

# GROOMED FOR MARRIAGE

By R. Shannon

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## **MAIN CHARACTER LIST**

For readers, like me, who find it hard to keep track of characters when there are more than a few, this is for you.

- Colleen Kessler, legal assistant, married to Jacob
- Jacob, stockbroker, married to Colleen
- Fr. Liam, Colleen's uncle, parish priest
- Mike Mullens, retired, Fr. Liam's brother, Colleen's father
- Maria Mullens, retired, Colleen's mother
- Ryan Mallardi, Private Investigator, Fr. Liam's client
- Angelica, Ryan's girlfriend
- Marsha, Colleen's best friend

## **MINOR CHARACTORS**

- Marie-Louise Lenoir, autistic parishioner
- JF Lenoir, Ryan's new client, Marie-Louise's grandfather
- Alice Brennan, parishioner, obsessed with death

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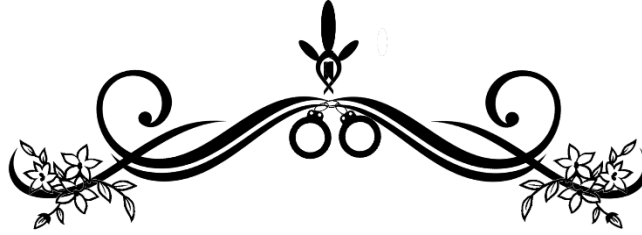
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## CHAPTER 1

**Monday, April 23rd, 10:30 AM  
Ocala, FL**

MOST MONDAYS WERE a bit slow for Fr. Liam after all the weekend weddings and Sunday masses. This Monday in late April, he had been invited to speak at a sister parish, St. Theresa's Parish Retreat. Juanita, his parish secretary, was getting a list of questions she needed answered as Fr. Liam would whisk into the office right after morning mass for just short of an hour. Then he would be gone and incommunicado for the better part of the day. Juanita had to make sure she had all her questions ready because she would only have this one chance to get answers. If she forgot something, she would get stuck waiting for a time she could call or see him. Even in a world where bosses were one cell phone call away, priests were different. You can't call them during mass, or confessions or when they are comforting people who just lost someone. So it can be tricky. Juanita was already proficient in tackling Fr. Liam as he dashed in and out of the parish office and before he got away for the day. He had been assigned to their parish four years ago after their long-time pastor had passed away. She had been Fr. Liam's parish secretary from his arrival.

Juanita had been with the previous pastor, Pastor McCarthy, until his last day. He died sitting at his desk in the next office. He was 85 years old, still working, but slow-going most of the time. He was a sweet and kind man who Juanita came to love very much. When Fr. Liam was assigned to the parish, and she heard he was an ex-cop who entered the priesthood two years shy of his 60th birthday, she didn't think she would ever adjust.

She liked Fr. Liam well enough, but the first two months were an adjustment because his schedule was three times as busy as Pastor McCarthy's. Fr. Liam's walking and talking pace was also three times as fast as Pastor McCarthy's. In time, Juanita became only too happy to make the adjustment.

As she stacked her work pile with handwritten notes to go over as soon as Fr. Liam swept into the office, Rose Arnett came up to her desk. She handed Juanita another note that was dropped into the poor box. The poor box slot was slightly wider than a half-dollar coin and thick enough to put in only one coin at a time. Someone in the parish was now using it as a suggestion box. *'There is entirely too much talking before mass when people are trying to pray', 'people need to stop wearing shorts, especially the elderly as they are too wrinkly and disgusting to be out in shorts at all'*; every two weeks or so there was some other complaint left for Fr. Liam.

“Look at this one,” said Rose as she handed the note to Juanita. Usually the women snickered over the suggestions and more times than not they even agreed with them. *‘There is a murderer going to the 11:00 mass on Sundays now’*. Juanita read it out loud and they looked at each other.

“What does this mean? Is this murderer someone we know?” asked Juanita looking at Rose.

Rose raised her shoulders and shook her head. “Just give it to Fr. Liam for his collection.” She proceeded to sit at the side of Juanita’s desk to count up the money put into the poor box. It would need to be deposited into the bank and a check sent to *Peter’s Pantry*, their food ministry.

