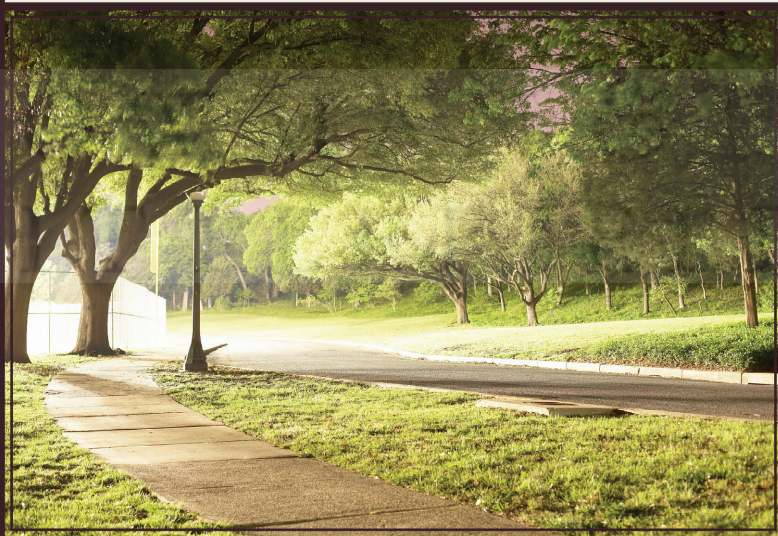


COMPLEX LOVE



Lucille M. Griswold

Also by Lucille M. Griswold

Grandmother's Jewels I

Grandmother's Jewels II

Life Lived In Reverse: A Memoir

My Story: Only God Will Be My Judge

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Complex Love

Lucille M. Griswold

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For my family

For William —

How many can say they married their high school sweetheart and ended
up living and traveling around the world? —
It has been a great sixty years.

For My Children —

Gary /Lore, Greg/Sarah, Pam/Keith, Sandy/Mike (deceased) —
Without family we are nothing.

For My Twelve Beautiful Grandchildren —

Cheyne/Kristen, Bryan, Amanda/Dave, Cathy, Aaron/Stacie, Camille,
Devina/Tyler, Robert/Erin, Teresa, Ashley/Chris, Brandi and Michael —
You delight in ways unimaginable.

For Christopher, Gabriel, Isaac and Ethan —

The next generation. Words cannot express the joy you bring to my life.

My love for ALL of you cannot be defined.

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Chapter One

Pundits exclaim that love is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, nor demanding nor irritating. This theory can be contradictory, and is often ignored by the human race due to the very nature of human existence. We can love yet become irritated at those we love. We can love and become jealous, or we tend to want to be boastful no matter how inappropriate. Whether we choose to admit it or not, we often demand the most from the people we claim to love. Maria, Father Jon and Eric easily became trapped in love's complexities.

I flushed and watched the water swirl down the toilet bowl. Much later the darn stink bug was still alive and kicking away in the bowl water and no matter that the water churned like a tsunami, the bug kicked its little legs and escaped the roto-route of the water down the bowl. I put down the lid and walked away. Surely, this stupid bug was going to get tired — right?

Six hours earlier I had just made a nice hot cup of coffee and settled down for a short fifteen minute respite to watch the beginning of one of my favorite talk shows when I saw my brown couch begin to move. Impossible! I looked again and there sitting beside me was the chubbiest, fattest stink bug I had seen in a while doing all the moving. Why now I wondered, and how did it get to that spot? Any windows were over five feet away. I knew though that as long as I sat there the bug was going to haunt me incessantly. For crying out loud, all I wanted was my fifteen minutes of peace with a nice hot cup of coffee. Puleeeze! Not going to happen. I went into the bathroom and grabbed a tissue and came back to scoop the bug off the couch. Stupid bug! Then I smiled as I dropped the whole package into the commode and watched foolishly for the end result which didn't happen. The tissue became unwrapped by the water and away from the bug, and ventured on down the bowl while the bug fought its way to the water line. I flushed again. Bug still there. ARGGGGGG! Down went the lid and I left home for several hours. When I returned, I passed the bathroom on my way to the laundry room and remem-

bered the bug. Surely, it was either dead or gone. Nope. Still there! Alive and fighting!

What a stupid concern on the day after my husband's funeral. I am Maria and my young husband died unexpectedly a week ago. What a cruel shock. One minute there is this handsome, vital, strong husband, father and friend, alive and well, and then without any reason he dies in his sleep from heart failure. Just like that. Boom. No breath, no life, nothing. I shook him, screamed at him, shook him again. How could you I wondered? What about the children? What about me? God, I can't be a widow. I am way too young. Oh God, please no, this can't be. Please help me, please!!! Damn you God. Why? Why? I screamed to the children to call 911. The second eldest son Bob understood and called 911 without question. The younger ones followed my adolescent path and screamed too. Bob, mature like his Dad, called my childhood friend who also happened to be our local parish priest. Both the medics and the priest arrived around the same time, one giving the last rites, and the others attempting to revive a corpse — protocol I guess.

Uncharacteristically, I shrieked at Father Jon asking him what kind of God would do this to a young family. "What God would take away the father of my four children? Explain it to me now! How could he? What did I do to deserve this?"

Father Jon grabbed my hands forcefully, attempting to calm me while saying softly, "I'm sorry Maria. I just don't know what to say to you right now except I am so, so sorry."

"Sorry is not going to cut it Jon. That's the same as when you pushed me to the ground when we were little, and I cut my knee on the cement. You said you were sorry then too, and it didn't help the pain one little bit. Don't tell me you're sorry. You can't possibly know how I feel."

The door bell rang causing Maria to come more to her senses when she realized it was the coroner. Father Jon took the children into the kitchen and started making them some breakfast while telling Bobby to call their grandparents as he wanted to talk to Bobby's grandmother. Gary, the oldest son stayed near his mom trying to console her. In a short while Mel and Gina arrived and immediately took over the task of comforting not only their daughter but their grandchildren too while also attempting to settle things in the house.

Gina got Robert's family's phone number out of the book and took upon the task of telling Robert's family the sad news while dreading every minute of it. She, herself, was devastated at the loss of her son-in-law, and she could not begin to imagine the hurt and shock that would occur when she told Robert's parents. However, they needed to know and promptly.

Chapter Two

Maria went through the week in a daze, but things did get accomplished like the planning of the funeral as to the site, the service and trying to remember any wishes Robert may have had. Except, they were still young enough that most of what you might call funeral plans were made in jest — like throw my ashes over the first park bench where we made love. Stuff like that.

So many friends and neighbors brought food to the house, or gift cards to food establishments, so that Maria was not going to have to cook another meal for about a month. Mel and Gina had food catered for the after funeral reception which all decided just to have at the house.

Three of Maria's best friends were a tremendous help that day taking care of the smaller children, sprucing the house before the people arrived and setting the food on the table. They managed this by going directly back to the house after the funeral instead of to the grave area.

Granny also came in from Chicago and was going to stay with the family for as long as she felt she would be needed. Maria adored her no nonsense grandmother, but she also knew that Granny was not going to tolerate any of her outrages like the one with Father Jon the day Robert died. Even Bobby said to his Mom later how very strange it was to hear his mother speak so loud and brazenly to the family's dear friend. "It just wasn't like the way you normally act Mom."

"Well, honey, for crying out loud, it is not every day you wake up in your bed and find your husband dead."

"Yea, Mom, I'll give you some slack, but it wasn't Father Jon's fault."

Evening arrived and the only people left were Granny, the three best friends Zoe, Rita and Janet, and Father Jon. The four parents, who both lived about fifteen minutes away in opposite directions, had gone home about an hour earlier.

Granny kept watching how irritated Maria would become every time Father Jon was around or tried to comfort her. A wise old woman, Granny knew and always suspected they both loved each other, and she blamed this

annoyed attitude of Maria's to just that fact. Yes, Robert was the love of Maria's life, but Father Jon went back a long time and the bond between those two could never be denied. Father Jon even told Granny many years ago that one of the main reasons he entered the seminary was when he heard that Maria and Robert got engaged and were planning a wedding. He as much as said, "If I can't have Maria, I don't want any other woman and will devote my love to God." Yes, he could be a great comfort to Maria, but darn, now Granny was somewhat upset he had to be a priest as he would have been a nice man for her darling Maria.

The kitchen had been cleaned and the house put in order, and it was thought the family needed to get a good night's sleep. The three girls gave Maria a huge hug and they promised she would hear from them the next day. Maria loved them. They did everything together like go to the movies, shopping, out to lunch, and they were just there for all kinds of support. Father Jon followed the girls out the door, and Granny could not help but notice his hug for Maria was softer and longer than anyone else's, and she could even see Maria's shoulders relax somewhat in the priest friend's embrace. *Lord, Granny thought and prayed, we are going to need help on many things in this household from here on in. Give us all the strength.*

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Chapter Three

Granny was cleaning the kitchen after breakfast the next morning after her second cup of coffee. She knew at this point she had a bad case of halitosis after that second coffee and was planning to go up to the bathroom and brush her teeth when there was a knock on the front door. Her disposition was somewhat annoyed when she heard the knock that someone would come before she had a chance to take care of her bad breath. Hoping it would help a little, she popped an apple slice in her mouth.

A male voice yelled out, "Anybody here?"

"Oh, hi Father Jon. I am the only one here at the moment. Maria is out walking with her friends, and the children have all scattered in different directions."

"How's Maria doing Granny?"

"She's mad at the world Jon."

"Do you think you could get Maria to go to the morning Mass?"

"The church is the last place I can imagine Maria going. She's blaming God for everything."

At this point, Maria clumsily entered the house wearing both a purple headband and a purple jogging outfit. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair was wild looking and even Granny thought Maria looked gorgeous as she followed Father Jon's eyes giving Maria the once over. *This is not a good thing*, Granny thought. Her old intuition told her something was just not right as she noticed the strong affection between Father Jon and her granddaughter. *Am I really seeing this affection, or is it just my old age wanting to see love in every observation.*

"Oh, hi Jon," said Maria in a rather sarcastic tone, "What words of wisdom are you bringing me today?"

"Jan, who works in the parish office, has to take a couple of months off on emergency leave. Could you possibly fill in for her either until we find someone else or until she returns?"

“Do I have to answer you right now? My mind is not thinking clearly. Would you like to join me for a cup of coffee?”

“No, thanks, I have a funeral to perform.”

“Gee, Jon, all these funerals that you perform — don’t they depress the living daylight out of you?”

“Of course they are sad, but it is part of my job and I would imagine the funeral parlor director must feel it even worse.”

“Yes, but for the director it is a business, and every time someone dies he stands to make money.”

“Oh for crying out loud Maria, give him a break,” Granny interrupted.

“Well, it’s true....,” but before she could finish, Jon headed for the door saying, “If you can help in the office, let me know by 5 p.m. tomorrow,” and he let himself out the door.

“How was your walk?”

“My walk is the best part of my day Granny. I love walking with the girls. They have this inner comprehension of my situation that no one else seems to be able to feel.”

“Oh, Maria,” Granny responded. “We also understand completely how you feel, but you seem to favor the opinions of your friends and treat the rest of us with a more hostile attitude. I find you act especially nasty to Father Jon.”

“Well, he just doesn’t have answers except wanting me to trust in his God to help me. His God is just not giving me the response I need.”

“He’s your God too Maria, and nothing gives you a reason to be nasty to anyone. You are not the only one to lose someone you love.”

“Maybe not, but I just don’t need impractical advice or lectures from anyone right now. I’m running up to take a shower. I have an appointment with an attorney. Do you want to ride along?”

“Not today. No thanks.”

Chapter Four

Granny had been living alone for quite a few years since her husband of over fifty years passed away. She often read lately of spouses that had lived a long time together who would both pass away within a few minutes or hours of each other. How she at first wished this had been true since her experience of loss right after her spouse's death was almost more than she could bear. In time, Granny had been called upon out of genuine need so much by her extended family that existing began to have purpose once again. Her life would essentially never be the same without her beloved spouse, but she had learned to make the most of her situation.

Maria's attitude annoyed Granny this past morning and as much as she might otherwise have enjoyed a trip outside the home, in some odd way she intended to enjoy her time alone. Living alone in Chicago was actually a comfort. If she wanted the house quiet, it remained quiet. The only time the house was messy was if Granny made it messy herself. As much as she loved the excitability of being in a vibrant, lively house full of children, there were other times Granny just wanted to crawl into a quiet corner. Today was one of those days.

Her thoughts drifted to Father Jon. Maybe he was just concerned for his dear childhood friend and Granny was interpreting way too much from the priest's actions. The ringing of the phone caught Granny's attention.

"It's me Granny," said Maria. "I called the parish office, but got the answering machine that cut me off before I could say I would work there temporarily. You know, it might keep my mind from being so sad. Anyway, I have to get back with my attorney. We have lots to discuss, and I may not be finished by five o'clock. Could you call the church for me later to tell Father Jon I will accept the position for now? After my visit with the lawyer, I am taking one of the children to the dermatologist and we should be home around supper time. We can reheat some of the food brought by the neighbors."

"Not a problem. Take care."

After lunch, Granny decided to walk over to the parish house since it was such a beautiful day. Father Jon was climbing the steps to the rectory as Granny approached the area.

“Hi, Granny. Fancy meeting you here. Is something wrong?”

“Oh, heavens no. Maria wanted me to tell you she will take the job temporarily.”

“Thank God. That phone has been ringing off the hook, and I think I screwed up the answering machine.”

“You must have because Maria tried to leave a message without success.”

“Could I talk you into a cup of tea? I’ll even let you make some for both of us,” Jon said with that ingratiating smile of his.

“How can Granny turn down such an offer by one of the most handsome men this side of heaven?”

By the time Granny arrived back at the house, Maria and the children had just arrived as well, and the pace of their actions escalated immediately.

The dinner conversation revolved around Maria telling her children that the attorney assured her that they would all be well cared for by their Daddy because of his assets that had been put in trust, plus Dad had a great life insurance policy. They would be able to continue living in the manner to which they had become accustomed.

You could tell that some of the children rather assumed the news about what their mother informed them was actually true all along, but the older children had a look of relief on their faces.

Chapter Five

On her walk with the gals the next morning Maria explained they would have to walk an hour earlier come Monday because she would be working for a time at the rectory.

“You lucky dog,” chimed Rita, “I wouldn’t mind working there and looking at that doll face all day.”

“Rita,” reprimanded Janet.

“Well, I wouldn’t. It’s true.”

“Geez, you guys are out of control.”

On a more serious note, Zoe began to explain one of her deep concerns. Recently divorced, Zoe had seen her husband physically abuse her children many times, not to mention the beatings he often gave her. “We are going to court tomorrow, and I’m afraid of what the judge will decide about visitation rights.”

“Surely, you’re not suggesting the Judge will let him see the children?” asked Maria.

“Yea, I am terrified this will happen. He has made me out to be a conniving bitch that will do anything to prevent him from seeing his children.”

“Can we go along as witnesses?”

“Unfortunately, no. It’s a closed hearing with both our attorneys. My attorney managed to get us a huge compensation package for the children and my alimony is great, as it should be for all those years of abuse, but the only way he would agree to that large amount of money was if there would be no mention of the abuse. I could still kick myself for agreeing to that statement. I was so distraught at the time; my main concern was to be able to provide adequately for the children.

At this point they arrived back at Maria’s house. While Maria ran into the house she shouted to her friend to call her as soon as the hearing was over the next day. Maybe we can walk later in the day tomorrow.

The news of her friend’s problems put Maria in a bad mood instead of the happy feeling she would normally experience after walking. Then, before

Maria actually got to the door she noticed one of the cats lying in a funny position. She bent down to get a better look and realized the cat had died from what appeared to be blunt force trauma to the head. *Oh, God, no!* She yelled for Granny to come.

Hearing the loud shouts, Granny jumped out of her chair and ran to the side yard.

“What’s wrong honey?”

“Someone killed Bunky!”

“Oh, that’s terrible.”

Maria’s neighbors came running out too. The husband saw what happened and told his wife to escort the two women into their home while he explained he would take care of the cat.

The neighbor reassured the women that most likely the cat had fallen some strange way to get the blow on his head. He felt he could almost guarantee that the cat had not been killed by someone. After getting permission from Maria, the neighbor dug a hole in the backyard near some bushes and buried Bunky.

The hardest part was when Maria had to tell the children. After their father died they took solace and comfort in playing with their pets — and now this.

Dinner was very somber that evening. All the talk centered on Bunky dying. *Whys* and *hows* dominated the conversation. Some claimed it was not fair, others were just unable to be consoled.

Maria tried to divert the conversation by bringing up the fact that she would be working for Father Jon on Monday during the hours the children were at school.

The children all adored Father Jon and spent a lot of any free time just stopping by the parish office to say hello on a normal basis. Granny suggested that if any of them felt too sad about Bunky they should talk to Father Jon. Soon this conversation avoided their somberness and thoughts of Bunky were no longer the primary topic of discussion.

Chapter Six

Maria was working on clearing her desk of the multitude of paper work that appeared to smother her since her husband died. Her object was to get most of it out of the way prior to Monday rolling around and before she started working at the parish house. Munching on the last remnants of her lunch while writing some checks, she was momentarily bothered by the fact she could not remember where she had placed the instructions that listed all her husband's passwords to his many accounts. She was so frustrated by this she could not concentrate properly when the phone rang. Zoe was attempting to speak, but was crying profusely.

"Didn't the court proceedings go well?" Maria inquired.

"You just won't believe," cried Zoe. "The judge took each child back to talk to them in his room individually. When they came back they had been crying. They told the judge their father beat them, and they didn't want to spend time with him. Honestly, Maria, I never told them to say this. Even I did not know the seriousness of my husband's beatings where the children were concerned."

"So, surely the judge did not provide joint custody knowing what they said, right?"

"The judge did precisely that."

"You've got to be kidding."

"The children cried all the way home, even the older ones. It's crazy. None of this makes any sense to me. None of it! I just feel like taking them and running away from everything — go to some island in the middle of nowhere. How can I, as a good mother, expose them to someone known to beat them...and he hits them in places where you can't see the scars or bruises. The fault is mine entirely. I became so obsessed about bleeding that jerk of every penny; I never considered this would happen to the children."

"I am rather flabbergasted to be offering you any good pieces of advice right now, but perhaps you should get the name of a good social worker and a phone number. Give it to the children to keep with them always. If their Dad

does anything — anything at all to them that they interpret to be wrong, tell them to call and report the details to the worker. Then, they should call you, and you keep your own written record of the abuse. We'll get this bastard somehow."

"Good advice Maria. I'll call the other gals and see if they want to go to the coffee house after our walk today."

"Let's do that in an hour. I need to finish some paper work junk, and it will take me about that long."

Maria laughed when she put the phone on the receiver and after hearing Zoe answer her request with the letter *K*. Lord, in what direction was this world going when we now started talking as though we are texting? *OMG*, *LOL*.

Miraculously, and suddenly out of nowhere, the list of passwords appeared. She probably did just enough shuffling pieces of desk paper around while speaking on the phone to cause the paper to appear. This would certainly facilitate meeting the one hour deadline.

Zoe's appearance before the judge created a lot of mumbo jumbo meaningless talk among the three girls on their walk because they were so outraged but felt helpless to be able to solve the problem. So, they kept rehashing the scenario over and over. One good thing that transpired from this hot topic was that their hour walk was over before they ever imagined it would be. The sky was just starting to get dark. The girls split at the corner to go to their own specific homes. People were starting to turn their interior house lights on, and Maria always used to enjoy looking inside and imagining the wonderful happy family moments transpiring. At least that was how she used to think when her husband was alive. The image always portrayed in her mind that of happy spouses coming home from work, and excited children running to greet them. There was always the illusion of the wonderful smell of good food being prepared, and the soft velvety lights casting beautiful shadows across their faces. Tears automatically started falling down her cheeks. Would she ever experience these good times again? However, she was not the only one not to experience happiness behind closed doors with lamp lights directing lovely dusky silhouettes. Zoe's family was proof of that. Who would have known those beautiful children were being beaten and so much so they didn't even want to spend time with their own father. We supposedly had a good court system, but there were so many times lately where justice did not seem to prevail, especially on the news where a beautiful child was found mutilated, all evidence turned to the mother, but the mother was set free. Where is justice in that? When Maria finally walked in her front door she could tell that Granny had been busy preparing a good meal, and for a little while there was a small sense of normalcy in her household.

Chapter Seven

Working in an office atmosphere was familiar to Maria. She found her first morning at the parish enjoyable and the work easy to perform. The tasks kept her busy enough so that the hours flew by quickly. People meandered through the office all morning either with requests, or they were the volunteer money counters counting the money from the late afternoon Sunday Masses. There was always someone with whom to converse either in person or on the phone. Father Jon had briefly stopped by Maria's home in order to drop off the key to the parish house early Sunday evening since he was going to be at meetings with some Bishops most of Monday.

During lunch time, Maria took a walk back to the cemetery located behind the parking lot of the church since it was such a beautiful day. She had heard other people say how comforting it was to go to the cemetery and speak to their loved ones, but anger and sadness overtook Maria and she threw her body onto Robert's grave screaming the question, "Why did you have to leave us like this? I just don't understand," she yelled as she pounded the gravesite. She noticed a car driving up the pavement and quickly pulled herself up off the ground. Her emotions were not those of comfort as she had hoped when Maria found her way back towards the church. She was surprised to see that Father Jon had already returned and she expressed her surprise to him. "Oh, I won't be here long Maria. I just returned to pick up something I had forgotten to bring with me this morning. How's it going?"

"The job here is just fine, but I feel lousy, Father Jon. The tears just keep coming. When are they going to stop?"

"I wish I had some miraculous answer Maria. Maybe when I have more time we can sit and talk about it."

"Yea, yea, you'll only give me some cockamamie answer anyway. By the way, since things are going pretty good in the office, I will leave around five o'clock."

"Yes, that's the time we usually close anyway. Take care, Maria."

The gals were going to meet in front of the church at Maria's closing time for their walk. Zoe looked miserable, but explained that she did find a social worker and supplied her children with the worker's phone number. The children were all in miserable moods however, and Zoe had a hard time convincing them to go to school.

At the last intersection of their walk, and before they would each travel on to their own home, the girls heard a big clash of metal and turned around to see that two cars had collided, one apparently running a red light. The women immediately ran towards the vehicles while Zoe called 911. The other three went to comfort and assist the injured. Both cars were being driven by teenage drivers, one male, and one female. Maria was able to comfort the young female and the teen asked her please not to leave. The teenage male had been knocked out and the medics tended to him first. When the medics finally were to transport the young female, she told the young men she would not get in the ambulance unless that lady would go with her. She said this as she pointed towards Maria.

