

**Beware: Things Are Not Always  
as They Seem**

By R. Shannon

# COPYRIGHT

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright ©2021 by R. Shannon

Forward copyright ©2021 by R. Shannon

Preview of this book copyright ©2020 by R. Shannon

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher constitute unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use the material from the book (other than for review purposes), prior written permission must be obtained by contacting the publisher at [rshannon@gmail.com](mailto:rshannon@gmail.com).

Thank you for your support of the author's rights.



# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**COPYRIGHT**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**MAIN CHARACTER LIST**

**CHAPTER 1**

**CHAPTER 2**

**CHAPTER 3**

**CHAPTER 4**

**CHAPTER 5**

**CHAPTER 6**

**CHAPTER 7**

**CHAPTER 8**

**CHAPTER 9**

**CHAPTER 10**

**CHAPTER 11**

**CHAPTER 12**

**CHAPTER 13**

**CHAPTER 14**

**CHAPTER 15**

**CHAPTER 16**

**CHAPTER 17**

**CHAPTER 18**

**CHAPTER 19**

**CHAPTER 20**

**CHAPTER 21**

**CHAPTER 22**

**CHAPTER 23**

**CHAPTER 24**

**CHAPTER 25**

**CHAPTER 26**

**CHAPTER 27**

**CHAPTER 28**

**CHAPTER 29**

**CHAPTER 30**

**CHAPTER 31**

**NOTE TO READER**

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**CHAPTER 1 (Book 3)**

# MAIN CHARACTER LIST

Some readers, like me, have trouble keeping up with the characters if or when there are more than a few. I have this list of Main Characters for those readers!

- Colleen Kessler, Fr. Liam's niece
- Jacob Kessler, Colleen's husband
- Fr. Laim, ex-cop, Priest of Our Lady of Mercy Church
- Ryan Mallardi – Private Investigator
- Angelica – Ryan's girlfriend
- Mike Mullens – Fr. Liam's brother, Colleen's father
- Dennis Moore, Mike's neighbor, day trader
- Alice Brennan, Mike's neighbor
- Joey Fontaine, Mike's neighbor

## LESSER CHARACTERS (mentioned once or twice)

- Maria Mullens, Mike's deceased wife
- Lydia Mallardi, Ryan's mom
- Lucretia Molino, Ryan's aunt, Lydia's sister
- Agnes Fontaine, Joey's rich wife
- Perry and George – the movers



## CHAPTER 1

**Friday, December 14th  
12:00 PM  
Ocala, FL**

THERE WAS NO OMEN nor any premonition about what was to happen to any of them. The weather gave nothing away, as it was another mild day in December in Ocala, Florida. It was sunny, seventy-something degrees with an occasional cool breeze.

The season dropped no clues as it was two weeks before Christmas and things in the church were busier every day. Fr. Liam always looked forward to the exciting and joyous holiday season. No one in the women's group seemed to sense anything in the air either. They went about decorating the church for Christmas and there was only excitement in the air.

One could say Fr. Liam's life was calm and happy, although he did still feel a pinch of loneliness every so often. His wife had died five years earlier and he still carried around a lonely heart. The loneliness came upon him only when he had the time to think about it, which was mostly at night.

He hoped that was about to change as his brother and sister-in-law were preparing to move into town. Their house was being prepared to put on the market. Their chosen retirement community, Summer Grove, was only five minutes away from Fr. Liam's rectory. This would be his last Christmas without family. That was the plan, anyway.

Fr. Liam looked out the window of the parish office. He saw the gentle sway of the beautiful oak trees that lined the church property. Catching up on the never-ending paperwork of his parish, it was almost noon already. He waited for the arrival of Ryan Mallardi, a young parishioner whom he helped through the annulment of his first marriage. Fr. Liam had earned a counseling degree at night school long before they had online classes. He was quite popular with the younger men in the parish, as he had been a Fort Lauderdale cop for 30 years before becoming a priest. He always had a crazy story or two to tell.

Leading up to early retirement from the police force, Liam Mullens had entered the diaconate program in the local seminary intending to become a parish deacon. He was in his last year of studies when his wife Patty died from ovarian cancer. In one moment of time, the calling to become a deacon morphed into becoming a priest. In some strange way, he felt the door to the priesthood open for him.

## Beware – Things Are Not Always as They Seem

---

A call came into the rectory office and Juanita's first whispered words were "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Where will the wake be?"

Juanita was Fr. Liam's secretary since he was assigned to Our Lady of Mercy Church four years earlier. The parish was surrounded by predominantly retirement communities filled with aging baby boomers. There were about twenty five percent younger families, but mainly boomers. Over the last few years, that generation was dying out in droves and Fr. Liam was doing at least one wake and funeral a week. On occasion, he had as many as three.

When the call ended, Fr. Liam asked, "Who was it, Juanita?" He stood up and went to her desk which was outside in the parish office receiving area.

"It was Geraldine Regan. She was in Marion County Hospital with pneumonia, and she died an hour ago. She'll be laid out in Kramer Funeral Home. I have the dates here. They want a mass on Wednesday morning followed by a burial ceremony. I'll call one of our deacons to do the wake."

"Geraldine was suffering with her breathing for a long time, so now she's at peace," said Fr. Liam.

"She'll be free of that grandson Bill who has been nothing but trouble for her. She had to take out a home equity loan on her house to get him out of jail last year. She was a nervous wreck after that. When I see him around town, I get so mad."

"What were his charges about?" asked Fr. Liam.

"Drugs, theft. Meth, which is the worst of the lot, I hear," said Juanita, as she shook her head disparagingly. "Poor Geraldine. She's in a better place now."