Fr. Liam walked into the office smiling. “Good morning, ladies.”

“Good morning, Father,” said Juanita as he walked into his private office. “I have several questions I need to ask you on my work before you leave for your speaking engagement. But Rose gave me another note from the poor box/suggestion box. This one is a bit intriguing.”

Fr. Liam came out to Juanita’s desk, took the note and read it. He closed his eyes and shook his head. He folded up the note and gave it back to Juanita. “Just add it to the suggestion folder we made for her.”

“What does it mean? Do you know of a murderer that goes to the 11:00 mass?”

“The whole church is comprised of saints and sinners, so we probably have a murderer or two in the pews, I’m sure. Our suggestion-maker thinks I’m still a cop, which I’m not. I was a cop for 30 years and I was in the criminal-catching business but now I’m a priest and I’m in the soul-saving business. I’ll talk to her.”

“You know who it is?” asked Juanita and Rose at the same time.

“Yes, I heard her tearing the paper note from a spiral notebook during my homily - which I don’t believe she caught one word of. Then Deacon Bob saw her squeezing the note into the poor box after mass,” said Fr. Liam as he went back into his office.

“Who is it?” asked Juanita.

“I would rather not say. If your curiosity is killing you, go to the 11:00 mass on Sundays and linger after mass for a few minutes. You’ll see her trying to fit the next note into the coin slot. That’s why she has to tear the paper down to as small as she can. She does it right out in the open,” said Fr. Liam chuckling.

“Let’s go to the 11:00 mass this weekend,” said Rose to Juanita.

“Okay.” Juanita said as she grabbed her pile of work and headed into Fr. Liam’s office.

“What time do I have to be over at St. Theresa’s? Is the retreat in their parish room, I assume?” asked Fr. Liam.

“Your talk is scheduled for 11:15 and it’s in their parish office, yes.”

“What questions do you have on your work?”

“I need you to tell me who gets copies of these letters --”

The phone rang. Juanita, sitting in the chair in front of Fr. Liam's desk, handed the four letters to Fr. Liam and he began to read them. She answered the phone on his desk. "Good morning. Our Lady of Mercy Church, this is Juanita, may I help you? ... Hi, Alice ... There's only one so far this week, Mr. Russel. ... His mass is on Wednesday at eleven. ... Kramer Funeral Home. ... Sure, bye now."

"Alice Brennan?" asked Fr. Liam as he put another post-it note on one of the letters with a list of who to copy.

"Yes, she calls every week to see who has died and where the funerals are. She goes to all of them, you know," said Juanita. "Who goes to funerals of people they don't even know?"

"Alice does. That's why they call her '*Madam Macabre*' behind her back," said Fr. Liam smiling.

"But why? Why does she go to all the funerals?"

"She has a fixation, let's call it, on how people die. She works the crowd when she goes to the wakes and finds out how they died and whatever details she can get out of everyone. She's particularly interested in the cause of death, who found them, and what the scene looked like. And let me tell you, she gets more details than a seasoned FBI detective."

"She does?" asked Juanita laughing.

"Oh, yeah. First of all," said Fr. Liam looking up now, "she has a whole mourning wardrobe. If it's a working-class family, she arrives at the wake dressed in a simple black dress with a black lace mantilla and rosaries wrapped around her hand. She walks among the crowd like a grieving relative, touching everyone's forearm and saying, 'I'm so sorry.' That's how each investigation begins. When it's a wealthy family, she arrives dressed in full black designer wear including a velvet pillbox hat with that hanging French netting and she goes into a more formal routine," said Fr. Liam.

Juanita chuckled and took back the letters Fr. Liam had finished putting post-it notes on. She checked her next item.

"Fr. Peter from the seminary called and said he will cover your masses on Saturday and Sunday so you can go away on Mother's Day weekend,"

"Perfect. I can go and visit my brother in Boca Raton for the weekend."

"You miss living close to him, don't you?"

"I do. We've always lived about ten minutes away from each other our entire lives. We're only fourteen months apart; they had no such thing as *child-spacing* back then. We grew up together. We raised our kids together. When I was married, we went out as couples, had holidays together. We've been best friends since we were kids and we're both miserable living so far apart. We're on an organized campaign to talk his wife Maria into moving here to Ocala,"

"Do you think she will?" asked Juanita.

