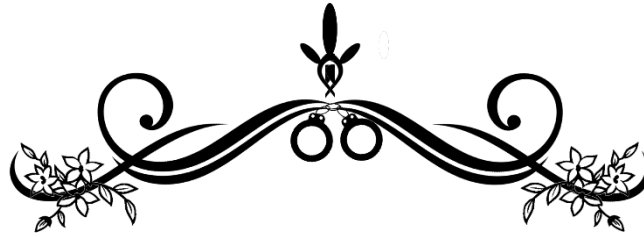


MOTHER'S INSTINCT

By R Shannon



COPYRIGHT

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

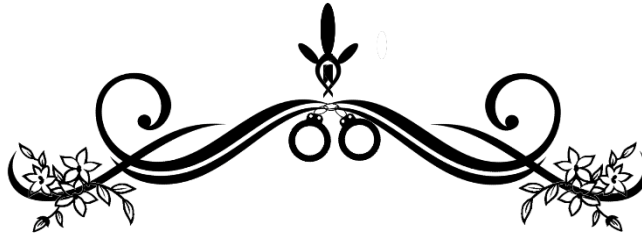
Copyright © 2023 by R. Shannon
Forward copyright © 2023 by R. Shannon
Preview of this book copyright © 2023 by R. Shannon

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



TABLE OF CONTENTS

COPYRIGHT	
MAIN CHARACTER LIST	
TABLE OF CONTENTS	
CHAPTER 1	
CHAPTER 2	
CHAPTER 3	
CHAPTER 4	
CHAPTER 5	
CHAPTER 6	
CHAPTER 7	
CHAPTER 8	
CHAPTER 9	
CHAPTER 10	
CHAPTER 11	
CHAPTER 12	
CHAPTER 13	
CHAPTER 14	
CHAPTER 15	
CHAPTER 16	
CHAPTER 17	
CHAPTER 18	
CHAPTER 19	
CHAPTER 20	
CHAPTER 21	
CHAPTER 22	
CHAPTER 23	
CHAPTER 24	
CHAPTER 25	
CHAPTER 26	
CHAPTER 27	
CHAPTER 28	
NOTE TO READER:	
ABOUT THE AUTHOR:	
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	



CHAPTER 1

JORDAAN AND BREA, his wannabe-socialite girlfriend, mingled among the rich and famous who were all now swirling around them. They were at Gresham Booth's birthday party in Orlando, Florida. Jordaan could feel Brea's excitement as she loved nothing more than taking selfies and pictures of them together in exclusive and rich surroundings. He hated all the pretense, but he loved her and had somehow learned to live with it.

"Where's Alex's father?" asked Brea.

"He's at the center of the big brouhaha in the middle of the room," said Jordaan sarcastically.

"The one standing next to Alex?" asked Brea.

"That's him," said Jordaan as he took a sip from his crystal wine goblet.

"His father seems to be ignoring him," said Brea.

"His father is just giving him the usual cold shoulder, letting him know he's still not happy about me and Alex being in business," said Jordaan.

"He needs to let Alex do what he wants," said Brea. "Let's go out here, Jordaan. Look at this." Brea walked through the French doors and out onto the marble balcony that wrapped all the way around the side of the mansion. She snapped one photograph of herself against the beautiful white French doors and another right outside the patio by the umbrella tables.

Jordaan followed her, but her excessive self-absorption tonight was grating on his nerves. He was angry all the time now, and his patience level, which was passable at most times, was extremely low.

When he caught up with Brea, she was puffing her hair and lips to take more pictures against the balcony railing. This was Gresham Booth's family home. Jordaan was in business with Alex Booth, his youngest son. It was a forty-five-room sprawling tropical mansion estate that included two pools, tennis courts, and its own professionally maintained tropical gardens.

Jordaan and Brea stood together, looking out at the estate properties. It was hard not to be impressed by everything, including the marble balustrade and expansive marble tile that surrounded the wrap-around balcony overlooking this vast tropical property that went on for as far as the eyes could see. Alex had told him many times about how his father started out as nothing more than a struggling salesman in Orlando thirty-five years earlier and built his empire one brick at a time.

