

Forewarned but Unheeded

By R. Shannon



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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!

Ryan Mallardi, PI, Colleen's new boyfriend
Colleen Mullens, Ryan's girlfriend, Fr. Liam's niece
Fr. Liam, Pastor at Our Lady of Mercy church
Kevin, Steve & Linda – Ryan's staff members

Gloria Sullivan, Police officer, Ryan's first love
John Logan, Gloria's partner

Jean-Francois (JF) Lenoir, 75-Year-old Family Patriarch, Tara's husband
Tara Murphy Lenoir, JF's new young wife
Anthony, Tara's secret boyfriend, horse groomer
Francois Lenoir - JF's eldest son
Nicole Lenoir – Francois' wife
Denis Lenoir - Francois & Nicole's oldest son, Asst to the President
Rene-Andre Lenoir - Francois & Nicole's middle son – Marketing Dept
Mitzi, Nicole's old Yorkshire Terrier
Coco, Nicoles new Yorkshire Terrier

Rene Lenoir, JF's younger son
Michelle, Rene's wife, Marie-Louise's & Adam's mother
Adam Lenoir, Rene's oldest son
Marie-Louise, Rene's young autistic daughter
Clair and Jean-Henri Bouchard – JF's daughter and her husband
Francine Bouchard, daughter of Clair and Jean-Henri Bouchard

Mildred, librarian
Lucas, house manager

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NOTE TO READER

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

OTHER BOOKS BY R. SHANNON:



CHAPTER 1

**Wednesday - November 4th
12:00 Noon**

IT WAS EARLY November and Flora was excited about the upcoming party activities this weekend for Jean-Francois's 75th birthday party. This would kick off the holiday season at the mansion that would last until after New Year's Eve. Flora was the full-time housekeeper for the Lenoir family estate in Ocala, Florida. Although the home was 8500 square feet, only half of the home was in use on a daily basis, making Flora's housekeeping job easier than it may have looked to outsiders.

Flora, who was baptized Florentyna Kowalski forty years earlier in Poland, had grown up in abject poverty mainly due to an alcoholic father and a sickly mother. After her mother passed away, her Aunt Hanna and Flora came to the US on a vacation visa and, like so many others, escaped into the population when their visas expired. Life in the US got better for them, but it got better in degrees. At first, Hanna managed to get jobs for both of them as housekeepers at a motel in the Orlando area. It wasn't a motel one would likely see in any vacation or Disney brochure, but more like the \$30-a-night motels in downtown Ocala where they had more of an *'hourly trade'*.

Their boss, knowing they were illegal, lorded over them like a slave master. They worked a minimum of twelve hours a day with barely any breaks. Hanna's priest at the time, Fr. Benedict from Orlando, managed to get Hanna and Flora housekeeping jobs with the Hilton Hotel in Ocala. The only downside was they would need to relocate one hour north which meant leaving their parish and Fr. Benedict.

Reluctantly, but quickly, with Fr. Benedict's coaxing, they took the jobs as their starting hourly wage would be almost two dollars an hour more than they were paid in Orlando. It was surely a step up but it took them time to get used to their new surroundings.

After working at the Hilton for a while, another opportunity came to them, this time through Fr. Vince at their new church in Ocala. One Sunday, Fr. Vince introduced them to Francois and Nicole Lenoir, whose long-time housekeeper had just retired and returned to France to live with family. There were now eleven Lenoir family members living in the mansion estate house, so the Lenoirs were happy to find Hanna and Flora as a matched set. Within two weeks, Hanna and Flora had moved

into the Lenoir home and had their own area, including a kitchenette and sitting room, on the third floor of the mansion. After their apartment lease expired, they no longer had living expenses, which was the equivalent of another huge raise.

Hanna and Flora thought they died and went to another level of heaven. The Lenoirs treated them like family, especially after Hanna got sick and died after living there for only four years. Knowing Flora was now alone, Francois, the oldest son, hired an immigration lawyer to help Flora get a green card, which took less than a year. For most people, it could take many years, but the Lenoirs were a wealthy and influential family in central Florida and I guess you could say Flora's green card got some '*rich privilege*' as it made its way through the immigration process in record time.

Now she had a driver's license, a social security card and was a full-fledged member of Floridian society, you could say. Flora felt nothing but love and loyalty to the Lenoirs, especially Francois, who was kind to her. He kept a fatherly eye out for her, even though he was actually five years younger than she was.

Francois Lenoir was the oldest son of the heir to the global tire company, Lenoir Rubber & Tire. Jean-Francois, the patriarch, was the grandson of the original tire magnate, Jean-Pierre Lenoir, who founded the Lenoir Tire Company back in 1890. The Lenoirs owned many properties around the world, but their main home was a beautiful three-story mansion on one of the many horse farms that populated the countryside in Central Florida.