**Same Day - December 14th  
4:00 PM - Four Hours Later  
Fort Lauderdale, FL**

Late in the afternoon, Gladys McElroy heard a loud banging outside her new neighbor's apartment. She lived in the Tivoli Apartments in Fort Lauderdale for at least ten years and knew many of the residents. The family who moved next to Gladys was only there for about three months. No one saw much of them. The mother came and went with groceries, always walking quickly, and never making eye contact with anyone. On occasion, the neighbors heard yelling and what sounded like domestic problems coming from their apartment. Gladys didn't know anything about them, not that she didn't try to find out. They all kept to themselves.

The banging got louder and louder. Gladys considered this an invitation to open the door, as did other neighbors, and go out and watch. She saw a man about 65 years old banging on her neighbor's door and shouting, "Kaufman, I know you're in there. Open up. I want my money." He appeared to be a normal person by his dress and appearance, but he was red in the face. He was as angry as a man could be. He continued banging and repeating the same mantra over and over. Inside the apartment was only silence.

## Beware – Things Are Not Always as They Seem

---

Gladys slowly approached the angry man hoping to find out more about what was going on. “Can I help you, sir?”

“I’m looking for Barry Kaufman, the stockbroker thief who stole my money, all of my money,” the stranger said. He banged again, from anger, which Gladys could feel from a foot away.

Suddenly a police car pulled up and two Fort Lauderdale police officers approached the angry man. At first sight of the officers, the man lunged into a long tale about this Kaufman guy having stolen his money. Apparently, Kaufman was fired from his job and he was here to get his money back. He wasn’t waiting until some lawsuit settled. His story was long and rambling and peppered with expletives. The cops told him to lower his voice, but they let him vent for a couple more minutes.

One of the police officers began shooing all the neighbors back into their apartments -- for safety, of course.

The other officer, as deliberately as he could, said, “I’m sorry, sir, you cannot continue to bang on the door. Mrs. Kaufman, who does live here, was the one who called us about a man banging on her door. If you continue to bang on the door, we’ll have to arrest you for disturbance of the peace.”

“So, he gets to steal almost a million dollars from someone and that’s it, I’ll see you in court?”

“Sir, what is your name?” asked the officer.

“Martin Silver. I invested with his company. He was assigned to me as an expert investor and he stole money from my account. The company can’t reach him. No one else is moving on this. I found him myself after paying a private investigator.”

“Sir, we are happy to meet with you at the police station. You can file a criminal complaint against Mr. Kaufman if a crime has been committed.”

“I’ve already filed a complaint. I’ve been told by the prosecutor that there’s a warrant out but they can’t find him,” said Martin Silver. “I’ve tracked him down here. He lives here. He should be arrested.” Both policemen said nothing.

“You steal from the wealthy, nobody cares,” said Martin Silver, now gesturing with his arms and hands, acting for his audience.

The shooing police officer wasn’t doing very well. All the neighbors went into their apartments but kept their doors open and continued to watch.

“I cannot tell you whether that is true or not, sir, but you will still have to stop banging on this woman’s door. She has told us by phone that her husband has left her, and he doesn’t live there anymore. Why don’t you come down to the station and file a complaint? If you have proof that he still lives here, and he has stolen from you, we will be happy to arrest him.”

“Oh, great. It took me two weeks to find this bastard here,” said Mr. Silver. “By the time I fill out the complaint, he’ll reinvent himself again and take off.”

“I’m sorry, sir. Like I said, we are happy to make a report for you, but you have to stop banging on their door. If you have proof of a crime, we will proceed and put out a warrant for Mr. Kaufman.”



## Beware – Things Are Not Always as They Seem

---

This was all Gladys was able hear. She was finally just about physically pushed back into her apartment by the one cop and the door closed by the second officer. She then watched through the apartment window. The two police officers slowly escorted poor Mr. Silver into the parking area. She could see Mr. Silver's frustration and anger as he went on and on to the police officers in the parking lot. Pacifying and diffusing the public was now part of the officers' job duties. The cops let Mr. Silver carry on for another five minutes venting, before all three of them left.



## CHAPTER 2

**December 23rd**  
**Almost two weeks later**  
**Fort Lauderdale, FL**

IT WAS THE start of Christmas week in Fort Lauderdale. The Intercoastal was littered all day with boats and yachts of every size and kind, all filled with residents and tourists alike. From party boats to single day cruises, the waterways were busy from early morning to sundown. As the sun went down in early evening, the same waterway became almost deserted. The local restaurants and bars filled up with the same tourists and residents. Christmas week was a busy time in Fort Lauderdale. It was a frenzied combination of out-of-state vacationers and locals. Everyone was anticipating and preparing for the holidays.

By eight o'clock, it was as dark as midnight on the Intercoastal. A slight purring of a single boat engine could be heard on the water. It made its way into an alcove hidden from the shoreline. Once it turned into the alcove, the boat's lights went off. The boat slowed to a crawl but continued forward for several minutes in the dark. Then the engine shut off.

Two minutes later, an anchor splashed into the water and began to sink. The only other sound was the slight rocking of the boat in the dark but calm waters of the Intercoastal.

Inside the boat, on the floor, the body was wrapped in a new tarp purchased at a home store. Next to the body were two fifty-pound bags of river rocks and two rolls of duct tape.

The murderer unfolded the tarp which now contained a small pool of the victim's blood. The body was still dressed in shirt and trousers. He wrapped duct tape around the pant ankles and sleeve cuff endings. He tore open the river rock bags and stuffed rocks inside both legs of the victim's pants. His hands shook more than they had ever shaken before. His actions were frantic and awkward. He hadn't expected to feel such panic.

