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CAUGHT RED-HANDED

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MISSING
Caught Red-Handed

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, Private Investigator
Angelica, Ryan's estranged girlfriend
Fr. Liam, Pastor, Colleen's uncle
Colleen Kessler Mullens, Fr. Liam's niece and Ryan's new girlfriend
Jacob Kessler, Gambler, ex-husband
Moirra, Colleen's counselor

Rena Williams, Girl who went missing from mall
Peter and Mary Williams, Rena's parents
Debbie Summers, Rena's best friend
Bruno Kaszuba, Rena's friend from Home Depot

David Evans, AA member, Fr. Liam's friend
Suzie Langdon, AA Member, Warren's girlfriend
Warren Polito, Suzie's boyfriend
Bill Regan, Warren's friend
Det. Gloria Sullivan, ex-girlfriend of Ryan, works in local PD

MINOR CHARACTERS:

Linda, Ryan's assistant
JF Lenoir, Ryan's 74-year-old client who is obsessed with Tara
Tara, JF's new 34-year-old wife
Ed, owner of Ed's Diner
Lee, Colleen's lawyer
Keith Ford, Ryan's new partner
Lisa, Colleen's personal assistant



CHAPTER 1

Monday - October 7th - 9:30 AM

IT WAS LESS than a month since burying his brother and best friend Mike. The heaviness of grief was still pressing on Fr. Liam. Mike and his wife Maria were unexpectedly dead and the shock of both losses was still raw. Fr. Liam's future plans of being reunited with his family was shattered after having spent only about three months together in Ocala, Florida. As he explained to many a parishioner, life goes on and we all have to go on with it.

Compared to his previous life as a Fort Lauderdale cop, chasing criminals, dealing with resisting arrests and working *all-nighters* while on the homicide squad, Fr. Liam's life as a priest seemed pretty easy. Less physical, certainly. But with the added grief, he had to push himself through his workdays lately.

His niece Colleen wound up in a mental institution for five days after her father's death. She was released only a week ago. She was also his main focus now. With his brother gone, his first priority was to make sure his kid was okay and up and running. One could say he was getting through the days by the grace of God alone.

Juanita, his loyal parish secretary, who was with him since his first day in the Ocala church he pastored, had been doting on him like a handmaid since the passing. She was a sweet and compassionate woman and Fr. Liam came to depend on her as a right-hand man, so to speak. She came into Fr. Liam's parish office with documents he needed to sign. She said, "David Evans called when you were on the phone with the bishop and said everything is set for this Saturday."

"That's great. I'm going golfing with David and a few of his buddies," said Fr. Liam as he signed the letters and documents. "Since my brother died, David's been reaching out to me and including me in the group of guys he hangs around with, which is very much appreciated. It helps."

"He's so sweet. I love his smile," said Juanita. Fr. Liam continued to sign the letters, checking them for any typos or changes.

"So the Bishop called. Is anyone in trouble?" teased Juanita.

"No, he was thanking me for praying for Rena Williams at all of our masses yesterday. Apparently, he knows the Williamses personally and wanted to get that message across."

"She went missing on Saturday from the mall?" asked Juanita.

"Yes, I got the call from the Bishop on Saturday night for prayers for Rena at all the masses."

“I can't imagine a child disappearing. It's too horrible for words,” said Juanita, as she scooped up all the now-signed letters and attachments to prepare for mailing. About fifty percent of her work was still sent by snail mail. As most adherents know, the Catholic church likes to keep a comfortable twenty years behind the times.

“I don't think there's anything worse,” said Fr. Liam, as he looked out his window. “Speaking of the Williamses, they are on their way into the office now. If they are here to see me, lead them right in, okay?”

“Yes, Father,” said Juanita as she moved back towards the outer office.



Juanita led Mary and Peter Williams into Fr. Liam's office. Mary plopped down into a chair in front of Fr. Liam's desk. He felt the full weight of her collapse, dabbing her eyes with a tissue that was already in tatters. Fr. Liam handed a box of tissues to Mary and she pulled two out and continued to dab her eyes.

Peter, her husband, sat down in the chair next to her and put his arm around her shoulder as she tried to contain herself. Their daughter Rena was missing for two full days already and they were here to ask Fr. Liam for some solace. They were reaching for some way to understand how this could happen to them. After all, they were good people and things this horrible shouldn't happen to good people.

“Father, Rena is still missing. It's two full days now. How can this be?” cried Mary Williams. “Rena has her whole life ahead of her. I need God to help us.” She broke down crying again.

“Mary, the good live among the wicked and the evil in this life and bad things do sometimes happen to good people. I wish I could tell you God would strike down whoever is involved in this with a lightning bolt in the next couple of hours, but life on earth doesn't work that way -- unfortunately. Sometimes bad things do happen to all of us.

