

I KNOW HER EYES

By R Shannon

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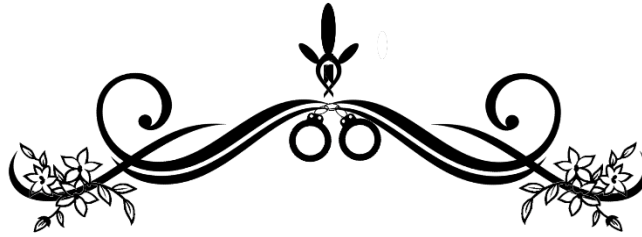
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CHAPTER 1

MARIBEL AND RANDALL Bovine had been married for going on 26 years. Close friends of theirs would say they had been to hell and back again. Tragedy either brings a couple together or breaks them apart. What they had been through together made them closer. In that sense, they were one of the lucky ones. In some strange way, it anchored them. It gave them a purpose they never had before. It also sobered them up.

It was a Sunday afternoon in May. The weather in Ocala, Florida, was warm and sunny. They had decided to go out to dinner after their weekly meeting. As they drove to The World Equestrian Center, they talked about the speaker from the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. They expected this to be just another day in their lives. There was no omen, no premonition that things were about to go a bit upside down for both of them.

Ocala, Florida, has been officially known as the Horse Capital of the World since 1977. Its claim to fame began back in the mid-1940s when horses raised in Ocala began winning championships all over the world. Turns out, the natural soil in the area is perfect for growing hay and the winters are sunny and mild. Starting in the 1950s, more and more horse farms sprung up one by one all over the Ocala area. Even horses who didn't live here full-time were known *to winter* in Ocala because of the mild weather.

It was only natural that property developers, together with the town uppity-ups, built and opened The World Equestrian Center in 2022. It was bigger and more spectacular than anyone in small-town Ocala would have ever expected.

Randall and Maribel were on their way to have dinner at The Yellow Pony Pub & Garden. It was one of the more popular restaurants in the new equestrian center, and Maribel and her husband had been talking about going for at least a month already. This would also be their first visit to the grand World Equestrian Center that their neighbors had been raving about.

As they entered the center holding hands, each looked up and around in all directions as they took in the twenty-foot ceilings and the professionally designed and staged lobby area. It took them a good five minutes to take in the entirety of what the huge reception room had to reveal: The beautiful furniture, the fireplace, the piano, the various sitting areas, the museum-quality artwork displayed in tightly-knit vignettes, not to mention the dozens of dog and horse paintings that graced every wall.

After absorbing as much as they could on a first visit, Randall led Maribel over towards The Yellow Pony. The lobby was crowded with other visitors, mostly couples and family groups both large and small. As

they approached the restaurant, they observed a short waiting line to be seated. There were about twelve friendly people in line mingling and chatting with each other. A few even held a drink in their hand. An air of excitement was all around.

As Randall and Maribel determined where the end of the line was, Maribel drew in a loud breath and called out, "Oh my God, there's Rebecca. There's Rebecca, Randall." She let out a subdued but unmistakable shriek. She instinctively moved in towards the young, blonde woman, pulling Randall with her.

"Where? I don't see her," said Randall as he looked from woman to woman standing in the waiting line.

Maribel moved closer to the blonde woman who was standing calmly in line, talking with her husband and another couple. As Maribel moved in closer, the blonde woman turned her back and whispered something to her husband. Maribel, in her excitement, reached out, grabbing the woman by her forearm in an attempt to pull her closer. "Rebecca, it's Mommy. It's Mommy."

The blonde woman pulled away, not only in inches, but her whole countenance pulled back showing horror. "I don't know who you are, ma'am," she said in a firm voice.

"Rebecca, please. I know it's you," said Maribel. "Rebecca, it's Mommy."

Randall looked closely at the blonde woman, but he didn't see Rebecca. His seventeen-year-old daughter's face was etched into his heart and soul, but she had brown hair and was only a teenager when she went missing. He detected a certain fear or hostility coming from this young woman that his wife had provoked. He grabbed Maribel by her forearm and gently but firmly pulled her away.

The blonde's husband stepped forward and politely set himself between Maribel and his wife. His wife was at least twenty years his junior. "Ma'am, you must be mistaken. My wife's parents have both passed away. My wife's name is not Rebecca. I'm sorry, but you must be mistaken."

"Oh?" uttered Maribel, stunned. She retreated a few inches back, but her eyes never left the blonde woman. She continued to stare at her, even though she had now turned her back to Maribel.