As he stood once or twice during the process to wipe sweat from his forehead, he could tell this scene had *novice* written all over it. His plan was hatched in the state of frenzy and his inexperience showed. At this point, he had no choice; he just kept going. He would have to make it work.

## Beware – Things Are Not Always as They Seem

---

After stuffing the pant legs with rocks, he abruptly stopped. It just occurred to him that he had to get the body, once stuffed, over the boat wall. He should have thought this before putting in any rocks. But again, he had to keep moving.

Before stuffing the upper shirt area, he dragged the body into position onto the back wall of the boat. This way, once he added more rocks, he only had to push the body overboard. It required every bit of his strength to hoist the body up onto the boat wall. He could feel the strain in his lower back.

He finished stuffing the pant legs and shirt with river rocks. He put on extra pieces of duct tape around the victim's neck. With the little energy he had left, he pushed the body into the water. As he watched the body hit the water, he could tell the neck area didn't look secure at all. He hoped the rocks in the pant legs would be enough to keep the body submerged at least until he could get away.

Like the anchor, the splash of the body sounded twice as loud against the silence of the deserted Intercoastal. He watched as the body sank. The last part of the body to go under was the back of the victim's head. Even in the moonlight, he could see the bloody bullet hole in the lower cranium.

He threw what was left of the rocks overboard next and pulled up the anchor. He started the boat, turned around, and slowly and stealthily returned to the marina.



## CHAPTER 3

**Friday, February 1st  
4:30 PM - Approximately five weeks later  
Fort Lauderdale, FL**

BUSINESS AT Levitt & Cohen Financial Services was bustling. The market was up and the sales force were high-fiving each other as the market closed for the week. Several of the salesmen were mulling around and showing off at the reception desk where the two prettiest girls, Sarah and Kim, answered phones and greeted investors. It was Friday afternoon and close to five o'clock. Several of the younger traders were planning to go to happy hour to celebrate another market win. On the surface, all looked copacetic.

David Baker, one of the firm's private investigators, had finished speaking with Mr. Levitt, the head partner, behind closed doors. He left and nodded goodbye. He weaved his way through the celebration around the reception desk. He spoke to no one as he left.

Mr. Levitt exited his office. He quietly walked to his partner's door, knocked lightly, opened the door, and entered Mr. Cohen's office. At the sight of Levitt, suddenly the party atmosphere at the front desk subsided and everyone disbursed.

Levitt and Cohen were partners and business owners for fifteen years. They had been good and successful years together. Neither of them was expecting what had recently happened. The staff was not aware of what was going on under the facade at Levitt & Cohen.

Once the door closed, neither partner sat. They stood; Cohen behind his desk and Levitt in front of it. "I just spoke with David Baker," said Marc Levitt.

"What's going on?" asked Cohen, knowing by Levitt's expression that it was not good.

No louder than a whisper, Levitt said, "They just found Marty Silver floating in the Intercoastal. He was shot in the back of the head and weighed down with some configuration of duck-tape and rocks. They're in the process of notifying the family."

"He's the one who filed the FCC complaint against Kaufman, isn't he?" asked Cohen.

"That's the one. You know what this means for us, don't you?"

## Beware – Things Are Not Always as They Seem

---

“It’s going to be all over the papers and there’s going to be blow back and more lawsuits,” answered Cohen.

“Exactly. I’ve called everyone and the lawyers are coming in the morning, and we’ll figure out what to do next. They’re bringing in a PR company for damage control starting tomorrow.” Levitt shook his head.

A moment of silence passed between them.

“Kaufman was the last person I would have thought would have gone this bad,” said Marc Levitt shaking his head.

“I knew he couldn’t be trusted,” said Cohen.

“You don’t trust anyone, Bernie,” said Levitt.

“Now you know why,” said Cohen, as he dropped down into his chair and swung around and looked out the window.

Levitt walked casually out of Cohen’s office. The celebration around the reception desk was over and staff members were packing up to leave for the weekend.

Levitt went into his office and sat at his desk. He thought about what the next several weeks would bring: newspaper articles, sensational headlines, screaming clients, paranoid clients, and nasty clients. They would all be worried that they would be the next victim. No amount of assurance that the thief was gone would stop it. They would all assume their money was already gone. Fear could make people crazy.

Levitt and Cohen were trying to keep the mood up in the firm, but they were both laden with worry. Kaufman and the money he stole were nowhere to be found. If he was already out of the country, Levitt knew he was smart enough to land somewhere that would not extradite to the US.

The authorities traced some of this money through about four different transfers which cut off in Panama, where it was now stuck in legal limbo. Their private eyes were working with local detectives in Panama, but they hit a dead end. They had not found any trace of Kaufman there. There was now a legal standoff between the embassies and the banks. At least a large portion of the money in Panama was still there.

While working at the firm, Kaufman was known as extremely bright, daring and shark-like. The younger traders all looked up to him. He had a big personality and was the center of attention most days. Apparently, underneath this intellect was a criminal mind. He first slowly embezzled monies from Levitt & Cohen. Then he moved onto stealing from their clients.

Levitt knew Kaufman would reinvent himself and hide the money in a way that no one would be able to find him. He had an extremely calculating mind. Levitt just hoped, this time, he was wrong about him.

Marc Levitt was holding his head between his hands, looking at his desk. He was still absorbing the last report of the investigator. Thoughts of the private investigator bills, the legal bills, the newspaper articles, the frightened and screaming clients, the financial losses all seeped into his mind. He knew he had no choice but to take things one day at a time. He would need to trust the lawyers, investigators, state attorneys and SEC investigators. Hopefully, they could at least get back the lion’s share of the money.