"So far, she's very resistant to it as their only daughter Colleen is recently married. Maria doesn't want to leave her yet. But we're determined not to get discouraged."

It's only four hours away. Colleen and her husband can visit Ocala; and Mike and Maria, who are both retired now, can go down and spend time with her."

"Well, good luck on your campaign. I need you to sign these other three letters for the mail. Everything else I can do without you answering any questions. And you better leave for St. Theresa's now."

Fr. Liam finished signing his letters and left for his speaking engagement.



### **Later the Same Day - 5:00 PM Ocala, FL**

The St. Theresa parish retreat talk went well. Fr. Liam got a few laughs during his talk and he felt the group was inspired and hopeful at the end of the day. They had a late luncheon at the retreat and he joined Fr. Dominick for dinner with a couple of his parishioners. From the outside, a priest's job could look very monotonous, but it didn't feel that way to Fr. Liam. The circumstances that surrounded the same rituals or ceremonies were always different. He often felt that certain people were led into his life and he into theirs.

At about twenty-after four, he excused himself from the retreat and said his goodbyes on the way back to the parish office for his 5:00 counseling session. During the years he was on the police force, particularly in his years as a homicide detective, Fr. Liam earned a philosophy and psychology degree in night school. During baptisms, marriages and funerals, Fr. Liam only got to know little snippets about his parishioners. He never spent enough time with them to know them well.

During counseling, he worked with them individually. He helped them with grief issues, addiction issues or moral questions. These were the people he got to know well and even became friendly with. It was more personal. He helped many of them move from a very dark tunnel back into the light of hope. This was a big part of his calling. Little by little this group of strangers became his second family.

He checked his watch and had ten minutes before his session started. He had helped Ryan Mallardi, a young thirty-something parishioner, through the annulment of his first marriage. It was a Las Vegas wedding at some random chapel on the strip. Most of their counseling focused on how a sacramental marriage is different from a civil marriage. As with too many young Catholics today, the concept was all new to Ryan. Although Fr. Liam loved the Church, he had to admit that somehow, in some way, they had completely fallen down on their obligation to catechize an entire generation -- or two. During the last couple of months, Fr. Liam and he had come up against some issues with his mother and girlfriend that he wanted to address. So their counseling sessions continued on a weekly basis.

Ryan Mallardi worked for a private investigator while getting his computer science degree from the University of Florida. He opened his own private investigations and computer security business right out of college. So at the youthful age of thirty-four, he had his own thriving business with three and sometimes four employees. Being an only child of a widowed, still-single mom, he was a self-made man in ways that the coddled youth in America rarely were anymore.



Fr. Liam knew that Ryan, rendered fatherless at the age of eleven, had longed for a father figure all his life. Fr. Liam was only too happy to step in, as his own two sons were both living out of the country.

The door to the parish office opened and Ryan entered. It was 5:15 pm and Juanita was already gone for the day. They shook hands and entered Fr. Liam's office. As Ryan sat down, Fr. Liam said, "Have you received the final annulment papers yet?"

"Not yet. You said it could take up to six weeks, so I'm still waiting," said Ryan. He crossed the ankle of one leg over his thigh and got comfortable. He loosened his tie and opened the top button of his shirt.

"So what's going on in the world of private investigations, beautiful girlfriends and dependent moms?"

"The usual. They're both sniping one another and I'm in the middle and think they're both stubborn and wrong. I have my hands full working investigations and managing my own business. The uninterrupted refereeing is draining me."

"You need to put some boundaries up with both of them. We've talked about this in our previous sessions. Did you ask Angelica to stop making negative comments about your mother?"

"Yeah, I did. So now before she makes negative comments about her, she prefaces each statement with *this may sound negative, but it's not...*"

Fr. Liam half smiled and raised his eyebrows. "What about your mom? Did you tell her you're going to hire a certified nurse's assistant to drive her to doctor appointments and other errands so you can have your time back?"