The Booths owned many mansions around the world. Their estate in Orlando, however, was the main family home. Gresham Booth founded his first medical equipment business in downtown Orlando, and he and Alice, his one and only wife, raised their kids in the suburbs of Orlando. The global business expansion came later in his early forties, as did the acquisition of other properties and investments.

After dominating the small medical equipment business, he branched off into the biomedical engineering industry. His two older sons had degrees in bioengineering and had taken their rightful places at his side in his empire. Even his daughter, Marleen, received a biomedical engineering degree. She was working in the orthotics side of the business and was now working with artificial intelligence.

Jordaan Hansen was invited to the party by Alex. Jordaan's family were blue-collar workers who immigrated from Holland only one generation ago. To him, this place felt like a scene out of the movies. Unfortunately, his present anger prevented him from truly enjoying any of it.

Brea Roman posed once more against the balcony with a view of the rolling estate behind her. She snapped several more selfies, making sure to unnaturally puff her hair and lips for each shot. Jordaan seethed at the sight of it but continued biting his tongue.

Brea worked for a catering company four days a week, but her passion—as she referred to it—was to be a full-time social influencer. She had already built up a social media following of over ten thousand followers and believed she was way more than halfway to her dreams. Jordaan knew these pictures from the Booth Orlando estate with celebrities and well-known politicians walking around would be on her social media pages before they got home.

"Do you want another drink, Brea?" asked Jordaan.

"Yes, I would love another drink." She took a moment away from her own personal photo shoot to post some of the recently snapped pictures to her social media pages. Jordaan was relieved the photo session was finally over, but he spoke too soon. She took one final quick shot, this time allowing the spaghetti strap of her top to fall down a few inches. It was sexier that way. She wanted to catch the sun as it began to descend.

"Let's go inside, and I'll get us another drink," said Jordaan, stuffing his anger down further and continuing to bite his tongue.

She put her phone inside her purse, at least for the next ten minutes, and shifted into girlfriend mode. "Did you talk to Alex? You're not being firm enough with him, Jordaan."

"I've talked to him several times already. He's insistent on taking on the third partner. He keeps telling me I can't see the big picture. I've been trying to capture him to continue our talk, but I can tell he's avoiding me tonight." Jordaan looked away dismissively, hoping Brea would drop the subject. It didn't work. He hated this side of her sometimes-aggressive personality.

"Jordaan, you need to be tougher. You said yourself that you signed a contract as a fifty-percent partner, not a thirty-three-percent partner. He doesn't have the right to just take on another partner and alter your original

deal." Out came the index finger, and Jordaan knew she was now in full lecture mode. He hated this side of her too. Maybe he needed a new girlfriend. It made him want to get drunk.

"Brea, let me handle this."

"You're being weak, Jordaan. You're being a beta male. This is because you're introverted and too laid back. You need to be tougher with people, especially in business—and especially with Alex. You're letting him run right over you," said Brea.

"I'll handle it. Let's go inside, Brea. It doesn't concern you." He tried again, signaling non-verbally that he didn't want to talk about it anymore, but subtle signals went right over Brea's head. She was an alpha female, and it took a lot more than subtle hints to shut her down once she got going.

"This does concern me. It's affecting the amount of money you'll be making. We're talking about marriage, and this change will affect all of our future plans. You promised to support us when I quit my job to do influencing full-time. I need you to make more money, not less."

"Let's go," said Jordaan, raising his voice a bit. "I'll talk to him again. I promise."

She rolled her eyes. "Just tell him the truth, that you have a legal contract with him and you don't want to change the original agreement. Remind him that you both signed that contract. He can't just pick up the ball and decide to play a different game. Stand your ground, Jordaan."

"I told you; I'll talk to him. I don't want us fighting over this." He held his hand out for her to take it. Reluctantly, she did.