When the woman's husband took a stand against Maribel, the other waiting diners took notice of this strange interaction. Randall lovingly steered Maribel towards the back of the line. Reluctantly, his wife went with him, but every few minutes, she attempted to step forward again to take another look at the blonde woman.

Randall could tell the once-polite couple was now alarmed by Maribel's strange behavior. On top of attempting to walk closer to the blonde, Maribel began to cry and mumble to herself. Randall recognized his wife going into an obsession again. He also saw the blonde's husband now looking around for security.

"Maribel, it's not her," whispered Randall in as firm a voice as he could as he walked her again to the back of the line.

“It’s her, Randall. I know her eyes. Why won’t she acknowledge me?” asked Mary with a still-stunned look in her eyes.

“Maribel, listen to me—”

“Why is she denying me?” Maribel wiped a tear that had ran down her face.

“Maribel, listen to me. Listen to me.” Randall turned his wife firmly to face him as he spoke directly to her. At just above a whisper, he said, “Her husband said her parents are both dead. I admit she looks like Rebecca, but it’s not her.”

“Don’t you recognize your own daughter?” asked Maribel with accusation in her voice.

Randall saw Maribel’s eyes well up in tears again. He assumed she felt rejected by this woman who she mistook for their daughter. He had been through *sightings* before with Maribel, but she hadn’t had an incident like this in many years.

“I would recognize my own daughter if I saw her, Maribel. But it’s not her. This woman has blonde hair—”

“She has highlights. Her hair is brown at the roots—”

“—and her facial features are different,” insisted Randall.

“I know her eyes. I’ll never forget her eyes,” said Maribel, now whining again. One or two of the patrons waiting in line turned around one at a time to look at Maribel. No one knew what to make of it. Maribel seemed oblivious to anyone but this woman she thought was her daughter Rebecca.

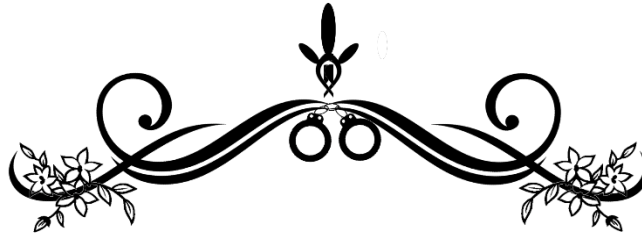
“Maribel, keep your voice down,” said Randall as his patience waned. “This is not the first time you’ve thought you’ve seen Rebecca.”

“I know, but this time I’m sure it’s her. I know her eyes. When I called her Rebecca, she answered to her name. I saw it, Randall.”

Randall, who had been holding her hand, brought it up and kissed it. He petted the top of her hand in a gesture to calm her. It didn’t work.

“I want to get a picture of her to show to Evelyn,” said Maribel, as she quickly pulled away from him and stepped forward in the line again. She aimed her phone camera at the blonde woman. Randall came right up behind Maribel. He saw terror register on the blonde’s face right before she buried her face in her husband’s chest. Maribel took one picture before Randall swooped up behind her, took her by the forearm and walked her outside the Equestrian Center. Their dinner plans at The Yellow Pony had come to an end.





CHAPTER 2

IT WAS EARLY afternoon in May. Fiona Quinn and her older brother Matthew, a priest in Orlando, Florida, went walking at a park next to his parish. Since moving closer to him, Fiona and Matthew had made a habit of catching up after his Mass every Sunday. Fiona just turned thirty and moved her life from Fort Lauderdale to central Florida a little over two months ago. She and Matthew were always close growing up, but now he was her only local family member and her confidant as well. Her recent transition to Cresentville turned out to be a little rockier than she anticipated and, thankfully, Matthew was there to help.

She dressed in a casual knee-length sports dress and had changed into walking shoes after Mass. Matthew had taken off his clerical collar to walk in peace and anonymity. They speedwalked along the jogging path for about a mile before slowing down to talk and catch up.

“So, how are things going now for you and Gus?” asked Matthew once they reached the duck pond. He opened a bag of bread ends he and the other priests in the rectory saved to feed the ducks on Sundays.

“They’re going great,” said Fiona, smiling. “I feel more settled than I did the first three weeks I was here, that’s for sure.” Her red hair was long and loose today, not in the usual tight ponytail she wore while working as a police detective. She enjoyed dressing more feminine on the weekends, as detective clothing was not very flattering on anyone, let alone females.