“However, before we race into despair, let's talk about hope first. Right now, Rena is only missing. She's not presumed dead yet by anyone, including the media, who like to go hysterical at their first chance. Even they are asking for information about Rena's whereabouts. Statistically, most missing persons' cases resolve themselves in a few days. I'm praying for you. The parish is all praying for you. We have asked for prayers at all the masses yesterday as soon as we heard the news.” Fr. Liam could see a spark of comfort land on Mary but he also saw the terror in her face. He knew as much as she tried, her mind was going to every horrible thing a man could do to a young twenty-three-year-old beautiful woman which was pure torture.

“The cops are not doing anything. They said Rena is an adult and adults are allowed to go missing. They can't get involved because going missing is not a crime and unless or until there is evidence of foul play, they have no reason to act,” cried Mary. “What are we supposed to do?”

“Unfortunately, Mary, what the cops are telling you is the truth. You need to hire a private investigator if you want someone with investigative skills working on this all day every day,” said Fr. Liam gently, attempting to cushion the blow. “Most people think the cops can drop everything and start looking for their loved ones, but they can't.

Many adults deliberately go missing for any number of reasons and that's their right. The cops will get involved in the event there is evidence of foul play or if other girls start to go missing." Fr. Liam watched to see if this registered with them and made sure not to go as far as saying the words *serial killer*.

"How can we find a private investigator?" asked Peter.

"We have one in the parish, Ryan Mallardi. His business is down on Route 200, Mallardi Investigations. It may cost at least a few thousand dollars, but you'll have someone actively trying to find her. That's what I did when my brother went missing."

Mary and Peter both went quiet and only exchanged a concerned look, as they both knew that Fr. Liam's brother turned up dead. They were torn between showing sympathy for Father and the terror that just set in thinking that their daughter Rena could show up dead too.

"We don't know what to do. We've looked all over the mall and called all of her friends, but what else can we do?" asked Peter.

"Your best strategy is to try to get the media involved in talking about Rena being missing. If you can keep Rena in the news, someone who has seen Rena or knows something about this may come forward. That is your best strategy.

"Hiring a private investigator at the same time is also something constructive you can do. It will give you some peace and solace knowing you are doing everything you can.

"You should also contact all of the missing children's agencies. Even though Rena is an adult, they may have other resources that can help you.

"Was there anything going on with Rena that would lead her to run away?" asked Fr. Liam.

"She wanted her independence and she did tell us we were treating her like a child at times. But we thought this was normal behavior for someone separating from their parents," said Peter.

"Rena is sheltered and doesn't know there are evil people in the world. I was always worried someone would take advantage of that. That's why I fussed so much about her and wanted to know where she was all the time," said Mary. Fr. Liam could detect a bit of guilt in Mary's statement, but what parent doesn't worry and go a little overboard about their children in today's world?

"Keep reminding yourselves that the statistics are still with you. Don't allow yourself to go to the darkest and scariest places with your worry. You can choose your thoughts to a certain extent," said Fr. Liam. "Call Ryan Mallardi, he's right down the street. Tell him I sent you," said Fr. Liam.

"We'll call him. Thank you, Father, for seeing us on short notice. Please pray for Rena and for Mary too," said Peter as he stood up and guided Mary to the door.

"I will, of course. If I can do anything else, please let me know. Right now, it's best to pray for strength and fortitude," said Fr. Liam. "You're not alone in your suffering. The Lord is with you."

"Yes, Father, we will," said Peter.

“Thank you, Father,” whimpered Mary, as Peter guided her out of the office. Father walked behind them, hugged them both at the door and they left.

Once they were gone, Fr. Liam saw his secretary shaking her head in sympathy. “I feel so sorry them. Worrying about a beautiful young daughter who’s missing for two days must be torture,” said Juanita.

“Sheer torture,” said Fr. Liam, as he went back into his office awaiting his next counseling session. Fr. Liam knew they would get next to no sleep and their anguish would wear them down to a nub. He prayed for them.



Sitting at his desk with four files to his side, Ryan had the rest of the day open to do catch-up on documenting his open cases and preparing reports. Linda, his assistant, was holding all of his calls allowing him this catch-up. Or at least that was his plan.

As Linda was fibbing to Ryan's mother on the phone, telling her he was out of the office, Ryan heard the office door entry bell sound. He had no clients on the schedule for today, so he listened to see if he recognized who came in. He didn't. He heard a woman sniffing and some whispering. His curiosity was triggered.

Linda had already gone out into the waiting area of the office and brought a box of tissues and a bottle of water when she saw the woman in such distress.

“Ma'am, here is some water and a few tissues. Have a seat. How can I help you?” asked Linda, standing before Mary and Peter Williams who had just wandered into the office waiting room and had both sat down. Ryan peeked out from Linda's office and he didn't know the couple, but he recognized them from his church.

Peter sat next to Mary on the waiting room couch and said to Linda, “Our twenty-three-year-old daughter Rena is missing and Fr. Liam suggested we come and ask Ryan Mallardi to help us find her.”

“I see,” said Linda. “Mr. Mallardi was on a conference call earlier but let me see if he's available or when he will be.” Linda walked into Ryan's office and he was already standing and waiting to talk to her. Linda closed the door for privacy.