"I gently told her about wanting my own time and introduced the concept of an assistant to her. I explained that the assistant could drive her wherever she needed or wanted to go. She was insulted and not understanding at all, which was not a surprise. She's now mumbling things under her breath like *'I don't want to be in the way. Why don't you just euthanize me? Then you'll have all your time back,'*" said Ryan with tongue in cheek. "That's an example of the mumbblings that are coming. She's got one for every occasion, all guilt-loaded, each one more and more morose."

Fr. Liam chuckled. "Push through and don't allow the guilt-laden mumbblings to cause you to change your plans. It's going to take her time to adjust. Guilting you has worked for a long time; she's not going to give it up that easily."

"Yes, it has worked," said Ryan.

"It's going to get better, at least with your mom."

"I hope you're right. It's all exhausting," said Ryan a bit more seriously.

"Don't be hard on yourself, Ryan. This dynamic with your mother becoming overly dependent on you began forming after your father died. You were only eleven and too young to form any defenses to it or even know it was happening. Instead of grieving and finding another husband, or becoming more independent, your mother went into a kind of *professional widowhood*. In that process, she became too dependent upon you. She made you into a *little husband* and this is what has to change. This wasn't done in any sinister way, mind you.

“You can be a good son to her but free enough of your time so you can be a good husband to a wife.” Fr. Liam waited to see if this resonated with Ryan.

“I never thought of it that way, but it makes sense, especially the part about not having any defenses to it. I always thought my mother and I had a great relationship,” said Ryan, as he looked up and sideways. “I didn’t realize how dependent she was on me.” Fr. Liam could tell Ryan was looking back in time to see this dependency playing out. He could tell it resonated with him. He knew they were getting somewhere.

“What’s the diagnosis with Angelica and me? Do you have any insight into that?” asked Ryan.

“Angelica is a bit demanding, as some very beautiful woman can be. I don’t see her as being the most compassionate or sympathetic person, do you?”

“I guess not. She thinks my mother should snap out of it and *‘leave you alone’* is how she puts it. But it’s all the time,” said Ryan as he took a deep breath and exhaled. “She doesn’t seem to have any compassion for my mother at all. I mean, not every widow starts rocking the bar scene and gets remarried and moves on. Your church is filled with widows and divorcees that never find anyone else. My mother claims she could never love anyone besides my father. She still has his pictures around the house everywhere. She still wears a gold locket with his picture in it. I think it’s a touching love story, but the plot line has drifted entirely over Angelica’s head.” Ryan took another deep breath and looked at Fr. Liam for some feedback.

“Is her complaint that your mother calls you too much or is her complaint that your mother calls you at all?”

Ryan looked at Fr. Liam and said, “Any time my mother calls me, or if she needs anything, even if it’s legitimate, Angelica bitches and moans. She sees every favor I do for my mother as being taken away from her somehow.”

“I want you to think this week about what virtues Angelica has and we can discuss that next week, okay?” asked Fr. Liam.

“I can do that,” said Ryan. “Virtues, I know a few, but I may have to do an internet search on that.”

“The seven virtues are: purity, temperance, charity, diligence, patience, kindness and humility. You can google the seven heavenly virtues and start there. We can talk more next week after you’ve had a chance to start noticing these. Just look for Angelica’s good traits and we’ll start discussing them next week.”

“Okay. I’ll do that.”

The session went on for a while longer. Ryan went into some other frustrating instances where he felt caught in the middle of this antagonistic dynamic between Angelica and his mother. Fr. Liam knew he needed to vent so he listened and could see Ryan felt relieved at the end of the session.

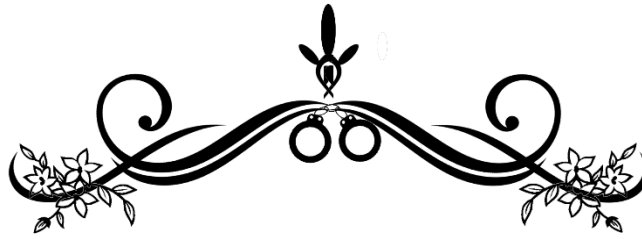
Fr. Liam knew as an only child, Ryan had been the head of his little household with his mother most of his life. He wanted to be married without another divorce but somehow this relationship with Angelica kept veering off course. Fr. Liam could see the dynamics between he and his mother and he and his girlfriend. He could also see

Ryan didn't have much insight into what was really going on. But he was open to change and Fr. Liam knew that was all that was needed.