## Beware – Things Are Not Always as They Seem

---

Levitt had liked Kaufman. He paid him very well, promoted him, and even protected him from a few disappointed clients. He treated him like a family member. Aside from the legal and financial storm that he faced, Levitt felt betrayed and heartbroken.

Bernard Cohen felt only hatred towards Kaufman. He never trusted him. In this moment, he realized why Cohen had built a wall around himself. Although Cohen had to deal with the same financial and legal fallout from this, he didn't feel the sting of betrayal or the heartbreak Levitt now felt. Maybe Cohen had a point.



## CHAPTER 4

**Monday, June 3rd**  
**Almost Six Months Later - 10:30 AM**  
**Boca Raton, FL**

COLLEEN TOOK A vacation day from work to see her parents on their last day in Boca Raton, Florida. This move would reunite Mike and Liam after being apart for the last four years. While driving over, she called Marcia, her best friend since grade school at St. Jude's.

"Marsha, I waited 35 minutes. No call, no text, no excuse at all. What normal guy, who claims he wants a relationship, does things like this? Can't a woman count on at least basement-level courtesies?"

"I'm afraid we've passed that point in society several years ago," said Marsha. "It's his loss. Kick him to the curb and move on. Don't let him live in your head," advised Marsha. "That's what it says in the last few dating books I've read, anyway." Marsha had become a hardened ninja dater in the years since her own divorce.

"I'm on my way to my parents' house. They're moving up to Ocala today. I'm meeting them for a champagne toast and a few extra hugs before they go. That means I'll have to cut my usual twenty-minute dating rant short — but I'll have more to say on this later!" Colleen quickly added. "I might call and tell this guy off -- not that it'll matter -- but just in the name of dating justice."

"Don't bother. Don't waste your energy. Call me later," said the more-seasoned Marsha.

Colleen met and married Jacob while still in college. She thought she lucked out in the dating world. Things seemed to work out so easily. She could still remember how taken she was at his good looks and charm. She fell head over heels for him right away. Her parents warned her that something was off with Jacob, but she wouldn't hear any of it.

Even her best friend Marsha predicted that Jacob, who she referred to as a spoiled child, would always rely on his parents. She said flat out one day that he would never grow up. She discounted that because Marsha can be kind of harsh at times. Colleen thought Marsha didn't understand about being an only child with doting parents -- as Jacob and Colleen both were.

## Beware – Things Are Not Always as They Seem

---

When she signed up for online dating, Colleen secretly knew she was trying to meet someone new too soon after separating from her husband. She was more than anxious to put her past behind her and she thought the distraction of a new love would help. That was her theory, anyway. But the online dating wasn't helping. It was making her feel worse.

Two blocks away from her parents' house, Jacob called. Colleen rolled her eyes and answered. "Yes?"

"Colleen, don't hang up. I'm in trouble, big trouble. I need money. I borrowed money from two thugs I met at the casino and they're now following me. They've warned me that I need to give them a minimum of \$2,000 or I'll be sorry."

"Where do you think I'm going to get \$2,000 from? I used to have great credit and I could have helped you. But of course, now I have a horrible credit rating and can't help you -- which is all thanks to you. Ask your parents. They're rich. They'll help you," said Colleen. She could feel her anger rising.

"Colleen, you know they've cut me off. Thanks to you leaving me and tattling to my mother about the other women, they've blocked my calls. You're my only hope," said Jacob.

Jacob had manipulated Colleen using emergencies and stories of being in trouble before. It took her a few times to realize it was all manipulation. She assumed this call was more drama trying to get more gambling money. "I can't help you, Jacob. I'm waiting with bated breath for the divorce hearing which is only a few months away." Then she hung up.

Pulling up to her only childhood home, Colleen was overcome with a moment of sadness. As the movers carried her mother's sewing machine cabinet to the van, she remembered her mother teaching her how to sew. She was so proud of the first placemat she made. It was only four seams, but she thought it was a masterpiece. It would be a long day for her parents, but an exciting one. There was a part of her that wished they wouldn't move away so soon. She had too many changes she was already adjusting to. As she got ready to go in and see her parents, she decided not to let her feelings of sadness and loss show.



Her parents had both retired early. They were now moving away from Boca Raton and their great school districts up to Ocala, where club med for the elderly had been developing over the last 20 years. Uncle Liam and her dad were brothers and lived in the same neighborhoods all their lives. This move would reunite them as one family. They could now golf, fish and be a close-knit family again.

Colleen was an only child. She kept asking her parents for a sister, but it wasn't God's Will -- at least that's how her mother explained it to her.

She thought back to how many times she heard her parents talk about how lucky they were to celebrate their 30-year wedding anniversary. Her mother talked openly about the culture of divorce. She said it had decimated many marriages around her and her dad over this thirty-year period of time. Having this continually pointed out to her, Colleen realized that her and her mother lived in two different worlds.



## Beware – Things Are Not Always as They Seem

---

Most of Colleen's young friends were either having trouble finding someone who even wanted to get married, or like her, were already familiar with the divorce courts.

She had detected her mother's guilt about leaving her and moving four hours away. Her mother kept telling her she would come down and be with her when she faced her divorce hearing. Colleen found ways to let her off the hook.

Her father had pressured her mother to move up to Ocala and her mom really wasn't ready to go. Once Uncle Liam moved up to Ocala, her mother shared that her dad was moping around the house missing his best friend. Her dad went on a relentless campaign to persuade her to move and she finally gave in -- but only to be a snowbird.