"Sure, honey, I'll ride along if the medics will allow it."

The other three friends went to Zoe's house to pick up her car, and they assured Maria they would meet the ambulance at the hospital and bring her home from there.

The young man in the accident was transported to the trauma hospital, and the medics had contacted the female patient's father. Finding the female's identification in her wallet it was discovered the girl's name was Jody. Zoe, Rita and Janet got to the hospital a short time later and sat in the waiting area with Maria waiting for Jody's father to arrive. The police entered the hospital Emergency Room and walked up to the four women inquiring if they knew anything about what had occurred at the accident scene. They all explained that they had been walking in the opposite direction and only realized there had been an accident when they heard the two cars collide. From what they could determine it did appear that the young man had run a red light judging from the position of the two cars, but they were only guessing. The hospital personnel had taken Jody for a CAT scan so Maria thought it would be nice if they stayed long enough to give some assurance to Jody's father when he got there. The four women had settled themselves and were prepared to be at the hospital a while after notifying their families, but it was at that point that a very handsome, slightly graying young man walked through the Emergency Room doors. The frown upon his face caused the women to suspect he was Jody's father and that fact was confirmed when he walked up to the desk and they overheard him mentioning Jody's name. The girls sauntered up to him and explained why they were there. He briefly thanked them when the nurse came to escort him back to the area where Jody would come after her scan. At that point, the women decided to leave and

silently prayed Jody and the young man would be fine. Young mothers themselves, they all knew this was a parent's worst nightmare.

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Chapter Eight

Janet was the only one of the four friends who had been divorced for about five years. *Why didn't her husband die?* Janet would have been sad, but she was not even living with her spouse when they divorced, so her sadness could not be as bad as mine, Maria told herself. In fact, there were times she almost envied Janet. Janet and her ex-spouse shared custody of their children which meant that every other week Janet was a free woman to do as she pleased whether it was to go to a movie with some other divorced women, visit a museum, or just go to lunch. All Maria's other small group of friends, prior to Zoe's situation, had two parents to share the duties, but strangely those two parents were constantly on the go, and it was unheard of to go see a movie in the middle of the week for either parent. Life can indeed be strange thought Maria. Janet had called earlier in the day to see if Maria wanted to go away for a few days, but because of the promise to work at the church, Maria felt that now was not a good time to go away. Plus, the children were still having a hard time dealing with the deaths of their father and cat, so Maria would not even consider getting away at this moment in time.

On her lunch break, Maria took a stroll into town and noticed the local newspaper's headlines were about the accident they had seen. Maria picked up a copy of the paper, went into the luncheonette and after ordering her lunch proceeded to read the article in the paper. *Oh, no*, thought Maria when she read that Jody's mother had recently passed away from cancer and that Jody had several siblings. *Here I am complaining about my situation, and here another person, and a man no less, is going through the same process of dealing with death. Well, they probably were not as close as Rob and I were, so he probably does not even miss his wife as much as I miss Robert.* She finished her lunch and tossed the newspaper in the trash.

Father Jon walked into the office around two that afternoon and mentioned to Maria about a grief counseling group that met every Wednesday evening. "You really ought to consider going Maria. They can teach you some coping mechanisms."

“Ha, that’s all I need in my life right now is to go and listen to a lot of other people who are as miserable as I am. How is that going to help for crying out loud? You just don’t know what it is like Jon, and since you were never married, you won’t ever know how I feel. How can priests be family counselors for their troubled parishioners when they haven’t experienced any of the same feelings and emotions? How?”

“Well, some like the fact that we approach situations from a different angle, and frankly Maria, I have had more people thank me for my help when they have been grieving, and — in fact, if I stop and think about it, I never had a complaint from anyone. Frankly, lately, it appears as though all you know how to do is offer criticism. You don’t even want to hear advice, let alone accept it. However, I won’t give up on you, but sometimes I am concerned about your depressive state of mind.”

“Oh, for crying out loud, I AM NOT DEPRESSED.”

“Well, here is a card for the group I told you about, and for now I’m out of here,” and Father Jon was out the door before Maria had a chance to blink.

Her first intention was to take the card and throw it at Father Jon, then she was going to tear it to pieces, but the phone rang, so she stuck it in her pocket.

Upon arriving home that evening, the house was quiet because most of the children had after school activities and other parents were taking their turn in bringing them home later. Granny and Maria sat down to enjoy a glass of wine. That is, Granny had some iced tea since she rarely drank alcohol. She just did not enjoy the taste of it.

Granny began speaking by saying, “It has been a month since I have been here. I think you deserve to be rid of me by now and be on your own.”

“Oh, Gran, please don’t go. You just don’t realize how very much I need you. I know I’ve been acting like an idiot sometimes, but I need someone like you to set me straight. Please don’t go.”

“Listen, honey, I have to relieve the person who has been taking care of my home, and make sure my bills are all in order. I love you guys dearly, but I know you can make it on your own now. In fact, it is probably better for you that I do leave. Once you become too dependent on someone, it is always that much harder to function on your own. I admit, it is going to be hard on me to go from this lively household, and lively it is, even though you all have experienced such sadness — well, as I said, it is going to be hard for me to leave and go back to being all alone with all that quietness. I’ll take the train back home this coming weekend and I don’t want any tears when I leave. That will set me back a hundred years.”

“Well, if you insist, but I can’t promise about the tears.”

Chapter Nine

Granny was gone now, and fortunately there was not too much of a slobbering fiasco when she left. Maria just sat in her living room feeling so lost and alone even though she was surrounded by children. Having the job at the church turned out to be something really good now she realized because it was going to force her to get out of the house tomorrow.

Maria started talking to herself, telling herself to get up out of the stupid chair and get moving. Gather the children. Go some place — anyplace.

She put two fingers in her mouth and let out an extremely shrill, un-lady like whistle that used to thrill Robert to death as he always wondered how that loud shriek could come out of this beautiful small package. One thing for sure, it got the attention of all the children as they came running. “Let’s all get in the car and go to *Moo Cow* for some ice cream. I’ll treat you all to the biggest, sloppiest ice cream concoction your little hearts’ desire.”

There was not one objection from the bunch. On the ride to the ice cream parlor they started mentioning endearing things their Granny did that were so different than their own generation, but charming nevertheless. Maria thought to herself — this is what I have to do. I must plan fun things to get us all out of the house, so we don’t sit around drooling in sympathy all the time.

On the way into the shop there was a man with a young girl coming out. They did not see her, and they were already in their car when Maria realized they looked familiar because it was Jody, the girl in the accident, and her father. That man had such a somber look on his face, almost snobbish in some ways and she wondered how they were doing. She remembered from reading the newspaper article that Jody had lost her mother to cancer only about a month before. Knowing this helped Maria to comprehend more why the young girl became so attached to Maria when the ambulance personnel were treating her. Maria understood more fully what the young teen was going through, and it was her desire to want to help her that day.

The ice cream parlor was packed, but no one seemed to mind the wait. When the children finally were able to place their orders they were ordering

extravaganzas unfamiliar to Maria like a decadent chocolate gigantic volcanic sundae. Well, you get the picture. One thing for sure, none of them had any leftovers.

That evening when Maria was getting into bed she thought how grateful she was that they had gotten through their first day without Granny. Hopefully, the days would get better. She sat on the edge of the bed removing her boots and socks when a tinge of sadness swarmed quickly through her body. These pangs of sadness came frequently, but fortunately did not last long. All it would take would be the sound of some music, a look at a familiar object, or a certain expression to set the tears flowing. Just climbing into the same bed she shared with her husband was difficult. The bedroom, and the bed, was where their most intimate, joyful moments were shared and now came the fear reoccurring of finding her husband dead where his body had once been so alive and vigorous. So many happy times had been created in this room, but now the atmosphere had been changed drastically. She looked at the rather outdated quilt and the valances on the windows. The color of everything had now become outdated and window dressings were less voluminous and more sharply precise, bright and clear in the 2000's. This all needs to be changed. I will redecorate and move the furniture around and I will do the same in the den and living room as soon as I finish the job at the church. That night, Maria could not make herself sleep in that bed and she decided to sleep in the guest room instead.

LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Ten

Had the purpose been to get a good night's sleep in the guest room then it just did not work. One would have thought Maria was hit by a piece of farm equipment. Aches and pains filled her limbs and her mood was lousy. Even a cup of coffee did not help, and while the children woke in a good mood, their moods were quickly going to change the longer they were in their mother's presence, so they hastily ate their breakfasts and left.

Father Jon was seated at his desk in his office that morning when Maria arrived. One look at her and he knew they were going to be treading on thin ice. He was almost afraid to ask how Maria was doing, but nevertheless the words came out of his mouth.

"Pretty lousy, if you must know. Granny left this weekend for one thing."

"Ah, I see. I loved Granny when she used to come and visit your family during the summer months. She treated us all as if we were her very own. She was so full of vim and vigor and not at all like the average doting grandmother. She was always thinking of fun things for us to do, dancing around the room like a puppet on a string — a lively hand puppet string at that. I can fully understand the loss you are feeling."

"No you can't. You priests always seem to think you know the answers to our private lives, but you just don't. Like, Jon, do you know what I miss the very most? Do you Jon?"

"Well, I guess I don't. Why don't you tell me?"

"I miss the sex I had with my husband. Do you hear that? How do you like that? Hmm?"

"What can I say? Apparently anything I do say you are not going to like anyway."

"That's right, I miss the sex, sex, sex — do you hear me? And, don't you dare tell me to pleasure myself. DON'T YOU DARE!!

Father Jon squirmed in his seat.

"I could only get pleasure from my dear husband, and God took him away. AWAY — do you hear me? Self-pleasure could never compare to his

warm embrace, the wonderful cuddling, lying so close together that we were like one person. NEVER. Don't you ever tell me to do that — ever! Do you hear me?"

Maria was one woman who became more appealing the more disheveled she became. Her hair was flying every which way, framing her most gorgeous face, and she had a growl to her voice that only became sexy on her, but might have made any other woman look like an evil spirit possessed by one needing an exorcist. "Don't you dare tell me that? Do you hear me?"

Father Jon set the paperwork aside he had been reading and gently raised his face to stare at Maria with his gorgeous blue eyes while gazing straight into her what appeared to be liquid polished dark brown eyes. "Maria," he said in a voice so deep it did not even sound like him, "I would be the last person to tell you something like that."

That seemed to be just what it took to knock Maria back to her senses. "Oh, I'm sorry Jon. Please forgive me. I don't know what creates these outbursts any more. Please forgive me."

"All is forgiven. Now, can you please read this letter for me and see if you think I need to change anything?"

The shouting and yelling essentially did help to calm Maria and the rest of her day went along without too many problems. As she was getting ready to leave, she noticed a card lying on the floor and bent over to get it. The card was the one about the grievance sessions, one of which was to be held this Wednesday evening in two days. Maybe I should at least give it a try. Perhaps they can help me to learn how to calm myself in some manner. This time she stuck the card in her purse, locked the door and left for home.

Chapter Eleven

All Maria saw were a bunch of somber faces when she walked into the grief session that Wednesday evening. She found a seat in the rear deciding she was only going to listen and see what happened. A few did come over to welcome her, however she realized she was being standoffish and they were gracious enough to leave her alone. Looking way down to her right she happened to notice Jody's Dad. She wondered where Jody was, but then realized her thoughts were foolish. After all, she did not bring her own children to the session. Jody's Dad had such an unappealing manner about him that she almost wished he had not been there. Just looking at him put her in a bad mood.

The session started, and one poor woman had recently lost two children in a tragic car crash and the woman was beside herself in the way she acted. While urged to converse with the group and tell her feelings, her demeanor and her story was so upsetting that no one could hold back the tears. This is awful thought Maria. When break time rolled around she quietly sneaked out the door. She left feeling worse than when she had arrived.

Well, a lot of good that did me. She noticed a text message from her friend Janet stating she was back from her trip and would like to get together for a chat and drink. Maria immediately texted back saying she would meet her at the coffee shop in town in fifteen minutes.

"Gosh, Janet you don't look rested at all. What's up?"

"Well, those are always the first words one wants to hear upon returning from a trip."

"Sorry, but really, what's wrong?"

"It's my 16 year old son Fred. I know something is bothering him, but I can't get him to tell me what it is."

"Is someone bullying him? That seems to be such a problem today."

"He has not complained of that. His mood is just very grave and he lacks the usual jovialness that always was part of his demeanor."

"What does your Ex have to say about the moods?"

“To be honest, he doesn’t even seem to notice. For Jim, his best answer for anything that appears to be a little wrong is to write a check and voila, he thinks that solves everything.”

“Oh, Wow, what a jerk.”

“Yes, and his ditsy wife is not much better. Half of the time she acts as though the children frighten her.”

“Well, I have been hearing it said on talk shows that parents should spend a lot of time talking about things that don’t matter. This will get the children used to having a conversation with you so that when things do matter it will not be so dramatic and easier for them to then speak about anything, even problems. Since you have no better options at this time, I would suggest you try that.”

“Yea, what have I got to lose?”

The conversation drifted to wondering how Maria was coping, to Jody’s recent trip and the good time she had, and wondering how Maria’s children were getting along without Granny there to help. The biggest reaction Janet got from Maria was when she inquired how her job was going at the church office.

“Oh, Lord, Janet, I seem to be taking all my anger and sadness out on Father Jon. I am even beginning to get embarrassed by my actions. I have known him for so long he is more like a member of my family and therefore he becomes the easiest person right now for me to shout at every time I am upset.”

“Knowing Father Jon, he will not let your actions bother him. I feel positive that he feels good being around to give you the support you need, just like the three of us. You and Rob really had such a special marriage and friendship. I can’t even imagine, to be honest, what you must be feeling.”

“Janet, is the hurt ever going to go away?”

“I don’t know honey. I know for me, my divorce was one of the most terrible things I ever experienced. Please, that is not to say I am in anyway comparing my divorce to Rob’s death, but if anything I can appreciate your hurt even more imagining it to be four times what I felt, and in that respect, I inherently know that what you are experiencing is bad, really bad. I guess every time you get in one of those lousy moods, you must call one or all of us. Give it to us, like you do to Father Jon, and somehow we will all get through this horrible mess.”

“I like yelling at a man. A man I wouldn’t have to marry...A temporary replacement for Robert. Telling you guys just wouldn’t be the same. Besides, Jon is like my brother he’s been around so long. He knows me better than I know myself, so that is why I probably take it out on him all the time. I know it’s not fair. He’s only been totally respectful, not only to me but to my children as well, and even to Rob when he was still living. God, why did Rob have to die? He always took such good care of himself and exercised all the

time. He was not one ounce over weight. Go figure, huh? Janet, I miss him so much it hurts like I never knew I could hurt. One minute you are planning your whole life together, and then....! While we were always excited to be raising our children, we often talked about when they were out of the house some day. We knew we would miss them, but we talked all the time about the places we would visit, the beaches, the mountains, the foreign countries. Now I have none of that — none at all, I have nothing to which I can look forward. Even just sitting in rockers on our front porch, I can't imagine it anymore. That is so sad, and I feel a loneliness I never knew possible."

"I don't know how to say this to you Maria without it sounding condescending."

"What is it you have to say?"

"From what I understand, Robert left you and the children without a lot of worries, especially financially, plus you are well educated in your own right."

"Well, yes, he did. But what has that to do with anything?"

"Often the widows/widowers who were concerned about money or education had to figure out a way that they would survive. If they were left money but had no special training, they knew they needed to take that money to educate themselves so they could get a good job and support their family. If they were left without either an education, or money, they had to spend so much time either working very hard at low paying jobs, or they struggled just to pay the bills. Their minds were so preoccupied with the necessities of life; they did not have a lot of time to focus on the sadness and losses they were facing."

"So, are you calling me a spoiled brat? My God, you would think we both would get some credit for planning ahead for such a tragedy — just like we did. Now, you are saying that is hurting me?"

"I told you it was going to be hard to take. I meant you no harm, and I was not disparaging you in any way. The simple thing is facts are facts. Maybe you need to get a live in house keeper/nanny and get yourself a full time job. A job you would love and one that would give you a good focus with which to face life."

"Don't you think that would be hard on the kids, for me to be trapped most of my time in a job where they are not my first priority?"

"Guess, we'll never know unless you try it. They are happy children and probably want to see their mother happy too."

"Right now, your suggestion does not appeal to me at all, but I am grateful that you are here to offer me advice. Maybe with enough discussion the right answer will appear. We need this time alone to have these discussions. I do think that I had better get on home now though. Let me know if you have any more problems with Fred, and try talking to him about *nothing*."

“That’s a go. See you on our walk tomorrow and be careful going home.”

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Twelve

The friends decided for the remainder of the time that Maria was working for Father Jon they would now take their walk immediately after she got off work. Daylight Savings time had started and the weather was nice enough that walking after work would alleviate them all having to get up so early in the morning before Maria left for work. The time they were walking could be used by the children to complete their homework assignments.

The nearby park had been chosen as the destination for them all to meet and start their walk. Apparently they were all feeling extra lively since the pace they were walking was fast and energetic. Rita started the conversation by saying she had run into Jody's Dad at the super market the other evening. "He is one handsome man. I can't imagine him staying single for very long."

"Who's Jody?" Those words came out of Zoe's mouth. The girls could see that her mind was really not focused on being with her friends.

"Jody's the girl that was in the accident we witnessed," explained Rita.

"Oh, yes, I had forgotten we found out her name. If I remember correctly, when her father came in I momentarily did think how handsome he was."

Maria chimed in saying there was something about his bearing and composure that made her think of him as being somewhat snobbish.

Rita said, "On the contrary. He was very sociable and even thanked us again for helping his daughter. He even asked if I would relay the message to you Maria of how much he appreciated your riding in the ambulance with Jody."

"Well, that certainly is a surprise. Every time I have seen him in passing I always had the same standoffish impression. You know what I think Rita? He is enamored of you and is dazzled by your gorgeous red hair."

"You mean the red hair out of the bottle?" That was Zoe's contribution to the conversation.

Finally, Janet chastised Zoe when she said, "Zoe, that remark was totally uncalled for to Rita. Ever since we've known her she has always had this beautiful red hair. Perhaps in these later years Rita has used some coloring to

enhance her natural red hair, but we all know she is still gorgeous and your remark was unnecessary.”

“OK, OK, Sorry,” apologized Zoe. “I guess you can say I am just a smidgen jealous.”

Rita did pipe in this part of the conversation to say she had red hair from the day she was born and therefore her mother named her after the actress Rita Hayworth.

“You’re all gorgeous in your own way gals, but I wouldn’t be surprised if Jody’s Dad noticed Rita’s red locks when he first saw her in the emergency room, and that is why he is being so nice to Rita now,” continued Maria. “Too bad she’s married.”

“On another note,” Rita spoke her remembrances, “next Wednesday will be the fifth anniversary of my breast cancer surgery. Carl wants you and your families to join us for a cookout and a little ceremony he has planned to mark the occasion.”

Zoe quickly exclaimed what a great idea that was and what a nice man Carl was, always so thoughtful and considerate of others.

“Tell him we will make it a pot luck dinner. We gals can coordinate the vegetables, side dishes and dessert and all he has to worry about is the main course like hamburgers or hot dogs,” Maria included.

“That is certainly not necessary,” explained Rita, “but I know there is no point in telling you otherwise, so I will mention what you said to Carl and let him know it is a go.”

Like most days, weeks and months anymore, the time seemed to fly by, and the following Wednesday arrived before anyone could say Jack Rabbit.

Upon entering Rita’s living room, one immediately noticed a huge bunch of pink balloons with long strings attached. The yard was also featuring a new Crepe Myrtle tree, planted that morning, to mark the occasion every year when it was expected to bloom pink flowers. The florist went out of her way to see that the tree got delivered on the correct day.

After some appetizers, Carl came in with little pieces of white paper with pink ribbons printed on them. Everyone was asked to write a special wish to mark the occasion and tie the wish to the end of the string attached to each balloon. We all then went outside and stood around the new tree, someone said a few words, while the young men were joking and one saw his balloon go bye bye to the heavens and everyone looked up to the skies and stared. He quickly ran in to retrieve another balloon and the ceremony commenced; only this time everyone released their balloons watching them drift up and away all at the same time and the group all watched until the last one disappeared into the blue universe.

Once the last balloon was out of sight, all went inside, or out on the deck, to enjoy a fabulous meal and a lovely evening of socializing. It had been their

first group get-together since Robert's funeral, and all enjoyed being together for a fun reason instead.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Thirteen

One Saturday afternoon, Maria was volunteering at the local community center. This particular day was geared to giving teens at risk, or those without parents, advice on writing essays to help get entry into college or in teaching them how to write resumes in order to apply for a job.

Everyone volunteering was pleased with the huge turnout which meant their advising skills were going to be put to good use. However, the huge group of students also implied that there were way too many students who obviously were lacking private guidance at home, or there were too many at risk students.

Maria finished with a student before her lunch break and was walking to the water fountain to get a sip of water when she heard her name being called. Turning her head to the side, she noticed Jody coming towards her and she was the one that had been calling her name.

“Hello, Jody. Are you here to get some help in preparing paperwork for college?”

“Not really. I volunteered to help things keep running smoothly.”

“What a thoughtful thing for you to do Jody.”

“Well, actually my teachers advised me to do this to keep my mind off of my Mom. I have been so depressed that sometimes I can hardly function, and no one at home seems to be able to want to help or listen to me. It is as though we are all in a deep rut and can’t pull ourselves out. My Dad is the worst of all of us.”

“I’m so sorry Jody. In many ways I can relate.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I just lost my husband about a month ago.”

“Really?”

“Sadly, that’s true. Come into the lunch room with me and have a little chat.”

Jody did not need to be asked twice, nor did she have a problem accepting Maria’s offer of half of her sandwich.”

“My Dad did not want me to come today. After the accident he seems afraid to let me do anything or go anyplace. He’s driving me crazy. I had to get out of that house. None of us can keep it looking as good as when Mom was alive. I know I try, but nothing is the same. Sometimes I hate waking up in the morning.”

“Perhaps you need to see a psychologist honey.”

“Oh, my Dad would never hear of it. He always says that our problems stay in our own house.”

“Do you think it would help if I called and talked to him on your behalf?”

“I don’t know what would work to be honest.”

“Well, I’m temporarily working at Saint Gregory’s Church. Feel free to stop by any day you have the need to talk. Also, Father Jon might even offer some advice.”