Three generations of Lenoirs were living at the mansion at one time or another. One or two were a bit odd, another few a bit spoiled, but one or two were even considered normal and down to earth. But Flora's working conditions were a dream compared to the original flea-bitten, dumpy motel where her life in America had begun. When not working, she participated in a few ministries at the women's group in her church.

On special occasions like parties or holidays, Flora needed help at the mansion and she was invited to ask a friend or two to work these special events with her. Today Marjory from the woman's group worked with her to prepare for Jean-Francois' party.

As Flora pulled sheets off the bed in a visitor bedroom in the east wing, Marjory stepped into the bedroom. "Flora, I finished the two bedrooms in the west wing. What do you need me to do next?"

"Check and see if the grandkids went downstairs; then do their rooms. I heard voices, people on staircase a while ago, so their bedrooms may be ready to clean," said Flora.

“This place is so gorgeous, Flora. I see a delivery truck from Taylor Rentals outside. What’s going on with them?” asked Marjory, as she looked out the bedroom window.

“They bring the party tents for backyard and some chairs. Family are coming from France and people from church and town are coming to party,” said Flora smiling. She saw Marjory taking in the excitement and anticipation that hung in the air. There was not one clue of what was yet to come.

“I’m off again to the west wing,” said Marjory as she took off back towards the central staircase area and on into the west wing.

Flora went back to removing the bed linens. Tomorrow another friend Katherine would join her and Marjory as more Lenoir relatives would arrive from France to stay at the mansion for the party.

Jean-Francois -- who everyone now called JF to distinguish him from his oldest son, Francois -- was still the reining family patriarch and President of the US Lenoir Rubber & Tire Company. The whole family was flying in to honor him on his 75th birthday.



JF was still working and as sharp as a tack at age 68 when his wife of 44 years, Elizabeth, died unexpectedly of a heart attack. Over the next months, Francois, his eldest son, watched as his father was eaten up by the loneliness following his mother’s death. JF inherited the business acumen of his father and grandfather, and even his choice of wife was part of his success. Elizabeth was a born socialite who built a successful life around JF and once she passed, his world crumbled one brick at a time. Elizabeth wielded matriarchal power over this extended family up until the very end. When Elizabeth decided a family event was mandatory, no one dared not show up. JF and Elizabeth were a matched set so it wasn’t surprising when JF’s life spiraled a bit out of control after she passed so suddenly.

The original plan was for JF to retire at age seventy and pass the presidency of the companies to Francois. But JF continued on as President, over no objection, as everyone felt he needed to keep his position so the loneliness didn’t consume him.

At work, Francois started picking up the slack for JF’s loss of mental acuity. At first, he fixed things a little behind the scenes. However, as each year passed, JF failed even more. Some thought it was Alzheimer's or even senility, but Francois knew JF was attempting to replace his wife Elizabeth and had been getting involved with every woman that crossed his path -- including a visiting nurse and one woman from the kitchen staff.

Francois and the other family members living in the mansion were horrified at what was going on with these women, but JF had a mind and a will of his own. The family had to deal with each new rising drama as best they could. JF and the women who were *gold-digging him* had become the main topic of family gossip.

The current woman JF was now involved with was Tara Murphy and she did bring JF to life again. Tara was forty-three years old but looked quite a bit younger. She was employed as a horse groomer at the Lenoir Stables, which were attached to the mansion properties. After a week, she seamlessly reinvented herself as JF's girlfriend and a fellow horse enthusiast. Within two weeks of dating, the whole horse grooming thing was dropped from polite conversation. Tara loved the excitement of going to the horse races, the horse shows, and all the parties and banquets JF was invited to as a company executive as well as an established member of the Ocala Horse society. After all, Ocala Florida was known as the Horse Capital of the World.

As was common in families with money to burn, two generations below JF were already watching his money and thinking of it as their rightful inheritance. They also watched anyone around him, especially women, as potential usurpers and/or gold diggers.

Tara was everything a blue-blooded family like the Lenoirs dreaded. She dressed like a whore, talked too loudly, wore too much makeup, and her hair looked like she bleached it herself. The sight of her was enough to make the family members gasp. JF, on the other hand, told everyone who would listen how beautiful Tara was and how much she looked like Loni Anderson, a famous TV star from the 1970s.

JF had, in this last six months, gone from being happy to have met Tara, to being overly concerned about her, and finally into full-fledged obsession. JF knew that Tara was too young for him. But she was five feet four inches tall, thin, blonde, and interested in him, so he didn't care. With her on his arm, he was walking on the clouds.