"I want you to be more alpha, Jordaan. You're not being tough enough. You're acting like a long-suffering fishwife with Alex."

He cringed inside. "I want you to be more supportive. I want you to stop lecturing me. I want you to chill out. I want a drink."



Jordaan and Brea didn't know anyone else at the party other than the Booths, so they just meandered around the mansion. Jordaan followed Brea, who found one exquisitely decorated corner after another, all of which made great backdrops for her Instagram photos. He attempted to have a good time, but he wasn't able to let go of the resentment he felt towards Alex. He acted nicely and cordially to everyone, but he was seething one inch below the surface. He couldn't shake it. His partner, Alex Booth, had turned out to be a control freak, and dealing with him was now the hardest part of his job.

When Brea made her way around the mansion towards the front door, to Jordaan's shock, Daniel Webb, the new unwelcome third partner, walked into the party. Alex didn't mention inviting Daniel to the party. This was another case where Alex had gone ahead and acted without conferring with him. Jordaan's anger only grew. They were supposed to be equal partners, but Alex always acted like it was his business and Jordaan worked for him.

"What is he doing here?" asked Brea, motioning to Daniel.

"I don't know. I was not aware he was invited," said Jordaan, who was no longer able to hide his exasperation.

"Oh my God, he brought his crazy girlfriend," said Brea. "I can't believe he is still with her after what she did."

"Maybe she'll be Alex's just desserts for inviting them," said Jordaan.

"I can tell she's already been drinking," said Brea, shaking her head and scoffing. "Look, Daniel is already holding her arm as they walk. It's only a little after nine o'clock. I hope she doesn't start in with anyone."

"She looks like an alcoholic to me," said Jordaan. "Alex told me Daniel and his girlfriend's dynamic is very complicated."

"What does that mean?" asked Brea sarcastically.

"Who knows? He better not allow this guy to join the firm without my consent," said Jordaan.

"You better say something before it's too late, Jordaan. He's obviously still thinking about it if he invited him to his father's birthday party."

"All right. Brea, don't start in again."



Daniel and his girlfriend, Vera, slunk into the party like intruders. They were both out of their element in this elitist crowd and it showed. Vera was five feet, four inches tall, with shoulder-length blonde hair. She was extremely thin, and tonight she wore too much makeup. Her eye makeup had already started to dampen and smear. Although being well under thirty years old, she already had the look of a seasoned alcoholic. Her blue work suit was sharp and expensive enough, but she seemed a little wobbly in her five-inch-high blue designer heels.

Daniel was five feet, ten inches tall, thin and slightly built. There was a frailness about him. His jacket, shirt, and trousers were all in the same beige and brownish palette that's popular with men who dress themselves and know nothing about fashion. He unfortunately didn't know enough about proper clothing sizes either, as his pants were an inch too long, and the jacket shoulder pads sat one inch out from his shoulders. Walking arm in arm, they made for a very odd couple with her high-end designer clothes and his off-the-rack Salvation Army garb.

Jordaan thought Daniel always looked unsure about himself. He could tell Vera wore the pants between them. Daniel never resisted her. He seemed to like being bossed by her. Something about their dynamic rubbed Jordaan the wrong way—especially tonight.

Daniel and Vera skulked around aimlessly for about five minutes before Alex raced over and greeted them. Jordaan watched it all from a distance. He now knew for sure this was why Alex had been ignoring him all night. Alex led Daniel and Vera over towards his father. As they moved in the direction of the great family don, Jordaan put down his wine goblet and quickly invited himself to join them. Brea went celebrity hunting.

"Oh, okay," said Alex as Jordaan sidled up to him. Alex led the way, and they all walked over towards his father. Gresham Booth stood alone

just a few feet away from where he had been sitting with a close friend for a while.

"Dad, this is Daniel Webb, the AI coder I was telling you about. This is Vera, his girlfriend. You already met Jordaan."

Gresham shook hands with both young people without speaking. To Jordaan, the scene looked like a dangerous bear shaking the hands of two wandering ten-year-old children. Gresham introduced them all, including Jordaan, to his friend Mark, who had returned with a plate of food.