“I’d like that. We’re not Catholic, but we haven’t been to any church in a long time.”

Maria wrote the parish phone number on a piece of paper along with her cell phone number and handed it to Jody. “I have to get back to my post now, but feel free to call me anytime.”

“Thanks so much Mrs. Andrews.”

Some of the children that were designated at risk nearly broke Maria’s heart when she heard their stories. Many were physically abused or mentally abused. Others had been addicted to drugs, or their parents had substance abuse problems.

There was a feeling of great satisfaction as she left her post that day, a feeling of worth that she could focus on someone else and really help them. Walking to her car she found the soft cool breeze refreshing on her skin. There was something uplifting about helping others. When she was so intent on helping others her purpose was less on focusing on her own problems.

Maria’s oldest son Gary was such a tremendous help to the family after his father died. She knew how hard he was trying to be *the man of the house*. Today he had volunteered to take and pick up the younger children from their various activities so their Mom could help the other children who were so much in need.

Barreling through the front door around five in the afternoon, the children were all in a fantastic mood and very much mirroring their own mother’s good mood. The delicious smell of spaghetti sauce cooking on the stove only served to enhance the mood even more so as they sat down to dinner hungry and anxious to eat.

Chapter Fourteen

How could it be that one day might be so positive, and the next day you could feel lousy all over again? When Monday morning rolled around, the mood overtaking Maria was so bad it was beyond comprehension.

Father Jon was already there to greet her with the request of wondering if Maria could possibly consider working one more month. Jan was not able to return yet, and he was still in a bind.

A huge sigh erupted from Maria's chest and out her mouth.

"Why did you have to start this day with that request?" She was gazing directly into Father Jon's eyes.

A dire feeling surged through Father Jon as he returned Maria's gaze. He was a priest he told himself. This woman friend was not supposed to stir emotionally these feelings spreading through his body. From day one of becoming a priest he confessed his love for his dear friend Maria. Every day Jon asked for God's help on this special love he felt for Maria — and only Maria.

When Robert was still alive, the family had not been in such close contact. Now, being in Maria's presence nearly every day was driving him out of his mind. Too bad he was not feeling these emotions just a few minutes before he asked Maria to continue working for about another month. Perhaps it was a mistake asking Maria to continue working there. Yet, Jan was having her own problems. At this thought he too let out a sigh from deep within him.

"Would you rather I find someone else to take over Maria?"

"No, Jon, I'll survive."

I am not sure I will survive though he thought to himself. He went to sit behind his desk, but there was no way he could keep his eyes off Maria that day. She bent over to get something from the bottom file drawer and her lovely physique drove him to distraction and he wiggled out of his chair to purposely look out his office window. There was a beautiful red cardinal perched on the branch of a tree in the yard and the cleric stood there momentarily watching the bird's every move. Fortunately, at that point, a family that

had recently moved to the area came in to talk to the priest, and Maria answered the ringing phone thus stabilizing the office routine.

Taking the vow and all it entailed to become a priest was a serious endeavor for Father Jon. He realized this promise would not be easy, but his every intention was to respect the vow and never break it

Later, going to his living quarters at the rectory, Jon noticed a note on the kitchen table from the cook stating his meal was kept warm in the oven, stating also that she would clean the kitchen when she returned the next morning. She apologized for leaving early that day to take care of a family matter.

Momentarily guessing the letters and phrases on the television show *Wheel of Fortune* proved to be the perfect dinner companion and a great diversion from his inner turmoil.

Maria and Jon were inseparable as children. If one child happened to be sick, the other child was always right there giving comfort. Jon obviously adored Maria much more than Maria would ever admit of her adoration for him. She could treat him nasty as a devil, but Jon was never fazed by her rudeness towards him.

Age was a factor in Maria treating Jon more respectfully as they both entered their teen years. Often Jon would anticipate asking Maria to a dance or to the Prom, but inevitably, despite the fact they were seemingly always together, some other guy would beat Jon to it and off Maria would go with someone else. Jon never gave up hope. He became active in sports and various school clubs, so one could not say he didn't have a life without her. Yet, he did avoid all the other pretty girls who always competed for his attention.

Jon was undeniably handsome. There was no getting around that fact. A popularity contest would have found the two of them comparable, and there were times he took other girls to various gatherings, but it was mostly to be near and observe Maria. The feelings Father Jon now presently felt were new to him and troublesome. Jon was a good man in every sense of the word and well respected in both the town and church community. He dispensed good advice for troubled parishioners, but in his own life felt a lack of knowing any individual where he could discuss any concerns he personally might be experiencing.

When Maria was sad or hurt it might as well have been Jon that was troubled.

Father Jon knew when he took the vow of celibacy that he would still experience the normal passion of all men, but he had always been quite willing to make what some might call a sacrifice. The church after all did not forbid marriage to anyone. All men who wanted to marry were free to do so. Also, the celibacy rule for Priests was not a Biblical mandate and therefore it is not an unchangeable doctrine or dogma. Roman Catholic Priests were

allowed to marry during the 1st century. The two aspects of Religion and Politics caused the change of priests marrying and caused a split between the Orthodox and Catholic Church. The Religious aspect said that the priest is married to the church and should be at the church's disposal at all times. The Political aspect came about when the Bishop of Rome did not want the priests' family inheriting the priest's wealth, so this problem was solved by not letting priests get married. The tradition of priestly celibacy is mandatory only in the Roman or Latin rite of the Catholic Church. Father Jon knew the rules of his church, and his intentions were always to follow them. For the most part it had never been a problem until recently. There were times when Jon first became a priest and he would visit Maria's family that he would often play a game in his mind of what would have happened if the church had changed the celibacy rules. He could imagine being married to Maria and the children she already had would be his own. Robert would be completely eliminated. Imagination told him they would live in a beautiful little ranch house near both their parents and he would still be a priest. Being a priest was instilled in Jon's mind from day one by his determined Irish mother. He had a sister who was a nun too. His and Maria's house would have a cute little white picket fence, and they would all be very happy always. This little fairy tale would always bring great satisfaction to Jon and was the perfect solution to any perceived problems being celibate might bring to his life in the future. Yet, in reality, he knew all this presupposition of what might have been would never occur, and he had learned to be quite content with the choices he had made — until recently.

Chapter Fifteen

Jody decided to stop by Saint Gregory's Church to see Mrs. Andrews. There was a feeling of a special kinship from Jody for Maria not only because she was at the accident site and offered her help, but now she felt even closer to her knowing Maria had recently also lost a loved one, someone she treasured and was special in her life.

"Jody." Maria exclaimed. "How great it is to see you. Is something bothering you?"

"No, I just had some classes that were cancelled today. An electrical problem or something at school, and I didn't feel like going home yet."

"Are things still bad at home?"

"Not bad, just depressing. My Dad would probably have a fit if he knew I was here."

"Why? Because you are at a church?"

"No. I just don't think he appreciates my getting advice from other women, even though you were so kind to me the day of the accident. There is this attitude he has that if any of us have to seek help outside our home then he feels he has failed us."

"Oh, that's unfortunate honey. While I don't want to encourage you to go against your father's wishes, I will say I am happy to see you."

Father Jon walked in at that moment and anyone could see that Jody was totally impressed by him. After a brief introduction by Maria and explaining once again that Jody was the young lady whose mother just died and that she had been in an accident since then, Father Jon immediately picked up on that news and invited Jody into his office for a brief talk.

Jody never realized priests could be so darned handsome. She at first was embarrassed to be sitting across from the reverend and staring into his beautiful eyes, but when the Father started to speak to her in his deep mellifluous, soothing voice, Jody was instantly put at ease.

"I'm sorry about your mother Jody. Maria told me the circumstances concerning your previous problems. Mothers have such strong attachments

to their children and vice versa. Losing a mother, especially when you are a young teen, can be so devastating.”

“You know, Father Jon, losing my Mom was bad enough, but my Dad is making life miserable for all of us. He would really be upset if he knew I was talking to you right now. I just know it would anger him a lot.”

“We certainly do not want to do anything against your father’s wishes.”

“I take full responsibility for coming here. I have made up my mind to do things that make me feel good. My Dad never told me I could not do certain things, so it is not as though I am disobeying him. His attitude is the problem. I get his message from the vibes he emits.”

“We have a church youth group that meets once a week that you might enjoy. Also, Maria and I are always available if you would like to get something off your chest as they say. Someday, though, I would advise you to sit down and have a nice talk with your Dad. Tell him what you have told me. Explain how revealing your concerns to others can be a comfort. Suggest maybe he should try and do the same.”

“Maybe someday I will Father Jon.”

“Maria can give you the information about the youth group on your way out.”

Jody shook the Priest’s hand and told him how much she enjoyed talking with him. She then rolled her eyes at Maria on the way out and silently mouth, “Wow, he’s a hotty.”

Maria gave her a chastising expression, and then both females began to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” asked Jon.

“You don’t want to know,” replied Maria.

For some odd reason Jody went up to Maria and gave her a huge hug before leaving. “You can expect me back,” she shouted on the way out the door.

Jody had given a lot of thought in attempting to talk to her Dad and see if they could work out a plan where they were not always in a combative mood. However, when she arrived home her Dad was out, so she put her back pack and the church youth group pamphlets on the end table near the phone and went into the kitchen to get a bite to eat. The dog enjoyed having her play with him a while before she went upstairs to her room where she became interested in a television talk show, and consequently she did not hear her Dad when he came into the house.

He checked the answering machine for any messages and noticed the church pamphlets on the table. *Catholic Church Youth Group* — What the Hell? He yelled, “Jody.....Jody?”

“Yea, Dad. I’m in my room.”

“Get down here — NOW!”

Her Dad’s tone sounded frightening, so she ran down the stairs.

“What’s wrong Dad?”

“Where the hell did you get these?” He was waving the pamphlets in front of her face.

“I got them at Saint Gregory’s Church.”

“Why in God’s name would you go there? We’re not Catholic.”

“We’re not anything anymore but grumpy old people who are unsociable.”

“We are doing just fine for a family that just lost their mother.”

“We are not doing fine,” Jody shouted, “And we are not the only family that ever suffered a loss.”

“Don’t shout at me young lady!”

“Don’t shout? Don’t shout? That is all you ever do anymore. Our life in this house is lousy. We’ve lost the love we used to have. You’re a terrible father. You show no concern for the feelings of your children.”

As soon as the words came out of Jody’s mouth, she wanted to kick herself.

The hurt expression on her Dad’s face was sheer torture to see. Neither spoke after their outrage. Jody so wanted to run up to her Dad, hug him, and say she was sorry, but he walked out of the house, got into his car and drove away. So much for the peaceful talk Father Jon suggested. How did she let those horrible words come out of her mouth?

Thinking only illogical thoughts, Jody decided to pack a few things and leave the house too. Embarrassment was the only emotion she could feel once her father left, and she also experienced a feeling of shame for speaking to him the way she did. Escaping the unfortunate situation proved the only solution to Jody, so she went to her car, got in and drove to nowhere in particular. Since it was the weekend anyway, she would find a safe place to park and just live out of her car for a few days where she hoped she could gather her thoughts.

When Jody’s Dad arrived home later that evening he was greatly concerned when his other children told him Jody was not home. Frankly, though, he was still so upset with her he did not experience the normal fear her absence might normally bring him, and he just figured Jody was staying with a friend.

Monday morning when she still had not arrived home was a different story. He called Jody’s friends and realized they had not seen nor talked to her. Irrationally, he tore out of the house and drove directly to Saint Gregory’s. He stormed through the door and started shouting at Maria. Father Jon had not yet arrived.

“Who the hell do you think you are butting into my family’s life? Where is my daughter? Where are you hiding her?”

Confused, Maria asked, “What do you mean?”

“Jody. Where is she?”

“I have no idea where Jody is.”

“Who do you think you are interfering in our lives? Where is my daughter?”

“I don’t have a clue where Jody is. If she is missing, I suggest you call the police.”

“If you didn’t interfere in our lives, I am sure I would not be looking for my daughter. I just lost my wife for crying out loud. You just don’t know how that feels.”

“I certainly do.”

“How can you even pretend to know what we are going through? And, I have three other children.”

“Listen jerk, I just lost my spouse a short time ago, and I also have four children. You are not the only one hurting.”

Mr. Viera did an about face when he heard Maria’s words. It was at this point that Father Jon walked into the office.

Jody’s Dad was not about to stop his angered tantrum though. He just switched his ire to Father Jon. “I suppose you know the whereabouts of my daughter. Do you? You clergy have your nerve trying to shove your pious religious beliefs down the throats of every person who thinks differently than you. You have your nerve trying to enroll my daughter into anything related to your church.”

“Sir, I just met your daughter yesterday when she herself walked into my office. I only offered her kind words and told her to discuss any problems she had with you, her father.”

“Well, then it’s that stupid lady you have working for you,” he said pointing to Maria.

“Look, you can be as mad as you want to be, but I will not stand here and listen to you use derogatory language about Maria or anyone else associated with Saint Gregory’s church, so knock it off.”

Wow, Maria thought. You go Father Jon.

“You sanctimonious religious people are all alike. I can see this conversation is not going to amount to a damn thing,” and at those words he stormed outside.

“Gosh, Jon, I am quite worried about Jody. Where do you think she could be?”

“I am tempted to call the police to report Jody missing, but that guy was so angry that frankly, I don’t know exactly what is the right thing to do at this point.”

“If we don’t hear anything about her soon, I have a friend this Mr. V. seems to like. I’ll have her give him a call. Maybe she can find something out.”

“I guess the only thing we can do right now is pray that she is fine,” and at that Father Jon walked into the privacy of his own office. He found that just being close to Maria was somewhat tortuous anymore.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Sixteen

Zoe stopped by Maria's house that evening after dinner.

"Hi gal, how's it going?"

With a perplexed look on her face Zoe exclaimed, "I'm worried every time the children come home from a weekend with their father. While I feel I have an excellent rapport with them, and we talk freely with each other — well, their faces are telling me a different story as opposed to their verbal statements when they tell me they had a good weekend with their Dad. "

"Do you think he is still abusing them?"

"Yes, I do, but I have no concrete evidence to prove this. I would attribute my feelings to motherly intuition. When I try to interrogate the children they sort of go into a defensive mode."

"I wonder if your ex is threatening to do them harm if they tell anyone so that they are afraid to say anything."

"That is exactly what I am thinking. The courts won't allow granting sole custody on suppositions, and rightly so, but I'll never understand how that moron was allowed to have custody in the first place."

"As good as your relationship is with your children, you are going to have to be more precise when you question them. Then again, maybe questioning them is not the answer. Perhaps you could sit them down with specific topics to discuss. For example, say, "Sometimes a few parents or friends have problems and they need to be treated for their problems. You know how I have always told you to tell me if your daddy or anyone else ever hurts you? Yet, sometimes, people may harm you but tell you they will hurt you even more if you tell someone what they are doing. You then tell them that if this should happen, they must promise you that they will always tell you because then you can get help for that individual and make them stop doing those bad things. Let your children know that if they don't tell you, it is possible that the person might even get worse with their abuse. After this little talk, go and do something fun with your children while reminding them to think about what you just said."

“Do you really think that might help?”

“To be honest Zoe, I really don’t know. I am fortunate to never have experienced any type of physical abuse. I may not be the right person to ask. I am just offering a suggestion, and you can let your womanly instinct decide what to do next.”

“If nothing else, I always feel comforted after discussing anything with you Maria. You do make a good sounding board. Who would have thought when I got married years ago that my spouse would have turned into such a monster? I thought we were both so happy at that time. However, I realize that if I am honest with myself I really didn’t know Al that well. We went together for about six months before he proposed to me and we became engaged, but the only times we were together it was only to do fun things. We never discussed having children. I never saw him around children, and the only money issues we ever talked about were costs for our wedding. We both had good jobs, but in retrospect we were extremely naïve and totally unprepared for the intricacies involved in the relationship of a marriage.”

Maria appeared deep in thought when she finally said, “In some strange way Robert and I did prepare an outline for our future. We discussed having children and put together a budget plan. We might have been considered extremely well-prepared to enter into becoming a couple and all that becoming a couple entailed, but what good did it do us though? Robert died.”

Contemplating her thoughts, Zoe exclaimed, “In reality your time spent planning a budget and discussing having children helped the two of you become more close to one another. You saw each other’s serious side and not just the fun exterior aspects of life. Yes, Robert died, but from what you have told us on the days we all walk together, the two of you planning ahead made it a lot easier for you to continue living in a lifestyle to which you had become accustomed. So, essentially, you knew each other a lot more than Al and I ever did. Sometimes, I must admit, I wish I could go back in time and start over doing things in a more intelligent manner.”

“We all make mistakes Zoe. Maybe some of us make them more than others, but we can’t look back because it is just not productive unless we learn from our mistakes and do better. You need to figure out the best way to help this abuse situation with your children and make this your priority.”

“I think I am going to call Al directly and make some threats of my own. Men like Al are really cowards. I’ll figure something out. Now, I’d better get on home. See you on our walk tomorrow.”

Usually, time spent with her friends put Maria in a good mood, but that desired result did not occur when Zoe left that evening. Maria had a lousy sleep, and when she went to work the next morning she was extremely irritated much to the chagrin of Father Jon.

Jon inquired if Maria had heard any news about Jody.

“I really have no idea. I spent time with another friend last evening that has problems of her own, and honestly I did not give Jody another thought once I got home. I love the child, if you can love someone you haven’t known very long, but her father obviously does not want me in her life, and unless the child persists in calling me, I will not go searching for her. I feel confident that had something terrible happened to her we would have heard by now.”

“I know you had good advice for Jody. Hopefully, her father will realize this and come to his senses soon.”

“You know something? If I never see him again I won’t be sorry one little bit.”

“Ok, ok, I can see an attitude coming on and overtaking you. Think I’ll go and say some prayers for you,” the Father said while giving Maria a minor salute, and off he walked to talk to the grounds keeper in the church yard.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Seventeen

Maria was contemplating if all her friends' spouses caused nothing but problems. This occurred after watching television one night while preparing dinner. Rita's husband was a high powered politician, extremely attractive, and when discussing his good looks, his description as a "lady killer" was often the way he was described in typical conversations. Maria momentarily thought perhaps the wording of "killer" was totally inappropriate as it could easily be taken in the literal context by someone in a newer generation and therefore be totally misconstrued while she knew it to mean one totally good looking hunk of man.

Often, the two couples would socialize with each other and these occasions were always enjoyed by Maria and Rob. The relationships of both couples appeared to epitomize what was expected in a good marriage.

Listening to the evening news on television while fixing dinner, there was the mention of a group of politicians at a meeting in some foreign country that were involved in a sex scandal while using government money to boot. Never associating Rita's husband with the scandal, Maria did not pay that much attention to the news at first until a breaking news flash monopolized the screen which caused her to turn the volume louder. Maria knew Drew was away, and she became horrified when she realized Drew was involved after they mentioned his particular government department. *Oh my God no* thought Maria. *Do I call Rita?* What Maria did not know was that Rita would not have answered the phone even if Maria did call her.

Stories get blobbed across the airways that are most horrific in content, and they get repeated ad nauseam. No one ever gives consideration to the fact that in many cases the individuals about whom they speak often have relatives that are at home listening to their family member being spoken about with disparaging content. While the words may be true, or not, the repercussions felt by the family members only serve to hurt their relatives beyond repair, and this certainly was the case for Rita.

Zoe was the first to call Rita with the intention of warning her after Zoe heard the news on the car radio. Rita had just returned home and was checking her mail when the phone rang.

“Hi Zoe,” she answered after seeing the caller ID.

“Hey Rita, have you been hearing any of the bulletins on the news?”

“No, what happened?”

“You are going to need to listen. I won’t keep you on the line. Just let any of us know if we can help.”

“You’re scaring me.” At this point she could read the taped message along the bottom of her television screen. “Oh, God, Zoe.....listen, I’ve got to get the children. Please don’t call back. I’ll get in touch with you later.”

Zoe texted all her friends and Maria was receiving her text as she was contemplating what to do where Rita was concerned. Boy, she thought, that type of news has to be right up there with the death of a spouse. Then, she thought again and decided there really was no comparison — with the death being a heck of a lot worse.

All three friends texted back and forth and decided to give Rita some space and time alone with her children in order to assimilate everything being reported. Rita did agree, by sending a text to Zoe, that she would be in contact with her friends probably the next morning.

The news flashes were constant and obnoxious stating speculation as though it were fact. As mad as Rita was that her husband might possibly be involved in this scandal, she did consider that in fairness to him she ought to at least listen to what he had to say to her first. She tried waiting patiently for him to call while making up her mind she was not going to call him. Fortunately, the children would have been on the school buses and not privy to the news flashes yet. As soon as they walked through the door, she asked them to please sit down in the den while explaining she wanted to talk to them about something important. Rita had prepared some snacks to appease their after school appetites.

After the discussion with her children, Rita was not totally convinced they actually comprehended the full impact of what had occurred. At least, she thought, they heard the news from her and not from their friends. This fact helped her to feel she had some control over what might happen.

The hour was late when Rita finally decided to go to bed. The news casts had been unrelenting in their smear campaign against every man in Drew’s organization. All those men, according to most talk show hosts, were ruthless womanizers without a moral bone in their bodies. Fortunately, the children had all fallen asleep after doing their homework. During homework time they were not allowed to have any use of their electronic devices unless they were using Word on their computer. Rita had just rolled down her bed comforter and was ready to climb into bed when the phone rang. It was Drew. In one

sense, she feared picking up the phone, and her emotions were mixed. Should she be happy, sad, or angry?

“Hello, Drew.”

“Hi honey. You can’t imagine everything that’s going on here.”

“Are you serious? What’s going on there is all over the news here, blocking out normal programming.”

“Oh, Lord, no.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“A few jerks here have made our whole organization look bad. My God, they are acting like a bunch of teenagers.”

“Can you really tell me you were not involved?”

“Absolutely not! Rita, how can you even think such a thing? Nor were any of the other men in our small group. After our session and dinner we all watched a movie in the theater located across the street from our hotel. When we came out of the theater, we could see all sorts of commotion in front of the hotel like television crews, trucks and vans that were parked there. Had we known it involved our organization, we would have entered through a rear door, but instead we walked right into the fiasco because we were curious as to what was happening. We were bombarded with flash bulbs and had microphones shoved in our faces. Some security guards helped us to get away and to our rooms. We could see some guys from the other groups being questioned, but after we showed our receipts from the theater they allowed us to go to our rooms. Plus, some other hotel guests vouched for us that they had seen us throughout the entire show.”