“You were smart to give things a chance to settle down after moving in. I’m glad things with Gus smoothed themselves out. If I remember correctly, you were plotting to kill him about two months ago,” said Matthew.

“I know. We had a rocky time settling in, that’s for sure. But now he’s the old Gus I know and love. He’s been so nice and thoughtful lately. He keeps telling me he’s so happy we’re living together. And his apartment is feeling more and more like our place instead of only his place.”

Matthew nodded but didn’t respond. He tossed a few pieces of bread over to the ducks. They had gathered into a quacking mob as they followed the bread Matthew continued tossing to them.

Fiona took a few pieces of bread from Matthew’s bag and tossed them to the baby ducks who got pushed to the back of the pack. “I actually talked him into swapping out a desk in his back room for one I had brought in the move. It was a hard sell, mind you, but I finally got him to see that it had much more storage space and fit into the back room much easier.”

“That’s great, Fiona. Have you chosen a date to get married?”

“We haven’t talked about an actual date, but I did get him to agree that we’re on the same page about wanting marriage. He wants some time to make sure we’re a good match. I think that’s reasonable,” said Fiona, shrugging.

“Don’t let him get too comfortable with having a wife and not signing on the dotted line. I hate to put it that crudely, but that’s my fear.”

“Don’t be fatalistic, Matthew. It will all work out. We’re both on the same page now. Trust me, things are much better for us. He had some territorial issues when I moved in.”

Matthew shrugged.

“Things at work have settled down too.”

“That’s good to hear. What have you been working on at the police station?”

“We have a big push to get our case load down, solve the ones that got pushed to the back burner. All the detectives have been on a phone-calling marathon, trying to locate witnesses, set them up for interviews, that kind of thing,” she said. “So, what’s going on with you? How is the parish? What’s going on in the rectory?”

“I told you about Fr. Vincent who transferred to our parish?”

“Yes, I remember you telling me about him. He’s the one who walks with a cane and takes an hour to dress for Mass?”

“That’s him,” said Matthew. “Well, his body is 75 going on 80 but his will is still 40 years old. So, every day he wants *to serve*, as he calls it. I’ve been assigned to help him, so it takes me an extra hour to get out of the rectory every day with him.”

“God is helping you develop patience,” said Fiona, smiling.

“I think God is teaching me patience and testing my vocation at the same time,” said Matthew, chuckling. “But compared to the problems some of my parishioners have, it’s nothing. It’s a one on a scale of one to ten.”

“That’s a good way to look at it,” said Fiona.

Matthew moved over several feet and emptied the final breadcrumbs into the pond. The little ducks had another chance to get a small piece of bread. He felt better knowing his sister was happy again. She had a tough week or two when she first moved in. At that time, he wasn’t sure she and Gus would make it, but things seemed to have worked out. He didn’t like the idea of his little sister living with anyone without marriage but he had to accept things as they were.

After their walk in the park, Fiona drove her brother back to the rectory. She headed home to join Gus for dinner and a movie.



As Fiona unlocked the apartment door, Gus came around to greet her. He was smiling and seemed happier than she had seen him in two months. He approached her, wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tight. She felt his love and it warmed her heart.

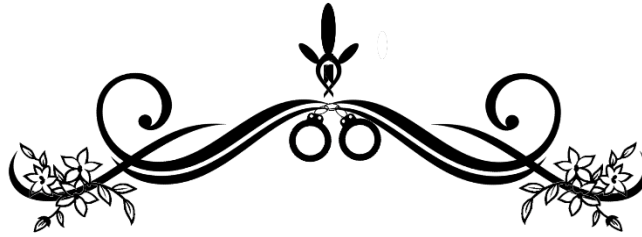
“Fiona, I love you. I’m so happy together. Are you?” he asked as he held her tight.

After hugging him and pulling back to look into his green eyes, she said, “Gus, you don’t know how long I’ve been waiting to hear you say that. I’m very happy. I couldn’t be happier.

“When I first moved in, I thought you were done with me—with us. I’ve been nervous about things for several weeks. So, it’s music to my ears hearing you say you’re happy now.”

He pulled her close again and hugged her. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened. I just went mental. I have no other explanation. I think it was all your furniture arriving at once. I never saw that side of myself. But I’m sorry, Fiona. Things feel perfect between us now.”

He kissed her and she felt every bit of all the love in his heart, which she was sure belonged only to her again.