Jordaan smiled as best he could, but the inner conversation going on in his head prevented him from listening to every word being spoken. It didn't matter as it was another brag-a-thon by Alex for his father. This time, he introduced Daniel Webb as the next Elon Musk, the coder to the stars and ultimately, the coding genius that would bring them into the next century.

Jordaan had lived through many brag-a-thons with Alex, as he was the salesperson and financial guy in their website and marketing business. This type of performance did have its good side. Alex was able to talk anyone into anything, but tonight, it was grating on Jordaan's last nerve. Jordaan handled the coding and technical side of Booth & Hansen. Out of the blue, Alex had suggested taking on this Daniel Webb as a partner to help them with the new AI technology, which Jordaan didn't think they needed.

Gresham was nice enough, polite enough, and charming enough to all of them. He said all the right things. He was polite to a fault. But Jordaan could tell he was still not impressed with Alex. As much as Alex thought he could enroll his father into supporting him, everyone around Alex knew his father's quiet but deadly disappointment would continue until, like his brothers and sisters, he gave up his own ambitions and joined Gresham's family business. But he didn't stop trying.

As Alex came to the end of singing Daniel's praises, Jordaan turned away and caught sight of his girlfriend taking a selfie with a well-known Florida senator who was in the papers every other day. He looked away in disgust and caught sight of the balcony they had been on earlier. He felt like running over and jumping off. He wanted to scream. He wanted to do something, but he didn't know what. He felt there was nothing he could do about the changes Alex Booth was bringing into his life.



After about three subtle hints that he wanted to get back to reminiscing with his childhood buddy, Alex graciously bowed away from his dad. As he walked with Daniel and Vera, Jordaan reached out and grabbed Alex's arm.

Alex looked down at his arm and emitted a subtle look of offense, a *how dare you* that only the filthiest of the rich can pull off.

"I want to talk to you—privately," insisted Jordaan.

With a silent scoff, Alex said to Daniel, "I'll be a few minutes. Have a walk around and get yourselves a drink. There's still hot food in the dining room, so go have a look." Daniel and Vera both glided, still arm in arm, over towards the buffet.

Jordaan walked out onto the balcony again, closing the doors behind them. As his anger rose and he prepared to confront Alex, he looked down and realized he was still holding his glass of wine. He put it down on the top of the balcony balustrade before he started. He needed to present a show of strength; for that, he needed both hands. Alex stopped in front of Jordaan and said, "What do you want to talk about?"

"You're acting as if this partner thing is a done deal, Alex. We're partners. We have a contract making us partners. I don't want to take on a third partner and reduce my ownership down to thirty-three percent," said Jordaan. "We don't need him. I can learn how to hook into AI within a few weeks."

"We need to branch out now, Jordaan. Artificial Intelligence is on fire. All our competition are already introducing products using AI. I've been watching it over the last few days and weeks. We need someone who can do NPL and AI coding now, not three months from now. You're talking about going to a boot camp and learning a new language, but—"

"Coders learn new languages all the time. It's part of the business," said Jordaan. "It's no big deal."

Alex hesitated and crossed his arms. "You're being influenced by your girlfriend. She sees this as a setback, and she has convinced you that it's a negative thing. It's not. I want you both to see this as a way of catapulting forward. That's how I see it. Plunging right away into AI and offering it in our product packages will double, triple, or quadruple our business."

"My girlfriend has nothing to do with this. I'm talking about my feelings and my opinions here. I'm ready to move into AI now. Learning the language is part of the process. Computer languages change all the time."

"Look, no offense, Jordaan, but you're not ready to do this now. Now," said Alex, pointing down to his feet. "We're standing in an opportunity now, not six months from now."

"I can get up and run at one hundred percent within a few weeks. In the meantime, we can hire someone who can tide us over until then. We don't need to give away ownership in order to get that kind of help. I don't want to give up over twenty-percent ownership to someone else just because you're impatient," said Jordaan.