“Well, the media here has not mentioned anything like that. I know it sounds terrible to you that I should be so skeptical, but you would have to be here and listening to everything that is being said. Even if you are innocent, you are still being maligned. They make it sound like you are all cheating on your spouses.”

“God, honey, I am so sorry....I”

Outside, Rita got a glimpse of some vans parking in front of the house.

“Oh, no Drew,” she interrupted him. “The crews have arrived. I need to go and close all the blinds.” She was in such a hurry, she didn’t even remember to say goodbye.

Drew stood staring at the phone. What right does anyone have to smear everyone’s name because of a few? He remembered one leading newscaster who had been accused by a woman of having an affair. How quickly that story was thrown under the table, but when it involves other innocent people they only appear to want to perpetuate falsehoods.

Early the next morning, with the children’s suitcases having been packed the night before, Rita ushered all of them out the back door where Zoe was waiting in her SUV. She was going to take Rita and her children to stay with Rita’s Mom in a neighboring state. Rita would contact their teachers and

home school the children until something else took precedence in the news. All in the vehicle were told how Drew and several of the other men were innocent, and hopefully this fact would be brought to everyone's attention in the media soon. In the meantime, she wanted her family out of the area. Her friends were going to take care of the house and send any media personnel that were still hanging around on their way.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Eighteen

That same morning, Maria entered the parish office about ten minutes late. She was unaware that Father Jon had already arrived. He was crouched down near the file cabinet deep in concentration hunting for a folder, so he did not realize Maria had arrived either.

The parish phone rang, and the two surprised individuals jumped at the same time to answer it, and both let out yells of fright. The phone continued to ring as both stood there staring at each other. Maria's lips were so close to Father Jon's he was overcome with a momentary reaction of wanting to kiss her. Had Maria not backed up and away from the priest to answer the phone, he absolutely knew he would have taken the opportunity to do just that. With shaking hands, the priest attempted to hand Maria the retrieved file where he had written some instructions for her to do after she finished talking on the phone.

What is wrong with me? I haven't experienced these strong emotions since before becoming a priest. Physiologically he felt increased desperation and heartbeat. Every part of his being felt like it was pulsating. Help me God. This cannot be good. He reasoned that the only logical thing for him to do at the moment was leave the rectory quickly. He decided to make use of his gym membership to work out his frustrations.

Around lunchtime, Jody came wandering into the church office. Maria was eating lunch at her desk and said, "Well, young lady, to what do I owe the honor of this visit? I am happy to see you all safe and sound. You certainly gave us all a scare, and your father treated us like criminals."

"I know. He is still convinced you knew where I was and that you ordered me to leave my home. My Dad is so irrational that I can't convince him otherwise. I came home later on Monday after I cooled down. Besides, it was scary sleeping in the car all night."

"You didn't."

“Yes, I did. I couldn’t face my Dad after our conversation. He was so accusing, and I said some nasty things to him. He needs professional help I think, but no one can tell him anything.”

“Knowing how your dad feels about us, maybe this is the last place you should be right now.”

“I felt you deserved some type of explanation and to know that I was back home and safe. I gathered from my Dad that he had been here to accuse you in person.”

“Both Father Jon and I felt very helpless when your father came here. We were frightened for you, and we really wanted to call the police, but he was so adamant against that. He also made it quite clear we should not interfere in any way or manner.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt my Dad, but I think he is finally beginning to change a little after hearing my words. Maybe I need to give him more time. I just hope he doesn’t continue to stifle me since that can be extremely frustrating.”

Wearing shorts and a tee shirt, or what one might call gym or workout attire and with a towel draped around his neck, Father Jon walked in and noticed Jody. He expressed how happy he was to see her.

“Thanks, Father Jon. I’m sorry my Dad was so nasty to you. I just stopped by to let you know I am okay and that I survived my ordeal.”

“I do want you to know you can always count on us to help, but it would be best if we had your father’s approval.”

Father Jon continued on back to the living quarters while the two females gave him the once over from his rear position. Jody reluctantly prepared to leave after pretending to faint and go extremely ga-ga looking at Father Jon’s posterior.

Maria waved her hands at Jody with the playful intention of shoos her away which caused both of the gals to giggle loudly.

“The two of you appear to find a lot of humor together,” remarked Father Jon when Maria dropped the finished file on his desk.

“Oh, yea, we do!”

The building committee in charge of the new church partition was meeting with Father Jon that afternoon. He was thankful for the diversion as he watched Maria leave his office and return to her desk.

Maria, in the meantime, sent a text to Rita to see how she and her family were doing. Drew was going to fly directly to his mother-in-law’s home and spend some time with his family hopefully trying to get them to understand his dire situation. In a few days he would be going to a hearing in Washington, DC about the circumstances that supposedly involved apparently all in his group — deservedly, or not.

Rita thanked Maria for her concern and said they were all managing as well as could be expected under the circumstances. Maria’s mood became

somber once again as her heart ached not only for the loss of her husband, but for the problems her friends were also experiencing. Mentally, she decided to create in her mind a menu for dinner that would be filled with all the comfort foods. She was not going to let the somberness drag down her emotions. Think positively, she told herself. Some good old fashioned meat loaf and mashed potatoes with a nice gooey dessert ought to do the trick. The rest of the afternoon progressed on a more even keel.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Nineteen

On their early morning walk, Janet had all types of sinister questions to ask about Drew. “Surely you guys don’t think he’s innocent of everything, do you? I mean really, we all know that all men are alike.”

Zoe was the first to snap at Janet which was surprising knowing the fact that her own marriage turned out to be a disaster. “That’s a terrible thing to say. What’s wrong with you?”

“Oh, please, you of all people should know that about men for crying out loud.”

Maria piped in by asking Janet why she thought all men were having affairs. “Just because you chose a man that proved to be a lousy husband doesn’t mean that all men are bad. I certainly trusted Robert implicitly.”

“Well, Robert of course was the one exception that comes to my mind. Name me another one.”

“What about your parents and my Granny and Robert’s parents?”

“They came from another era and things were different then.”

“You are so totally out of whack,” both Maria and Zoe agreed and Zoe continued, “We have many friends that have happy marriages. We are not all running around having affairs.”

“Oh, you don’t know what goes on inside someone’s bedroom and in their family life,” Janet snapped back.

“My God,” said Maria, “Why are you so hostile? Drew has advocates who could vouch for him that he was inside a theater all night watching a movie with men from his group, and others from his hotel who knew the men and were also in the theater vouched that they were there all evening.”

“How do you know that? I never heard any of that on the news.”

“That’s because the media doesn’t always report the news and the facts. They are looking for headlines that will show a different story because their readership seems to thrive on tawdry situations.”

“Well, I am not totally convinced Drew is innocent.”

“You prove my point about readership.”

Zoe finally requested they talk about something else. Their walk was becoming more of a chore rather than something they usually enjoyed. “How’s your job working out with that hunk of a priest?”

“Lord, Zoe, the both of you are driving me crazy this morning, and I am wondering now why I ever came on this walk.”

At that point, Janet poked Maria in the ribs and pointed to the path across the street. “Get a load of who is jogging over there?”

“Who is it?”

“The girl who was in the accident...it’s her hunky Dad.”

“You mean Jody? He’s the last man I want to see right now, that arrogant son of a you know what.”

“Whoa, you really hate that guy, don’t you?”

“Frankly, I can’t find anything nice at all about him. I don’t like the way he treats his kids, and I hate how he feels sorry for himself like he is the only one with problems. I speak from knowledge since he has come to the parish office and confronted not only me, but Father Jon as well.”

“Oh, lighten up,” said Janet. “Not everyone handles situations in the same calm, practical manner as you do Miss Pris.”

Maria stopped in her path. “Are you just out and determined to start a fight over anything this morning? Next time you are in such a lousy mood just stay home.”

“Puleezeeee Guys. I am not enjoying this walk at all,” Zoe interjected.

Both Maria and Janet said, “I’m sorry.”

At this point another group of lady friends passed the girls and the conversation quickly turned to thoughts about them.

Maria took a quick shower once she got home. When towel drying she could overhear her son Bob talking to someone named Alicia on his cell phone in the hallway. She had noticed him to be preoccupied lately, spending a lot of time on the phone, half the time trying to whisper, and often he was coming home later than usual. Maria made a mental note to spend more time talking to him. If this Alicia was the person causing her son’s distractions, Maria definitely wanted to know about it. How often we become so concerned with other children’s problems (she was thinking particularly of Jody) that we forget our own responsibilities. As a widow, she could not let this happen. Without any male influence in their lives her children needed her more now than ever. Certainly, it was not uncommon for many children to be in the house, both male and female. They just hung around watching television, playing ping pong, raiding the refrigerator and having fun. Lately, Maria could not help but notice though that Bobby was spending more time away from home, and this Alicia was one young lady she could not recall ever meeting.

Maria had forgotten some important bills at home when she went to work that morning, and she needed to be sure to get them in the mail. She put the

answering machine on at the office and left for fifteen minutes to go and get the bills. Upon opening the door she walked in on Bobby and Alicia on the couch, half undressed and well....Maria was shocked. The children did not hear her open the door they were so engrossed in their love making. *What should I do, and why am I the one to be embarrassed?* Her first reaction was to think of Alicia as nothing but a slut out to get her son, and all kinds of thoughts whirled around in her head. I have to stop this right now. Actually, it was the gasp coming out of Maria's mouth that caught the attention of the teens and they were immediately grabbing clothes and covering themselves with pillows while attempting to sit up and appear like nothing had happened.

"Mom, what are you doing home?"

"This IS my home, and I can darn well come here any time I want, in case you forgot that fact."

"I mean, you are usually at work."

"Yes, I am, and I am also extremely disappointed in you and your actions right now."

Alicia had by now managed to get her clothes on and started to walk out the front door. Maria did not try to stop her she was so upset, but Bobby did attempt to get her to stop. Maria grabbed him by the arm and softly said to him, "She's humiliated right now. Let her go. We need to talk."

At first Bobby pulled his arm away from his Mom in anger, and then he became resolved that he needed to face up to the situation. He went and sat down on the couch and waited for his mother's tirade. Instead he was pleasantly shocked at the calmness in his mother's voice.

"I know how upsetting this must be for you Bobby. I had no idea you would be home now, and while I am sure we are both somewhat embarrassed by my catching you in that uncompromising position, nevertheless I am happy I caught you actually. I wish your Dad were here to give you advice. I know hearing the words from him would be much less humiliating for you. However, it is what it is, and I happen to be the one here. Emotions can put you teenagers in such turmoil with your hormones driving you crazy, but I want you to stop and think of the consequences of your actions. Furthermore, if you really are infatuated with Alicia and she is the nice girl I would hope you would choose then she deserves your respect. Getting her pregnant and grabbing her body just to fulfill your own desires is selfish and immature. You should revere her and treat her with esteem. Not take her on the sly on someone's couch and hope she doesn't get pregnant. If you are thinking she could always get an abortion, just remember — getting an abortion is not a form of birth control. If this continues, then you probably should be using condoms, but my mentioning the fact does not mean I am giving you the right to get in a position to use them. I am hoping you learn to treat your friend with the respect she deserves and try to curb your emotions. Alicia is

invited to come here anytime, but only when others are in the house with you. The same goes for when and if you visit her home. With all the kooks in society, I would not even advise you to park your car some place where someone could harm the two of you. Please try and be more responsible honey. I love you so much. Please know I want only the best for you and your friends.”

“I’m sorry mom. I’ll try and do better.”

“Why don’t you call Alicia and see how she is doing. Let her know I am not angry and assure her I would welcome her back anytime.”

Alicia picked up her cell phone and the first words out of her mouth were, “Oh, Bobby, I feel like such a jerk. Your mom must hate me.”

“Actually, my mother was very understanding, but I guess we better not spend a lot of time alone anymore, or we may really get in trouble.”

“Yea, my mom has tried to tell me in the past what I should and shouldn’t do, but it is one thing to hear her words, and quite another to lie close to you. I know you have that part time job. I think I need to get one too. I don’t need to have too much idol time on my hands.”

“Just make sure you don’t hook up with some other jerk. I know how jealous that would make me.”

“Well, same goes for you Buddy.”

“Why don’t you come over and have Sunday dinner with us.”

“Oh God, I don’t think I could face your mother.”

“She’s the one that told me she is not angry with you. She just expects better things from us in the future. Think we can do it?”

“I don’t know. I guess if your whole family is around — well, we are not stupid. We’ll just have to try really hard.”

When Bobby got off the phone he mentioned to his mother that he invited Alicia over for Sunday dinner.

“Good,” she said verbally and mentally she made a note to invite Father Jon over that evening too. There is nothing like a good priest to instill some values in the kids.

Chapter Twenty

Monday afternoon the parish office had to be closed due to an air-conditioner failure. A message was left on the parish phone telling parishioners there was an air-conditioner problem and letting them know what numbers to call in an emergency while explaining that regular phone service should resume by the following morning.

The weather was gorgeous outside. It had been a while since Maria had an afternoon off from work this early in the day, so she decided to get some rays on the back deck. She slipped into her easily moveable lounge chair lying back in a horizontal position staring up at the sky. The blue of the sky was beyond description, pale and glistening from the sun's rays. Humongous white puffy clouds drifted across the sky appearing like huge chunks of cotton with frayed wispy edges. Before she knew it, Maria fell sound asleep, only to be awakened twenty minutes later by the squeaky squawky sound of two birds fighting. She propped up her chair to a sitting position and reminisced about the dinner the evening before. Father Jon's repartee with the children was something to be admired. The conversation never came to a lull the entire evening and after dinner while Maria stacked the dishwasher, Alicia, Bobby and Father Jon played the board game Monopoly while the younger children were sent upstairs to get ready for bed, and Gary was working at the fast food restaurant ... *This is what it would have been like had Robert not died. They would have been one happy little family enjoying a Sunday evening in the cozy atmosphere of their home with a friend there to take in all the fun.* Just that one little thought of Robert was enough to bring tears to Maria's eyes which barely had time to roll down her cheeks when the younger children ran in from school and seeing the patio door blinds ajar they immediately found their mother. At this point Maria realized her brief time for relaxation was over and they all went inside for milk and cookies.

"I want to join Little League Baseball Mommy," said little Gabe.

"Yes, I remember promising you could do that once they announced plans for the League. Did you bring home the paperwork for me to sign?"

“Yup, sure did. The first practice is tomorrow night at 5:30 at Reagan Park.”

“OK, sweetie. We’ll leave around five o’clock even though the field is not that far from our house. Better to be early than late.”

The next afternoon, Maria left a note for one of the older children to put the casserole she made in the oven so dinner would be ready when she returned from practice with Gabe. As soon as they got to the field, Gabe saw his friends and took off. She went and sat on the bleachers with some of the other mothers most of whom she knew.

One of the women was heard saying, “I hope my son gets put on that hunk’s team.”

“Who do you mean? What is his name,” Maria inquired.

“I really don’t know his name, but you can believe I am going to find out soon enough,” said the divorced mother of twin boys.

Maria had not seen a lot of the women in quite a while, so she enjoyed the little tidbits of gossip swirling from their tongues. She looked up just in time to see Gabe give the ball a solid hit with the bat. All his buddies were cheering for him, and Maria was glad Gabe had found an activity he enjoyed doing as she thought it would be good for him to be around not only his friends but some adult males as well. He was as happy as could be after practice and his disposition put his mother in a good mood. They stopped at the ice cream shop and got a quart of his favorite ice cream to have for dessert after dinner. Whether it was the lovely weather, or just that the children were learning to adjust to the loss of their father, Maria didn’t know, but conversation flowed freely that evening around the dinner table as they all appeared to be in a good mood. Even Bobbie and Alicia seemed to have settled their emotions somewhat. Gary, *God Bless him*, always appeared calm and happy. Whatever he felt at the loss of his father, no one ever knew. Without that constant smile on his face, Maria might have been concerned, but that smile always seemed so genuine and Gary’s disposition was always on a pleasant even keel.

“How do you like your coach Gabe?” asked Bobby.

“Oh, that man is neat. He said he was going to try his best to see that we all participated in some way, but of course we really had to pay attention and follow the rules. Oh yea, Mom, I volunteered to bring the drinks to the first game in another week.”

“You did, did you?”

“The coach said to bring a lot of different kinds because some religions don’t allow their children to have caffeine in their drinks.”

“Ok, will do. What is your coach’s name by the way?”

Gabe had a questioning look on his face and said, “Oh, gee whiz, I forgot it. I sure do like him though.”

Maria glanced at the paperwork that the coach had signed, but his handwriting was illegible. Oh well, she thought, we'll find out soon enough.

"Oh Yea Mom, I remember now, the coach said to call him Mr. V."

That doesn't tell me much thought Maria, but she said, "Alrighty then — Mr. V it is."

"Can I go and play with Eli for a while after dinner?"

"Is your homework done Gabe?"

"I'll start it now. I just have to look up five words in the dictionary. It won't take me long."

"Ok, sweetheart."

Eli was a darling little African American child who lived down the street and came from a lovely family. When the family moved into the neighborhood about a year ago, Eli's mom immediately attached herself to Maria expressing her concerns that the neighborhood people might treat her family with a hint of racial bias, but she later confessed that her thoughts never materialized into facts. She especially told Maria that she and her family could not have been more cordial to them when they arrived. Maria was fascinated by Eli's real name which the mother said she first saw in the Second book of Samuel in the Bible. Eli was the shortened version of Elishama, born to David through one of his concubines or wives she explained.

Maria remembered thinking, well when did the rule come about for one man married to one woman? The mother further explained that all her family members were telling her that the child would have a hard time having to live with such an unusual name, but without much thought most people just shortened the name to Eli and the name never became a problem except when she had to spell it out when Eli was required to give the full birth name. Gabe apparently had a big crush on Eli and the two of them wanted to spend every spare minute together. Maria finally told Gabe he could go after checking first with Eli's mom to be sure his arriving would not upset Eli's schedule.

Maria had a much older sister who lived on the west coast. It had been over twenty years since the two sisters had seen one another. Francine had one son named Josh who was about five years old the last time Maria had seen him. The two sisters conversed via phone about once a month, but they had just spoken earlier in the week so that when the phone rang and Maria could see it was Francine, she was somewhat surprised to hear from her again. "It's Granny Maria, she's been in a car accident, and I am sorry to say they don't expect her to survive." As the oldest of Granny's grandchildren, Francine had the Power of Attorney to handle Granny's affairs and it was a neighbor of Granny's who called Francine.

"Oh, my God, no. Oh, Francine, I feel like I am going to collapse."

“Sit down, honey. I know how you feel because I went through the same thing. I am leaving in an hour on a flight to Chicago.”

“Of course, Franny. I am going to make arrangements to come to Chicago too as soon as we are finished speaking. You will probably be mid flight when I have my schedule. For sure you will need some help. God, we are all she has left except for Mom and Dad. You can explain all the details when I see you.”

“Josh is coming with me. You should see him Maria. He’s a man now and will be a big help I am sure.” Francine had also lost her husband at a young age.

“Well, I will focus on seeing Josh and try not to focus on Granny. I will text my info and will get a cab from the airport. Gary and Bobby can watch the younger children Gabe and Joey, and Mom and Dad are not far away though physically they are having medical problems too. I’ll also ask Father Jon to keep an eye on them. Granny did the right thing having you carry out all her plans instead of Mom and Dad because they are now so fragile themselves. Hang in there Francine. Love, ya.”

“Bye honey, love you too.”

Maria did not know which way to turn first after she placed the phone in the receiver. The older boys were not home yet, so the first thing she did was to make plane reservations and then she called Father Jon.

He was as shocked as Maria and Francine. Granny was like his second mother and Maria knew how the news of her accident was going to affect the priest.

Chapter Twenty-One

When Maria arrived at Granny's home it was pouring rain, and between trying to keep her hair covered and lugging her over-packed suitcase, she had a difficult time getting out of the cab, paying the driver and getting into the house. She should have let the cab driver put her luggage in the trunk, but she obviously was not thinking straight. On the flight to Chicago she kept trying to imagine seeing her nephew now. Francine was recovering from a serious operation when Maria's husband died so she and Josh did not get to Rob's recent funeral, therefore Josh was about six years old the last time she saw him which meant he was now around twenty-six years old and a man. Maria realized that all she would look like to him was an older person, but his transformation was going to be totally different from a child to manhood. Though when she thought about it, her hair used to be much darker and was worn in a curly style years ago. Now, a lot of her time was spent straightening her naturally curly hair to fit today's trend of straight locks. In that respect, she would look different, except with all this rain and humidity in the air her straight locks were easily now turning to either curls or frizz.

Maria reached the front door, and after a few moments the door opened slowly and there was Francine. She had let her hair go completely white and it was at first shocking to see her like that, but Maria realized she was beautiful either way. The look on Francine's face was not good, and Maria instantly knew that Granny had passed. She dropped her suitcase on the floor with a bang and fell into her sister's arms.

"I know I am selfish to say this Franny, but I just don't know how I can go on without Granny. She was the one person who always kept me on the straight and narrow path, and put me in my place when I became obnoxious. Having her death so soon after Rob's is almost more than I can tolerate."

"I know honey. You and Granny were so close. You're not being selfish at all. I fully understand," Francine said as she kept rubbing her arms up and down Maria's back. At this point Maria sensed someone walking to her from her right side and this very deep voice said, "Hi, Aunt Maria."

“Who is this handsome man?” Maria threw her arms around Josh and gave him a huge bear hug. As she pondered his appearance, she could see the adorable face Josh had as a child still there though it was much more mature now, and while still adorable, the word to presently describe him would be to call him downright gorgeous. Josh had graduated law school, and as Francine’s only child he was indeed the light of her life. His skills as an attorney would come in handy the next few days for sure, and this was probably a good reason to give Francine the Power of Attorney for Granny’s estate rather than Granny’s own child and the mother of her granddaughters.

“We kept your dinner warm in the oven. You must be starved.”

“I hadn’t really thought about it to be honest, but I know I should have something to eat in order to keep myself functioning. I am still in a daze, and while I eat, I would like to hear just what happened to Granny.”

“She was on her way home from a routine doctor’s visit and had a green light going through a four way intersection. A thirty-five year old sober man that was busy texting ran right through a red light on Granny’s left and smashed right into her car. While the seatbelt and front airbag were helpful in keeping Granny stable, her car was old and did not have side airbags and some glass from the broken window cut an artery in her neck and she nearly bled to death by the time the medics got to her. We had some slight hope they might be able to save her, but I just think the trauma was too much for Granny.”

“That sounds like a good reason to sue,” Maria said as she looked in the direction of the young attorney.