From his years studying philosophy and psychology, together with his years working with the criminal classes, Fr. Liam knew that the absence of a father created a myriad of problems. These problems, if left untreated, could create havoc in a young man's life.

Fr. Liam and Ryan talked about boundaries with his mother being essential no matter who he was in relationship with or married to. Once Ryan was assured this dynamic could change, he exhibited signs of hopefulness. This is where the heart of Fr. Liam's work really was.

He had decided to enter the diaconate while still married to his wife, Patty. He was three-quarters of the way through his studies when she got sick with ovarian cancer. She died only four months into her treatment. He was overwhelmed by grief for about six months. At that time, his call to serve went from the diaconate to entering the priesthood. Now he had devoted the rest of his life to working for the Lord's church. He knew it was presently in shambles, but he hoped to be part of the movement to build it back up. It was these moments of helping people like Ryan improve their lives that instilled hope and a sense of purpose into Fr. Liam's heart and soul.



## CHAPTER 2

### **One Day Later - 12:00 Noon Boca Raton, FL**

MARIA MULLENS WAS talking on the phone in her upscale, beautifully-furnished home in Boca Raton. She was drying and putting away dishes with the phone crooked between her head and shoulder. She was fielding another complaint call from her 23-year-old daughter, Colleen, who married almost nine months earlier. Her daughter's complaints were about her husband, Jacob, having to work late all the time. Maria attempted to realign her young daughter's marital expectations. She was convinced Colleen thought the honeymoon would never end. She tried to help her daughter adjust to the changes and compromises demanded by marriage.

"Colleen, a lot of men work longer hours, especially men who make lots of money like Jacob does." Colleen seemed unconvinced, so Maria let her carry on for a few more minutes to vent. In the meantime, she put away the dishes from the dishwasher.

"Every marriage has challenges and things we have to get used to. Don't be the type of woman that has to be babysat, Colleen. He's trying to get ahead in his career." Maria had reminded Colleen several times in previous discussions that marriage was a never-ending series of compromises. Obviously, the message wasn't fully absorbed yet.

"Mom, this is the third night this week. He worked Monday and Tuesday until almost eleven o'clock. His hair was a mess and his shirt was a wrinkled mess from sweating. He looked like he was in a wrestling match. Plus he is snapping at me all the time."

"He's probably working under a lot of stress, Colleen. At least he's calling you now by the early afternoon when he has to work late so you don't start cooking. That's a compromise. He's doing that for you, right?"

"Yes, he is. I don't understand. He has the same job that he had before we got married. So why is he now having to work like this?" asked Colleen.

Maria chose not to answer.

"All right. I guess your silence is a non-verbal cue that I'm making too much of it. Is that it?"

Again Maria said nothing.

“I’ll stop complaining,” said Colleen, unsatisfied with her mother’s responses.

“He’s still taking you out to a nice restaurant on Saturday nights. He’s still talking about having children soon, so it’s not all bad, Colleen.”

“You’re right. I don’t want to be a nag or a complainer. I’m worried that he doesn’t love me anymore and that’s why he’s staying away from home.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Maria scoffed. “Tell him how you feel. He’ll reassure you that this is about his career and then you can let go of that fear. You just got married nine months ago. You’re still newlyweds,” said Maria, as she walked away from her husband Mike. She saw him approaching with his Ocala homes brochure.

“Your father is approaching me again with that Summer Glen brochure. I told you he’s stalking me with that, didn’t I?” She looked over her shoulder and glared at Mike. Her husband had been positioning himself behind her to talk as soon as she said goodbye to Colleen.

“Yes, you did. He needs to take a break with that. You need to get that brochure and hide it, Mom.”

“He doesn’t realize that the country now has stalking laws on the books for this very reason,” said Maria, looking at Mike through squinted eyes. Mike dropped his arm holding the brochure and walked with it outside to the pool area.

“Is Uncle Liam coming for Mother’s Day?” asked Colleen. “Jacob and I will come at one in the afternoon because we have to go see his mom at four.”

“I’ll be ready by one. Don’t worry. We’ve compromised and are eating earlier than normal. You see how it works?” asked Maria smiling. “We used to have dinner later in the afternoon. But since you now need to see both moms, I’ve adjusted. We’re having dinner at one o’clock. That’s a compromise.”