Alex glared at him. He hesitated for a moment before saying, "You're happy to make a hundred grand a year, Jordaan. I have bigger ambitions than that. Look around you. I want you to try to think bigger than a hundred grand a year," said Alex. With that, he turned on his heels and walked back towards the mansion door. Before going back inside, he turned and said, "You need to look at the horizon you see from this balcony, Jordaan, and think bigger."

"This is your dad's horizon, Alex. Not yours."

Alex let the door slam behind him. Jordaan was sure he had heard his last remark. He turned around, lifted the wine goblet, broke it in half, and tossed it off the balcony.



Jordaan took several deep breaths as he continued looking out at the exquisite horizon before him, which had absolutely nothing to do with Alex. The deep breaths continued as he calmed himself. His anger subsided a little with each deep breath.

Alex is just the son of a wealthy and ambitious man. Fancy degrees aside, he's just a pitchman. Anyone could set up an Excel sheet to follow our finances. We tell the clients what the package will cost, and they send us the money. He's probably using QuickBooks for all I know. He has learned to puff up his knowledge and importance in ways I'm sure he learned at his father's knee. He feels entitled to get his own way because he comes from a wealthy family. I have got to find a way to change his mind.

Brea walked out onto the balcony. "Jordaan, what's going on? I just passed Alex, and he unmistakably snubbed me. He looks mad. What did I do?"

"We just had it out, I guess you could say," said Jordaan, still leaning on the balcony.

"Really? What happened?"

Jordaan could see how excited she was.

"I told him I was not happy with him acting as if taking on a partner was a done deal. I also told him if things don't get better within three months, I'm leaving. I'll sue him for the return of my original investment," said Jordaan. "But I have another strategy I'm about to set in motion, too." Jordaan pulled Brea in and wrapped his arms around her.

"What strategy is that?" She smiled as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I can't tell you," said Jordaan as he kissed the side of her face. He wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Is it an alpha or beta strategy?"

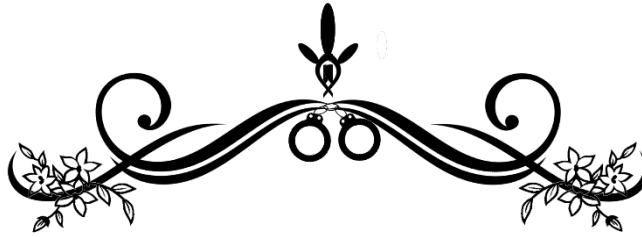
"It's an alpha strategy," he said.

"This isn't going to ruin things for us, our plans for our future?" asked Brea.

"No, but I don't want you to see this next three-month period as a setback. I want us both to let go of this for now. I'm giving this situation three months to see where we are in that time."

"Okay. I'm glad you told him off," said Brea.

She leaned in and kissed him. He enjoyed the affection as he wondered how his new strategy would play out.



CHAPTER 2

~ TWO DAYS LATER ~

JACK HELD HIS four-month-old daughter Mia in his arms as he leaned against the door jam in their bedroom. His wife, Megan, sniffled back tears as she packed the last few items into her suitcase. He saw the anger in her movements as she threw things into the suitcase. She was packing for rehab. He wasn't sure what was going through her mind, but he could tell she wasn't happy.

"Maybe I should just go to a doctor for medical detox. Maybe going in-patient is too much. I think it's too soon for me to leave Mia." He could tell she was testing him about not going.

"You tried kicking drugs on your own more than three times. It didn't work for you in the past, Megan. It never works for anyone. In-patient detox is the easiest way to go through this," said Jack.

"I know. I just don't want to leave my baby," said Megan.

"She's our baby, and it's only two weeks. It will only be three to five days for the actual detox," said Jack.

"I don't think you'll be able to take care of Mia on your own." She hesitated. "I don't mean it in a bad way to insult you, Jack, but you're so new with her. You've never been alone with a baby before."

"It'll give us a chance to bond. Besides, my mother and sister are coming over to help me."