“Fr. Liam sent them because their twenty-three-year-old daughter is missing.”

Ryan stood motionless and Linda could tell he was thinking. He finally spoke. “It's never good when a twenty-three-year-old female disappears. I hate cases like this. She's probably already dead and I'll be looking for a dead body and they are definitely not ready to hear that.”

“What do you want me to tell them?” asked Linda.

“I try to avoid this type of case, but they're part of my parish, how can I turn my back on them?”

“Give me five minutes to organize this mess so I make sure I don't lose my place and then bring them in.” Ryan immediately started putting notes on his work and piling one case on top of another to clear his desk area.

“Text me if you want me to get lunch. I'm going to Mike's Sub Shop,” said Linda.

“Just get me a meatball sub. Give me five minutes and bring them in.”

Five minutes later, Mary and Peter Williams came into Ryan's office and Mary was composed again.

“Mr. and Mrs. Williams, have a seat. My name is Ryan Mallardi. Linda tells me your daughter hasn't come home yet. Is that right?”

Peter and Mary sat in the two chairs in front of Ryan's desk. “Yes, she hasn't come home since Saturday, October 5th. She and her friend Debbie Summers were shopping at the Paddock Mall and they said goodbye and left. But Rena never came home,” said Mary Williams. She dabbed at her eyes with the new tissue that was already now in tatters.

“We tried calling her cell phone starting at about six o'clock that night, but it kept going to voice mail. We tried texting her too but there have been no replies. This is so unlike Rena. We got a sick feeling right after the second call,” said Rena's father.

“I see. I assume you have reported her missing and filled out a missing person's report?” Ryan placed a box of tissues on his desk in front of Mary.

“Yes, we did,” said Peter. Mary took a new tissue. “But the police said no crime has been committed and they can't do anything. We're frantic with worry,” said Peter.

“Linda tells me Fr. Liam sent you here?” asked Ryan.

“Yes, he told us you helped him on his brother's case,” said Peter.

“I see.” Ryan explained his hourly charges and daily charges to them. Ryan watched and the figures didn't even register. That meant (a) they were wealthy and the prices meant nothing to them or (b) they were in shock and it just didn't register. There was no response at all.

“Has Rena ever disappeared before?” asked Ryan.

“She has always come home, but we have caught her lying about being with a girlfriend and she was really with her boyfriend overnight. But she has always come home,” said Peter.

“Is her boyfriend still around?” asked Ryan.

“Yes, her boyfriend has been in touch with us and he doesn't know where she is either. He said they were arguing a lot lately but as far as he knows, there was nothing going on. She never said anything to him about going anywhere.”

“Do you believe him?” asked Ryan.

Peter answered right away. “We were suspicious of everyone at first, but he did show us a movie stub from the movie he went to with his friend at 4:00 pm. I checked with the theater and that is a ticket from their theater, so right now, I believe he's telling us the truth.” Peter looked at Mary and she nodded in affirmation.

“Have you called all of her friends?” asked Ryan.

“Yes, I've called them all, as many as I can think of. She has a lot of friends.” Mary seemed more stunned than Peter.

“We think because of her age and all of this *white slavery* stuff we hear about, that it's important to keep looking especially right now. She may be captive somewhere against her will,” said Peter. Mary winced and dabbed at her eyes.

“I understand. Where was she last seen?” asked Ryan, now with pen and paper in hand.

“Paddock Mall. She and her best friend Debbie met at the mall in separate cars. They shopped at Macy's together, stopped and had frozen yogurt. Then they both walked out to the parking lot and went to their separate cars. They both parked by Macy's, but in separate parking aisles.” Ryan could tell Peter Williams felt like he was doing something constructive by telling Ryan the facts.

“What's Rena's boyfriend's name?” asked Ryan.

“His name is Paul Paulson. We think he's a really nice guy and we don't believe he has anything to do with it,” said Mary.

“What kind of a relationship do you think they have?” asked Ryan making sure to remain in present tense.

“They were planning to get engaged at the holidays. Several months back Paul had Rena draw the shape of a diamond for an engagement ring and we were all expecting the proposal at Christmas or New Years,” Mary made it through the whole sentence before she started to cry again.

“When I spoke to Paul after she didn't come home, he said she was acting strange lately. He thought it was a case of cold feet or nervousness thinking about the upcoming engagement,” said Peter.

“What did he mean by that, by the word *strange*?”

“She was picking fights over every little thing; like what colors the flowers should be at their wedding and it being her right to pick out the invitations. He said they weren't even engaged yet and she was just much more argumentative than she was in the past.”

“Have the cops questioned Debbie and Paul?” Ryan put out two bottles of water from his refrigerator for Mary and Peter.

“No, the cops have told us there is no evidence of a crime and they can't do anything until there is. I questioned Debbie myself but she said they left the mall, they were parked in separate parking aisles, and after they hugged goodbye, that was the last she saw or heard from Rena.

“And when I questioned Paul about it, that's when he told me about going to see *The Joker* movie with a friend. The movie was at about the time we think Rena went missing and he still had the ticket stub. That's when he told us about Rena seeming argumentative, but he doesn't know what happened to her.