This six-month-Tara-obsession period also brought on worries for his son Francois as JF dropped the ball once or twice at work in ways that required legal action to fix, not to mention creating more general distrust of his capabilities. It was always one Tara issue or another that distracted him.

Behind the scenes, Francois and his son Denis complained that part of the problem with JF at work was that his time was now exclusively replaced by wining and dining Tara and squiring her around to show off his beautiful young wife whenever and wherever he could. It was all very frustrating, but Francois had the patience earned from years of business experience. Denis, too young to know a rich man with money couldn't be controlled, allowed the situation to aggravate him on an almost daily basis.

Francois tried to use the incidents as learning moments but most of them ended with Denis leaving the conversation just as frustrated by his grandfather's slip-ups. Francois talked JF into giving Denis a promotion to Assistant to the President with a sizable raise and this seemed to quiet Denis down a bit. But it also triggered jealousy from the other grandsons, Rene-Andre and Adam, who assumed their unearned promotions should be in the hopper next.

Along with running the company behind his father's back, Francois also had to at least try to keep ahead of his father's generosity with Tara. Once JF started speaking of marrying Tara, Francois and his wife and children went into panic mode as Tara looked and acted like the proverbial gold digger. It wasn't so much the money or the wining, dining, or vacationing they objected to. There was plenty of money for Tara. It was having Tara's name added onto the businesses and the properties. When prompted by well-seasoned family lawyers to have Tara sign a prenuptial agreement limiting her inheritance to a monthly income to protect the family business and financial holdings, Tara refused to sign and then refused to marry JF.

That's when the real trouble started. That's when JF started acting behind Francois' and the family lawyer's backs. He removed his grandchildren from his five-million-dollar life insurance policy and added only Tara. That's what it took to convince Tara to elope with him to Las Vegas.

When JF disappeared for the Las Vegas elopement, the family originally thought he was missing and even filed a missing person's report. This was the first time they wondered what Tara was capable of. His disappearance for 24 hours set off a chain of phone calls, non-stop family gossip, and they all concluded that Tara was guilty of foul play. Within three days they heard from JF about the Las Vegas wedding and how wonderful the honeymoon was. It wasn't until the following weeks that the revelation about the insurance policy change came to light. Apparently, JF convinced Tara to sign the pre-nuptial agreement and go forward with the marriage in exchange for the life insurance monies. In JF's mind, it was a good and fair compromise.

Francois and his wife Nicole were relieved this was the only change as the control that would pass to Tara with her name on the mansion, the stables and/or the other businesses would be a bigger problem than a life insurance or any other cash payout. But Adrian and Adam, the youngest grandsons, were furious that this gold digger stole what they saw as their rightful inheritance. Both grandsons worked for the family tire company, both already had trust funds, but they said, *it was the principle of the matter*. It had been the subject of a few run-ins between the grandsons and Grandpa JF. But JF never backed down and the arguments ended by Grandpa telling his grandsons to mind their own business.

After Tara came back from Las Vegas as Mrs. Jean-Francois Lenoir, she started to throw her newly-acquired power around. You could cut the tension now in the mansion with a knife.

One month into the marriage, Francois was looking through the paperwork on JF's office desk -- which was now a routine to prevent any further screw-ups -- and he saw bills for a private investigator named Ryan Mallardi. Francois asked his father about it and was politely told it was a personal matter and he didn't need to be concerned about it. '*Mind your own business*' had become a mantra for JF when it came to questions about Tara. Francois concluded that the investigation had to be about her.

Outside his father's presence, Francois called Ryan Mallardi's office to make an appointment to talk about his investigative bills. Although he was told someone from Mallardi Investigations would get back with him, no response ever came.

Not used to getting blown off, Francois dropped into Mallardi Investigations, unannounced, for a face-to-face one afternoon. After hearing a whispered conversation between Ryan and his assistant, Francois was brought into Ryan's office.

"Hello, Mr. Lenoir. Have a seat," said Ryan, standing and holding out his hand. They shook hands and Francois had a seat in front of Ryan's desk.

"Thank you. I called you a couple of days ago, but I hadn't heard back from you." Francois was used to getting a quick response from most people and he was waiting for Ryan to present some sort of excuse or apology.

Ryan looked unperturbed. "I did receive your message. How can I help you?"

"Well, I'm concerned that my father is using the services of a private investigator unfamiliar to me. We have a legal department in our business and use investigators from time to time, but he seems to be doing some kind of investigation that I'm unaware of. I'm concerned for my father because of his age and who he is associating with lately." Francois emphasized '*who he is associating with lately*' with raised eyebrows and just a hint of sarcasm. Ryan knew well he meant his gold-digging wife Tara.

"The work I am doing for your father is confidential and I'm not at liberty to discuss it with anyone but him," said Ryan.