“Okay. You’ve made your point, Mom,” said Colleen, with a tinge of sarcasm. “My lunch break is over. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Goodbye, Sweetie. I love you,” said Maria. “The first year of marriage can be the hardest so don’t be discouraged. You both have to compromise until you reach a happy medium, which you will. It’s all going to be okay,” said Maria. She looked outside to the pool area and saw Mike sitting by the pool. “I love you, Colleen.”

“Love you too, Mom.”



Fr. Liam’s brother, Mike, after getting busted by his wife, took his Summer Glen brochure out onto the back patio. He sat at the wrought iron table next to their built-in swimming pool. The landscapers had come earlier in the week and the palm trees, the rock garden, and the shrubs were all perfectly coiffed. The pool guy prepared the pool for the start of the swimming season earlier in the day. The pool was spotless and the water was glistening clean. It reflected the sun beautifully.

The swimming season in south Florida was from May to early October. Tourists tended to swim at the beaches into mid-November and later, but the residents of Florida bundled up into sweaters at the first sign of a cool breeze. Mike called his brother, Fr. Liam.

“Hey, Liam, how did your retreat lecture go?”

“It went well. I got some good feedback after it was over, but I think I heard some snoring too. I guess it went as well as could be expected.

“How is the campaign going?” asked Fr. Liam.

“Not too well. I just approached her with the brochure again and she swatted me away like a mosquito,” said Mike. He flipped a page or two in the brochure that was now laid out on his pool-side table.

“You better lay low for a while. I think she’s onto us and her resistance is too high,” said Fr. Liam.

“I think you’re right. Did you get the time off to come down for Mother’s Day weekend?”

“Yes, I did. I’ll come Friday night. We can golf early on Saturday, spend time with Maria on Saturday afternoon and have family dinner on Sunday. We’ll both subtly work on Maria a little bit over the weekend.”

“Perfect. I’ll make sure I have reservations at the golf club for us,” said Mike, already planning their weekend in his mind.

“How is Maria and how are Colleen and Jacob?” asked Fr. Liam.

“Apparently, Jacob is working late a lot and Colleen doesn’t like it. Maria is trying to tell her she has to be more understanding. This is part of why Maria won’t let go of being here. Colleen is calling all the time complaining about every little thing that he says or does. They both analyze everything to death. They’re worse than us,” said Mike.

“Sometimes the first year of marriage can be a battleground until they work out the kinks,” said Fr. Liam.

“We’ll see. Colleen isn’t a complainer so I’m thinking that maybe there’s something going on. Maria keeps telling me we have to support them in the marriage. Between you and me, Liam, when she told us she wouldn’t get married in the church because Jacob was an atheist, I was heartsick. Looking back on it now, it’s not a church wedding and if it just ended, I think I would be relieved.”

“The one reason listed in the letter of St. Paul about leaving a spouse is when they refuse to allow you to practice your faith. She stopped going to mass at his request,” said Fr. Liam.

“That’s true, but she’s giving him cover by saying it was because she wanted to be more interfaith, more spiritual, whatever that means. I better stop talking about it. I can feel my blood pressure going up.”

“Don’t get mad. Just pray for God’s Will, for the truth to emerge. That’s all we can do. Because even if it’s not a sacramental marriage, once she gets pregnant, they’re a family. They’re all bound by blood,” said Fr. Liam.

“Maria is coming out to the pool now. I have my brochure; I’m going to take another crack at her. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Good luck,” said Fr. Liam.



After her phone call, Maria looked out into the patio area where Mike was sitting at the table by the pool. He was flipping through his Summer Glen brochure again as he talked on his phone. She knew without asking that he was talking to his brother Liam. Since Liam moved up to Ocala four years ago, Mike started moping around the house. He was lost without his golfing buddy, fishing buddy and all-around best friend.

She never saw him as obsessed about anything before he seized on moving up to Ocala. Colleen’s sudden and too-short engagement had distracted Mike for about a year. But after Colleen’s wedding, Mike had returned to suggesting almost daily that they move up to central Florida. One day he would complain about the brutal summer heat. The next day his complaints were about hurricane season, having to run from pillar to post every time a hurricane swirled off the coast of Africa. And the day after that it was about how crowded the whole area had gotten.