“The cops told us to watch her social media to see if anyone talks about seeing her or what happened to her,” said Peter.

“Anything else happening around Rena that you would consider odd or unusual? Any stalkers, any weird hang-up calls?” asked Ryan.

“Not that she mentioned to us. She was in the process of separating from us, you could say, like she wanted to be treated more like an adult. She had been telling us to leave her alone and stop treating her like a baby. She said we hovered over her too much, that she wanted to feel more independent. So we are attempting to back off,” said Peter.

“We backed off and look what happened,” said Mary.

“Where is her car?” asked Ryan

“It's still in the mall parking lot. We don't want to move it yet. We thought the police would go and look inside but they said they don't have permission to enter the car. They said because Rena is over eighteen, we can't legally give permission to them to enter her car,” said Mary, expressing her frustration at the cops not being able to do anything.

“Is her purse or keys in the car?” asked Ryan.

“No. We looked inside of it but we didn't find anything,” said Peter.

“You have a set of keys for the car?” asked Ryan.

“Yes, the car is actually in our name,” said Peter.

“Did you tell the cops that?” asked Ryan.

“No, but they never asked us that either,” said Mary.

As Ryan passed a blank retainer agreement to them, he said, “I must tell you that there is no guarantee that I will find Rena. The only guarantee I can give you is that I will do everything I can to find her. I have had cases where I have found people and cases where I have not found people. I want you to know that before you decide to hire me. And if you need time to think about it, that's fine,” said Ryan.

Mary and Peter looked at each other and Peter said, “We want you to start looking now. We understand there are no guarantees, but we want to do all we can now when it's only two days from seeing her.” Peter and Mary both signed the retainer agreement without batting an eye.

“Write down the names of all of her friends, even acquaintances. I will do a full social media search myself to see if there's any chatter about anything going on in this group of friends.” Ryan grabbed two business cards out of the top drawer of his desk.

Mary and Peter put their heads together and Mary wrote the names down as they thought of them. They made a list of all the friends' names, the phone numbers, and what connection they had to Rena.

Ryan stood and made a copy of the retainer agreement. He pulled a new client folder out of his drawer which had information for clients about generally what happens during any missing person's search. This would give them an idea of what he would be working on. He inserted a copy of the retainer agreement, along with the business cards, into the folder and sat down again at his desk.

They handed over their list of friends and acquaintances. Ryan handed them the folder and told them, “This is a new client folder along with my business cards. This

lists the type of social media searches, online searches and other general steps are done in any missing person's case. This will give you an idea of where I am going with this.

“Specific to your case, I'll call or email you updates as I uncover anything, if I do. Feel free to call me if you need to. But know that as I uncover anything, I will call and update you.

“I need a picture of Rena, a few pictures. You can email them to me, drop them off, or text them to me.

“If you have any passwords for her banking accounts, which would be helpful. We have ways to get passwords, but it takes a lot of time. So if you have those, that would be great. If money is moving in or out of her account, that can give us an indication of where she is.”

“We don't have her banking passwords. She does online banking with Bank of America,” said Mary, “but that's all I know.”

“Also specific to your case, I'll review the parking lot videos from the mall and let you know if I see anything.”

Peter took the folder and asked. “What can we do in the meantime?” asked Peter.

“You can call everyone on this list you just handed me and tell them that you have hired someone to help you look for your daughter and ask them to cooperate. This way, they will all have a heads-up and they won't think I'm from some enemy camp or the press,” said Ryan.

“We'll do that,” said Peter. Mary felt much better. She had stopped crying as soon as she saw the new client folder. It made her feel she was actively looking for her daughter.

Ryan continued questioning the couple. He retrieved all relevant information needed to do a background check on her friend Debbie and her boyfriend Paul. Mary and Peter would be taking part in an organized search tomorrow where the community and a few local cadets would search the wooded area around the mall. Ryan knew that translated to having connections either in the mayor's office or the police department.

Peter Williams wrote out a retainer check, they shook hands and Ryan assured them he would begin looking into the case right away. He escorted them out of the office in a better emotional condition than they had entered.

On his way back in he approached Linda, “Call Paddock Mall security and ask them to have the videos from Saturday, October 5th available for viewing. Also call Macy's and Dillard's and ask them for the videos for the afternoon of October 5th.”

“Those poor people. Their stomachs must be churning every minute,” said Linda. She sat down and called the mall.

An hour later, Linda had everything set up for Ryan to view the videos in the morning. He assigned one of his new techs, Kevin, to come along and do a search of the parking area to see if anything relevant was found. A true search for Rena had begun.



CHAPTER 2

Monday - October 7th - 7:00 PM

SUZIE LANGDON WAS back in the AA program after a two-year slip back into drug hell. Waiting on a short line to get coffee at the back table in the meeting room, several guys were looming around her hoping for a chance to catch her eye or get a chance to flirt with her. She was that pretty. Suzie smiled and was friendly to everyone -- well, almost everyone. She had noticed a strange-looking guy who tended to get very close to her when she was at the coffee table. He had a far-off look like he may still be on drugs or drinking. But it could even be mental illness of some kind. She always moved away from him, trying to be very subtle as she did so.