"My father is 74 years old and I'm concerned about him," said Francois.

"I am too," said Ryan.

"You are working for him or you are concerned about him?" asked Francois, now with knitted brows.

"Both," said Ryan.

“Why are you concerned about him?” asked Francois.

“Because of his age and ‘*who he is associating with lately*,’” said Ryan, using air quotes around Francois’ words.

“What do you mean by that?” asked Francois.

“I can’t tell you any more than that without getting permission to talk to you from JF.” Ryan took a deep breath and let it out. He waited for the usual *rich-guy fit* that he was sure Francois would lunge into, but he didn’t.

“I understand. I have your bill here and it appears quite high. Can I talk to you about your services?” asked Francois.

Ryan smirked. “What would you like to know?”

“There are three separate charges for \$500 apiece. How do I know you are not taking advantage of my father due to his age?” asked Francois.

Ryan knew he could care less about a fifteen-hundred-dollar charge as his family had billions. He also knew Francois was attempting to get as much information without breaking the seal of confidentiality, which Ryan was happy to participate in. He had wanted to contact JF’s family about what was going on but JF had refused and had sworn him to secrecy.

“The three charges were for three separate four-hour surveillances, each occurring on different days. That is the standard charge.” Ryan reached over and grabbed a general price list brochure and handed it to Francois, who took it politely in hand.

“I see. So you are following someone for my father.”

“I said what appeared on the bill were charges for surveillance. I’m not at liberty to tell you what I’m doing for your father. Do you have any other questions about the bill itself?” asked Ryan. He saw Francois make the connection that he had to address all questions to the bill itself.

“I see. Did this surveillance charge occur in Ocala?” asked Francois.

“Yes, it did.”

“Were pictures taken and given to my father?” asked Francois.

“Looking at the bill, I can tell you that pictures taken and video taken are included in the surveillance charges. They are given to the client in the normal course of business. I can’t tell you anything about what I am doing specifically for your father.”

“Should I be worried about what is going on with my father?” asked Francois.

“Yes, you should be,” said Ryan.

“I should?” asked Francois, suddenly alarmed.

“I am,” said Ryan.

“You are what?” asked Francois.

“Worried about your dad,” said Ryan.

Francois sat motionless, trying to figure out a question to ask next using the bill, but he couldn't think of one.

“Mr. Lenoir, let me talk to your father again and ask him if I can talk openly to you about this. I have told him I am worried about him myself --”

“You've already told him you're worried about him? And what did he say?” asked Francois.

“He said I don't understand the '*battered woman's syndrome*,’” said Ryan. “He thinks I'm too young and I don't understand women like he does.”

“Understand women? He was married to my mother for 44 years and since she died, he has gotten involved with one gold-digging psycho after another. Has he told you that?” asked Francois, raising his voice unintentionally.

“No, he hasn't mentioned anything along those lines. Although he did mention a relationship that '*didn't work out*' with his nurse,” said Ryan, using air quotes.

“Didn't work out? We had to pay her almost a million dollars to not bring him up on sexual harassment and stalking charges,” said Francois, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath.

“He seems to be quite confident when it comes to women.” said Ryan, smirking.

Francois just sat in the chair shaking his head. He waited for Ryan to say something else.

“Look, Mr. Lenoir, I need to call your father and ask him if I can talk openly with you. He has told me no --”

“You already asked him?” interrupted Francois.

“Yes, after you called my office about the bill. I knew you really wanted to know why your father had hired me. I tried to get him to agree to allow me to talk to you but he said no. I'll ask him again.”

“Should I be worried about him in the meantime?” asked Francois.

“Yes, you should be,” said Ryan.

“Should I be worried about his money? Should I be worried he’ll be poisoned or killed? Or are you talking about some other kind of worry?” asked Francois.

“You should worry about him being swindled and/or harmed in a way that getting at his money would be easier for someone,” said Ryan.

“Is it the wife I should be watching?” asked Francois.

Ryan shook his head affirmatively several times as he said, “I’m sorry, that’s all I can tell you.”

Francois got up and as he left, he said, “Thank you, but I’m not sure for what.”

“You’re on the right track,” said Ryan.

Francois should have known this day that all was not well. This conversation should have triggered an alarm in him, but just like with his brother Rene, he didn’t read the writing on the wall fast enough or seriously enough.



CHAPTER 2

Same Day Later in the Evening

FLORA AND HER friend Margery took a late dinner break down in the main kitchen area. Edward, the Lenoirs' full-time cook, prepared two plates of food for Flora and her friend as there were lots of leftovers. They decided over dinner to finish the last four bedrooms on the second floor, collect the trash, and then they would be able to start fresh in the morning on the main floor downstairs.