Mike finished his call to Liam and began flipping through the Summer Glen brochure again. Maria came out to sit with him. When she approached, he let go of his brochure, sat back and was just looking at the water.

She wanted to give in to him about the move, but with Colleen calling her every other day and needing guidance, she felt it was too soon to go. She decided she would talk to Mike and Liam on Mother’s Day about being open to it maybe next year.

She joined Mike at the table under the umbrella. He smiled up at her and looked over at the water. “How’s Colleen?”

“She’s okay. They’re adjusting to life after the honeymoon is ending, I guess,” said Maria.

“What do you mean?” Mike looked into Maria’s eyes.

“Jacob has started working late a lot; two or three nights a week. Even last Saturday he had to go in for a few hours. She said he never worked like this before they got married, so this is all a surprise to her.”

Mike shook his head negatively. Maria could tell he was biting his tongue.

“He wasn’t telling her he was going to be late until the last minute. He would call after five, when she had already heated up the oven to make them dinner. Or he would call her when she already picked up take-out for them.” Maria raised her eyebrows as she looked at Mike.

“Well, that’s ridiculous. He knows he’s going to have to work late before dinnertime,” said Mike. Maria knew Mike didn’t allow Jacob too much wiggle room so she took what he said with a grain of salt.

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her that some men have to work late. I told her you had to work late many nights. There were short stints where you were working almost around the clock. I explained to her that she has to adjust to his schedule,” said Maria, waiting for his response.

“He should tell her by two o’clock in the afternoon if he’s going to be working late. All men know by two o’clock whether it’s going to be an all-nighter. He’s being inconsiderate,” said Mike.

“You think so?” asked Maria.

“Yes, I do. I always gave you a heads-up, didn’t I?” asked Mike.

“Yes, you did. You always told me early in the day. I don’t think Jacob is as considerate or soft-hearted as you are.”

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

“Well, I think Jacob has a good side, but he has a side that can be kind of dark too. It only comes out when he’s confronted about something or when things are not going his way,” said Maria.

“Do you think we need to be worried about our daughter?” asked Mike. Maria was surprised by his level of seriousness.

A moment of silence passed between them. Maria let it drop because she didn’t want to get Mike thinking there was anything sinister going on. Maybe *dark* wasn’t the right adjective.

“Elaborate on what you mean by dark side,” said Mike.

“Well, when you get mad, you can get loud. You sometimes yell. And sometimes you can go on and on into a bit of a tirade. But you were never mean to me or Colleen. Your anger is outwardly directed. You tend to shout at the world in a way. I’ve always noticed that this is how you vent your anger. Then when you’re done, that’s it, you move on. You have no vengeance. You don’t seek revenge.”

Mike was listening to every word. He was engaged with Maria in intense eye contact.

“But with Jacob, he gets angry, but instead of shouting at the world, he shouts at Colleen. Like he unloads this angst and anger onto her. She has a very sensitive heart and she’s always been that way. It’s her nature. I worry that this difference in anger expression will lead to bigger problems. She cries and feels blamed and rejected when they fight.”

“Do you think he would ever raise a hand to Colleen?”

“No, I don’t believe he has that in him. I also notice he has an impatience and an intolerance with people which is harsh. I hope she never has to be on the receiving end of that.”



“I better not hear of him ever raising a hand to my daughter. I guarantee his mommy and daddy will not be able to get him out of that kind of trouble,” said Mike.

“Now, Mike, I’m only sharing my concerns with you. Don’t get mad at him and don’t start thinking something has to be done. I’m telling you what is going on with your daughter, keeping you in the loop, that’s all. Everything is fine. Every couple has to work out their arguing and discussion styles and put up their own boundaries. Anyway, that’s what’s going on with them. It’s easy at her young age to think the honeymoon will never end.” Maria reached over and rubbed Mike on his forearm.

“Okay, I won’t shout at the world over it. I’ll take your word that everything is fine.” He grabbed her hand and they both looked out on the pool. “I never get tired of looking at the pool water glistening in the sun.”