Francine, however, piped right in and said the young man was so remorseful she did not think she had the heart to start a law suit. She expressed how she did hope he would be punished appropriately however. Besides, there are too many other things we have to consider right now. Fortunately, after Gramps died, Granny took the time to write out all the instructions for her own funeral, telling me where her assets were, and she was extremely thorough in that regard, so our job mainly is to follow through with the information already provided by her.

Slapping the palm of her hand against her forehead Maria remembered and exclaimed how she had to contact Father Jon immediately so that he could tell the children of Granny’s death.

“Oh yes, Maria, tell Father Jon that Granny expressed a desire to have him perform her funeral Mass.”

Arrangements were made at Granny’s local church with that Parish priest for the date and time of the Mass and Father Jon was going to officiate. Train reservations had been made for Father Jon, Maria’s children and her parents. They would be travelling together. Local hotel reservations were made for the family and Father Jon, and Maria would move out of Granny’s house to stay with her children when they arrived.

Throughout the evening there were many kind interruptions of friends and neighbors coming to express their condolences and most of them came with platters of food. Around ten thirty that evening Francine, Josh and Maria were exhausted, and they turned out the downstairs' lights and went upstairs to bed.

Maria looked around the room where she often stayed as a child. It appeared so much smaller than what she had imagined. Granny had not done much to change the décor over the years and everything was pretty much where Maria remembered it to be. Even the odd flaw in the ceiling that always made Maria think it was a huge mouse was still there staring at her. The sheets and cross stitched handmade comforter had the smell of Granny's house — it was neither a good fragrance, nor a bad one. Perhaps the smell could better be categorized as more of a familiar odor. As Maria's mind wandered, she was overwhelmed with the worry she might not be able to fall asleep. However, as she gazed around the memorable room imagining all the good times they had at this home as children, she easily fell asleep without a problem and only awakened the next morning when she could smell a fresh pot of coffee being brewed and bacon being cooked. Revived from a good night's sleep, she took a quick shower and hastily made her way down to the kitchen anxious to grab a bite to eat. She was greeted by Josh and Francine.

There was going to be a lot of running around to do this day. They all knew this and therefore ate heartily to fortify themselves. In the late afternoon Josh would go to the train station to pick up Father Jon and Maria's Mom, Dad and children. He could not help but think how odd it would be to see miniature versions of his Aunt Maria. Josh loved young children and often volunteered his time as a big brother in his home state. He dreamt often of someday meeting a nice woman, marrying and settling down with youthful offspring of his own.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Despite the fact that Maria and Francine were busy, they managed to take the time to register the Priest and Maria's family at the hotel since Josh was going to bring them all back to the house to help eat some of the mountains of food brought to the home. With the exception of warming a few things in the oven or microwave, at least no one was going to have to cook, and paper plates would do the job of china this day. The obituary had been written and given to the funeral director to be put in the local papers and also in the newspapers back in Maria's hometown.

It so happened that Jan, the regular parish secretary, had finally returned to work so Maria did not have to be concerned that she would not be there to handle the incoming phone calls and other parish duties. Maria had actually been looking forward to spending time with her gal pals who had missed several weeks of their daily walks. Ever since Rita had to leave town the girls' daily routine was upset. Rita's return actually coincided with the same week as Granny's death, so once back home Maria was looking forward to meeting with her friends who would be so good about consoling her, giving her their advice and just for the sheer enjoyment of being with them.

Josh's car pulled into the driveway. Maria was expecting the children to barrel out of the vehicle and come running, so she was rather surprised when they all seemed so reserved. How foolish of me to think the children would not be in a somber mood thought Maria. They loved their Granny, and for children who were so young and who had recently experienced the death of their own Daddy, of course they were not going to be their usual jovial selves. There were big hugs all around and Josh was the one to exclaim, "I'm famished. Hope we can all sit down to eat right now."

Maria's Mom had developed a terrible headache while on the train, so her two parents went directly to the hotel. Granny's death had really upset her daughter who was not all that well herself.

"Everything's ready. Let's sit down and say grace."

Father Jon took the honors of saying grace and obviously the somberness of the children did not affect their appetites because they all dug in with great gusto. A lot of the conversation revolved around what readings and songs were to be used at Granny's service, and then there was catching up to do as the children learned all about the success of their cousin Josh.

The funeral was scheduled for ten o'clock in the morning, and the family was to arrive at the funeral parlor which was across the street from the church at nine o'clock. Knowing this, Maria cut their evening short so she could get the children settled in bed. Josh took them all to the hotel in the huge van they had rented to transport the large family around.

Once the children were in bed, Maria was going through some receipts in her purse when she noticed some instructions for Father Jon there that had been given to her by the parish priest. She put on her robe and walked down the hall to give the paperwork to Father Jon. Jon opened the door with a surprised look on his face as he breathlessly mouthed the word Maria in a questioning manner as if to ask what she was doing there. Perhaps it was the full impact of Granny's death finally coming to reality that caused them both to stare into one another's eyes and the force of this realization caused Maria to collapse into Father Jon's arms. The priest embraced his best friend with mixed emotions. Sadness of course was perhaps the primary emotion, with both of them knowing that in reality they would never see Granny again, this individual who had always been such a presence in their lives. They also knew that their own existence was now on the short equation of life. One of the main characters that had always been there for them, the one who set them straight and would take no nonsense was now gone, and she would be gone forever. It felt lousy. Maria choked out the words, "Oh, Jon, how are we going to continue without Granny? Right now I think life sucks. Why did my husband have to be taken away from me so soon? Now I have to experience the loss of the other most important person in my life." Maria never fully realized the importance Granny played in her life until she just now mouthed those words. How sad that we don't fully appreciate those in our lives who matter until they are no longer around, and then it hits us. Her Mom was a good mother, but she seemed always to be on another planet. The bond was just not the same with her Mom as it had been with Granny.

Father Jon was having emotions of his own as he most definitely felt such a void at the loss of Granny, but the longer Maria stayed in the embrace of his arms, the more he experienced such physical pain and adoration he did something without even considering that he was about to do so. He pulled Maria even closer and kissed her soft lips with such passion that for a moment both he and Maria were lost in the ardor of the kiss and nothing else seemed to matter. Then it hit Father Jon and he put Maria at arm's length and kept repeating over and over that he was so sorry — so so sorry. "My God Maria, I don't know what came over me. Please forgive me."

Maria just stood there stunned. It had now been several months that she had been kissed by a man and if truth be told, it felt good, but the shock of the person who placed that kiss left her numb. Finally, she sat down on a nearby chair and calmly said in a low sweet voice, “Jon, we are both overcome with grief. What we did was not normal. We must forget it ever happened and try to get through the rest of this time here in Chicago.”

The priest just stood there in a state of shock and the only words he could get out of his mouth were, “I’m so sorry. God forgive me. I am so sorry.”

Looking at the paper in her hand, Maria remembered why she even came to Father Jon’s room in the first place. She quickly got up out of the chair and handed Jon the piece of paper explaining to him what it was about, and then she quickly left the room without even a goodbye, feeling dazed and confused. Sleep did not come well that evening until about five in the morning. When the alarm went off at six o’clock, Maria felt so tired and groggy she almost turned off the alarm and went back to sleep, except one of the children heard the alarm and crawled over to one of the two queen sized beds in the room occupied by Maria. The next few hours were filled with such commotion and emotion that she really did not have a lot of time to go over what had happened the night before until they all got to the funeral parlor and Maria saw Father Jon across the room. Their eyes met, but just as quickly they both averted the other’s glance.

The funeral fit the bill. Granny did herself justice in her prior planning and everything went off like clockwork. They all deposited a yellow (Granny’s favorite color) rose on the casket at the gravesite and returned to the limos that were awaiting the family members. Father Jon drove back to the church with the parish priest. He was going to remain in Chicago on business a few more days and would fly home, so Maria did not have to contend with being close to him on the train ride home with her family. While the flight to Chicago had been a lot more swift, it was comforting to mull away the hours on the train ride home listening to the monotonous click clack turning of the wheels as the train rode along the tracks, and having her parents and children beside her. One child fell asleep with his head in Maria’s lap. Another child cuddled beside her as close as possible. The intimacy and comfort of the children being close to her appeased the sadness in Maria’s heart.

Chapter Twenty-Three

There was nothing like the comfort of one's own bed thought Maria when she awoke refreshed the next morning. Not having to go to work was another bonus on many levels. She was ready to just stay home for a while, relax and try to make some sense out of the deaths she experienced and the incident with Father Jon. Maria realized she always had a special feeling for Jon since they were youngsters. She never attributed those feelings to be more, she thought, than the love of a sibling. Now, after that kiss, she was not so sure. Emotions stirred in her that she thought were dead after Robert died. Was what she happened to feel sincere or the result of the sadness in her heart that may have caused her and Jon to do something foolish? Maria did not know, and who in the heck was she going to ask for heaven's sake? The two people she often went to for advice were now out of the picture — Granny and Father Jon. Well, she thought, I am just going to assume that my sad emotions got away with me and attempt to proceed with the life I had before.

She began returning all her friends' phone calls, and that took up a good portion of her morning. The group of friends had not met since Rita had to leave town, so they decided that instead of walking they needed down time to sit around and talk and talk and talk. Maria realized however, that as friendly as she was with her dear friends, there were just some things she would never discuss with them and Father Jon was one of them. They all decided to meet at Janet's home the next evening for dessert. That way they could be sure the children finished their homework and got to bed at a decent time. Most had a child old enough to take care of babysitting the younger offspring.

The rest of the day Maria did some grocery shopping and dusting of the house. She was going to cook a hearty meal this evening — their first real evening home from Chicago. Last evening when they arrived home from the train ride it was essentially in time to go to bed. She wanted this family meal time so that the children could perhaps express any problems associated with the recent passing of their grandmother and of course their father. She was happy that Bobby did not invite Alicia over for this evening's dinner. They

were spending just about every spare minute together, but appeared to have gotten their act together. Who knows really? Maria actually enjoyed having Alicia around, but not tonight. This night was to be specifically for family.

There was a certain amount of reassurance that Maria could notice in her children's faces. All seemed to have adjusted to this latest heartbreak, and they were full of stories to tell from their day at school.

Gabe popped up stating, "Oh yea, Mom I found out Mr. V's last name."

"Oh, honey, you just reminded me. Did you have enough drinks that day you had the game and I had to leave for Chicago, and were those drinks fine for everyone? I am sure your big brother Gary took care of everything, but how did it go?"

"We had more than enough drinks Mom and Mr. Viera said to thank my Mom — so thank you."

"Mr. Who?"

"Mr. Viera."

Oh, for crying out loud, I do hope it is not the same Mr. V I know — Jody's father. I really dislike that man's attitude. To Gabe she said, "Thanks for letting me know."

The next evening when they had practice and Maria brought Gabe to the field, there was Mr. Snobbish handing out something to the boys that were already there. *Oh, Lord, it IS the same guy. What kind of luck is that — for him to be the coach out of all the other people in this town that could have been the coach?* Gabe trounced off completely unaware of his mother's feelings. Secretly, Maria hoped that her interactions with Mr. Snob would be few and far between.

As soon as she got Gabe home after practice she saw that the family got fed, and they enjoyed some of the dessert she had prepared to bring to Janet's where all the women were to bring their favorite goodie. All the other gals were already at Janet's home when Maria arrived and the conversation was lively. They all filled their glasses with wine and made a toast to their everlasting friendship.

The first main topic of discussion of course concerned Rita. She exclaimed her family was doing well, but she also knew that no matter how innocent her husband was there would always be a group of people who would never believe he was not involved in the scandal. This hurt Rita a lot. "Why are people always so anxious to believe what they read in the papers without wanting to know the truth?"

"I don't know honey that really sucks." They all agreed.

Then Zoe piped up with the news about Father Jon being transferred.

Maria nearly spilled her drink. "What did you say?"

"Yea, I'm surprised you of all people didn't know about it."

The feeling in Maria's stomach was as though someone had punched her. He is the rock upon which I stabilized my life. How would my life be without

him? She began to realize just how fortunate they had been throughout the years. Father Jon was always around to the extent that they took him for granted, but still she had no idea he would ever be leaving, and it certainly was apparently not something he knew would be coming. Oh, why now? Maria was jarred away from her thoughts when Janet said, “Hey, are you still with us young lady? Maria? Maria?”

On the second shout of her name, she came out of her stupor and apologized saying she had forgotten something she was supposed to do, and for the rest of the evening Maria attempted to appear somewhat normal though now her heart had a double ache. The gals fell into an easy rapport with one another and the rest of the evening flowed freely. They had missed each other and when they left that evening they promised to meet the next afternoon for their daily walk.

Once home, Father Jon’s transfer was all Maria could think about. I have to call him tomorrow. I need to hear the words out of his mouth. How will I manage without his male influence on the children? Her own Dad was not all that well and she thought her Mom was showing signs of dementia. They rarely were around anymore and if truth be told, when Rob was alive she never sought much help from either set of parents, but Father Jon was always there for advice. Even Rob consulted him during special trying times. Maybe Father Jon won’t be going too far away but will remain in the area hopefully. That perhaps she could take. Yes, she will have to call him tomorrow.

LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Twenty-Four

Maria had a GYN appointment the next morning. She had been seeing the same female doctor for about ten years. Dr. Juliana had just taken over the practice of Dr. John Russell who had reached an age where he was ready for retirement. More and more of the graduates from medical school were now females and Maria thought she would like having a female doctor for a change. She was not disappointed. The young female doctor was a mother herself and related easily to many of the female situations about which the ladies spoke. This was really Maria's first appointment in a year and certainly the first since her husband had died. How strange to now go into the office knowing she no longer had sexual relations, and she in fact asked Dr. Juliana if all her female parts would now atrophy without any action.

"Don't worry about your losing anything right now Maria. You are still young and will one day have another wonderful relationship. Not to worry! I could go on now and give you many medical reasons to confirm what I am saying, but today is not the day to focus on something that in all probability is not going to happen to you. The conversation turned elsewhere, and Maria decided she would ask her divorced friends how they are managing without their spouses. They were always full of first hand information, and most of it was personal and from experience.

On the way home from her appointment, Maria passed the rectory and on impulse decided to go in with the pretension of wanting to talk to Jan.

"Hi, Maria, thank you so much for substituting for me while I had to be away."

"I was glad to be able to help Jan. I hope I didn't screw up things too much for you."

"Actually, I think you left them better than when I was absent. Father Jon should be in any moment. I feel terrible that he is leaving, and somehow I rather sense he asked for a transfer. I thought he loved it here and would just as soon prefer to stay here."

"Do you really think he would ask for a transfer?"

“Actually, Maria, he’s been rather quiet about the whole thing and doesn’t say much. Usually when a priest is going to be transferred, the grape vine gets the news out before it ever becomes official. This has all been so sudden. It is just strange.”

“Well, it is good to see you back Jan. Let me know if there is anything I may have filed or misplaced that confuses you and I’ll try and help.”

“Thanks, Maria, you really did a great job.”

Maria had decided not to wait around for Father Jon to arrive, but as she was going down the steps Father Jon came around the corner. The two of them stopped in their tracks and stared at one another. Finally the priest said, “Let’s take a walk through the cemetery Maria. We need to talk.”

Maria just shook her head yes and started to walk in the direction of the cemetery while Father Jon followed.

“Why are you leaving Jon? Is this transfer mandatory now of all times when our family needs you so much? Who is going to take your place?”

“The assistant pastor from Saint Bernadette’s will be replacing me. The transition should be an easy one since most here are familiar with all the priests from that parish.”

“Who said you had to leave and why?”

“Ahh, Maria, what I did the other night in Chicago was so wrong on so many levels. I asked for a transfer.”

“That was just a horrible mistake Jon. We were both overcome with grief and you should not change your life and all our lives because of that one incident.”

“No, my sweet Maria. My body has been in a constant battle over you ever since your husband died. Truth be told, next to God I love you more than anyone in the world, but I made a vow when I became a priest, and I will keep it to my dying day.”

“I, I, I had no idea. Oh, for the love of Mary. Did I do something to cause this? I am so sorry if I did. Please don’t go Jon. It won’t happen anymore. Please?”

“No, Maria. I can’t trust myself. I need to go before I do any more foolish things.”

“It was just a kiss and not foolish.”

“Ahh, but my body wanted more than just a kiss and that is the problem.”

“Your leaving is going to set me back a hundred fold. I just don’t know how I am going to manage. Everyone I love is being taken away. At least you won’t be too far. Right?”

“Well, is Rome too far?”

“Rome? Oh, God, no. That’s horrible and so far away. When are you leaving?”

“The end of the week.”

“Did you have to tell anyone why you asked for a transfer?”

“Only one higher official in Rome is aware of my problem and he promises to not reveal the information to anyone.”

Tears started streaming down Maria’s face and her whole body started to shake as she heaved huge sighs.

“Please don’t do that here Maria. People will notice, and all I really want to do is enfold you in my arms, but that would be all I need to do to get everyone talking. My heart aches over this as much as yours is aching, but we will get through this. We have to.” He handed Maria his handkerchief and she composed herself.

“I have to get to the rectory. I promise to stop by the house and say goodbye to the children by the end of the week before I leave.”

Maria shook her head to indicate that was good and walked further on into the cemetery to Robert’s grave while Father Jon went back to the church to work.

That evening before dinner she took Gabe to little league practice and this time Mr. V was sitting on the ground surrounded by a couple of boys and rather stared at Maria in shock as though he were surprised to see her. He probably didn’t realize she was Gabe’s mother. All Maria could think about was why that jerk was staring at her and again she secretly cursed the fact that of the entire little league coaches in this town, her son got the idiot one.

Sleep did not come easy that night, and Maria realized that sleepless nights were becoming the norm. She kept going over and over in her head the fact that Father Jon was leaving and to Rome for heaven’s sake. There was no one left now for her to seek advice. Then she would remember the kiss, and truth be told she had to admit she enjoyed it. It was only a onetime thing, right? Actually, she instinctively knew this was not true. When something felt that good you always wanted more — whether that was right or wrong, that was the truth. We did not do it on purpose she would tell herself. God had to know that. But, could she promise God it would not happen again? Her sub-conscious mind told her probably not. *Jon is part of my family though. He can’t leave us. It will be like another death to me. He’s been around all my life. Oh, what on earth made us kiss that night? It happened so fast. We certainly did not plan for anything like that to happen. Oh, help me God. Please help me.*

Maria wanted to call one of her friends, but the hour was way too late. She knew Janet stayed up late a lot, but this would be the one night Janet retired early if I did call her. There was no point in staying in bed. She put on a fleece robe for warmth and walked from one room to another checking on her children who were all sleeping peacefully. How beautiful they were. If anything ever happened to any of them she knew that she could never survive. Before leaving each room, she gently kissed each child on their forehead. Some of them stirred a little at her soothing touch, but most appeared to be knocked out solid and didn’t move even one tiny little bit.

I must get myself to bed and try to sleep. I will not be able to function without rest. Oh how she missed being wrapped in Robert's arms on the nights she could not sleep in the past. He was always able to reassure her that everything would be fine. *Oh, man, I can't go there, I can't.* Again the tears started pouring down her cheeks. At least in the privacy of her room she could find some solace by crying to her heart's content, and eventually the tears satiated her tired body and sleep finally came.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Twenty-Five

Gary was spending some rare time with his mom in the car. Fortunately for Maria, Gary decided to go two years to the local community college. The relief Maria felt knowing her oldest son would not be going far away was just what she needed. This would probably be the last time Maria would go with her son for his college physical, or for any doctor's appointment. In fact, she inwardly thought that Gary did not even want her with him this time, but intuitively he knew his mom would complain if she didn't come along, so he just accepted the fact she was coming.

Riding along in the car was always a great time to have a good talk. They were essentially trapped with you inside the vehicle, so at least some answers to questions had to be forthcoming. Unlike his brother Bobby, Gary had not attached himself to just one girl yet. The one girl he had been crazy about when he was a freshman in high school had moved away and since then he had a few girls he tended to date, but no one person in particular.

After seeing Josh at Granny's funeral, he had been expressing more and more that he might like to be an attorney. Maria was grateful that she and Robert had put away money so that educating her son through law school would not be a problem, and this would be even more feasible since he would be going two years to a community college.

The waiting room at the doctor's office was packed with other young kids getting physicals and both Gary and his Mom were surprised to see Janet's son Fred. Janet wasn't with him though. The two boys immediately got into a good conversation about what they had planned to do and Maria began to think that perhaps she could have let Gary come on his own after all, but those thoughts quickly dissipated when the nurse came out and called Gary's name. She indicated for Maria to enter this part of the exam where they would be talking to the doctor, and then she would leave and be called back in again once the real physical was completed to discuss any immediate concerns. The appointment went well. Maria's main concern was wondering if her son showed any signs of having a heart problem. The doctor assured

her they would monitor Gary for this problem because of his Dad's heart history. On the way out they waved goodbye to Fred who apparently was seeing another physician. He was still waiting to get in to see that doctor.

"Fred seemed to be in a good mood," shared Maria. "A few months ago Janet was worried about her son because he appeared to be out of sorts," Maria told Gary.

"Maybe he was out of sorts because he is gay Mom."

"Who told you that Gary? You must not spread rumors that might not be true."

"I wouldn't do that Mom. Fred told me himself a couple of months ago. We were in the locker room and the guys were teasing him and really being nasty to him. I told the guys to cut it out and lay off. On the way out to the parking lot later Fred came up to me and thanked me for what I did. I say *to each his own* Mom. I hate when kids criticize any one for any reason. Do you think his parents don't know this about him?"

"I am sure Janet doesn't know, and now I wonder if I should mention that fact to her. Are you gay Gary which caused you to be so concerned for Fred?"

"Gosh, Mom, No! Why would you say that with all the gals I've been dating?"

"Well, sometimes gays date girls to make it appear they are not gay, and while I really did not think you were a homosexual, I didn't think that about Fred either, so I thought it best to just get the conversation out of the way right now while I am talking to you."

"In fact, I just haven't had a chance to tell you about this chick I met from Eisenhower High School on the other side of town. She was at our school for some cheerleader competition and there was a dance afterwards. We really hit it off, and she is one reason I decided to go to the Junior College."

"Well, when was I going to hear about this, and what did she do to convince you to go to the local college?"

"Well, how about the fact that she will be going to the same school?"

"Wow, son, you must really have it for her, but that is quite a decision to pick a school just because someone you recently met is also going there. What if she decides to leave later?"

"I'll just have to deal with that if it ever happens."