Suzie, who had a bubbly personality, reported proudly to the others at the coffee table that she was two weeks straight and sober. Even Warren, her boyfriend, had picked up another white chip one week ago and they were both positive about going forward.

Once it was her turn, Suzie poured herself a cup of coffee and another one for Warren. She was excited at the thought of a new start. Suzie and Warren were back in Florida after being on what can only be called a drug rampage.

Suzie was a bottle blonde who recently turned 27 years old. She was reed-thin from drug use, stood about five-four and always had between one to two inches of dark roots between color touch-ups. She was sensually attractive, and whether her hair was freshly dyed or not, she always had a bit of the *other side of the tracks* look about her.

Warren, Suzie's on-again-off-again boyfriend for eight years, turned around several times and watched the crowd of men fluttering around Suzie. His jealousy and anger slowly rose. He was tempted to go back to the table and make a scene, but he decided to keep it together and only say something to Suzie.

The meeting facilitator was already seated at the head table. The meeting was being held in the back room at Our Lady of Mercy Church. The facilitator banged the meeting gavel a few times to call the AA meeting to order. The meeting attendees, whether getting coffee or visiting with each other, quieted down and went back to their seats. Back at her chair, Suzie handed Warren his cup of coffee, which he grabbed while giving her a dirty look.

“What's wrong with you?” she whispered. Warren ignored her and kept looking straight ahead at the facilitator, sipping his coffee. Both of them recited the preamble to the meeting along with everyone else.

Their speaker for the night was Raymond J who shared his journey to sobriety. The theme that ran through his story was staying away from people, places and things that connected him to the drugs and alcohol. Raymond said, “By breaking those bonds, I realized that I had nothing. I was literally all alone and had to rebuild my life from the

ground up. It took a long time, but taking things one day at a time, it was possible. Today, if I had to tell anyone what my individual secret was to getting sober, this would be it: *Cutting all ties and bonds with people, places and things linking me to drugs and alcohol.*”

As Raymond shared the rest of his story, Suzie felt Warren's mood go from bad to worse. She knew he was most likely jealous over the attention she got for three minutes back at the coffee table and he was seething in it rather than paying attention to the meeting.

Raymond J. laced a few funny stories about how crazy he was during his drinking and drugging days. You would have to be a drug addict or alcoholic to get the humor, but most people in the meeting room could relate. Halfway through the meeting, Raymond wrapped up his comments and allowed others in the meeting to share about whatever they wanted.

Suzie tried to hold hands with Warren, but he pulled his hand away and would not look at her.

One by one, others shared their feelings about some of the things Raymond said and some chose to share about individual pain they were experiencing that day. Everyone in the meeting was at a different place in sobriety.

Suzie raised her hand. Warren looked at her and then looked away. Once called on, Suzie said, “Hi, my name is Suzie and I'm an alcoholic and drug addict. Today I have two weeks clean and sober and I'm very happy and hopeful. I don't have much to share other than I'm grateful for everyone who comes and shares about their journey. It's so helpful in getting through the days and weeks. That's it really,” Suzie said smiling. “I just wanted to share my happiness.” Warren didn't look at her. Suzie could feel him silently scoffing, but she was used to his moodiness.

The meeting went on and Suzie saw several people she had known from her last stint in AA. She had gotten sober for the first time almost two years ago, but one by one, she and Warren fell off the wagon. The drugs and alcohol took her down to an even worse place. She used to tell anyone who would listen that it was Warren who led her back to drugs, but she learned in the last two weeks that she had to take responsibility for her own choices.

David E was in the room, and when Suzie saw David, she smiled and waved at him. He winked and smiled at her and showed her a thumb's-up sign. He had long term sobriety and mainly came to support everyone else. He owned a bar in Boston in his past life and always had really funny stories to share about crazy drunks, including himself. David was so nice to her during her first attempt at sobriety. She thought about him often during her slip back into drug hell. She was glad to see him still around.

After the meeting ended, Warren walked quickly out of the room without speaking one word to Suzie or anyone else. It was Warren's first real attempt at getting clean and sober. He had been to AA meetings in his past, but they were court-appointed mandatory meetings in order to stay on probation. He was never serious and only did as much sobriety as needed to get through the drug testing and the court system.

Suzie was stopped by several people welcoming her back. She was beaming from all of the support and attention. Warren wasn't the most compassionate or supportive type, so Suzie needed the love and help of the group to keep going.

Warren Polito, who was also drug-addict thin, with shaggy and usually-dirty hair, was waiting for Suzie. Shifting his weight from foot to foot, hands in his jeans' pockets, his impatience was on full display. Warren was 30 years old, good looking enough, but he had an edge about him and a sinister look in his eye even when he was just waiting in neutral. One got the sense he was always operating, sizing someone up, casing his surroundings.