The snowbird arrangement was still in process. They purchased one house in Fr. Liam's parish. Wherever Colleen eventually settled down, they would buy another condo close to her. That was the plan, anyway.

Raised to stand on her own two feet, Colleen was certainly a responsible adult in every sense of the word. She worked in a law office as a legal assistant. She earned enough to eke out a living in the expensive Boca Raton area, where she now lived. She had moved into a studio apartment after recently separating from Jacob.

After a short courtship -- three months -- and a whirlwind wedding, Colleen soon woke up to an ever-expanding nightmare. She went from the romance and glow of dating, down the aisle of marital bliss, only to awaken in a nightmare of lies, deceit and compulsive gambling. Now she was left with a broken heart, mounting debt and a husband who still lied to her. Jacob was in Gambler's Anonymous when they met, or so he said, but immediately after the wedding, he fell off the wagon. This nightmare shattered all Colleen's marital hopes and dreams -- as well as her credit score.

Standing five feet five inches tall, Colleen was a pretty young woman. Half Irish and half Italian, she picked up her coloring from both sides. She inherited the white skin and blue eyes from her father's side, but the dark wavy hair and womanly shape from her mom's side of the family. As she walked in to greet her parents, she put on her happiest face.

"Hi Mom, hi Dad, are you both excited?" Colleen greeted them as they were both waiting for her at the door.

Hugging Colleen, Maria said, "We're excited about moving up to be around Uncle Liam and out of the city, yes. But we're sad to be leaving you temporarily behind. We'll have a double toast of champagne, first for good fortune in Ocala and second, that it won't take me long to talk you into moving up there with us."

"It's too quiet up there for me at my age. It's hard enough meeting men in a population as large as Boca and Fort Lauderdale. It's probably ten times harder up there," said Colleen.

"Well, I'm praying for you to meet a nice Catholic boy, the one God knows will be best for you," chided Maria. "Right, Mike?"

"I'm praying for you too, Honey. I'm also praying for spiritual justice for that bastard you married," said her dad. A little bit of residual anger slipped out not quite under his breath.

## Beware – Things Are Not Always as They Seem

---

“Now, Mike, today’s a special day, so don’t start in,” said Maria with a seriousness Colleen and her dad recognized.

“That’s right. It’s happiness only as we all march forward,” said Mike, as he popped the champagne bottle.

They were standing in the kitchen in one of the only areas that weren’t filled with boxes as high as the eye could see. The movers were padding the heavy furniture pieces with blankets and tape.

Mike poured the champagne into the cheap plastic throwaway glasses. He handed one to each of them.

“Remember now, we’re not leaving, we’re only moving out of the city area and away from these crazy hurricanes, Colleen. We’re not abandoning you.” Her mother smiled and held her glass up to toast.

Her Dad held up his glass and said, “Wait until you see Ocala, it’s filled with beautiful horse farms and long winding roads. It’s beautiful country. You’re always welcome, you know that. I know you have to tie things up here first. But you may want to come north for a new start when your divorce goes through,” said Mike, who then added under his breath, “or that husband of yours is imprisoned, whichever comes first.”

“Mike, please” scolded Maria.

Mike held up his glass again and toasted. “Here’s to our real retirement up in Ocala and leaving hurricane alley.”

“And here’s to Colleen deciding over the next year or so to join us,” said Maria, looking lovingly at her only daughter.

Colleen held up her glass and said, “Here’s to both of you. I wish you both only love, luck and fun for all the days of your — our lives!”

Mom said, “That’s a beautiful toast, Colleen. Come here, I want to give you something.” They took a sip of their champagne and put the glasses on the counter.

Maria led Colleen into the dining room, out of earshot and view of Mike. She pulled a bank envelope out of her purse that was sitting on the dining room table. She handed Colleen the money envelope and whispered, “This is so you don’t worry. This should help you get through the next three months until the divorce is settled. I want you to promise me you won’t fret anymore about finances.

“Dad would help you now, but he’s so angry at Jacob that he wants to wait until everything is final so not one dollar of his help goes to him. I don’t have to tell you, he really wants to see him in jail. He’s so mad at what he’s done, but you already know that. So promise me you won’t worry.”

Colleen teared up and hugged her mom. Maria wrapped her arms around her, patted her back, and rocked her the tiniest bit back and forth. It was the type of comfort only moms could give.

“Thanks, Mom. I love you. I’m going to miss you. You’re so good to me,” said Colleen through tearing eyes.

## Beware – Things Are Not Always as They Seem

---

Maria paused one moment after the hug ended. “I’m serious, you need to find a nice Catholic boy who was raised like you so you can have a successful marriage, Colleen. It’s not easy today.”

“Catholics get divorced all the time too, mom.”

“I know. You’re right. It’s so sad. It’s so hard for the young people of today. It’s like trying to build a life on an obstacle course. It wasn’t this hard years ago.”

“Well, this is what it’s like now, Mom.”

“I know. I’m praying up a storm for you. I know you’ll find a nice guy who wants to be married. He’ll show up when you least expect it. That’s what you need.

“We’re still married, Dad and I, because neither of us would leave; not because we didn’t have our share of problems or couldn’t justify a divorce,” said mom, adding a playful grin to lighten the tenor of their conversation.

“Hey, where are you two? I’m driving and I need a supervisor with this champagne open here,” Mike said, calling out to *his girls* as he referred to them.

“We’ll be there in a minute, Mike,” said Maria.

Maria continued and in a lowered voice said, “You know I will come and stay with you when you’re going through the divorce. Your father will be running around with Liam so I’ll have plenty of time to come down and stay.”

“Okay, Mom, I appreciate it. I’m worried and nervous about it all. It’ll be much easier if I have you here with me.”

