, the team’s graphic artist, Jim, loosened his tie another fraction and drummed the table with both palms, and announced, “My gut is yelling we’re taking this thing home tonight. The Martin account? Nobody came close. The commercial where the family is sitting around one of Noah Martin’s beautiful polished tables...?” He pointed his fork at Mazie as if it were a spotlight, “Pure Mazie Magic.”

Heat crawled up her neck. She couldn’t ask for a better group of talented people to work for her.

She lifted her water glass, condensation cool against her fingers, and tipped it toward her team. “We built that campaign together. Every frame, every line,” she held her glass up and toasted them.

Forty-five minutes later, dinner plates were picked up, and her gaze drifted to the stage, where the evening’s host, Stephen Hudson, the firm’s second partner, and her boss, tested the microphone with soft taps. “Please help yourself to the dessert station. We’ll begin in five minutes,” he announced.

Winning the top team award tonight could turn Stephen's vague "when-you-are-ready" promises into something she could actually touch. She pressed her thumbnail into the soft pad of her index finger, just hard enough to feel the bite, and waited for the lights to drop. Still no sign of Terry. She was really beginning to worry.

The lights dimmed, and Stephen, holding the microphone, turned to watch the video as he reflected on the firm's marketing triumphs playing on the large screen behind him. The video displayed snippets of commercials, brochures, and social media spots they had all produced over the year. Woops and applause broke out when the video ended, including table ten. Excitement flooded the room.

Mazie's team leaned forward, whispering about their different ads on the video, and assured one another theirs would win.

As if on cue, Brad Adams, the firm's senior partner, bounded onto the stage, shaking Stephen's hand and slapping him on the back, eager to begin the awards portion.

Several people turned their chairs to get a better view of the stage, while Stephen took a seat with his family and guests.

Brad started by reading the list of nominees for the Photo Team of the Year award. Suddenly, before he could announce the winner, a loud thud at the back of the room drew everyone's attention.

A man in a black suit stumbled in, crashing into a server holding a tray of coffee carafes and cream pitchers, sending them crashing to the floor. Splashes of coffee and cream went everywhere.

“Terry?” Mazie whispered under her breath in disbelief.

He tripped again as he tried to straighten and said loudly, “Whoops,” and muffled a laugh.

With eyes opened wide, Mazie watched her best friend make an absolute spectacle of himself. Oh, perfect, she thought, Terry chooses the night of my awards dinner to channel his inner fraternity ghost—what in the world is he thinking?

Jayna leaned over. “Is he drunk?”

“It seems so, but he doesn’t drink. I don’t know if I’m furious or worried?”

Realizing he had to be stopped before he did more damage, Mazie marshaled her frustration, stood, and went to him, tugging on his arm tightly toward their table.

The waitstaff quietly picked up the coffee carafes and mopped up, and Brad brought the attention back to the podium and began again.

Mazie’s heart raced. She felt embarrassed not only for Terry but also for her team. She could only imagine how they felt to see their team leader’s friend so out of control.

She leaned into him. “What is wrong with you? Have you been drinking?”

“Did you win?” he said loudly, ignoring her question.

She waved her hand downward to quiet him, feeling her face flush when heads turned toward them.

Terry had been her friend for years, and this wasn't like him at all. They'd seen each other through thick and thin, but she'd never seen him drunk. She wondered if he'd stopped taking his meds. From the stories he'd told her about his childhood, he wasn't able to keep his emotions to himself until they found the right combination of medications that finally helped.

The room erupted with clapping for the team that had just won. Which she missed. Reaching for her water glass, she took three big gulps, hoping to calm down, her anger brewing just below the surface.



THE SUITE ON THE 11TH FLOOR of the Marble Springs Hotel had been converted into a rolling command post.

Special Agent Peter Bennett adjusted the knot of his tie in the mirror. The suit jacket already warm against his skin. He'd learned over the years that it was best to mimic the guests' attire when he was about to raid a dinner party. It caused less stress for everyone concerned if they didn't go in with FBI written on their backs and their guns drawn.

Peter Bennett had been with the FBI for seven years since leaving LA, where he worked as a street cop. Now he worked for the US Attorney's office in Englewood, Colorado.

He didn't regret choosing the FBI. In fact, he rather enjoyed being in the middle of complex cases, but he was ready for bigger ones. Ones that made national news. This one might just be that kind of case if the evidence proved solid enough.

But he'd have to do everything by the book. His boss was counting on this case to draw the state senator's attention. She had political goals and eventually wanted to be nominated to the US Supreme Court.

"Ballroom number one seven-five, right side, in the middle," directed Agent Scott Walters, sliding a tablet across the table toward Peter Bennett. A live feed from the ballroom showed Terrance Cunningham in a black suit sitting at table ten.

Bennett reviewed the room layout. "We move in five."

"Copy that," Agent Walters said, and palmed a pair of handcuffs into the breast pocket of his suit jacket like a linen napkin. "If he bolts for the exit, we have it covered."

Feeling for his FBI badge in his pocket, Peter Bennett announced, "Let's try for a quiet entry, quiet exit."

He slipped the arrest warrant into an inside pocket, smoothed the lapel of his jacket, and stepped into the hallway. The elevator hummed downward to the second floor, carrying four well-armed agents toward ballroom one seventy-five.