Suzie finally came out of the room still in conversation with those around her. Warren grabbed her hand and forcefully started dragging her to the car. It was subtle enough for no one else to notice, but he was showing his physical strength to Suzie, who he liked to control. It could have been his diminutive size as he was only five feet nine inches tall, which was a little short in the world where men lived. Or it may have been his propensity towards violence which he began to exhibit as early as grade school.

Suzie went to the driver's side of the car and Warren said, "I'll drive."

Suzie started to protest as Warren had a suspended license from multiple tickets he never took care of. "Warren, I better drive. You don't have a license. I don't want my car to get impounded if we get stopped."

"We're going two blocks down the street. Besides, if I drive with you, I'll wind up losing my temper. You drive like a turtle and I'm already pissed from all the flirting and drooling you did with the guys in there. Get in the car."

Once in the passenger seat, Suzie said, "What are you talking about? They're friends and no one said one thing to me and I didn't say one thing to anyone else besides *how are you* and small talk. You're ridiculous."

"I know what I saw, Suzie. You can't go anywhere without draping yourself on every guy in the room. You're disgusting."

"Warren, I didn't do anything wrong. And if you think I'm disgusting, then let's break up. I don't want to be with someone who thinks I'm disgusting."

"Relax. Take it easy. You always have to blow everything out of proportion. God." Exaggeration and sarcasm were Warren's signature style. A few moments of silence passed as he drove out of the parking lot and down Route 200 towards their apartment.

"It was a good meeting, don't you think, Warren? You know, about staying away from people, places and things that make us slip up? I think that's true, don't you?" Suzie tried to smooth things over and get rid of the tension that already started between them.

"Yeah, I guess. But you know, I'm still gunna see my friends, Bill and Gus. I've known them all my life. I've told them I'm getting clean and they understand."

"But they're still using, Warren, and that will be very tempting."

"I can handle it," said Warren confidently.



He continued driving to their new apartment he rented a month before. As they got back from the meeting, Suzie could see the place was still sprucely decorated, but she

had lots of plans for adding color and other furniture pieces. She just had to get a job. She was excited and hopeful about life going forward.

“I feel better, like stronger, after I go to the meetings, don't you, Warren?”

“Not really. Some of these people go on and on about every little thing.”

“The meetings help me stay firm on my decision to not use drugs. I guess I need them more than you,” said Suzie.

“I need to be straight for my upcoming court hearing. After that, I'm going to cut back to a meeting a month because I can't take all the whining.”

Warren's motivation for sobriety was an upcoming sentencing for break and entry. His lawyer's advice was to get clean and sober and show a pattern of stable and clean living. For Suzie, her motivation was a new beginning filled with excitement and hope, maybe even settling down as a married couple and having kids. Warren knew that his promise to remain sober and straight was a temporary thing as no court or government was going to dictate how he lived. As soon as he got the courts off his back, he would do what he wanted, but just be more careful going forward.

Once inside the apartment, Warren approached Suzie and hugged her. “You're so beautiful, Suzie.” He kissed her lips and then moved down to her neck.

She kissed him back and said, “You shouldn't say such horrible things to me like I'm disgusting.”

“I was sick with jealousy with the way those guys were all drooling over you. I'm sorry. I'm in love with you, Suzie, I can't help it. When you flirt with these other guys, it triggers my jealousy.” Warren held her close and continued to kiss her and run his hands through her hair. “Please forgive me, Suzie. I'm touchy with this sobriety stuff.”

“Okay, I forgive you. When you are loving and good to me, Warren, I love you so much. But you have to stop being so mean to me. When you get nasty and abusive, it makes me scared and makes me want to leave.”

“You'll never leave me, Suzie. I won't let you.” He kissed her deeply and Suzie could feel his sincerity and his love. That's one thing she could say about Warren, no matter what he was feeling, he was certainly expressive.

As Warren kissed Suzie, he slowly backed her into their bedroom and playfully pushed her back onto the bed. He unbuttoned his shirt and removed it. She started to unbutton her shirt and he said, “Stop, I'll do that.” She smiled.

He removed his shoes and his belt and laid down next to her on the bed. He smiled at her. His foul mood was gone. He unbuttoned her shirt as he kissed her, and then he reached up and turned off the light. There were lots of issues that Suzie and Warren needed to work on, but the chemistry wasn't one of them.



It was a little after nine o'clock in the evening and things were a little slower on Mondays around a parish. The day had given Fr. Liam some time to reflect on all that was going on in his personal life as well as parish life. He was still adjusting to life without his brother, but each day got a little easier.

After a nice hot shower, he was ready to retire for the day and read for about an hour before going to sleep. He thought about Mary and Peter Williams who would now be in the midst of a level of anguish they never knew existed. He prayed for them. He remembered too that his niece Colleen would be going to her bankruptcy hearing tomorrow. He called her to wish her well.

“Hi, Uncle Liam,” said Colleen, who already sounded a bit groggy.