CHAPTER 3

~ MEANWHILE ~

IT WAS SUNDAY evening and Jack had finished eating a big family dinner cooked by his sister Maggie. His mother as well as his two brothers and their wives went home twenty minutes earlier. Maggie's two sons retreated to their bedrooms to play video games and Moira, Maggie's daughter, was in the den watching videos.

Jack and Maggie were now sitting at her kitchen table with her laptop. She was coaxing him to answer questions as she typed in the answers. Reluctantly, he was letting her set up a profile on Match.com. It may have been the two glasses of wine he drank during dinner that weakened him.

His wife, Megan, had left him nine months ago and his sister had been gently nudging him to move on since then. Lately, Maggie had shifted into more of a strong-armed approach. Jack's resistance, having just eaten a full meal she cooked for the family, had weakened. His mother had also made an announcement at dinner that he should go for counseling because his life was in a rut and he was not moving forward.

He took a deep breath and exhaled.

"There's only a few more questions, Jack. Come on. What do you like to do?" asked Maggie, looking at him and waiting for a response.

"The only thing I do outside of detective work is come here for dinner and work out in a gym or my garage," said Jack.

"All right. Let's keep going. Exercise/Workout, that's a choice. Going out to dinner is another choice; you like to do that too. What else?" She looked at him, waiting.

"What do you mean *what else*? What more can a guy do without a wife? Should I go on vacations by myself? Should I walk around my neighborhood bothering all my neighbors?"

"This is why you need to find another wife, Jack. You're not doing well without one. You need to make yourself look more balanced. New women you date don't need to know you've been moping around, still wearing your wedding ring, for nine months. Here's another one: Reading. You like to read, right?"

"I like to read, yes," said Jack. "I don't get much time to read, but I like to read."

“Which reminds me. You need to redo your bedroom before you start dating. If you bring anyone into that Victorian boudoir Megan decorated, they’ll think you’re gay. It looks more like a set from a porn movie.”

“Megan likes the color mauve. What can I say?” Jack shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, she's not living there anymore, so you need to paint it a different color. And you need to take down the lace curtains and get rid of at least three-quarters of the frilly pillows. Come on, Jack. You need to be more enthusiastic about opening up your heart and loving someone again.”

He shrugged. “I took my wedding ring off. That’s something.”

“Yeah, after nagging you for six months to remove it, you finally took it off.

“I’ll choose a few more here. Movies and Travel,” said Maggie, “You like to travel.” She scanned the rest of the interests to see if there were any to associate with her brother.

“Who likes to travel anymore? The airport is like a prison now. They’re about three pieces of clothing away from a full strip search—and that’s just to get on the planes.”

“It’s important to be positive, Jack. I need a picture of you. Do you have a recent picture of yourself?”

“No—well, actually, I have a picture of me and your kids.”

“Text it to me and I’ll upload it. You can use that one as a secondary picture, but I need more of a portrait shot. You need a close-up picture because when twenty-five-year-old women see that gray hair, they’re liable to assume you’re a lot older than you are.”

“I don’t have a close-up picture of myself. Should I go to Glamour Shots Studio? Should I book a photo shoot?” asked Jack.

“You’re tall, thin and handsome, Jack. You’ll find a nice woman on here. I’ll take a picture of you with my cell phone. I believe uploading the pictures is the last part of the profile. Come over here by the refrigerator where the light is better.”

Reluctantly, Jack followed Maggie and stood in front of the refrigerator. She moved him from spot to spot as she looked for the best lighting. “You can’t scowl for the picture, Jack. I want you to look like you’re a nice guy who would make someone a nice husband. Here, stand right here. You look less morose in this lighting here.”

Jack chuckled at her remark as he stood against the kitchen wall across from the refrigerator. He reluctantly waited for her to take the shot.

“I want you to smile a little but not too much.”

Jack gave a half smile that didn’t even come close to reaching his eyes.

“Right now, you look like you’re posing for a mug shot. You need to look happier. I want you to look like you’re excited about meeting a new love of your life.”

Jack smiled as he said, “Where do you get all this stuff from? Who in their right mind is excited about online dating? What planet do you live on?”

Maggie took the shot as he was scoffing and complaining. She checked the picture and said, “This one is okay.”

“Let me see,” said Jack. “Ugh, it’s horrible.”