"I don't want your sister whispering horrible things about me into your ear the whole time I'm gone, Jack."

"Maggie won't whisper anything negative. She's looking forward to spending time with Mia," said Jack. "You're just feeling negative. It's because you're going through withdrawal. Everything will work out."

She looked around their bedroom and then closed her suitcase. She sniffled again as two tears dropped from her eyes. "Okay, I guess I'm ready."

Jack walked over and wiped her tears away. "Listen, it's two weeks, but the hard part will only be the first five days. The withdrawal you feel right now will subside a little each day. They'll give you a sedative or something to help you through this. This is the easiest way to get over the addiction, Megan."

She sniffled one last time and took a deep breath. He could tell she was trying to prevent a crying jag.

"You can't be alone with Mia if you're taking drugs, Megan. It's too dangerous," he said.

"I've been off of them for four days already," said Megan as she looked around to see if she forgot anything.

"No, you haven't. I don't know how you got them, but I saw you nodding off from being high two days ago when I came home from work. You can't be alone with Mia if you continue taking drugs."

"I know. I just don't want to go, but I'm ready to leave." She reached over and took Mia from his arms. He followed her with her suitcase as they both left the house and got into the car.

"You're just afraid, Megan."

"Please don't be mean to me, Jack."

"Who's being mean? I'm trying to comfort you."

"You said I'm not able to care for my baby. That's mean. I still think it's too soon for me to leave her."

"I'm sorry if I came across like I was insulting you. I didn't mean it that way. You know yourself it's not safe to take care of a child if you're nodding off from taking drugs." He knew she was an emotional wreck simply from craving Oxy and not being able to have them. This was not their first time down this road together.



They were silent as Jack drove them to the Vine Rehabilitation and Counseling Center. Megan seemed to forget her troubles for a few moments as she turned around and spoke to Mia, who smiled at her from the car seat in the back. Mia giggled as her mother tickled her foot.

As Jack pulled up into the rehab center parking lot and stopped the car, he turned to Megan and said, "Are you ready?"

"I'm as ready as I'm going to be." She looked over at the hospital entrance.

Jack hesitated a moment and said, "Are you coming back to me this time?"

"That's mean. You see? That is mean," said Megan, pointing at him.

"I think it's a reasonable question in light of our history," said Jack, raising his voice as some of his aging resentment slipped out.

"This doesn't look like a hospital. Maybe this is not the right kind of program for me," said Megan, sounding suddenly panicked.

"This is all resistance you're feeling. You have to go to rehab; I have to go to work; and Mia needs to go to Grandma's house," said Jack.

Megan sat quietly. She put her hand on the door latch but hesitated opening it.

"Kiss me goodbye," said Jack.

She leaned in, kissed, and embraced him. "I'm sorry I was complaining all morning," she whispered. "I'm scared, and I don't want to do this. I love you, Jack, and I want to get better. I just know it's going to be hard."

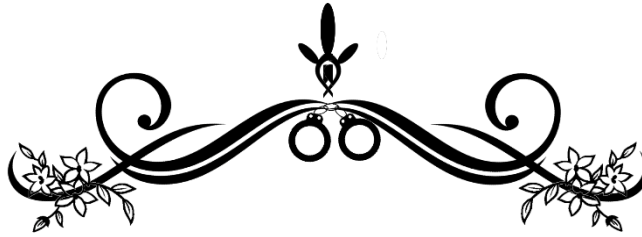
He hugged her and said, "You're doing it for us, me and Mia, for our family. They will keep you busy all day. The time will go by fast. They told us the worst of the addiction withdrawal will be over in three to five days. They'll give you something as soon as you get in there."

Mentioning *getting something* seemed to be the trick. She conjured up her resolve and got out of the car. She opened the back door and kissed Mia goodbye. She then crawled back in the passenger seat, leaned in, and kissed Jack goodbye again.

He watched as she left and walked with her suitcase into the rehab. He said a silent prayer that everything would go well for her. Once she was inside, he looked back at Mia through the rearview mirror and said, "So it's just me and you now, Mia."