Maria hugged Colleen. Some mothers were best friends with their daughters, but Maria was always mom. With only one child, she enjoyed doting on her daughter but she was one hundred percent parent.

“We better get back to the kitchen so he doesn’t drink too much,” teased Mom. They returned to the kitchen.

“Now, Mike, you’re the designated driver so we’re only having a half a glass each. We have a four-hour drive ahead of us and I’m already exhausted from all the packing we just finished. I never worked harder than these last two weeks.”

“Oh, I almost forgot, Colleen. I put aside some pictures I found for you,” said Mom. She dashed back to her purse on the dining room table. While in motion, she suddenly stopped, let out a strange sound, and fell to the floor.

Mike, who didn’t see Maria fall, said “She’s found some childhood pictures she wants to give you”.

“Oh my God, Mom ... Mom!” screamed Colleen, horrified by the sight of her mother falling and now laying on the carpet.

By this time, Mike had noticed Maria was down on the carpet. He ran over and got down on his knees beside her. Colleen knelt down next to him. He attempted to revive her, by gently patting her cheek but she wouldn’t come to.

As Mike turned his wife over, he rubbed her arms and lightly tapped the side of her face again. Nothing seemed to revive her. Suddenly, Colleen stood, dialed 911, and

watched as her father wept as he realized his wife was probably already dead. It was the first time Colleen had ever seen him cry.

The movers huddled in the living room after seeing Maria on the floor and hearing the panic in Colleen's voice. They were not used to having someone die during a move. Not knowing what to do, they mulled around, asking each other if they should continue or what. They continued packing, slowly and quietly. They tried to be invisible. Nothing between them was spoken louder than a whisper.

The paramedics came in less than ten minutes. After a few attempts to revive her, they pronounced Maria dead. Colleen collapsed into an armchair that was already padded for moving and wept. Mike sat stoically on the side arm of the chair with one hand on her back. He was too stunned to even know what to say or do. There could not be a more inopportune time for a death. A feeling of finality and horror hung in the air. Neither of them could have known that this was only the beginning.



**Monday, June 3rd**  
**10:40 AM - 10 Minutes Later**  
**Ocala, FL**

Aside from earning a bachelor's degree in psychology, Fr. Liam had a special interest in philosophy as well. From Aristotle to the early church fathers to the church mystics, Fr. Liam had read them all. It helped him understand the darker side of humanity. This was the side he saw while patrolling the rougher neighborhoods of Fort Lauderdale as well as later in the homicide squad.

Since his assignment to the parish in Ocala, he built up a reputation as a good counselor. On top of his other never-ending priestly duties, he spent several hours a week counseling parishioners on any number of issues. The better part of his satisfaction came from helping people lessen the anxieties and stresses of their lives.

The only time he still felt the pinch of loneliness was walking into his small, starkly-decorated rectory bedroom. It was a small room with a single bed, a small table, and low lighting. The other difficult time was spending some holidays with parishioners instead of with his wife, his brother Mike, Maria and the kids.

It was almost eleven o'clock in the morning and Fr. Liam was waiting to begin his counseling session with Ryan Mallardi. Ryan didn't have pressing issues or problems that he couldn't figure his way out of, but Fr. Liam knew he enjoyed the father-son interplay that was missing from his life. Father was only too happy to have a surrogate son at this time of his life.

As Fr. Liam waited for Ryan to arrive, he wondered where he was with clarity regarding his relationship with Angelica. In their last session, Ryan came to the realization they didn't have much in common. He also figured out they had different relationship goals. It would be interesting to see where he went in today's counseling session.



## Beware – Things Are Not Always as They Seem

---

Ryan arrived on time, sat down, and loosened his tie as usual. He let out a long breath as if he had been running all morning.

“What’s going on? What was that long breath all about?” asked Fr. Liam.

“Just busyness and stress, the usual,” said Ryan. He took a swig of the bottle of water he brought with him.

“So where would you like to go in today’s session?” asked Fr. Liam.

“Maybe I’ll catch you up on what’s going on. Then we’ll see where it goes on its own,” said Ryan. He leaned back and relaxed in the chair.

“Okay.” Fr. Liam smiled and leaned back too.

“So things are still up and down with me and Angelica. One day everything seems okay, the next day we’re fighting or sniping one another by text. I’ve been praying for clarity, but everything is leaning towards a breakup. I really don’t want that,” said Ryan emphatically.

“When you say you don’t want that, have you realized that you really love her and want to make it work?” asked Fr. Liam.

“Saying, ‘*yes, I realize I love her and can’t live without her*’ would be the noble thing to say and I would love to say that. But in honesty, I hate the thought of starting over with someone new. I know it’s pure selfishness. At the same time, I’m not ready to admit defeat or something. I keep thinking there should be a way to resolve our issues,” said Ryan.

“You’re not ready to admit that you have irreconcilable differences?”

“Yes, that’s well put,” said Ryan.

“If you could wave a magic wand and fix everything in one fell swoop, what would be different between you two?” asked Fr. Liam smiling.

“Well, she would stop drinking and let go of her love of partying. She would get more serious about starting a life together, having kids and being a family. She would stop sniping my religion and be more tolerant. And she would be at least a little understanding about my mother.” Ryan almost laughed. “Then I would feel like we were getting somewhere.”

Fr. Liam chuckled too. “You mentioned asking her to stop drinking or at least slow things down. Have you asked her that yet?”

“I haven’t formally asked her to stop drinking, no. I’ve hinted at the drinking issue and -- I think I’ve already told you -- she points out that I drink too. She reminds me that I’m her drinking partner, which I have been. She keeps reminding me that it’s me who has changed, not her. And she’s right about that.” Ryan looked at Fr. Liam for his feedback.