After dinner, they came up the freight elevator to the second floor to finish up before retiring themselves to the third floor. Margery decided to stay over and she would be staying in Hanna's old bedroom in Flora's area on the third floor. Tomorrow's plan was to get up early and clean the first floor, which was the main shared living area.

Margery helped Flora, but also took in the whole mansion, one wall, one picture and one art piece at a time. "I love these niches and the sculptures they have on display. Who buys the artwork, Flora?" asked Marjory.

"JF and Elizabeth buy most of the art in years past. Now, Nicole, Francois' wife, she buys at art shows and changes a lot. I get tired working here, but never tired being here. It's so beautiful. When I live in Poland, I only see things like this on TV and now I feel like I live in TV show."

Margery smiled as she knew Flora's history of her long winding road to America. They had all gotten close with each other in the woman's group.

Once they reached the second floor, they exited the elevator and Flora said, "You finish bedrooms from west wing, and I do east wing and we meet here at elevator again. The garbage bags, we keep them on cart here and throw out tomorrow when we go down to first floor, okay?"

"Will do," said Margery.

"If Rene-Andre is study in his room, it's okay to ask him to take garbage. He's very nice," said Flora.

“All right. That’s the last room I have is his. See you in a bit.” Margery rolled her cart down into the west wing and sure enough, Rene-Andre was still studying behind his closed bedroom door. She lightly tapped on the door and he opened it with a smile.

“Can I just grab your trash and tidy up a few things for you?” asked Marjory.

“Oh, sure. I need a break anyway. I’ll go down to the kitchen for a while. Take your time.” He shut his laptop and put it on top of the dresser, picked up his phone, smiled at Marjory and left. Instead of going to the kitchen, he went downstairs, and walked outside into the pool area. He sat down at a table on the patio and made a phone call.

Flora gathered the trash from Francois and his wife’s bedroom, Adam’s bedroom and Marie-Louise’s bedroom. She left the two unoccupied guest bedrooms until the evening as they would surely be empty. JF’s bedroom door was already closed but she couldn’t tell if anyone was inside or not. She went up to the door and heard muffled voices talking inside, so JF and Tara were most likely getting ready for bed.

Now in one of the unoccupied bedrooms, Flora pulled the towels from the bathroom and added them to the laundry pile. She began to strip the sheets from the bed when she heard what sounded like a gunshot. She was startled, physically jumped, and let out a short but distinct shriek. She walked out into the hallway and saw Marie-Louise, JF’s granddaughter, standing in the middle of the hallway. She stood a few feet back from JF’s doorway. Marie-Louise’s bedroom was across the hallway from her grandfather’s bedroom. She just stood there. She looked directly at Flora but said nothing.

“What was that, Marie-Louise?” asked Flora.

Marie-Louise did not speak. She only stared intently at Flora.

Flora heard another sound, a small bang, like a door closing, followed by a second similar sound. “What was that?” asked Flora. Marie-Louise just looked at Flora hesitating and finally said, “I don’t know.”

Flora walked hesitantly up to JF’s door and gently knocked. “Mr. Lenoir, are you okay?” There was no response. She then heard the door to the stairwell close. The stairwell door was all the way at the end of the east wing. It was metal and made a loud and distinct sound when it closed. That exit led down three flights of stairs and opened out at the pool and also into a storage area.

“Who went out that door, Marie-Louise?” asked Flora.

“I don’t know. I didn’t see anyone,” said Marie-Louise.

Flora then heard another sliding door noise and a bang. She recognized it as the shower door sliding open or closed. One second later, a loud and piercing scream came from inside JF Lenoir's bedroom.

The door to the bedroom opened and Tara came out screaming "Oh my God, he's bleeding. Oh, my God." Tara tied her bathrobe sash but she was dripping from head to toe. She was visibly shaking. Flora was paralyzed in fear at first. But as Tara continued to scream, she stepped forward and glanced into JF's bedroom. She saw Mr. Lenoir lying on his bed with his right hand and forearm over his head. His hand was moving slowly. She saw red blood slowly spreading out on his pillow. His eyes were open. As she watched, his eyes closed and his arm dropped into an awkward position.

Tara continued screaming for help. Francois ran down from the center stairway area which was in the center of the house. "What's the matter? What happened?" asked Francois when he saw Flora, Marie-Louise and Tara outside JF's bedroom. Flora had her hands up covering her mouth and nose from shock. Marie-Louise continued standing in place, not reacting to anything -- but this was her general demeanor. Tara, still dripping wet, pointed into the bedroom. She stopped screaming when Francois showed up. She then walked a few feet in all directions like she didn't know what to do or where to go.