He put the car in drive, put his foot on the gas, and two seconds later, Mia began to wail and scream.

When Jack realized he was all alone with Mia now, all he could say was, "Oh my God."



CHAPTER 3

FIONA, A CRESENTVILLE homicide detective, was tall, thin, and had a sprinkling of freckles that came with her natural red hair. She had finally moved into her own place. It was a rental house, but it was in the neighborhood she wanted to ultimately drop roots in. It just so happened to be in her partner Jack's neighborhood.

She looked at the clock. Her brother, Fr. Matthew, should be here soon. She calculated how quickly he would finish Mass, change out of vestments, dress in casual clothing, and drive here. She decided he should be here within fifteen minutes.

It felt so good to be settled. The last four months of her life had been an emotional roller coaster that ended with her living in a rented room. She looked around her new house. Besides all the still-unpacked boxes, there was a coziness that she felt already in this new home. She finally felt grounded. She hated the thought of starting over after her engagement broke up, but this wasn't the first disappointment she had to absorb in her life.

Matthew showed up earlier than she thought. It was good because they had a lot of unpacking to do together. She knew he was worried about her since her breakup with Gus. He didn't like Gus from the beginning, so maybe he had mixed feelings. She could tell he still edited everything he said about her ex-fiancé.

After Matthew came in, they caught up on some small talk and family gossip. Fiona made them coffee. Then, it was time to get down to work.

"While I have you, Matthew, let's unpack all the items in the kitchen boxes first. I need that stuff the most. The rest of it, I can unpack a little at a time at my leisure," said Fiona as she handed him a box cutter.

"From what you've told me, you're not doing leisure anymore," said Matthew.

"I've been losing myself in my work since Gus and I split up. It's helping me stay out of the state of sadness and disappointment," said Fiona.

"Keeping busy does help. I think I'll open the boxes and put all the stuff on the kitchen island. I have no idea where any of this stuff goes, Fiona."

"That'll work. It's good for me to get an overall view of everything I have before I start assigning homes to everything."

"How are you feeling in general since the breakup? I'm surprised Gus hasn't come running back to you like he did after the first breakup," said Matthew.

"He came back, but I told him we were just not a good match. When you told me you thought I was clinging to Gus because of some last hope to have my own kids, that hit me like a ton of bricks. I hated to hear it, but I realized you were right. I've accepted the reality that Gus and I weren't a good couple for several reasons. It's still a disappointment. It just helps to stay busy."

"I was just telling you that you had convinced yourself that he represented your last chance to have kids. I don't agree with that. You're thirty, and you still have time to have kids."

"You're very sweet, Matthew. I know you mean well," said Fiona as she put away some pots and pans.

"I have a parishioner who is a lawyer who wants to be introduced to you. His name is Thomas Doyle. He's thirty years old," said Matthew.

"I don't think I'm ready to be introduced to anyone, Matthew," said Fiona.

"He saw you in church and told me he thinks you're beautiful and he has a crush on you," said Matthew, smiling. "He works in a law firm in Orlando. He's already made partner, and he's a practicing Catholic." He could hear his own sales pitch.

"Have I met him before outside church waiting for you?" asked Fiona.

"No. But he's asked me about you twice already. So I thought I would throw it out there."

"I don't want to sound overly superficial, but is he good-looking?" asked Fiona, chuckling.

"He appears to be a good-looking guy to me, but I'm a guy. He belongs to the men's group. He's smart and very successful. I think making partner at thirty years old is pretty good. I've gotten to know him a bit over the last six months. He just came back to the Church after a long hiatus."

"I'm not saying yes or no. Let me think about it," said Fiona.

Matthew kept unpacking kitchen items, half of which he couldn't name. After a few minutes of silence, he asked, "How is your partner, Jack? Do you still have feelings for him?"

"Yes and no. We're still only partners. He's married and now has a new baby. His wife is going to a rehab center this weekend. Actually, I think a bed opened up and she's going in today. I told him I would be moving into the neighborhood today and to stop over with his daughter. Maybe he'll come over. You can meet him."