"We'll get back to this topic later. Right now I am still thinking about Fred and that I feel he needs to tell his parents because I know his Mom is worried about him. Maybe you could tell him about his Mom and encourage him to do so. Once he gets that information out in the open he might not continue to have such bad moods."

"I don't see him all that much and would feel strange bringing up that topic to him. I don't know if we should get involved in some other family's problems."

“Gee, Gary, you sound like you have more sense than I do. You show a maturity beyond your age. Yet, his mother did come to me for advice. Maybe he is better now. At this moment, I am going to concentrate on you and your siblings and find out what else I am missing about your lives.”

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Twenty-Six

Father Jon was flying out for Rome the next day and that evening he promised to go to Maria's home to say good-bye to the family. The sadness in Maria's heart by late afternoon was almost more than she could take. First her husband died, then Granny, and now Father Jon was essentially eliminating himself from their lives. The loss was felt as though it could have been a death. No one ever enjoys saying goodbye of course when someone is so close, but feeling the loss of the three people that had always had the most meaning in Maria's life was becoming incomprehensible. She did not want her feelings of loss to indirectly affect her children. You tell yourself not to be selfish, to think about your children and their need for normalcy as much as possible in their lives and to be strong, but right now all those thoughts were just words to complicate what she really felt. Loss was what encapsulated her. There was no doubt in her mind that her life would never be the same as she once knew it.

She went about her kitchen preparing some platters of cheese and crackers and other goodies to munch on in the hope that being able to eat would distract everyone from the real reason the family was meeting with Father Jon. *Why did we kiss she kept asking herself over and over again. Was I inadvertently sending wrong signals? Was I the one that instigated this whole mess? If that were the case, why did I do it? I guess I always loved Father Jon far more than I ever considered. I thought my love was always generalized and not sex specific, but have I been wrong all this time? Would things have been different if, when younger, I expressed my love to Jon instead of fighting it? Was that what I was doing — fighting it? Will I ever know the answer to these questions? Did this love only surface because my husband died? Oh help me Lord, because I have no answers, and I am feeling unimaginable remorse.* The doorbell rang and Maria's body immediately became stiff. The children all ran to the door knowing it was Father Jon. They really could not comprehend the fact that he was leaving for good. To them, the priest was going on a fun trip to Rome, and they were excited to see

him. Maria could hear the joyful greetings and excitement in the air. She looked at her reflection in the glass section of the microwave, patted down her hair and straightened her clothes before entering the living room. The two gave each other a brief hug and she invited Jon to sit down while offering him some snacks.

“I’m going to miss these wonderful times and delectable treats you have always exposed me to when I visit your lovely home. I could always count on good food coming from this house as well as lots of laughs,” the priest said to help break the tension he felt.

He had presents for all the children. His presence created such excitement always that it appeared there was an electrical charge in the house.

“When I am in Rome, I am hoping that someday you can all come to visit. It is a beautiful city, and I can take you touring to all the ancient historical sites like the Coliseum, the Leaning Tower of Pisa and you might really find Pompeii exciting when you think the city was buried in volcanic ash, people and all.”

Of course that last statement pricked the ears of the little ones and in actuality the thought of ash covering them they found frightening.

The evening progressed without a lot of mishap and slowly but surely the children said their goodbyes in intervals as they went up to bed until finally the only two left in the room were Maria and Father Jon. The first words out of Jon’s mouth were, “I’m so sorry Maria. I never meant to offend you in any way.”

“You did not offend me Jon. I am as much to blame as you are.”

“Oh, no, not at all. It was all my doing, and I can’t apologize enough.”

“I don’t see why you need to leave us because of one little kiss.”

“Oh, Maria. You just don’t understand the inner turmoil of my feelings for you. I know now that I always loved you and probably would have wanted you to be my wife before I became a priest, and before you married Robert. Perhaps I should have expressed these feelings to you, but somehow I always felt I should not approach you with my love or my concerns.”

Maria just stood there rather dazed. “I had no idea Jon. I always loved you, but thought of you as my neighborhood buddy. I suppose my love was deeper now that I think about it, but I was too young to actually realize what I was feeling and then Robert came along...well, you do know I loved him with all my heart. Right now I am hurting so much I can’t even begin to describe what I am feeling.”

“As I stand here talking to you, frankly I want to grab you and kiss you all over again. That is why I must leave. Only bad things can happen if I stay here in close proximity to you. In fact, I do believe it is time to say goodbye while I can still maintain an amount of composure. I feel a loss too Maria. I not only love you, I love those beautiful children of yours and I will miss seeing all of you. Pray for me, and I will pray for you. I really must go before

I do something terribly wrong.” At that, the priest gave Maria a quick hug and she could notice tears coming down the cheeks on his face and he was out the door in seconds. Maria stood there for what seemed like many minutes just frozen in the doorway watching the priest walk to his car.

When she realized how long she had been standing there she immediately locked the door, ran upstairs and threw herself on the bed and cried buckets of tears until there were none left and her body felt completely depleted. Only then did she fall asleep on top of the bed fully clothed and she never woke up until morning as the sun came through the blinds she never closed the night before. She could hear the children buzzing around in the kitchen and she immediately composed herself by throwing on a different shirt so the children would not know she had never put on her night clothes. There were things she had to do today, routine things that would require Maria to continue living whether in sadness or not. As soon as the children were off to school she made herself a cup of coffee and sat there thinking of Father Jon up high in the sky on the plane ride to Rome. Just as she was about to envelope herself in sadness once again the phone rang. It was Rita. She wanted to discuss one of the *Housewives*’ show on television. It was the perfect distraction where they could gossip about someone remote where no one would be hurt by their words, and this distraction led Maria’s mind in a more positive direction the rest of the day. Thank God for friends.

LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Gary had dropped Gabe off at little league practice earlier that evening, and Maria was now going to get him after practice. She spent some time talking to the other mothers and then noticed Gabe running towards her.

“Hi sweetheart, how was practice today?”

“Great Mom, Mr. V said I am doing a great job and to keep up my good work.”

Maria noticed a group of adult males coming towards them and among the group was Jody’s Dad. Jerk. He’s the last man I want to see.

Gabe kept tugging at his mother’s jacket. “See that taller man over there with the other shorter men....do you see him? That’s Mr. V my coach.”

What sort of weird circumstance is this for crying out loud? Mr. V happens to be Mr. Viera. What kind of unfortunate luck is that? Maria’s heart sank. She mentally observed how she kept getting these little inadvertent punches to the stomach. At least each little mishap felt that way.

“He’s a great coach Mom. I really like him.”

“That’s nice honey,” the words came out of her mouth, but that is not what Maria was actually thinking.

When the group got close to Maria and Gabe, Mr. Viera sort of did a double take. His expression was one of disbelief. With a brief bow of his head he rather acknowledged Maria’s presence and then immediately bent over to start picking up equipment.

There’s that cold SOB again, snobbish and completely ignoring the person who was so nice to his child. Who the hell does he think he is ignoring me like that? The other men in the group all came over to Maria and introduced themselves asking her if she were Gabe’s mother. When she acknowledged that she was, they all uttered some pleasant comments about her son. At least the other coaches have some class, not like Mr. High and Mighty.

Gabe immediately distracted his mother by asking if they could stop at the fast food place to pick up some French fries to hold him over until dinner. Maria thought that a great idea and stop they did. On the way out of the

restaurant she had noticed another family of friends and was sort of walking backwards as they spoke. She banged right into someone and turned around completely apologetic. The person was tall, with beautiful blue eyes, and extremely handsome. Oh no. The person was Mr. Viera. Maria was so embarrassed she wanted to crawl into a shell someplace. The jerk wasn't even gracious to her after she apologized to him and this only made her hate him more, plus she was doubly angry about her thoughts of thinking him handsome. *Get this man out of my life please*, she thought to herself, and she and Gabe were out the door.

On the rest of the drive home, Maria did contemplate asking to have Gabe moved to another team. She just didn't feel she could go through a whole season with that man as her child's coach. In retrospect however, when she gave the thought further consideration, she knew it would not be fair to the child. God only knows why, but the child actually adored his coach. How could she take that away from him after all he's been through? She would like to think that perhaps Mr. V would give her child extra compassion knowing he had lost his father and with him being in a situation where he could relate, but in all honesty, Maria did not think the man had a compassionate bone in his body. How did he raise such a lovely daughter she wondered — but maybe it was the mother's doing in that family that made Jody turn out so charming.

Pulling into the driveway, Maria came to the conclusion that she would leave things in a status quo position. Bobby had heated the dinner Maria had prepared and fortunately they could all sit down immediately since they were all starved.

Conversation flowed freely that evening. They had questions about Father Jon and if he had arrived in Rome. They wanted to know how soon it would be before they could visit him. They talked about their extracurricular activities, and Maria felt an overwhelming sense of well being that perhaps she was doing something right in the way she was raising her children. Of course, soon after dinner they got into fights about whose turn it was to do the dishes or take out the garbage, and she felt momentary regret at her previous thoughts. Then she realized it had been a long day, they were probably all tired, and gave them all some slack. That evening she took a long luxurious bath after the children were in bed, put on some night clothes and enjoyed some peaceful time reading before being overtaken by sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Janet had made arrangements to meet Maria at Janet's home late one afternoon. She wanted to get Maria's opinion on a dress she had purchased for a wedding. Any excuse was always a good excuse to get together.

While Maria was seated in the den, Janet went upstairs to get the dress and Maria could hear footsteps coming up the front walk. She whispered loudly to Janet, but hopefully not so loud the people could hear her, asking her if she was expecting some company. However, before Janet even had a chance to answer, Maria could hear a key in the front door as did Janet who was now on her way downstairs. She froze in her footsteps midway down the stairs and the two women looked at each other quizzically and even partially frightened at this unexpected intrusion. Both women were shocked to see Maria's son Gary helping Fred enter the house by essentially holding him up so he wouldn't fall. At first it was thought that perhaps Fred was drunk, but on further observance both women could see blood dripping from the top of Fred's head and dribbling down his face. Janet flew down the stairs nearly tripping at the same time that Maria jumped up from the chair. Both simultaneously asked, "What on earth is wrong?"

"Here Mom, help me. Grab Fred's arm and help me get him to the chair. I am afraid he might faint."

Janet interrupted, "Should I call 911?"

"I don't think that is necessary, but Fred has been banged around quite a bit."

"Who on earth did this to my son, and why?"

"Some guys from school. They were unrelenting in their teasing of Fred."

"Why on earth are they teasing him? Did anyone notify the school officials?"

"Fred told me not to. He asked me to please just take him home. I just happened to be walking through the parking lot and there were not a lot of other people or students around. I begged him to please let me call 911 because frankly I was scared that he was going to collapse. All the stupid

kids who did this to him took off in another direction when they saw Fred's bad condition. I knew the longer I waited the situation might get worse, so rather than fool around and waste time, I just decided to help Fred to my car and brought him here. Thank God you both are here because I had no idea what I was going to do once I got him home if you were not here."

Maria tended to Fred while Janet pretty much stood around asking questions. "What's wrong with kids today? Why can't they mind their own business? God, help my child. He wouldn't hurt a soul. What should I do Maria, what should I do? Why did they do this to you son? I know you did not provoke them, so why?"

Before anyone had a chance to say another word and after Fred drank some water that Maria had given to him while also attempting to get first aid to the large cut on Fred's head, Fred blurted out the words — "It's all my fault Mom. They treat me like this because I am gay. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Oh, that's a bunch of nonsense, for crying out loud. Don't be saying things that aren't true."

"Mom, I am telling you the truth. Why would I say such a thing otherwise? I guess now you can't even love me anymore. I wished they had killed me."

Those last words knocked Janet for a loop and out of her denial. "Don't say you wished they had killed you. My God, son. Why would you say that?"

"You try living as a gay person Mom, and the worst thing I could not even tell you or Dad."

"Why do you say you could not tell us for heaven's sake? You can tell us anything."

"Oh, yea, then why are you denying I am gay? I need your understanding Mom or I can't go on living by keeping my life a secret."

Gary and Maria stood there in a daze trying to figure out if they should leave or stay. Finally, Maria did say, "Perhaps we should leave Janet so you and Fred can have a private talk."

"Oh, please don't leave us. We need your help. What do I need to do, what?"

Quietly, Maria whispered to Janet that she did not have to do one single thing but to tell her son that she loved him. It was as simple as that.

"Please stay here Maria at least until I call my husband. I just can't do this alone."

"What do you think Fred? I don't intend to stay here if you think I am interfering."

"No Mrs. Andrews, if my Mom wants you to stay I don't mind. She obviously needs someone to comfort her, and I am obviously not it. Besides, Gary has been the one good person in my life."

“Well, if I do stay, Gary will have to go home and take charge of the other members of my family, so he won’t be here.”

“I understand.”

Maria told Gary what he needed to do for the rest of the evening with the children and to be sure he got them off to school in the morning in case she happened to stay the night. She then told Janet she would prepare some food for them and that they should all eat before calling her husband. They needed to brace themselves since Jim was not a calm individual and some fireworks could be expected once he got the news. First Maria made sure that Fred’s injuries were not going to require a physician’s expertise or a visit to the emergency room. Once it was decided that the first aid they had given him would satisfy, she then went into the kitchen and started to prepare some food for them.

Janet pretty much sat on a chair in a stupor the entire time. Maria brought the food to her to eat but she barely touched it. Fred on the other hand ate heartily. Once the meal was finished and the kitchen cleaned Maria suggested it would be a good time to call Jim, but Janet panicked immediately. “I can’t do it, I just can’t.”

“What about you Fred? Will you call your Dad?”

“No. I don’t feel like I can do it either.”

Maria heaved a sigh as she went over to the phone. “What is his number?”

“Dial one and it will get him.”

After a few rings Jim’s voice could be heard saying hello. “Hello, Jim, this is Maria, Janet’s friend.”

“Oh hi, Maria. How are you? I’m so sorry about your husband.”

“I’m fine Jim, but I am over at Janet’s house and Fred is here and they asked me to call you to come home.”

“Why do I need to do that? Let me talk to them.”

“I’m sorry. They won’t come to the phone.”

“That’s ridiculous. I insist NOW.”

As calmly as she could speak, Maria said, “You can insist all you want Jim. They will not come to the phone, and to save us all some misery I ask you to please come over now.”

“Why in the hell are you interfering anyway? What are you doing there if it’s our family’s concern? TELL THEM I INSIST THEY COME TO THE PHONE.”

At that tirade, Maria just replaced the phone back down on the receiver. The conversation was over as far as she was concerned and frankly she was somewhat frightened should he decide to come.

However, the phone immediately rang again, and Maria answered it.

“Don’t you ever hang up on me again, do you hear?”

“I don’t know who in the devil you think you’re talking to Jim, but as long as you sound threatening to me I’ll continue to hang up,” Maria said in a very calm and controlled voice. “Your child is having some problems, and if you love him as I would like to think you do, you will stop being so detestable and get over here as soon as possible.”

This time it was Jim that slammed down the phone. Maria assumed he was on his way over to Janet’s house, so in the meantime she urged Fred to get the words out of his mouth that he was gay as soon as his father came inside. There was no point in prolonging what he had to say and holding it inside any longer. “If your father gets abusive in any way or manner I will immediately call the police, but I don’t think he is that stupid.”

Maria was in another part of the house when she heard the front door being opened with force and the loud voice of Jim saying, “For Christ’s sake, what the hell is going on and why are you all bruised and bleeding?”

Before Maria had a chance to gain some composure, she could hear Fred spout out of his mouth, “I’ve been beaten by a bunch of guys because I am gay.”

Jim halted in his tracks and tilted his head as if to question if what he heard was correct. “You are what?”

“He’s gay,” shouted Janet. “Your son is gay and what are you going to do about it?”

Oddly, and out of character for Jim, he immediately calmed his persona and sat down on the sofa looking as though he might faint. Five minutes passed without anyone saying anything.

Finally, Jim said, “How long have you known this Buddy?”

“I must have been around six years old Dad.”

“Why didn’t you ever say anything? Maybe we could have gotten you some help to make this go away.”

“You don’t understand Dad. It is not going away. For me, this is normal, but for the rest of society apparently it is not.”

“Nonsense, I am sure a good psychiatrist can help you. I’ll get you one.”

Maria piped in by saying, “Jim, all your son needs to know is that you are going to love him regardless. When kids bully him he needs to know he has your support so he won’t be afraid to talk about it.”

“Shut the hell up and get out of our house.”

Janet screamed, “You have a nerve talking to my friend like that. Why don’t you leave? I no longer want you in this house or around my son. GET OUT NOW or I’ll call the police.”

“What’s the matter with all you stupid people? Have you all gone crazy? I have the money to get a good doctor, and that is what I intend to do. You are all a bunch of ignorant jerks.”

“That was always your answer Jim. Money! You think you can fix anything with money. You should know by now it doesn’t work. You tried to fix our marriage with money and you can see what happened there.”

“Well, you sure as hell are enjoying your monthly alimony payment. I don’t see you complaining one iota there.”

“That money helps me provide a decent life to our children. For me to say “our” children almost makes me sick when I think of the kind of father you have been to them. And that reminds me, the others will be home soon, so you get on out of here, now.”

“You’re all a bunch of ignorants. I’ll leave gladly. You all make me sick. Good bye and good riddance.” With those words he was out the door almost as fast as when he entered.

“I’m going to pop some pop corn and the three of us are going to sit down in front of the television and watch something stupid that requires no thinking at all. Something that will make us laugh. Then, tomorrow we need to talk about how to handle this bullying Fred. I have heard that if you stand up to them and not back away, they won’t get the same satisfaction of continuing to bully you. Now that the news is out you are gay, they really have nothing to hold over you. You and your Mom can and probably should seek some professional advice, but not for the reasons your father mentioned, but to find out how to handle uninformed and obnoxious people. Now, who wants butter on their popcorn?” Everyone did.

LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Driving up the driveway to her home after leaving Janet's house about 11:30 the next morning, Maria pulled beside the mailbox to retrieve yesterday's mail. She automatically assumed her children would not have thought to get the mail, and she was right. Maria was pleasantly surprised to see a post card from Father Jon addressed to the children with a scene of Rome on the front. Just to see his hand writing sent a chill up Maria's spine. Inside the home she was astonished to see that apparently the children had everything under control. While there were breakfast dishes in the sink, the kitchen table and the counters where some ate their breakfast were clean and shiny. Good for them she thought.

She checked her phone messages and there was a message from Francine in California. Maria immediately returned that call. Francine was still handling Granny's estate and had the good news that each of the great-grandchildren were going to be given \$50,000. This was in addition to the money given to the grandchildren. Maria was told Granny had done well with the investments Grandpa had made while living and after he died she continued to manage them very efficiently. The money had been put in trust and was to be given to each child when they reached the age of 21. This would certainly aid in helping them to become established once they graduated college (and that was a special stipulation that they all attend and graduate college).

"Gosh, Francine, what should happen if the children choose another path besides college? Perhaps that stipulation is rather harsh."

"I thought the same thing Maria. I think we will have to seek some advice from Josh to see what we can do about any children that do choose something different. I believe Granny's primary concern is to be sure the children achieved level-headedness and not splurge the money on alcohol or drugs, and most likely proper wording would have covered those incidences. We'll have to work that out to the satisfaction of everyone, but I know I won't get any problems from you, so it should really not be a problem. In the mean-

time, I guess we need to decide if the children need to know this news now, or later.”

“That’s a good point. We want them to know the value of working and not have the mentality that they will come into money so why should they bother working. Having that knowledge might cause them to ignore good planning and think of the money as something on which to splurge. Of course, some of it should be used to enjoy themselves. Yet, if we do tell them now that might just be an added incentive to want to go to college. It’s rather a double edged sword I suppose.”

“Anyway, I thought you would be happy to hear this news. I know you and Robert planned well, but with the cost of a college education increasing every year, should the children end up having to acquire some debt, it is nice to know they will have some money to help.”

The rest of the conversation was small talk. They both decided they were going to take turns visiting each other every summer. One year on the west coast, and one year on the east coast. They talked about Father Jon’s leaving and some other town gossip before saying goodbye.

Maria no sooner finished talking to her sister when Rita called. “I saw Jody and her Dad last night and another child of his. They are beautiful children, aren’t they? My Lord, he is so handsome, if I were not married I could easily fall for his type, and to think he is a single Dad.”

“You won’t believe this Rita, but he is Gabe’s little league coach. He has got to be the most conceited man I have ever met.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Have you ever had a chance to speak with him, or to have any sort of interaction with him? As soon as you do you will know what I mean.”

“Not really except with the exception of saying hello or small talk.”

“Well, I can’t describe it, but you will know soon enough if you ever get the opportunity. By the way, how is the fall-back from the recent scandal?”

“I still have people that are never going to believe that Drew is innocent, and this absolutely breaks my heart. It is all so unfair that innocent people should be accused of something they never did.”

“That does have to be hard honey, and certainly for this to happen to the two of you doesn’t make any sense at all. Drew is the least likely of anyone I know that would do anything to hurt you or his family. Society has gone to pot when people choose to believe the liars and cheats and gossip mongers.”

“I suppose the people whose lives are so boring their only enjoyment is attempting to live off of what others do, whether it is to their liking or not, really are not worth worrying about anyway.”

“You’ve got that right.”

“Why I really called was to see if the four of us could go see that latest chick flick at the theater during the morning show. After, we could have lunch and we can still be home by the time the children are out of school.”

“The whole deal sounds good to me. Plus, I like going to those early morning shows as opposed to those in the evening. The theater is never crowded that time of day and I don’t have to be concerned about someone tall sitting in front of me.”

They decided to meet that Thursday and Rita said she would call the others. Maria thought the diversion would be good for all of them and she hoped Janet felt good enough to go along. *I wonder if Janet will tell the others the news about Fred?*

Movie day turned out the way everyone anticipated. Days like this with friends were some of the best ever. The discussion after the movie and while eating lunch was always full of vim and vigor and there was no topic you could not discuss. A strange circumstance in today’s society where political discussions can turn into a battlefield, this group managed to be civil considering the fact that two were Republicans and two Democrats, but they learned a lot from each other. There was a movie being shown about the current President that was advertised as something he and his family would not want you to see. One of the Dems in the group said, “When someone tells me a statement like that I want to see it even more, and I am for the guy.”

“I think you would be in the minority about that,” said Maria, one of the two Republicans. I feel that most in your party do not want to hear or see anything that might be detrimental to their choice.”

“Well, you are putting us all in one group, and that is type casting each member of the party.”

“You could very well be right. That is a tendency for both parties. Do any of you want to see the movie? We can plan another day out next week if you do.”