“It does look beautiful, especially the first day it’s cleaned and open for the season,” said Maria.

“You’ll keep me posted on Colleen and Jacob?” asked Mike.

“I’m watching the situation as a good mother should. It’s a delicate balancing act. I’m monitoring them but trying not to be a meddler. It’s a tightrope walk, but I feel confident,” said Maria making light of the situation.

“You have to let her grow up too, Maria,” said Mike. “We won’t always be here and she has to be able to stand on her own two feet.”

“‘We won’t always be here?’ Where does that come from? You just retired and neither of us is even 60 yet. We’re still young, Mike. We’ll be here for a long time.”

“I’ve always had to ride you a little bit about over-spoiling her.”

“That’s true. I admit I can go a little overboard doting on her. You’ve pulled me back when I needed it. We’re a good balancing act, Mike.”

“You’re a great mother, Maria.”

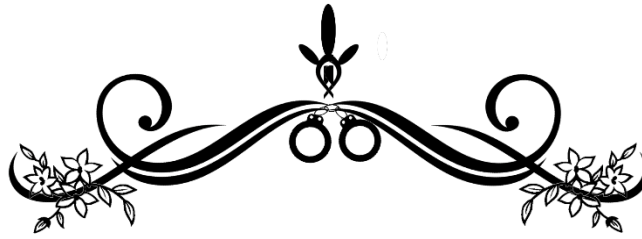
“It was and is my most important mission – until the grandchildren show up. Which is why we both have to stick around in Boca, just a little longer.”

Mike nodded with only a half-hearted grin.

“Couldn’t Liam get re-assigned to a church down in Fort Lauderdale?” asked Maria.

“They moved him right into a pastor position and they don’t move them too often once they become pastors. Besides, Ocala is more mild, Maria, no hurricanes, and it’s out of the city. Boca Raton is no longer the small sleepy little suburb it was when we moved here. It’s part of the Miami, Fort Lauderdale metropolis which is getting as busy as New York City. We’ll put everything in God’s Hands. I understand why you want to be here for Colleen.”

Maria knew it was Mike who was compromising this time. She felt Colleen still needed her parents, especially her mother, as she adjusted to married life. Maria could have never known how much she would need her parents.



## CHAPTER 3

**One Day Later - 4:30 PM  
Ocala, FL**

FR. LIAM HAD been sitting all afternoon in back-to-back meetings and counseling sessions. He now had fifteen minutes between sessions and needed to stand. As he stood and stretched his legs, he rearranged his desk and put things away for the day. The upcoming marriage counseling appointment would be his last session of the day. It was twenty after five and he could still hear Juanita at her desk as well as the printer.

“Juanita, are you still here?”

“Yes, Father. I’m printing out your schedule for tomorrow. You have two wakes tomorrow.” Juanita organized her desk and her list of things to do in the morning.

“The baby boomers are dropping like flies. They are dying as quickly as they were all born. I’m beginning to see our parish thinning.”

“I know. It’s very sad really. By the way, I called Marie-Louise to schedule her for this Friday. She was so alarmed at being contacted by you for a conference that she insisted on coming tomorrow morning. She said she would not be able to think of anything else or sleep and she had to do it tomorrow. I gave in as she is very ... *forceful*? Is that the word I’m looking for?”

“*Insistent*?” asked Fr. Liam.

“*Insistent*, that’s the word.” Juanita grabbed a copy of the schedule from the printer, put one on her desk and brought one into Father.

“Maybe *strangely insistent* is the most accurate, don’t you think?” asked Father.

“That is more accurate. Is she mentally ill or just strange?” asked Juanita, as respectfully as she could.

“Some days I’m not sure. I’ll get another chance to analyze her up close tomorrow. What time is she coming?”

“I was only able to squeeze her in before your luncheon, so she's coming at 11:00 tomorrow. I hope that’s okay.”

“That’ll be fine,” said Fr. Liam, grinning.

“Are you going to ask her about the notes?”

“We’re going to discuss her suggestions, yes.”

“Well, good luck, Father,” said Juanita as she gathered her keys and her pocketbook to leave.

“Thanks, Juanita. I’ll need it. Have a good night. I’ll see you tomorrow.”



## **GROOMED FOR MARRIAGE**