“It’s fine. It’ll work. I’ll have to take a candid shot of you when you’re here for dinner and you have a better attitude. But this one will work for now.” Maggie uploaded the two pictures from her phone and clicked through the process a few more times. “All right, we’re done.” She smiled at him.

“Now what happens?”

“You go to Match.com and see if anyone leaves you a wink or a private message.”

“And then?”

“And then you make a date with them,” said Maggie, running out of patience with him.

“I don’t think I’m ready for this.”

“You’re ready, Jack. Are you ready for a family intervention? You heard mom at dinner tonight. She’s dying to organize a family intervention because you’re not moving on.”

“No. And for the record, she’s gotten this idea about the intervention from watching that crazy show on TV.”

“That may be where she got the idea from, but I had to talk her out of it once already. You heard her start in with you again at dinner. The online dating will at least protect you from her and her interventions.”

“That’s true. That’s one way to look at it; it won’t be for nothing.”

“This will be good for you. You’ll meet someone who is fun and she’ll make you happy. You were happy being married.”

Jack shrugged and closed his eyes.

“You’re not doing that well without a wife.”

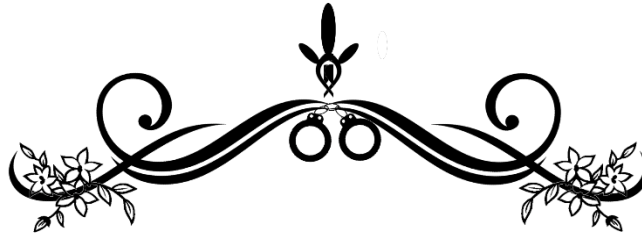
“What do you mean by that?” asked Jack, showing offense.

“Megan used to listen to you after work. You got to vent to her. She tamed you in some ways. Now, you’re spraying your frustrations all over the people at work and you’ve gotten into trouble a few times. Finn told me you came close to getting fired recently. That’s what I mean by you’re not doing well.”

“I understand what you mean,” said Jack.

“You know, Jack, some men want a wife because they want a little companionship. But other men need a wife. You’re the type of guy who needs a wife.”

Jack took a deep breath as he absorbed his sister’s words. They went straight into his heart and he had no verbal defense to them.



CHAPTER 4

IT WAS TEN minutes to nine on Monday morning at the Crescentville Police Department. The War Room, what the detectives called their work area in the station, was one large open area divided into sections by movable room dividers. The dividers would expand or contract based upon what cases were being investigated.

The white boards, chalk boards and all other case-solving tools and supplies were hoarded and well-guarded by the homicide and narcotics detectives. The chalk eraser suspiciously disappeared last year and after ten months of using an old rag to erase, there was a bump up in security.

The population in Central Florida was growing leaps and bounds and the rise in crime was depleting their police budget months before a new one was voted in. Lately, even the one-inch pieces of chalk were now kept under lock and key. Chief Salvo was campaigning weekly, to any town father who would listen to him, for an increase in the department's budget.

On the opposite side of the War Room sections, ten office desks lined up single file against the back wall. Each desk had a computer, an old-fashioned office phone, and piles of active case files. There were file cabinets strewn throughout the same area in an attempt to offer at least some level of privacy. This is where the detectives wrote or typed out their reports and made witness calls. On any given day, one to several meals were also consumed while working as they all tried to keep up with the rise in population and the subsequent rise in crime that went with it.

Jack arrived at his desk in the War Room; his new partner, Fiona, was already at her desk working. "Good morning," said Jack, who was still waking up.

"Hey, Jack. How was your weekend?" asked Fiona as she continued typing witness notes from a phone call she had already made. She was always in early.

"It was good until last night," said Jack.

Fiona stopped, looked at him, and said, "Did something happen?"

"My sister pushed me to put up a dating profile on Match.com. I went along with it to placate her, but this morning I think I made a mistake. I had just eaten a meal she cooked, so today I feel like I was under duress when I agreed to it. I have to find out how to delete it."

"You should keep it up and see who you meet. You've told me you need to move on. You can lurk around for a while and wait until you find someone interesting. Someone you see may change your mind."

"I guess. How was your weekend?"

Fiona smiled and said, "Saturday night was our anniversary. Gus and I have been dating one full year now. We went to Mark's Steak House for a romantic dinner. The food was to die for. We ran into Sergeant White and his wife. He bought us a drink for our anniversary. And yesterday, I saw my brother Matthew for lunch. We went for a long walk in a park near his church. So the entire weekend was great."

"Is that the brother who's a priest?"