Three agreed while the remaining Democrat in the group said she was not interested.

“Do you mind if we go without you?”

“Of course not.” And, so, another day was planned and the conversation continued on another topic until Janet divulged by blurting out quickly, “My son Fred told me he is gay.”

Because the statement was not relevant to any prior conversation the women at first sat there stunned. Only after the statement registered did the women ask a few minor questions pretty much reacting that this was so normal in this day and age that none of them were fazed and the conversation continued on to something else.

Maria mentally thought to herself how *that turned out well*.

Rita brought up seeing Mr. Viera once again to which Maria responded, “You know Rita, if I did not know how madly in love you were with your husband, I would say you had a big time crush on that stuck up Mr. Viera.”

“Wow, you are so hostile where he is concerned. I can’t ever mention his name without you calling him stuck up, conceited, or some other derogatory word. What is YOUR problem?”

“Whew, you are really on the defensive.”

“Every time I see that man he is always so gracious, and truth be told I feel sorry for him knowing he just lost his wife.”

“I don’t see you feeling the same remorse for me and I just lost my husband.”

“Sorry, but I think it is harder for a man.”

“First of all, I totally disagree, and a lot of it has to do with the degree of love the spouses have for one another and not their gender at all. Perhaps what the other women say is true, he has a crush on you so he treats you differently than the rest of us. Does he know you are married?”

“No, he does not know anything personal about me, and if he is attracted to me, well then as an old married woman I am flattered. Maybe you are jealous.”

“Oh please, let’s just get off this topic. Why spoil a good afternoon over some weirdo.”

“You know Maria, I will get off the topic. You are right in that we should not spoil an otherwise wonderful day, but I do not like you disparaging anyone the way you do him, and frankly that is not the Maria I know. It is just not like you to do that.”

Maria just shrugged her shoulders, but those words stung her. *Am I really being so spiteful? Perhaps Rita is right. I must try to do better.*

At this point a neighbor of one of the girls came by and interrupted the conversation, and they were on to something else.

Chapter Thirty

Back at St. Gregory's church, Jan was getting used to working with an entirely different priest. She really missed Father Jon. This new guy was fine, but his whole demeanor was in great contrast to what she had become accustomed. The parish phone rang and interrupted her thoughts.

A young female voice asked to speak to Father Jon.

"Well, honey, Father Jon is no longer with this parish."

After a brief pause, the girl asked if there was another phone number where she could reach him.

"Oh, my dear, Father Jon has been sent to Rome."

This time the silence on the other end of the phone lasted a lot longer. "Can I please speak to Maria then?"

"Maria no longer works here either sweetie. May I help you in some way?" The young girl sounded so distraught.

"Do you know how I could reach Maria?"

"I tell you what. You give me your phone number and I'll give it to Maria and have her call you."

"Thank you so much."

Jan immediately dialed Maria's home phone but had to leave a message. She did not know her cell phone number.

Much later in the day when Maria arrived home she got the message from Jan and wondered what young girl would be calling her, but she did not hesitate to call the given number.

A sweet and familiar voice said, "Hello?" Her voice rose as though asking a question.

"This is Maria Andrews." Then she remembered the voice and said, "Is that you Jody?"

"Yes, Mrs. Andrews. Could we meet someplace? I would really like to talk to you."

"I have a few hours before the children return from school. Can we meet at the coffee shop?"

“That’s fine. I’ll see you in half an hour.”

“Whoa, before you leave, does your father know you are meeting with me? I am just not up to another confrontation with him.”

“Not really, but I promise I will tell him after I talk to you.”

Maria could sense the tension in the young child’s voice so she said, “OK, honey. I’ll see you in 30 minutes.”

When Maria walked into the coffee shop, she at first did not see Jody even though the shop was not crowded. Like a ship circling around an island, Maria’s eyes circumnavigated the room one more time and there was Jody way in a back corner sort of away from everything. Maria proceeded back towards that booth. She could see that Jody’s eyes were filled with tears.

“Has your Dad been giving you more trouble Jody?”

“No.....,” and the child began sobbing uncontrollably.

“Please honey, don’t be upset. I am sure that whatever is bothering you we can help to solve. Perhaps we should just order some drinks we can carry and go for a walk outside. You don’t need to have the people in here see you in this state of mind and walking will release some tension.”

“That’s a great idea.”

The waitress arrived at that point and Maria told her they had decided to just order two cokes to go. The waitress said fine and brought the two cokes. Maria paid her and left a dollar on the table. Jody dried the tears from her face and they went outside walking to the far end of the parking lot out of reach of anyone. They found a grassy area under some trees and both sat down to drink their cokes.

“I may as well not beat around the bush and tell you that I am pregnant.”

Maria controlled herself from gasping out loud in shock and instead put her hand over Jody’s rubbing it in a soothing manner. “Oh, sweetheart, no wonder you are upset. Do you know the father of the child?”

“Oh, yes. He is the best thing that ever happened to me. I have known him since we were little and he is a freshman in college.”

Well, I know he doesn’t have any money then, thought Maria, but instead she asked, “Does he know about this?”

“Oh, no. I am afraid to tell him as I know his one goal is to finish college.”

“Well, Jody, to be honest, he obviously had another goal too when he got you pregnant though that may not have been his original intention. What do you want to do about this and have you told your father?”

“I am so afraid my father will never love me again for doing this. He had such high hopes for me and I have ruined them for him.”

“Well, you are not the first child to get pregnant out of wedlock and you won’t be the last. Your father is going to have to deal with this and help you. Have you examined all your choices? Did you decide what you want to do?”

“This is my baby. I can’t give it away, and the thought of an abortion literally makes me sick.”

“Of course, but raising babies takes a lot of money. What are you going to do about that?”

“I have thought about that Mrs. Andrews.”

“First of all, before we continue, I want you to call me Maria.”

“OK, Maria. I am still young enough to be covered under my father’s insurance, so at least my medical care for this pregnancy will be covered. Then, I will just have to get a job. I won’t be the first single mother to raise a child. I am going to attempt to get an online college education. I can do it Maria. I know I can.”

“You must tell your Dad and the father of the baby. I insist upon that.”

“I don’t think I want to tell the baby’s father, and even when I do tell my Dad, I am not going to change my mind about the choices I have made.”

“That will be between you and your Dad, but the baby’s father has a right to know. There is no reason he shouldn’t be helping you with this if he really loves you.”

“Will you come with me when I tell my Dad?”

“Oh God, Jody. I just don’t know. Your father thinks I have interfered enough in your life. He will not want to see me one bit. I do have a friend Rita though that I am sure will be willing to help.”

“Please, please Maria? Please come with me?”

“As much as I want to, I think my other idea is the best. Rita can tell him that you really wanted my help and we will see what happens from there. That is how it must be for now, but remember, once he knows that you asked me, no matter what he does I will always be there to help you. Let me call Rita now.”

Before Jody had a chance to object, Maria got Rita on the phone and explained the situation to her. At first Rita was hesitant and thought Maria foolish, but she eventually relented. They both decided there was no need to prolong the agony of the child. The sooner they told the father, the better. Maria decided to take Jody to dinner after calling her sons to help at home and telling them she had an urgent need that required her immediate attention. Jody knew that once they had eaten, the father would be home from work. It was not uncommon for Jody to come home later because of all her extracurricular activities, so the father would not miss her at dinner time. Rita told Maria she would join the two of them for dinner and in that way Jody would feel more comfortable after spending some time with her.

When they finished eating, Maria said to Rita, “Call me later to let me know what transpires, and Jody I want to stay in touch with you every day to help you get through this. Everything is going to be OK darling, so don’t worry.”

“Thanks Maria. God was so good to me when he sent you my way after the accident. It sucks not having a mother.”

“I know honey. Believe me, everything will work out.”

Rita was impressed at the sincere affection Jody did show for Maria, and knowing this she could not figure out why Jody’s father would be so nasty to Maria. Perhaps Maria was just being too sensitive. We shall see when we confront him with this news.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Thirty-One

Both Rita and Jody felt like they had butterflies in their stomachs as they walked up the front path to Jody's home. The father was walking through the living room when Jody opened the door. He was taken aback to see Rita, but he did smile at her graciously in acknowledgment. "May I ask to what purpose I owe the honor of your presence with my daughter?"

"Jody has something to tell you. Do you have some place private where the three of us could talk?"

Mr. Viera ushered them into the den and closed the door. He appeared to be in a very good mood when he said, "Now, what is so important that we have to meet in privacy?" When he uttered these words however, one could tell he was not anticipating any horrible news because he had a gracious smile on his handsome face.

"Mr. Viera. I am afraid you may not be happy when you hear what Jody has to say."

"What is it Jody? Did you decide not to go away to college or something?"

"In a way yes, Dad, that is part of the result of the fact that I am pregnant."

"Oh my God no. Oh, my God please tell me this is not true. This cannot happen to my baby. Oh Jesus, I wish my wife were here. Are you sure? Perhaps this is a mistake? Who in hell is the father? I will wring his neck. Surely it is not that fine young man who has been coming to our house for years. Please tell me it is not Tyler"....., then he looked at Jody's face and instantly knew it was indeed Tyler. Looking at Rita his tirade continued, "Why in hell did she need you to come and bring me this news? Why do you women always feel you need to interfere in our private affairs? Why don't you get your damn self out of this house?"

"Dad, stop it. STOP IT please."

"Well, you tell me, why is she here?"

Rita was about to throw something at him and began to realize why Maria hated him so.

“Actually, Dad, I wanted Mrs. Andrews to come with me. She is the one I went to for advice, and she told me I needed to tell you and the baby’s father — neither of which I really wanted to do. I would rather just run away because I knew how you would take this news. Maria knew you would resent her and she refused to come here and asked her friend Rita to accompany me. One good thing though is she told me she would always be there for me and to never hesitate to call her. Those comforting words are words I never expect to hear out of your mouth.”

This child had a way of cutting to the heart of things thought Mr. V. In many ways her words tended to knock some sense into him and he immediately apologized to Rita. He sat down on the closest chair and dropped his head to his hands. “God, I am a failure as a father. I don’t know how to handle my own kids since their mother died. I try my best. I volunteer as a little league coach. I think I am always here for them, and then something like this happens. “What am I doing wrong,” he asked as he looked in the direction of Rita for an answer.

“Mr. Viera, you have done nothing wrong. You have beautiful children. All children make mistakes. Some get in trouble with the law, or get on drugs, and others just are so sad they cannot control their passion as they want to be loved so much. Remember your own passion when you were Jody’s age and perhaps you can understand better. I would suggest that if your daughter feels so comfortable going to Maria for advice that you help her to feel free to do so. It is always good to have a man and a woman’s advice for a child. Believe me; Maria has no intention of taking away your child. You do not need to fear that. She has her own problems having recently lost her husband, just like you have lost your wife. I am going to leave now while the two of you talk over your private affairs. Things have a way of working out. Somehow things always work out.”

As he ushered Rita to the front door he apologized once again for his actions and thanked Rita for assisting Jody during this trying time.

Once Rita had gone, the father walked over to his daughter and embraced her in his arms and he literally broke down crying. They both did. “I had such dreams for you honey and in four more years I would have been thrilled if you married Tyler and gave me a grandchild. He is a fine young man, and I can see why he loves you so much as you are a beautiful child in appearance and in your heart. What does he say about this?”

“I’m afraid to tell him Dad.”

“He needs to know honey.”

“Did this Maria person give you any advice? I did not know she meant so much to you. I really thought she was one of the *butt in your personal business* type of person.”

“No, Dad. Maria is not that way at all. She is a very kind and understanding individual.”

“Do you know I coach her little boy? I must say he is a fine young man.”

“I did not know that Dad.”

“I won’t interfere any more with your friendship. I would appreciate knowing what she has advised so far.”

“She really did not want to give me advice because she was afraid of your reactions.”

“I really must come across as some type of scoundrel.”

“Her advice so far was to immediately tell you, and she also said I need to tell Tyler.”

“Well, we agree on that anyway.”

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Thirty-Two

Tyler was due to come home from school that weekend and Jody decided it would be best to tell him in person. She was scared to death of what his reaction might be. Jody was excited and frightened all at once. The thought of having a baby gave her the same reaction. Who doesn't go ga-ga over beautiful new infants, but Jody was not an ignorant child and she knew that having this baby was going to change her life drastically. Mentally, she told herself she could do it either with Tyler's help, or without. She got herself in this mess and she was going to take care of it, and that was that. Of course she was scared. Nevertheless, it is what it is and I will do my best to make it work she thought. I love Tyler so much. They tell young kids to play the field and not attach yourself to one person. Of course, that is easier said than done. Her inner self told her she was going to love Tyler the rest of her life. Who needed those other young immature teens always saying stupid things when she was in their presence? Tyler was so much more, and in reality they did talk of getting married and having a baby, but they were thinking of sometime in the future and not the present. I would like to think he feels the same way about this baby, but the last time she saw Tyler he was full of plans for his graduation and getting a good job to support a wife and child and she knew that she and a new baby were not part of the plan right now. I guess we are immature for not giving the whole matter a lot more thought, but in the heat of passion one is not always practical for sure. *Oh why am I tearing myself apart? This weekend is never going to get here fast enough.*

Mr. Viera was trying his best to accept the whole situation, but he had such an ache in his heart, and truth be told he was so worried for Jody and the new grandchild to be. *I am an adult with a good job and some semblance of common sense, and I am doing a lousy job of raising these kids now that I am alone, and Jody wants to do this all on her own. Oh my Lord, I do hope somehow miraculously she can have this baby and finish college too. Does life ever get easier? All my dreams of sharing my entire life with my spouse have been stomped out as one would step on a bug walking in your path*

across a sidewalk....just that fast and permanent. His thoughts rambled on causing him much disturbance. I suppose I should thank Mrs. Andrews for attempting to help my daughter, but what is it about that lady that irritates me so much? I really don't care if I ever got to see her again. In retrospect however, he realized how very much she looked like his wife. She had the same wild haired look and beautiful face, and not a bad figure upon really examining her over in his mind. I don't care how beautiful she is, I don't like her, and I don't ever want another woman in my life. Never! I just hurt too much.

The day was Friday, and Tyler was due home that evening. During school lunch break Jody decided to call Maria and explain to her what had been occurring and how she had planned to tell Tyler that evening.

"Well, sweetheart, you are doing the right thing. Don't be afraid. You expect the worst to happen anyway, so what have you got to lose?"

"My Dad said he promised he would not get upset if I called you anymore. That was after Rita gave him a strong "slap on the wrist" in your honor."

"Yea, I heard. In that case, since he says it is fine to keep in contact with me, do let me know what happens after this evening."

"Thanks, Mrs. A, you can't possibly know what your friendship has meant to me."

Jody didn't wait for Tyler to come to the front door Friday evening. She did not want glances from her father and perhaps his expectation that he might be included in their conversation. As she peeked out her bedroom window, and she saw his car come around the curve on her block, she immediately ran downstairs yelling bye as she ran out the front door and into the car.

"Well, aren't you the lively one tonight? What's the big rush? I was going to come in and tell your Dad about this course I was thinking of taking. He always has such good ideas."

"Tyler, can we go someplace quiet and talk? Let's get the blanket out of the trunk, go to the park and find a nice grassy spot away from everyone."

"Wow, you'll get no objection from me there — you little flirt."

"No, Tyler. The conversation I want is a serious one."

"Who wants to be serious? I came home to get away from my studies and being serious and to have some fun with you."

As this conversation was ensuing, Tyler was manipulating his car into a small parking space. After Tyler released the car trunk, Jody reached into the trunk to grab a blanket. They found a nice cozy area, and as Jody was getting the blanket, she noticed some bags of chips and chocolate in the car trunk and some yogurt covered raisins. She grabbed them too.

As soon as they got settled, Tyler wrapped Jody in his arms and gave her a long and passionate kiss. "Oh, man, I have been waiting to do that all week.

You don't know how much I miss you when I am away at school. I hope you are still going to enroll at the same campus."

He noticed a tear dribble slowly down Jody's cheek. "Is something in your eye honey?"

At those words Jody broke down in deep sobs. "Oh, no, is someone else in your family really sick again?" He remembered the extreme sadness felt by all when Jody's mother passed away not that long ago.

In between sobs, Jody shook her head no. "It's me," she said.

"My God Jody, are you sick?"

"No, no, no, I didn't mean that. I am the one with the problem. I am pregnant."

Trying to digest the words he just heard, Tyler wiped a tear from Maria's face and held Jody tight enclosing her in his arms. For what seemed a long time, but in reality was less than three minutes of time, Tyler just held Jody while rocking her back and forth.

Jody did not know how to interpret the silence, but it felt so good being held and comforted she almost did not want to hear any response. Perhaps, that was because she was afraid of what she might hear.

Then, Tyler cleared his throat, and softly spoke, "Well, what is our plan? What do you think is the wisest choice for us both to do? I almost know in my heart you do not want an abortion. This is our baby after all. The thought of you getting an abortion makes my stomach feel upset." But then he caught himself realizing that the choice was really not his to make, though he did hope Jody would consider his thoughts on the matter.

"To be honest Tyler, I thought you would be very angry. I know how you want to finish college, and for that matter, so do I. I was really afraid to tell you."

"Oh, Jody. I am so sorry you felt that way. I love you more than life itself. Other kids have been in this position and they survived. We will too."

"I am thinking of getting an online college degree. I know of one person who not only got her degree in that way, but she got a good job afterwards too. Apparently, they don't ask you how you got your degree on applications for employment. They just want to know you have one for certain types of jobs. That is what I told my Dad I would do."

"Oh, so you told your Dad already?"

"Yes, I felt I had too. I could not live in the same house pretending this didn't happen. After his initial shock, he is doing ok now."

"Listen, Jody, I need to go home now and tell my parents. Not knowing how they are going to react upon first hearing this news, I would feel better if I took you home and then later we can both go back and discuss this with them."

After eating some of the snacks and a few passionate kisses, they got in the car and Tyler took Jody home. She was happy the other members of her

family were not there and she went directly to her room and plopped on the bed. She felt depleted and immediately fell asleep.

Tyler's family had money and they lived in an extremely upscale neighborhood. Not that Jody's family was poor by any means, but one could tell the obvious difference just by looking at the land surrounding the house, the opulence of the structure and the sheer size of the house. Even the shrubbery had lavishness incomparable in most neighborhoods. He drove up the circular drive and braced himself for what was about to happen.

His mother was sitting by the fireplace reading a book and he could see his dad seated at his desk in the adjoining office/library. "Why, Tyler, what are you doing home so early? Is everything ok?"

"Sure is Mom. I just would like to talk to you and dad for a minute."

"Certainly, sweetheart! Why don't you go in and get your Dad, and we'll sit here by the fireplace."

When all were seated, Tyler's mom asked if she could get anyone something to drink which they both declined.

In a rather firm voice, Tyler's Dad said, "To what do we owe the pleasure of this unexpected visit? I hope you are doing well with your classes."

"Not a problem there dad. Jody is pregnant with my baby."

"What the hell. Did she think by getting pregnant, this was a way to extract money from us? If she did, she is sadly mistaken."

"Richard," Tyler's mom spoke to him sharply. "What a horrible thing to say about that lovely child."

"Yea, sure, they are all lovely, especially when they are so willing to give themselves up to our sons."

"That's enough Dad," spoke Tyler. "I came to have a serious conversation with you, but if you keep up this tirade, I will just leave and we will make our own plans without discussing it with any family members."

"Enough, Richard! The last thing we need to do is to cause an estrangement between ourselves and our son."

"Well, then, young man, what's going to happen? Is Jody going to get an abortion?"

"NO!!"

The sharpness with which Tyler expressed those words caused Richard to stand back and straighten his posture while looking at Tyler as if to wonder from where that rage came.

"I plan to finish college and Jody wants to get an online education. I am planning to ask her to marry me and was going to do that after telling you. Instead of living in a dorm we will get an apartment off campus, and I will get a job. Jody also plans to work until the baby is born and we will look into the nursery they have on campus that is used in the early education classes."

"What kind of an education is an online education?" Richard inquired.

“All good college campuses offer that option today Dad and if worse comes to worse I will also take advantage of it.”

“I don’t see why you have to get married. Just keep things the way they are, and if Jody needs money for the baby we will help.”

“You really don’t know Jody, do you dad? She would never take money from you.”

“Yea, right.”

“Look dad, I don’t want to fight with you. I thought you should know our circumstances. You and Mom think it all over. I am going back to see Jody now and we can meet with you tomorrow.”

Back in the car, Tyler called Jody on his cell phone and said he was coming back to her house.

“How did things go with your parents?”

“Oh, they could have been better. I’ll tell you about it when I get there. I love you Jody.”

“Tyler, you are the best. I love you too.”

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Thirty-Three

That evening the two young teens quietly went ahead and made their plans. They were going to get married at the City Hall the next week. They knew they were too young in everyone else's opinion, but they both knew they loved each other a lot. Some kids fall in love but wait four years or more to get married, but they both thought that waiting would only produce frustration in their lives. Of course, having a baby meant frustration anyway, so why have two major things keeping them on edge. Tyler was going to get an apartment near school once the summer semester was over in a few months. Both hoped to find jobs to help pay the bills when the fall semester started. Jobs around campus were usually more forthcoming than your ordinary town even if it meant working in a pizza parlor. Fortunately, Jody had graduated high school that year and she had been working at a law office. Hopefully, they would write her a recommendation, and she would ask Mrs. Andrews if she would do so as well. Her original intentions were to follow Tyler to the same campus he was attending anyway, but now she would enroll in the online schooling at least for the first year so she could be home to care for the baby. As far as they were concerned their problems were solved. They anticipated taking out a lot of college loans.

What they didn't know was that Tyler's parents had called Mr. Viera and they met with him to discuss the children. Mr. V went reluctantly, but after the meeting felt somewhat reassured. The Vieras were invited to Tyler's home for dinner the following night — or at least the dad and Jody were invited. The two sets of parents would present their plan they had considered for the children. Like Mr. Viera felt on the first night he met with Tyler's parents, Jody and Tyler decided they would go, but with a lack of enthusiasm.

Mr. Viera started to show anger when Richard started questioning Jody with what he thought was a harsh tone. The group had enjoyed a lovely dinner in the elegant dining room and they all had finally settled themselves in the den where they were going to have dessert.

“Jody,” Richard said, “I hope you realize that any money we appear to have is ours and not Tyler’s, so if your object in getting pregnant was to extract some of our family money then you are out of luck. Just what are you hoping for out of all of this?”

“Dad, why on earth are you talking to Jody like that? If you don’t stop, we are leaving.”