Francois went into his father's bedroom. Flora walked up a few steps and looked inside from JF's doorway. She watched Francois approach his dad and gasp at the sight of his now-dead father. Francois reached out and touched his father's face and then knelt down beside the bed. He stroked his father's head and then reached for his wrist and felt for a pulse.

Francois stood up, reached over and picked up a note from the bed. He read it silently to himself. He then turned to Tara and said, "I know you had something to do with this." His anger was on full display. Flora had never seen Francois this angry before. He was usually calm and controlled.

Tara said, "I didn't have anything to do with this. You wanted him dead before he put my name on the house. This is your doing, Francois, and you're not going to blame me for it."

Tara grabbed her phone from the dresser in her bedroom. Francois grabbed her phone away from her and said, "I'll handle things from here." He put her phone in his pocket and told her to not do anything until he told her to. He picked up the house phone and called Ryan Mallardi, the private investigator who was working for his father. It was Ryan who told Francois a while ago that his father was in danger. He just thought he had more time to resolve things.



~ MEANWHILE~
9:30 PM - Same Day

Ryan and Colleen talked for at least an hour and a half in the Horse & Saddle Restaurant before they headed back to Colleen's car, which was still parked in the funeral home lot. They had just made up from their first real fight, I guess you could say. The make-up took place at a friend's wake, of all places, and they had decided to go out for a drink afterward.

Avoiding the real issues between them, they made playful small talk and both seemed happy to be back together. Neither one wanted to get too serious or focus on what happened between them. There would be time for that ahead. Ryan spent most of the time telling Colleen about his last case, where he tricked the murderer into giving himself away to the cops. Colleen talked about her new condo and after the check arrived, they left, holding hands, and Ryan kissed her on the way to his car.

On the drive back to her car, Colleen said, "So this was unexpected with you tonight, Ryan. I thought you were done with me forever."

"I've thought about you the whole time we've been apart." He paused to see if she said anything. She didn't. She waited for him to go on.

"Have you thought about me?" asked Ryan.

"Yes, I have. I've felt terrible since you left so abruptly that day you helped me pack to move," said Colleen.

"My jealousy was triggered and I think I read too much into seeing you kiss and cuddle with your husband," said Ryan.

"I wasn't cuddling with him, I don't think," said Colleen.

"Oh, there was a cuddle. You were leaning against his car and he was leaning against you. Full body contact? That's a cuddle where I come from," said Ryan, through playfully-narrowed eyes.

"I don't even remember that part, but I take your word for it. He was trying to charm me back into his life," said Colleen. "I'm just glad you came over to talk tonight."

"I think we're good together, Colleen. I believe you want the same things in life I do. We come from similar places, have the same values and principles. You want kids, don't you?" asked Ryan.

“Yes, I do. I want to be married first, of course,” said Colleen.

“Old school -- yeah, me too,” said Ryan smiling.

“What made you come back?” asked Colleen.

“I had time to reflect on what happened and my reaction to it. The passage of time helped me understand my true feelings,” said Ryan, as he drove back to the funeral home.

“What true feelings?” asked Colleen.

“The whole thing. I was down at your apartment helping you move. I came back from an errand to get boxes and I see you in your husband’s arms, him leaning against you, and the two of you kissing. What was I supposed to think? I got jealous but on top of that, and what I didn’t realize in the moment, I was afraid I was going down another dead end, that just like with Angelica, we both didn’t have the same relationship goals. I thought maybe I was just a filler or a rebound guy for you.

“In these last few weeks, I realized that I was fearful of getting hurt and that’s why I left so quickly. But over the same few weeks, I found myself doing similar things with Angelica. I knew it wasn’t working between us. We were broken up, but I went to AA meetings with her, and wound up kissing her, sort of going along with things. I suddenly realized that maybe you were doing the same with Jacob.” He glanced over at her.

“Exactly. That’s exactly what happened with me. I wasn’t expecting him that day. He just dropped by. He apologized and told me he was back on the wagon. He was trying to charm me back into the marriage. I didn’t want to be mean to him, and I guess when he kissed me, I just kissed him back. But like I’ve already told you ten times, the marriage wasn’t even real. He married me for my credit or to make his parents think he was growing up finally. I don’t know. Some days I think the marriage was real and some days I don’t,” said Colleen, as she looked at Ryan driving.

A moment of silence passed and Ryan continued to watch the road. “I was and am still a little worried about the possibility of reconciliation.”

“I’m going to be divorced in less than a week, so that will prove there is no possibility of reconciliation. Uncle Liam has told me my marriage was not sacramental. Jacob is and was a non-believer, even hostile to Christianity. Uncle Liam said I was out of my mind,” said Colleen.

“Did he really say that?” asked Ryan, chuckling.