"You didn't answer my question. Do you still have feelings for him?"

"Yes, I do. And I can tell he has strong feelings for me. But a two-ton lead portcullis slammed down between us when his wife and baby returned. That's why we're still only partners. There is, however, a strong sexual undercurrent present between us all day long. Sometimes, I like

the feeling of it. But sometimes, it seems unbearable. It represents what cannot be. Do you know what I mean?" asked Fiona.

"Yes, I know what you mean. Maybe you should ask for a new partner? Sometimes being out of sight can put things out of mind," said Matthew.

"The problem is he's so much fun to work with. Plus, as I look around at the other detectives, I don't see anyone else I would want to work this closely with."

"I didn't know police work could be fun," said Matthew as he pulled a large KitchenAid mixer out of a box and set it on top of the island.

"Police work is not fun. It can be dangerous and very sad at times. But his attitude about things makes it fun," said Fiona, chuckling to herself. She stacked plates into one of the cabinets.

"What is it about his attitude that makes police work fun?" asked Matthew out of curiosity.

"I heard through the grapevine at work that he made millions investing in Bitcoin when it first came out. He never mentioned a word about it to me. He's very low-key about his financial situation. But he always seems to be about two inches away from quitting the job, which he could easily afford to do. He has a maverick spirit. He is his own man, and he tends to go his own way. I see an inner strength and conviction in that and I love it. You don't see that much in men nowadays," said Fiona.

"That's interesting. He may be smart to continue with a normal work life. Wealth can destroy people if they don't know how to handle it," said Matthew.

"People at work have told me I'm the only one who ever got close to him. His nickname is The Wasp because he blurts out the truth in ways that can be very stinging with people," said Fiona. "Most people at work tiptoe around him."

"I can tell you're still crazy about him. Dancing so close to lust can be like dancing too close to a fire. You better be careful. The last thing you want is to become someone's mistress, Fiona. You want your own man and your own life."

"Listen to you. Your mind is in the gutter. I never said anything about becoming his mistress," teased Fiona.

"Well, I hear all kinds of excuses for becoming a mistress from women in my parish. Some tales of how it happened are quite elaborate as they always make it sound so accidental. But when I ask a few follow-up questions, it becomes clear they were both dancing too close to the fire to begin with. The church teaches us to avoid the near occasions of sin."

"Speaking of the fire, Jack just texted me. He'll stop by in a few minutes to see the new house," said Fiona.

"Stopping by when his wife is in rehab? I can feel the heat of the fire and I haven't even met him," said Matthew.

"Don't start, Matthew. Be nice when he comes."

"When am I ever not nice?"

"When you're being honest with me, that's when!"

"You're being too critical of me, I think," said Matthew with a sly smile.

"Jack's nickname is The Wasp, and I'm thinking maybe I should name you The Snapper," said Fiona.

"Now that's just not true," said Matthew, chuckling. "If you only knew what I edit out of what I say out loud."



"Oh, I like the sound of the new doorbell, don't you?" asked Fiona, smiling as she went to open the door.

"It's loud, that's for sure," said Matthew as he followed her.

Fiona opened the door, and Jack stood there holding his baby daughter, Mia. "So you've moved in already? I like your house. You picked a nice one," said Jack.

"Come in. Come in. This is my brother, Matthew."

"Oh, this must be another brother? I thought you said the priest was coming," said Jack.

"I am the priest, Fr. Matthew." He held out his hand, and the guys shook.

"Oh, I thought you would be—"

"When Fiona asks me to come over to help her, I dress like a workhorse. She treats me like a pack donkey. I left my black suit and collar at home," said Matthew. "I'll be covered in sweat in less than an hour."

"Tell me about it. She's always prodding me in one way or another at work, too. She's like a prison guard. It's good to meet you and put a face to a name. This is my daughter, Mia," said Jack.

"She doesn't look so happy right now," said Fiona as she reached in to take her out of Jack's arms.