MAZIE FORCED HER attention to Brad, standing at the podium. He was about to announce the Marketing Team of the Year award. The most prestigious one of the night. The one everyone was waiting for. If her team won, it would bring her one step closer to that promotion Stephen constantly dangled in front of her.

Before Brad announced the five nominees, she leaned across the table and said to her team, "Listen, you've all worked hard this year. You deserve the award, but win or lose, you are all winners in my book." She nodded curtly and smiled, then looked up at the stage. She averted her eyes slightly upward, missing what she used to feel when she did so.

Mazie grew up going to church with her parents. They raised her to respect God and to go to Him with confidence in times of need, and for many years she did. But something happened when she was eighteen that made her question whether He really heard her at all, causing her to stop relying on the relationship she'd learned to count on.

Brad said, "Drum Roll Please." The audience began tapping the edge of their tables with their hands, and Brad opened the envelope. "And the award goes to ... Mazie Harris, and her amazing marketing team."

Applause erupted throughout the room, and her team stood at once to congratulate one another and Mazie. Mazie gave them high-fives and stepped forward to accept the award on the team's behalf. She punched the air with her fist as she approached the stage.

Terry also stood and cheered loudly.

Brad Adams shook Mazie's hand and gave her the award as she walked to the microphone.

Looking into the audience, she found Stephen smiling back at her and said, "Thank you for recognizing our hard work this year." Then, she aimed her gaze toward the audience and said, "I accept this award on behalf of my talented team. Their talent makes my job much easier." Holding up the award, she looked at her team and said loudly, "This is for all of us!"

The crowd stood and clapped, and her team pumped their fists.

Terry cupped his mouth and yelled as he swayed, "I knew you were talented, Mazie Harris," and let out a "whoop, whoop."

Stepping from the stage, she smiled from ear to ear, waving the award in the air in victory. It felt as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders at that moment. She finally had the reassurance that the firm's partners respected her designs, campaign slogans, commercials, brochures, and photo shoots. Her team's work had been noticed, and all those long hours with demanding clients had finally paid off.

Terry stepped away from the table to congratulate her when his foot caught on the leg of his chair, causing him to stumble forward, heading straight for her.

He flung out his arms, trying to catch himself, but to no avail. The crash sent her stumbling backward with the award

in her hand. The corner of the plaque slammed into her forehead before flying out of her hand and across the floor.

The strength of Terry's weight caused her to land on her backside, making her legs reach for the stars as Terry landed on top. It all happened in a matter of seconds.

"Get off me!" she demanded and pushed against the weight of his body. This was just great. How could the night get any worse? Terry climbed awkwardly to his feet.

John, one of her co-workers sitting at the table closest to the fiasco, helped her up. She quickly smoothed her expensive gown, only to notice a small tear above her name tag, which made her even angrier.

In a panic, Jayna reached for a tissue in her purse and ran to Mazie. "Take this, your forehead is bleeding."

"Is it bad?" Mazie said.

"I don't think so. It doesn't look too deep, but you need a Band-Aid."

The entire room watched in shock as Mazie tried to regain her dignity. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw one marketing manager looking at another, both with smirks on their faces. She straightened her shoulders, glanced at Stephen, and mouthed, "I'm so sorry!"

Terry sat at the table with his head in his hands.

Once Mazie reached her table, she grabbed her purse and said, "Congratulations," to her team. "I'm so sorry for my friend and how this turned out. I'm okay, but I'm going to get him out of here."

Completely humiliated, she grabbed Terry by the arm, helped him to his feet, and began to escort him out of the ballroom when, suddenly, four men in black suits entered through the double doors.

Mazie immediately stopped, still holding onto an unsteady Terry.

Two emotionless, strong-looking men made their way to the back of the ballroom, their hands behind their backs, shoulder guns visible beneath their jackets.

In a matter of seconds, with a look of concern about who these men were, Brad Adams stepped off the stage to find out.

“What do you want? This is a private affair,” he said loudly as he started toward them.

A woman at the back of the room screamed, “They have guns.”

“Remain seated,” the man nearest the door shouted, “I am Special Agent Peter Bennett. This is Special Agent Scott Walters. We are with the FBI,” he said as he flashed his badge. “This isn’t going to take long.”

Brad stopped in his tracks, and the crowd watched with their mouths open as Agent Bennett nodded at Agent Walters, giving him the go-ahead. They walked up the right side of the room and stopped where Terry and Mazie stood.

“Are you Terrance Cunningham?” Agent Bennett said.

“I am, but what do you want with me?” Terry held onto the chairback with one hand to keep his balance, and Mazie let go of his arm.

Agent Walter put a hand on Terry's shoulder. "Please place your hands behind your back." He clicked the handcuffs into place.

Agent Bennett reached into his pocket. "This is a federal warrant, Mr. Cunningham. You are under arrest for insider trading and wire fraud."

"What? It wasn't me. I didn't do anything wrong."

Mazie took a step forward. "Agent Bennett, you have the wrong man."

Ignoring her, Bennett read Terry his *Miranda* rights, while he and Walters each took an arm and led Terry around the tables toward the doors.

Tonight had been the most bizarre night of her life. Mazie and Terry had been friends for years. No one knew them better than they knew each other. Terry looked back before going through the doors. They held each other's gaze for only seconds, searching for some kind of explanation.

She saw a look of total despair in his eyes, and he saw a look of utter confusion in hers.