“Yes, he did. He said I should claim insanity as grounds for an annulment. You know how he is. He said if I want to be married, I need to be in a sacramental marriage. If not, the secular marriages have no security and they aren’t really good for women. You have no legal rights, no financial benefits, and most times the State becomes the father of the children.”

“I’ve never heard him say anything like that,” said Ryan.

“The next time you go golfing, ask him about it. He says that half of the parishes are made up of women who have been discarded or traded in for younger females. He says it’s a side of divorce no one ever talks about. Just ask him, you’ll get an earful.”

“I’ll ask him next time we’re golfing.

“I know we’re a new couple and it takes a year or so to get to know one another, but I’m very serious about us. I’m hopeful and have a feeling that we’re meant to be,” said Ryan.

“I do too,” said Colleen. She waited a moment and said, “I really do, Ryan. I’m not just agreeing or going along with things.”

He smiled but said nothing.



Once at her car, Ryan playfully pushed Colleen against the car, leaned against her and kissed her on the lips. He pulled away and said, “This is what your husband was doing when I last saw him. You can see why I may have misinterpreted it?”

“I do now, but I didn’t then.”

“His loss, my gain.” Still leaning against her, Ryan kissed her again. “What this means right now is I’m claiming you as mine. I’m erasing any memories of his cuddle from both of our minds and replacing it with my cuddle.” She smiled and he hugged her.

“I didn’t know cuddles could be erased, but I love the sound of you claiming me,” said Colleen.

They kissed again and Ryan’s phone rang. He recognized Francois’ phone ring and number. He knew he wouldn’t call at this hour if it wasn’t an emergency of some kind.

“Let me just take this, it may be an emergency,” said Ryan. “Hey, Francois, what’s up?”

“JF is dead. I need you to come to the house right away.”

Ryan heard the panic in Francois' voice and manner -- or was it fear and anger?
"What happened?"

"I don't want to get into it on the phone. I need you to come right away. It's an emergency," said Francois.

"I'm on my way," said Ryan, as he hung up.

"Colleen, one of my clients is dead and I have to go and see what happened."

"Dead?"

"Yeah. Remember you came on surveillance with me when we followed Tara?" asked Ryan.

"Yeah, the one who was kissing her boyfriend Anthony but she was married to the old rich guy?" said Colleen.

"That's the one. It's Jean-Francois, her husband, the old rich guy, he's the one who's dead," said Ryan. "I've got to go."

"Oh my God, what happened? Was it Anthony, Tara's boyfriend? You had a premonition about this."

"I don't know for sure. I'm going there to meet with his son to see what happened," said Ryan, "but the first and second suspects for sure will be Tara and Anthony." Ryan kissed Colleen quickly and he opened her car door to allow her to get inside. He then said, "I better go." He started to walk off to his car.

"So are we back together then?" asked Colleen.

Ryan turned as he was about to enter his car. "We're back. I'm officially your boyfriend now. And I want to see those divorce papers in five days." He smiled and got in his car.



Colleen's mood went from *low-level depression* to *happy to be alive* in the last two hours. She was still going through a tough time with settling her parents' estate and awaiting her divorce hearing. But the most painful part of her life lately was the disappointment over Ryan breaking up with her over what, in her mind, was a terrible misunderstanding. She knew that the whole incident with Jacob kissing her was behind them now.

Hope rose up again and she felt the curse on her -- which she assumed was the only way to explain the last four years of her life -- was finally lifted. Her last thought

before driving home was her mother telling her before dying that she needed to find a nice Catholic boy to marry. She felt her mom smiling down on her now.

As she drove home, she thought back to the night she and Ryan spent surveilling Tara, Jean-Francois' new wife, and her boyfriend Anthony. She remembered Ryan telling her he was afraid Tara and Anthony were up to no good with JF. Ryan even said he had warned JF of his fears on more than one occasion. JF had waved Ryan off, telling him he didn't understand the pressure Tara was under with Anthony. And now he was dead.

Is it possible Tara really married JF only for his money? Is it possible she and Anthony sat around at his house and plotted JF's death? Could people really be that cold and calculating?



10:10 PM - Same Day

On his way over to Lenoir Farms Estate to see what happened to his client, Ryan thought back to warning JF -- at least twice -- that he suspected Tara and Anthony were up to no good. JF was so in love and obsessed with Tara that he was in denial about her cheating with Anthony. No matter how many pictures of them together or videos of them making out in front of Anthony's house he saw, JF chose to see Tara as the victim of an abused woman syndrome, which is how he referred to it. And now he was gone.

Ryan keyed in the pass code and the huge iron estate gates opened. He drove up the long winding road to the front of the mansion and parked right outside the front doors. Expecting to see police lights or even a coroner's truck, he was shocked to see nothing. The mansion was still. Although he saw lights on in the upper wings where the bedrooms were, the downstairs appeared quiet and dark.