"Yes, that's him. I go to his Mass on Sundays and we go for lunch."

"Did your boyfriend go with you?"

"No. He doesn't go to church. He doesn't like organized religion," said Fiona, rolling her eyes.

"I think the translation on that is he's too lazy to get out of bed," said Jack. "Let's hope it's quiet for about two days so we can get some of these cases solved and closed. The new recruits will help us make witness calls."

"I'm writing up notes from a witness call I made myself," said Fiona.

Jack took his jacket off and hung it on the back of his swivel chair. His desk was in front of Fiona's. He logged into Match.com and read some of the dating profiles.

Fiona came around with her freshly printed case notes and asked him, "Do you want to read this before I put it into the file? We have to wait for a call back on this." When she saw his computer screen, she asked, "What are you doing?"

"I logged into my Match.com account. I can't get over these profiles. Look at this woman. She works as a media facilitator, whatever that is, and she has two kids. She also likes hiking, working out, jet-skiing, boating, Jazzercise, eating out at restaurants, movies, travel. How does a woman who works full-time and takes care of two kids have time for all this stuff?" asked Jack, in all sincerity.

"It's a dating website. People kind of pad their resumes a bit. She probably likes the idea of all that stuff, but she may only do one or two a week. Don't focus on that. Just try to find a nice woman who shares a few of the same interests as you."

"I want to take my profile down, but I can't figure out how to do it. There's no delete button anywhere. I guess I'll have to move away. I don't see any other way around it."

"It will help you forget your past."

"I don't want to forget my past," whispered Jack without sarcasm.

"I mean, it will help you move forward," said Fiona. After a moment's hesitation, she added, "You'll love again, Jack. You'll see."

He ignored her and clicked out of Match.com.

"Those two girls who work in Admin have crushes on you. Why don't you ask one of them out?" asked Fiona as she left her typed report on his desk to read.

"They look about fifteen years old. I don't think so. I like grownup women, at least twenty-five years old."



Jack and Fiona settled into a rhythm of work. They had just finished a murder investigation. Several active cases had fallen to the back burner. Their goal was to do a big catch-up.

Officer Billy Meade, a big office gossip, wandered over to Jack's desk. Looking both ways to see who was around, he said, "Jack, what's going on with the chief?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about. What have you heard?" asked Jack.

"A couple came in wanting to see him right away. They said they were family members. The woman was crying. The chief came out and brought them into his office and then closed the door." He appeared to be mining Jack to see if he was hiding something.

"I have no idea what's going on. He didn't mention anything to me," said Jack. Fiona was eavesdropping from her desk. She learned over the last two months that the station was a gossip mill at all times and Officer Billy Meade was the keeper of the secrets. He knew everything about everyone. He did police work between gossip sessions, not the other way around.

"They've been in there now for over 40 minutes. His secretary said she heard the woman crying and saying, 'Please, Tony, please.' I thought maybe something was going on in his family and he mentioned it to you," said Meade.

"I don't know anything. I know his wife had Covid a couple of months ago, but she's been fine for a while. I don't know anything else going on in his personal life; we'll have to wait and see."

"Sergeant White said he thinks the woman is the chief's sister-in-law."

"Can't help you. I have no clue. I don't know his sister-in-law," said Jack.

"If I hear anything, I'll let you know," said Meade as he caught sight of someone else he could tap for information. It was still early in the day. The criminals wouldn't be getting out of bed for another couple of hours, so there was plenty of time to socialize in the station.

Once Officer Meade moved on, Fiona asked Jack, "Do you know what's going on?"

"No, I don't. When I joined the force, I heard the chief's niece went missing about eight or ten years ago. It took place before I worked here. That's the only family issue I ever heard about, and I heard it through the gossip mill around here. I've met the chief's wife, Evelyn, a few times at work events, but I don't know anything about his in-laws or anyone else in his family."

"What is his wife like?" asked Fiona, smiling.

"She's a sweetheart. Very quiet but has a sweet temperament. She's perfect for him. He's outgoing and likes to work the room wherever he goes while she's quiet and loves to sit back and observe everything. They're perfect for one another," said Jack.

“It reminds me of what my grandmother used to say when I was younger. She would say, ‘There’s a lid that fits every pot,’” said Fiona.

“I wish that was true,” said Jack.

“You’ll see. You’ll find a lid on Match.com,” said Fiona.

Jack chuckled as he turned around and went back to work.

[I Know Her Eyes](#)