“What about if you choose to do some things that don’t entail drinking?” asked Fr. Liam.

“I’ve tried to come up with things, but I get voted down right off the bat. I suggested we go camping. She scowled and said *no way*. I suggested hiking and we went to a park and it went well. We hiked and talked together. I had a good time. It gave me

hope. But she wanted to stop for a drink on the way home. During the first drink, she called over some people we knew and within ten minutes it turned into another couples' party night. I can't win," said Ryan.

"She's a black belt partyer. No matter how I try to wrestle her away from the booze, as soon as I get her pinned against the ropes with what I think is a great plan for a sober date, she flips me upside down and gets my arm behind my back and leads me to a bar," said Ryan, jokingly. "I don't think there's much hope for me. At least with Angelica, that is."

"That's quite a visual," said Fr. Liam.

"It is, isn't it? Besides, to be honest, I'm busy with my business and I need a girlfriend who is the social director, like she comes up with the things we do together. Every guy I know, their girlfriend is the social coordinator and they do things they both like. Somehow, I can't seem to get that to work for me," said Ryan.

"Do you think that drinking is her favorite pastime? Is the other activity what she chooses to do when drinking? Some people like to go drinking and eat out as part of it. Others like to go bowling but the real activity is drinking. Do you believe drinking is the common denominator?"

"You've just described her to a T. It doesn't matter what plan I come up with, it goes hand in hand with drinking alcohol."

"When she said you are her drinking partner, you told me that's true," said Fr. Liam.

"She's right. But -- and here's where I see a difference. I have gone along with drinking as part of the dating process, I guess you could say. When we were dating and getting to know one another, I never noticed the drinking. It didn't bother me at all. But now we know each other. When I think of this as a lifestyle going forward, that's not okay with me. I don't want to live like this.

"I guess I thought of the drinking as dating behavior. I assumed that once we got to know one another, we would gravitate to healthier things. I thought we would begin to act more in terms of sharing our lives together, not going out partying all the time. I saw it as a temporary dating thing."

"I see the difference and there is a difference," said Fr. Liam.

"For example, I went with my mother to the doctor last week. When I was in the waiting room with her, there was a young woman in her late twenties sitting with her mother. She seemed to be a more wholesome woman -- or at least that's how she appeared to me from across the room.

"I started talking to her about having to come with my mother because she comes home and tells me she's dying all the time. I told her I had to come to get the real story from the doctor -- which is true, by the way -- and the woman thought it was funny. She told me her mother couldn't remember anything the doctor said and that's why she had to come. She could relate to taking care of an older parent. She didn't see me as having an umbilical cord wrapped around my neck, which is how Angelica sees me. It seemed this woman did everyday stuff and family stuff and was okay with it. I don't know where I'm going with any of this. Maybe you can figure it out." Ryan shrugged his shoulders and stopped.

## Beware – Things Are Not Always as They Seem

---

“You sound frustrated by Angelica’s lifestyle. It’s a problem because from what you have told me, she isn’t flexible about this,” said Fr. Liam. Ryan seemed to want more feedback so he continued.

“It appears also that Angelica has a day job that doesn’t require much effort. She likes to spend her spare time dressing up and going out partying. She doesn’t seem to be exhibiting any marital goals, at least from what you say or what you describe. You have more or different relationship ambitions than she does. You want to get married and have a family. Have you asked her about this, just in general?”

“I did, but she said she wants to have kids in the future but not now. She’s not ready to settle down, is how she put it.”

“How old is Angelica?” asked Fr. Liam.

“She’s twenty-five years old,” said Ryan.

“I thought maybe she was younger and wasn’t ready yet. But twenty-five is marriage-age, especially for a woman with no real business or schooling ambitions,” said Fr. Liam.

“So what do you think honestly?” asked Ryan.

“To be honest, Ryan, I see the same thing I saw when we began discussing your relationship with Angelica. I see fornication that’s all dolled up to look like something sacred or special, but it’s not. I don’t see much more than a sexual relationship that is being lubricated with alcohol. I wish there was an easier or more graceful way to say it, but there isn’t.

“You have no interests or activities in common. She rejects your real-world issues with having a widowed mother. This creates a situation where you have to take care of those issues on your own time. Her favorite pastime is drinking -- and I would even say *carousing* is more accurate. You’re tired of this type of lifestyle. So to me, I honestly don’t see two people who are a good mix for marriage and family. And I’m setting aside the whole atheist vs. Catholicism thing too.”

“You’ve said this before and on some level, I believe you’re right. It has the ring of truth to it. Maybe I’m not ready to face it yet. I don’t know.” Ryan shook his head. “When I think about breaking up, I don’t want that either.”

“I’m obligated to tell you that premarital sex is against Church teaching, Ryan.”

Ryan chuckled out loud and said, “I understand that, Father, but we agreed you wouldn’t hold it against me.”

Fr. Liam’s phone rang but he said quickly before answering it, “I won’t. I also won’t tell you again about the statistics of couples who sleep together and/or live together. Those that don’t live together statistically stay married. I think I’ve covered that with you already, didn’t I?” asked Fr. Liam, raising his eyebrows playfully.

“Yes, I got that lecture a couple of times. if I recall,” said Ryan, chuckling.

As Father placed his hand on his cell phone, he said “This is my brother Mike, he’s moving today. Let me take this call for two seconds. We still have a few minutes left to talk.”

## Beware – Things Are Not Always as They Seem

---

Fr. Liam answered the phone with a big wide grin. “Are the movers there? Today’s the day.”