When Francois called earlier to say that JF died, Ryan assumed it was a poisoning or another death under suspicious circumstances. But without the cops here, could it be that JF just passed away from a heart attack? Was he taken away already in an ambulance? Why would Francois want him, a private investigator, to come immediately? Ryan had nothing but unanswered questions.

As he approached the door, the house manager, Lucas Marcione, opened the door before Ryan was able to ring the bell. Lucas had an attitude that he was the richest man in the house and the Lenoirs were living with him. He enjoyed looking down his nose at people who were summoned to see the Lenoirs.

“Francois is waiting for you upstairs,” said Lucas, with his usual air of discontent. He pointed to the eastern side of the long winding staircase with a carpeted runner that filled the front entrance area of the mansion. The staircase led up to the bedroom areas; a wing on the east and one on the west. “Make a right when you reach the top of the stairs.” Lucas then slowly walked away towards the kitchen area like he had better things to do than to show some gumshoe where to go.

Ryan bound up the staircase, taking two steps at a time. He headed into the eastern wing. He saw a group of people, but no cops. Suddenly, Francois emerged from this huddled group and took several steps towards Ryan. “Thank God you’re here, Ryan.”

“What happened?” asked Ryan.

Francois walked Ryan back towards the center staircase area, away from the crowd of family members. Speaking just above a whisper, Francois said, “It looks like he killed himself. He was shot in the head and there is a suicide note that appears to be in his handwriting.” Francois was controlled but Ryan saw his chin quiver with emotion. But just as quickly, he paused a moment, and regained his composure so Ryan couldn’t see what he probably thought was a sign of weakness. Ryan knew this old-world machismo well and understood from past dealings that Francois loved his dad and any show of emotion was not for outsiders.

“Suicide? How sure are you that it was really suicide?” asked Ryan.

“Not very. I think Tara is responsible somehow but I don’t know what to make of it with the suicide note. Come and take a look,” said Francois, as he turned and walked down towards JF’s bedroom.

As they got up to the bedroom, Ryan looked in and saw the blood-covered pillow and JF still lying on the bed. Ryan reached out and gently grabbed Francois’ upper arm. “Francois, you have to call the police.”

“I don’t want the cops here. I don’t want this all over the papers --”

“Francois, you have to call the cops. If you don’t call them, I will. Gunshot wounds and suicides have to be reported.” Ryan moved heaven and earth to avoid getting officially involved in any court cases. But he also didn’t do cover-up work and he wasn’t a fixer of rich people’s problems.

“This will destroy my father’s legacy. I want to handle this with as much discretion as I can.” Francois was about to enter the room again and Ryan grabbed him by the upper arm.

“Francois, you can’t go near the body. This scene may be a suicide scene, but it’s the scene of a shooting and it has to be looked at by the cops. Stay out of the room.”

Francois was not used to being spoken to with such force. He was a bit put off by it even in his grief.

Francois lifted up one of the house phone extensions in JF's room and dialed 911. "I would like to report a shooting," Francois winced and closed his eyes, "at Lenoir Farms Estate. . . . The victim is Jean-Francois Lenoir. . . . He's my father . . . It appears to be a suicide." Francois placed the phone back into its charger.

"What is that on the headboard? It could be insignificant but it could be the letter 'A'," said Ryan, after scanning the scene from the doorway area.

"Yes, I saw that. I don't know what that means."

Francois reached over and picked up the suicide note. "Here's the note he left." Francois handed Ryan the note but Ryan would not receive it in hand.

"Put it down on the table out here." Francois put it down and Ryan read the note, without touching it. *'I'm sorry, I didn't want to become a burden on my family. In light of my recent diagnosis, it's best this way.'*

"What diagnosis?" asked Ryan.

"My father was diagnosed with diabetes, but the doctor told him he had to watch his sugar and take one pill a day. If he controlled his sugar with diet and exercise, he could stop taking the pill. He was scheduled to go in for another test in a few weeks," said Francois.

"Why would he commit suicide over that?" asked Ryan.

"You tell me. I know his gold-digging wife had something to do with this." Francois shook his head and Ryan could tell he was suppressing a deep anger. He was obviously biting his tongue and choosing to not speak any further.

"Was there any witness who heard or saw anything?" asked Ryan.

"Yes, Flora, the housekeeper, was across the hallway and she heard the shot and some other sliding or banging noises. She thinks it was the shower door," said Francois.

Just then the cops showed up and the house manager walked them up the stairs. Francois went down to meet them in the stairway balcony area.

Ryan stayed in the hallway and walked up to Flora and asked, "So you heard the shot, Flora?"

Read Forewarned but Unheeded