“Are you asleep already?” asked Fr. Liam. “I just wanted to wish you well and tell you not to worry tomorrow. Your lawyer Lee has everything under control.”

“I’m watching TV. I’m pretty calm about things actually. I trust Lee too. Lisa is coming with me to take notes and make sure I can remember everything I need to.”

“Great idea. That whole personal assistant idea was brilliant, don’t you think?” asked Fr. Liam.

“Yes, it’s been a lifesaver, really.”

“How are things going with Ryan?” asked Fr. Liam.

“He’s coming down this weekend to help me pack for my move. I’m very excited. I’m falling in love with him more each time I see him, which isn’t enough since I still live four hours away in Boca.”

“I couldn’t be happier for you. You both seem perfect together, but don’t be in too much of a rush to get too close too soon.” said Fr. Liam. “You’ll be in Ocala permanently in a week and then you’ll have more time to get to know one another slowly.”

“I feel like I know him already. It must have been sharing so much personal stuff with him when dad went missing,” said Colleen.

“But you only know him about a month, so you need time to really get to know each other,” said Fr. Liam. He also knew Ryan only broke up with his girlfriend in the last two weeks and he did worry that Colleen may be getting her hopes up too soon. He also couldn’t forget how quickly she met, fell in love with, and married her husband -- who she was now escaping from.

“What are you doing now?” asked Colleen

“Just took a shower, getting ready to read for an hour and then go to bed.”

“What are you reading?”

“*Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas,” said Fr. Liam, smiling.

“Oh my God, how can you read that? It’s too heavy for me. I couldn’t get past the second page.”

“I love it. It’s truth and philosophy. What’s not to like?”

“You found your calling, that’s for sure.”

“Yes, I did. And you’re in the process of finding yours,”

“What do you mean?” asked Colleen.

“I think your calling is to marry and raise a nice family, don't you?”

“Yes, that's true. I do feel that's my calling actually.”

“I wanted to let you know I'm thinking and praying for you. Tomorrow will go well and don't worry,” said Fr. Liam.

“Thanks, Uncle Liam, I love you. I'll be up there for good next week. I can't believe it.”

“I'm looking forward to having family close by again.”

“Me too. I'll call you after the hearing tomorrow to let you know how it went.”

“That's a plan. Good night, Colleen.”



Colleen hung up and thought about how much closer she had gotten to her uncle since her parents had both passed away so suddenly within the last few months. She was a daddy's girl and with her father gone, Fr. Liam had become like a second father to her. She was so grateful to him. He was really the reason she was moving to Ocala. With her parents gone and having no siblings, he was her only family now -- except his two sons but they weren't living in the US anymore.

Her life was completely different now but she was excited to be on the verge of happiness again. Ryan was a big part of what made it so exciting. Before he entered her life, it was a steady diet of worry, anxiety, and drudgery.

She settled back down on the couch and thought about how Ryan had come into her life so unexpectedly and at the perfect time. There seemed to be something so fateful about the way they met.

She remembered their surveillance adventure on the case of the cheating wife, Tara, and the 74-year-old rich boyfriend who loved her. Ryan was hired to see if she was cheating, and sure enough, she was. Going on surveillance with him was only to pass the time while she waited for Uncle Liam to finish a bible study, but she wound up falling in love with him that night. Of course everything that happened after that first night was like a plot for a mystery novel; but that first night with Ryan alone in the car, she would never forget it.



CHAPTER 3

Tuesday, October 8th - 9:45 AM

RYAN SHOWED UP at Paddock Mall at 9:45 am on Tuesday morning. He dreaded the next however many hours it would take to review the security footage of the mall parking lot. On one hand, they tended to be boring and monotonous, but on the other hand, he had to watch every second carefully to see all that he could in the hopes of finding even one tiny clue as to where Rena went after she left Macy's and her friend Debbie.

As Ryan walked to the customer service area, the manager of Macy's and the mall manager were both waiting for him. The mall manager, Morris Monroe, led the three of them to an office where the video-viewing information was already set up.

“We have all the videos from October 5th. These are the outdoor parking lot videos from the area in front of Macy's and Dillard's.” Morris Monroe pointed out the different video files.

“Thanks very much,” said Ryan.

Ryan put down a coffee he brought, took out his notebook, opened his laptop, bit the bullet, and started watching.

Within the first hour of viewing the parking lot videos in front of Macy's entrance door, he found the two girls leaving the mall. Unfortunately, Rena walked out of Macy's camera range and disappeared.

He rewound the video to an earlier time. He noticed that before Rena walked out of camera range, there was quite a long hug between her and her friend. Technically, it was a double hug. They hugged, pulled apart, and then hugged again. Debbie walked on to her car and opened the door. She hesitated before getting in. Debbie then turned around and looked in the direction Rena had walked. The hesitation was only a few seconds. Then she turned back and got into her car.

Ryan combed through several videos showing different parking aisles. About twenty minutes before the girls left the mall, a white van drove up and down the parking aisles in front of Macy's.