Suddenly the grin disappeared. Fr. Liam sat up straight in his chair and grasped his forehead with his elbows now on his desk. Ryan intuitively knew something was terribly wrong. He could tell he was getting some kind of dreadful news.

“Mike, what’s wrong?”

“Liam, Maria just passed away, they think from a heart attack,” said Mike, in a panicked voice.

Fr. Liam asked, “Oh my God, Mike, where are you now?”

“We’re at the house. The movers are here and still packing. The paramedics just pronounced her dead. Liam, what am I going to do? I can’t think. I don’t know what to do.”

Fr. Liam said, “Don’t worry, I’ll help you. What happened to Maria?”

“Colleen came over. We had a champagne toast to our new retirement. Maria walked into the dining room to get her purse, and — boom, she dropped onto the floor. By the time I reached her, she was unresponsive. I checked and she had no pulse. We called 911.

“I have movers here. I have to be out of the house by today. The paramedics have pronounced Maria dead. I cannot think in this state. How am I going to go on?” asked Mike.

The words that landed hardest on Fr. Liam’s heart were: “*How am I going to go on.*” His brother was an international businessman, some would even describe him as a tough businessman, if the situation needed it. Having grown up on the streets of Fort Lauderdale, the Brothers Mullen were streetwise, tough, and stoics of the highest order. But he knew his brother was also dependent on his wife Maria for almost everything else in his life.

“Mike, I’ll clear my schedule and I’ll get down there right away. The only thing you need to do is find out where the paramedics will take Maria’s body. I’ll walk you through the rest of everything when I get there.”

Fr. Liam heard Colleen crying in the background, “What happens when someone dies during a move?” She seemed to be calling out to anyone in the universe who was listening.

Mike said, “I’m not even sure what to do. Liam, I can’t think straight. I can’t put any thoughts together”.

Fr. Liam asked to speak to one of the movers. Mike handed off the phone to one of the movers and said, “This is my brother Liam. He wants to talk to you.” The mover listened and then said, “I’ll call and ask.”

The mover passed the phone back to Mike and said, “I’ll call you about the storage. He wants to talk to you again.”

Mike, let the movers continue packing the furniture onto the truck. “Mike, listen to me. Tell the movers to bring back the boxes of clothes that contain your suit and a



## Beware – Things Are Not Always as They Seem

---

proper dress for Maria to be laid out in. The movers will tell you within a half hour about keeping the furniture in storage. It will take me four hours to drive down, another hour to get coverage for my schedule, but I'll be there in five hours or less."

"Thanks, Liam. I've never been more shocked in my life."

Colleen yelled out again to no one in particular, "The paramedics are leaving now, where are they taking my mother?"

"Let me talk to Colleen," said Fr. Liam.

Mike passed Colleen the phone in silence. He dashed over and retrieved the information from the paramedics as to where Maria was being taken. The twenty-something movers were still hovering in the living room area, whispering, and murmuring to each other. None of them knew what to do in the face of someone dying on the job. Following Fr. Liam's phone instructions, the guys moved the furniture again, this time in complete silence.

Fr. Liam, in as gentle a voice as he could conjure up said, "Colleen, everything is going to be okay. Stay with your father. The movers will put everything onto the truck. Make sure they hold out the boxes with a suit for your dad and something for your mom to be laid out in. I know this is hard."

Colleen said, "Something for mom?"

Fr. Liam said, "Yes, for the wake." She too was in the state of shock.

Colleen wept. "Oh, my God, that's right. Are you coming? This can't be happening."

"Yes, I'm leaving in ten minutes. I promise everything is going to be alright."

Colleen, still stunned, said, "What happens now?"

"Wait for me either at the house if they are still packing, or at your apartment. I'll be in touch while driving. I'll see you in about five hours. Everything is going to be okay, Colleen."

She said, "I don't think so".

Fr. Liam said again pronouncing each word deliberately: "Everything is going to be okay. Trust the Lord."

"How can I trust a God who can let this happen on top of what just happened to me?" asked Colleen. She had already thrown out her family religion to marry her soon-to-be-ex-husband.

"Then trust my faith. Everything will be alright. I'll handle everything," said Fr. Liam.

He hung up and leaned back in his office chair. He exhaled all the tension and stress he just absorbed. "Ryan, my sister-in-law just passed away. My brother and his wife closed on their house this week and they are due out of the house today. The movers are there now and they think Maria died of a heart attack. My niece's marriage just blew up, as you know, and now this. My brother can't think and my niece is already a basket case."

## Beware – Things Are Not Always as They Seem

---

Ryan, already awkward about being present for such an intimate family occurrence, didn't know what to do or say. "I'm so sorry, Father."

Fr. Liam stood up and said, "This is the worst timing ever. I can't believe this is happening, but I've got to go to them now."

Ryan said, "Can I do anything to help you?"

Fr. Liam, rubbing his forehead said, "Yes, you can. Can you stay here in case Juanita needs any help over the next hour? She'll have to cover my schedule. She may need a second set of hands for the next hour and that would be a tremendous help. I've got to drive down to Boca now. I'll be arranging a wake and funeral over at least the next few days."

Ryan said, "Sure, I can wait with Juanita, no problem. Listen, do you want me to stay around this weekend? I could easily postpone things with Angelica."

"No, no, go about your life. I'll be down in Boca for the wake and funeral and then need to get my brother up to Ocala in one piece. This could take up to a week, so go away, enjoy yourself, we'll talk when I get back."

Foregoing their usual fist-bump, a bit awkwardly Ryan reached out to shake hands and Fr. Liam pulled him in for a father-son hug.

**BEWARE – Things Are Not Always as They Seem**