The van pulled into a spot, waited about five minutes, then backed out and roamed up and down the aisles again. The van hovered for several minutes at the top of the aisle giving the driver a straight view of who would be exiting the mall. The driver, who appeared male, seemed to be either waiting for someone or hunting for someone.

He certainly wasn't looking for a parking spot, as he had passed many empty spots. The driver never exited the van nor did he go inside the mall. He seemed to be watching and waiting. He moved the van every five minutes or so. Aside from watching who

came out of the mall, there was no other explanation for what he was doing. He wasn't seen again after Debbie drove out of the parking lot.

Ryan downloaded the relevant part of the van's behavior video onto a thumb drive and took a screenshot of the best up-close photo of the van. Even with the blurry video, Ryan could see it was an older van and this would be helpful when attempting to find the van in the DMV system.

He took a second screen shot of the van to keep on his cell phone and headed out to the local Ford Dealership. He picked up a sandwich and ate it in the car on his way. It was October in Ocala and although the mornings and evenings were mild, the temperature had hit 80 at noon and Ryan felt the heat and had the sweaty forehead and underarms to prove it.

Luckily, the manager of the Ford dealership was available to talk. He was able to identify the van as a white Ford E250 Cargo Van, and said the year was either 2004 or 2005. Ryan thanked the manager and left. He called Debbie Summers, Rena's best friend, as he drove back to his office.

"Hello?" asked Debbie.

"Hello, I'm calling on behalf of Rena's parents. My name is Ryan Mallardi and I would like to ask you a few questions about when you were shopping with Rena. Is there somewhere I can meet you?" Ryan waited to see what level of cooperation he would be dealing with.

"Yeah, sure. I'm home now. Where do you want to meet?"

"I can come over to wherever you are or you can come to my office on Route 200, whichever you prefer."

"Are you the private eye her mother hired?" asked Debbie.

"Yes, I am. I'm helping them look for Rena and I'd like to get some background information on Rena. Her parents told me you're her best friend." Ryan listened for her reaction.

"Okay." A moment of silence occurred. Then Debbie whispered. "Can I come to your office?"

"Sure. I'm going back to my office now and I'll be there in about 10 minutes. I can text you my address. How about that?" asked Ryan.

"What color is the building?" said Debbie, still whispering.

"It's a white strip mall with blue awnings and my business is *'Mallardi Investigations'*."

"I'll be there in ten minutes." Debbie hung up.

Ryan noted there were no tears. She also began to whisper at one point. Young girls usually reverted to tears when a best friend was missing or exhibited some level of fear, terror, even guilt. But with Debbie there were no tears. He wondered what that could mean.

Back at his office, Debbie showed up and meekly went into Ryan's office. She sat down in the chair in front of his desk and he sat behind his desk. Ryan made several minutes of small talk to relax Debbie and to create a rapport with her.

“So Debbie, was there anything going on with Rena lately that would have led to her up and leaving?”

“Not that I know of.”

“When you were both walking to your cars, did she say anything about going somewhere else after shopping?” Ryan noticed Debbie looking all over the office. Ryan surmised she was a sheltered twenty-three-year-old as her demeanor was more like that of a seventeen-year-old.

“I thought she was going home. That's all I know,” said Debbie.

“Was Rena happy in her relationship with Paul?” asked Ryan.

“I think so.”

“His name is Paul Paulson. Who names their kid Paul when their last name is Paulson?” asked Ryan, attempting to use humor to make Debbie relax.

“I know. It sounds funny,” said Debbie, as she chuckled. Ryan could see her physically let go of some nervousness.

“Did Rena talk about her boyfriend to you?”

“Sometimes she did,” said Debbie.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” asked Ryan.

“Yes, his name is Mike,” said Debbie.

“Did you both talk about your boyfriends, sort of compare notes?” asked Ryan, again attempting to increase their rapport.

“I guess so,” said Debbie, who smiled for the first time.

“Has Rena called you or texted you since Saturday?” asked Ryan.

“No, I haven't heard from her,” said Debbie.

Ryan went on questioning Debbie about Rena for another twenty minutes. Still Debbie didn't shed one tear. Ryan got the impression just based on experience alone that Debbie wasn't crying about her friend because she knew something but may have been sworn to secrecy.

“Mrs. Williams told me she thought Rena and Paul were getting engaged this Christmas. Did Rena say anything about that to you?” asked Ryan.

Debbie hesitated and her eyes moved side to side almost as if she was grasping for a side of the story she wasn't expecting. “She mentioned that they were talking about it.”

“They were talking about it, but maybe she wasn't ready?” asked Ryan.

“Did her mother say that?” asked Debbie.

“They are wondering if maybe she ran away because they were too controlling and she wanted to grow up, something like that,” Ryan stated it like an off-handed remark. He stood up and opened his office refrigerator and took out two waters. “Here's a water for you,” he said.

Debbie took the water and just followed Ryan's lead and opened the water and took a sip.

“Did Rena have a job?” asked Ryan.

“She had a job with a doctor's office in marketing, but the office manager had her fired,” said Debbie.

“Did she say why?”

Missing – Caught Red-Handed