Mr. Viera spoke as well, “I agree. I think that statement was totally unnecessary.”

Jody stood up and looked Richard right in the face. In a calm and concise voice Jody appeared to whisper, but all could hear her when she said, “Mr. Thompson, I am not a young girl who has a lot of wishes or hopes for myself. I love my family and my home. The only thing I would ever hope for would be to have my mother alive and not dead, and sadly that is not going to happen. I could not ever have a nice relationship with you as our baby’s grandfather if I knew you thought those horrible things about me. You have hurt me more than you will ever know.” With those words Jody grabbed her purse and started walking to the front door.

“Please don’t leave dear,” said Mrs. Thompson. “We have some things we would like to discuss with you and Tyler and to which your Dad has agreed, and Richard you apologize to Jody right now.”

“I’m sorry Jody. Sometimes my mouth speaks before my brain registers. Forgive me.”

The maid brought them some dessert and Tyler’s Mom began to tell what the parents had planned. Tyler’s parents would continue to pay for his education and for an apartment where they could live since had he not married they would have continued to pay for these expenses. Jody’s dad was going to pay for her online education and help somewhat with their food bill and payment of health insurance since both would be less than paying for a full daytime education at the University. For all the other expenses, the children would need to get jobs. If they wanted to be married and have a child, than they had to accept some responsibility for their actions and not expect a free hand from either parent. Once all had agreed to the details, they talked about the wedding at City Hall. Mrs. Thompson said she would have a small reception after in their home to honor the occasion, and the children should feel free to invite whomever they desired.

Instead of marrying that immediate week, the children decided to wait and let Tyler go back and arrange his classes so as to not miss any tests and to see the best day to schedule the wedding at the Court House. They were fortunate in getting the date and time they desired.

Tyler gave Jody a list of his friends he wanted to come to the reception, and she took care of inviting them for him plus her own friends. Jody also decided to invite Maria and her three friends that helped her the day of the accident.

Passing through the foyer the next day, Mr. Viera noticed Jody's guest list on the table. He perused through the list, and was just about to set the list down when he saw the names of Maria, Zoe, Rita and Janet. "Oh for," he stopped himself from saying the rest. He promised he was not going to interfere with Jody's choices unless he felt they would be harmful to her, but why in God's name did she have to invite those four women? *Yea, yea, he knew they were a great help during Jody's accident, but that didn't mean she had to be friends with them. The red head wasn't so bad, and he didn't know the other two that well, but that other one Mary, Marie or what the heck her name was just, she was an irritant to him and he secretly hoped they would all say no.* At that point he saw Jody come from the laundry room. She had a peacefulness and beauty about her that he had not seen in a long time. Her skin was radiant and her eyes were bright and any weight she might have gained only served to make her look less on the skinny side. *God, he said to himself, please help my daughter and Tyler to make a success of this undertaking so that they can have a happy and prosperous future.* That is all any parent would want.

"Hi dad, the laundry is done. In a little while I am going out to buy invitations for the reception and then over to Tyler's home where Mrs. Thompson is going to help me address them. She needs to know approximately how many are coming in order to know how much food to buy. I made you all dinner for when you get back from Little League practice. It is in the Crockpot with a salad in the fridge."

"Thanks honey. It smells delicious." *She's even acting like a different person. A happy person.* All the phrases his wife used to say kept popping into his head. *It is what it is. Things don't always happen the way you would expect. We don't always get what we ask for, etc., etc.* Maybe there was something to all these idioms. He changed out of his work clothes and got ready to go and coach the little guys. Always feeling the need to do charitable work and actively constantly participating was part of his life, but if he had to admit it to himself, he received much more gratification from coaching those young men than anything they were getting out of it from him. Just pulling up to the parking lot and seeing them all looking so cute in their mini baseball suits tugged at his heart. *Thank God for this diversion in my life, especially now,* he thought.

Chapter Thirty-Four

On the way to the Thompson's house for the party, the four women were enjoying all the multitude of things about which they always find plenty to say. Part of the time the conversation turned to Father Jon. Zoe inquired why the priest decided to leave their parish and go to Rome. "I heard he actually asked to be transferred. Do you know why Maria?"

At the mention of the priest's name Maria momentarily lost her focus and therefore she was in la la land when asked the question until Zoe spoke a little louder and said once again, "Maria, do you know why Father Jon asked to be transferred?"

In an extremely tentative voice Maria answered, "Hmm, no, not really. I never thought he would do such a thing. He did send the children a postcard and they were so thrilled to hear from him. I miss him terribly. Next to my children, who mean the world to me, Robert, Granny and Father Jon were the three most important people in my life, and now they are all gone. You guys can't possibly know how much I'm hurting from these losses."

"Oh honey, of course we do, and I didn't mean to get you all worked up and depressed. How about we change the subject? Why do you suppose we were invited to this party?"

Rita said she was sure it had to do with Jody as sort of her way of saying thanks for our assistance on the day of the accident. "I am looking forward to it. Every time I drove past her in-law's house I was curious about the people who lived inside, and I just wanted to get a look at the interior too."

"If only Jody's Dad did not have to be there I would feel better about going."

"Oh, Maria, stop holding a grudge against that poor man. He's doing as best as any man could under the circumstances."

At that point, they pulled into the circular drive and Janet said, "Wow!" With lights flickering in all the windows and a big sign over the garage door saying *Congratulations Jody and Tyler* the atmosphere was indeed impressive. A butler answered the door and ushered the four ladies into the living

room area where hors d'oeuvres were being served as well as any drink you could want. Jody and Tyler walked over to the ladies as did Mr. and Mrs. Thompson. The girls were all impressed with Tyler. He was so handsome and seemed so gracious and polite as were his parents. When Maria saw Mr. Viera walking towards them, in all probability to greet them as well, she made a quick request by asking where she might find the restroom and quickly avoided being anywhere near him. The other three women thought Mr. Viera was a knock out and that Maria had to be totally crazy. There was someone playing soft music on the white baby grand piano which added a certain ambiance to the atmosphere. The girls decided to ask for requests which they could sing, and this added a lively touch to the party. A good portion of those attending joined in the singing. A buffet of wonderful food was arranged on the long dining room table, and there were small groups of intimate tables around the spacious room. Both Tyler and Jody were sure to visit every table towards the end of the meal and before the cutting of the cake, and even Maria had to admit she was really enjoying herself. Even better, she managed to avoid Mr. Viera the entire evening which added to her pleasure. It was only towards the end of the evening as the gals were going to the front door to leave when Maria happened to look across the room and her eyes were looking smack into the eyes of Mr. Viera. They were piercingly beautiful, and she was momentarily taken aback, but she quickly regained her composure and avoided his stare. At that point they were all saying their goodbyes. The evening had been lovely. All the gals agreed they were happy to have been invited.

Wound up and excited, the women were not about to go home and decided to stop at a cozy little bar on the way home that had a small dance floor. They could all dance amongst themselves which was something they all liked to do. Very often throughout their time there many men would stop by and ask the ladies for a dance, but they always kindly refused. As the evening wore on the men began to realize these gals were not out to get a man and pretty much left them alone with the exception of sometimes having drinks sent to their table courtesy of some stranger.

Maria told of Gary's new girl friend and they all heard that Fred was doing so much better now that he had *come out*. He also was not bullied as much.

Rita did the driving that evening and around one o'clock they all decided they needed to get home. She dropped everyone at their home and was grateful her husband left the house well lit when she activated her garage door opener and parked her car in the garage. There was a note on the kitchen table reminding her that one of the children had a game early in the morning and she heaved a sigh considering the fact she would not be able to sleep late, but she was nevertheless delighted to have spent an extremely enjoyable evening with her friends.

Chapter Thirty-Five

For the first time in many months Maria's life appeared to have settled into a pleasant routine. In a sense, this fact made her nervous. She was always an individual who thought that something bad might happen following periods in time that lacked any turmoil. While drinking her morning coffee she actually was contemplating if she should attempt trying to get a part time job outside the home. She enjoyed those few weeks working at the church office. When working there she focused less on her own problems, and getting out of the house every day invigorated her. The thought of going on job interviews though gave her a nervous feeling in her stomach. She finished dressing since she had planned to meet Janet and go with her for a walk in the park. They both drove their own cars to the park and Maria arrived first. There was a frown on Janet's face as she exited the car.

"My God, you look like something the cat dragged in."

"Oh, Maria, you just won't believe what Fred told me."

"Oh, no, is he having trouble all over again?"

"Not a bit. He overheard a group of kids talking about us of all people."

"Us? Why, what on earth did we do?"

"Well, it seems anymore you don't have to do a darn thing for someone to accuse you of something."

"Accuse us? What on earth are you talking about? What did we possibly do wrong?"

"You remember after the party how we all went to the bar and were dancing with each other?"

"Yes, of course. We enjoy that and have done it before. What's wrong with that?"

"Apparently, one of the kids in the group had a mother and father who were there that evening and she told her children to stay away from our children because we were all gay."

"What? You're kidding right?"

"Why would I kid about something like that?"

“We are all married for crying out loud.”

“Oh yes, Fred heard that said too and the parents said our marriages were just a front to have children and that none of us liked men.”

“I knew things were going too good.” Maria was convinced her predictions of imminent doom were psychic in nature. Now she knew she had the ability to foresee trouble ahead of time and there would be no convincing her otherwise. “How does one handle untruths such as that anyway?”

“I have not a clue in heaven. In fact, why should we have to defend ourselves against something that is so totally false?”

“Maybe we shouldn’t even try. If we say something it might just stir more suspicion and cause the rumor to have some credence”

“Why would anyone make up such false rumors about us?”

“I have no idea. Perhaps they are jealous of us, otherwise really, why?”

“Wait until we tell Rita and Zoe.”

Janet picked up her cell phone and immediately dialed her friends and asked them to meet her and Maria at the park as they had something important to say.

Rita and Zoe, instantaneously upon hearing the gossip wanted to go and confront the gossiper right away. “This is ridiculous,” said Rita. “No one has a right to smear our name by making up stories about us.”

“That’s easy for you to say, Rita. It was not your son who told you, and my son Fred has been having so much trouble that I don’t want him to think he’s in more trouble because he thought enough to tell me this.”

Zoe was extremely furious. “You know, I have no objection at all about anyone’s sexual preference, but it is tremendously rude and vicious for someone to just make up any lies about us that come to their mind. I will not tolerate, nor will I stand for this at all. It is somewhat embarrassing to think anyone might even suggest such a thing.”

“Well,” interrupted Maria, “What do you suggest we do?”

“My Mom always used to tell me to take the time to think things over before snapping into a hasty decision. She did not want me to retaliate for something that may have a different perspective when given some thought,” said Zoe.

“Your Mom was probably right. Let’s sit on this for twenty-four hours and meet here tomorrow this time to see if we have figured out a way to solve this dilemma.”

The girls all agreed and went their separate ways. Maria was boiling in temperament on the way home. She had hoped some time would take away the anger, but once the children arrived home her emotions became even worse.

Gary was the one who spoke, “Mom, what the heck is this junk about you and your lady friends being gay?”

“Oh, no, you heard that rumor too?”

“It is all over school. The kids are pointing at us, ridiculing us and saying derogatory statements about our family. It’s not true, is it Mom? I mean what does that say about our Dad? I thought you two were madly in love? How could you be a lesbian and marry Dad just to have kids? How could you Mom?”

At this point Bobby walked in and he stormed through the kitchen door with a wild look on his face and repeated the words he heard his brother speak, “Yes, how could you Mom?”

“Boys, you don’t believe these rumors, do you?”

“We don’t know what to believe. Those kids at school can be unrelenting and vicious”

“Let me reassure you that those words are just rumors. That is all they are. My friends and I are all heterosexual, we love, or loved, our husbands and nothing could be further from the truth. We have to find out who is spreading these rumors and confront them. I am not going to let these falsehoods be perpetuated.”

“They caught you dancing with one another Mom. Can you deny that?” said Bobby.

“Women dance together boys. There is nothing sinister in that at all. We stopped after the party for a drink since it was still early and we wouldn’t dance with the other men there because we are married, and if we did that we probably would have been talked about for that fact too. Lord in heaven, what is it about today’s society where people are always so suspicious and telling lies about people they don’t even know? Why are they always speaking the worst about others and butting in their lives? What business is my life to them anyway?”

Both boys could see the anger building up in their mother and became concerned for her. Just from her reaction alone they knew instinctively that what had been said about their mother had to be lies and they began to be concerned about her state of mind.

“Here Mom, sit down. Let me get you a drink. We’re sorry! It was just awful to hear those things said about you and your friends, and I guess we got kind of crazy.”

Maria wrapped her arms around her sons and hugged them to her bosom. I’m so sorry you had to hear this nonsense with everything else you’ve been through lately. If you know who started this rumor please tell me, or try and find out who it was because I know one thing for sure and that is my friends and I are going to have it out with her. I have no doubt about that. She is a cruel and nasty person and this kind of nonsense has to be stopped.”

“I know exactly who it was Mom. Her kids are nasty just like their mother, and no one likes them. I didn’t want to believe what she said at all, but when you hear things like that out of the blue you do stop and think, and

unfortunately give it some credibility. Sorry, Mom,” said Bobby. “It was Mrs. Smith.”

“Well, that bitch! Oh boys, I’m so sorry to have said that.”

The boys just laughed and the tension in the room eased. “Call the other children into the house and let’s sit down to eat,” laughed Maria too, “they are playing in the empty lot next door.”

After dinner when the children had gone to bed, Maria tried to relax, but she couldn’t. Her mind continued to whirl with all the day’s events. She couldn’t wait until the next day to meet with her friends. She mulled over calling them that evening, but she thought better of it realizing any conversation with them would only cause her mind to become even more stimulated.

At the park, all the girls seemed to drive up to the parking lot at the exact same time. It was obvious they all could not wait to meet. Maria and Janet were the only two whose children knew the names of the perpetrator of the nasty rumors. As they walked around the park to release some of their anxiety, they began to form a plan. They had to find out either where she lived or worked and confront her. Enough was enough.

After finding out who the woman was Zoe said, “Actually, Mrs. Smith has some children that are the ages of my children and they have on occasion met at her house through cub scouts, so I do know where she lives. It is in the Robin Hood section of our town.”

“Let’s just go over there right now and get this over with and just pray she is still at home.”

“Oh, she’ll be home. She is not very popular, and she is just too gossipy to want to get a job. She sits around all day minding everyone else’s business and has no friends. I got all this information from the children. Leave it to the kids to know what is really going on.”

Rita suggested they all just go to her house in one car and leave the other cars in the lot while they drove to Mrs. Smith’s home.

When Mrs. Smith answered the door she really did not suspect that any of these women had heard her cruel rumors and was rather pleased that this popular group of gals was taking the time to visit her. She graciously offered to have them enter her home and immediately offered them some refreshments.

Rita was the first to speak. “Mrs. Smith, we are here to confront you about some nasty things you are saying about the four of us. Why would you say such things about us? You don’t even know us.”

“What are you talking about? I haven’t said any bad things about anyone.”

“Oh please,” chimed in Zoe. “We’ve had it confirmed through several sources that you are telling everyone we are gay and this could not be further from the truth.”

“Well, you are, aren’t you?”

“We are not, but even if this were so, what business is it of yours anyway?”

“See, you are saying it could be possible, and I saw you in person dancing with each other.”

“It was because we had spouses that we would not dance with other men. What you said was a cruel and very horrible thing to say and you had better watch what you continue to say or we will take you to court for defamation of character.” Janet didn’t even know if this was a legitimate reason to take anyone to court, or not, but it sounded professional and she hoped to put a certain fear in the mind of this ditsy woman. “Do you understand?”

“Get out of my house. All of you! I won’t stand for any of you to come here and threaten me in my own home.”

“Would you rather we call the police right now and have the law confront you here in your own home?”

This remark was what caused Mrs. Smith to do a double take and it appeared to knock some common sense into her. “Get out of my house,” she said, “You don’t have to worry about me talking about you because none of you are worth the conversation in the first place. Get out now.”

As they drove back to the park, while the women were pretty confident they got their message through to the arrogant woman, they could not be totally sure. Only Rita said, “She’s not going to bother us anymore. I just have this gut feeling since I have known other people like her. They hate to be confronted or caught in their abhorrent behavior, and when they actually are confronted they back down pretty quickly.”

Maria noticed a message from Jody on her answering machine when she finally got home, so she immediately returned the call. Maria hoped Jody’s pregnancy was going well.

“Hi Mrs. Andrews. I just called to say I am so sorry to have heard the gossip about you and your friends going around today.”

“Oh, no. You heard it too. Junk news has a life of its own.”

“I knew what they were saying was false, and I told the group I heard saying these things to cease and desist. How crazy can people be Mrs. Andrews?”

“We just came back from confronting the lady that started this Jody. Hopefully, she will stop it now.”

“I know who it was, and she is one vicious lady. I never liked her. In fact, I heard she said something about my being pregnant too. But that gossip never got a life of its own because when the kids began to taunt me I told them I certainly was pregnant and married and the baby’s father and I were looking forward to the blessed day. That shut them up good.”

“You go girl. That type of attitude is what they need I guess.”

At Jody’s home her Dad entered the room as Jody was finishing the phone conversation. “Who was that honey?”

“Mrs. Andrews.”

“Oh? Why did she call you if I may ask?”

“She didn’t call me Dad. I called her to tell her about some gossip I heard about her and her three friends. The night of our party they stopped at the local pub in the middle of town to continue their partying, and some gossip monger saw them dancing with one another and was telling everyone they were gay.”

“Gay? Not that gorgeous group of women. They may be a lot of things, but gay is not one of them. That redhead is really something else.”

“Daaaad, she’s married.”

“Well, they all are, I think, but I can still look, can’t I?”

Jody was seeing a new exciting side to her Dad lately and she enjoyed this about him.

“Well, Mrs. Andrews is a widow and I think she is the prettiest of all those women.”

“Oh, she’s ok. She reminds me a lot of your Mom to be honest.”

“Well, that’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“Not for me. First of all, I find her annoying, and secondly when I see her I think of your Mom and I get sad.”

“Believe me Dad. She is anything but annoying. I don’t know where you got that impression, but she is one of the nicest people I know.”

“Oh well, can’t help the way I feel,” and he walked into the kitchen to grab a bite to eat.

Back at Maria’s house the boys were enjoying her telling the story of the confrontation with Mrs. Smith. Another day had gone by, and another crisis hopefully had been resolved.

Chapter Thirty-Six

During the early evening hour before Maria was supposed to pick up Gabe and before dinner, she was putting some laundry away in the front bedroom on the second floor when she saw a car pull up in front of her home. *Man, I hope it is not some salesperson.* She decided she would not answer the door while peeking through the blinds. She became more fascinated when a tall and very handsome man exited the vehicle. However, on closer examination, she realized it was Mr. Viera and she quickly ran to the mirror to apply some blush to her cheeks and attempted to put her wild hair in some type of order. Then she thought to herself, *“Why in God’s name did I just do that?”* Almost at the same time she thought, *“What is that jerk doing here?”*

She watched him walk to the passenger side of the car and open the door. He immediately bent over and picked up a child in his arms. Upon closer scrutiny, Maria saw that the child was Gabe and she nearly fell while running downstairs, her heart pounding at a hard and furious pace. She flung open the front door startling both Gabe and Mr. Viera and nearly catapulted herself into both of their bodies.

“What’s wrong? Gabe, are you ok?”

Maria was surprised to hear the deep even tone of Mr. Viera’s voice when he said, “Gabe is fine Mrs. Andrews. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to alarm you. Gabe has a bad ankle sprain. One of the parents at practice was a physician and she took care of him on the field, but Gabe is experiencing a lot of pain and since we didn’t know what medications may cause him an allergy, I just decided to bring him home knowing you would not expect to pick him up for another hour. He’s such a little trooper I did not want to see him suffer, so one of the assistant coaches took over practice while I brought Gabe home.”

Realizing they were all standing outside with Gabe still in Mr. Viera’s arms, Maria attempted to take Gabe into her own arms, but Mr Viera said, “He’s really quite heavy for you, why don’t I bring him in and put him on the couch.”

Not used to having someone cater to her, Maria was taken aback but opened the door wider to let him enter with the child. After placing Gabe on the couch, Viera rubbed his hand over the top of Gabe's head while saying, "Take care Buddy. The doc said to take a day off and rest your ankle, and she's pretty sure you'll be fine in a couple of days." Maria wondered if the female doctor was married.

Gabe said, "Thanks, Mr. V," as the coach started to leave. Mr. Viera tipped his baseball cap towards Maria while saying, "Sorry if I frightened you. If you need any more help, don't hesitate to call." He was out the door before Maria realized what transpired. Starting his car, the thought crossed his mind that Maria was indeed very beautiful and how very much she resembled his deceased wife. Yet, there was something about Mrs. Andrews that irritated him and he could not figure out why. His wife never irritated him. His wife to him was like a piece of candy in a candy shop. He could never get enough of her.

"Well, I'll be damned. Who would have thought Mr. Jerk could be so nice? Will wonders never cease?" She kissed Gabe on the forehead while walking toward the bathroom medicine cabinet to get him something for his pain. When she returned, she also had a big bowl of ice cream with chocolate syrup topped with whip cream and a cherry placed on top which made for one happy little boy despite the pain.

Later that evening, Jody called saying her father asked her to call and inquire how Gabe was feeling.

"Tell him Gabe is sleeping peacefully. The pain medication appeared to help a lot. Thank your father for his concern Jody and for bringing Gabe home today. By the way, how are you feeling?"

"I have been experiencing some morning sickness, but I am getting it in the evening so it hasn't slowed me down with my daytime activities. We got a really nice apartment near the school, and I got a full time job in the Admin Office there. When the baby comes I can work part time if we can arrange Tyler's schedule where he could baby sit while I'm at work. Tyler works four evenings a week after school as a computer tech."

"That's great honey. Sounds like you have things under control."

"Oh, yea, if you have any spare furniture you don't need we'll take it. We're soliciting, and so far we have some nice stuff to fill up our spare rooms. We did buy a bedroom set with our wedding gift money. You'll have to visit once we get everything in order."

"I would love to."

"Well, glad Gabe is doing well. My Dad said he's a really good kid."

Any praise concerning her children always made Maria feel good. That evening as she was getting ready for bed, she pondered what prompted her to primp her appearance when she first saw Mr. Viera that late afternoon. What would it matter to him how I looked? How foolish of me — as if I cared what

he thought anyway. She did have to admit, however, that her friends were correct in saying he was one handsome hunk of a man — and that mellifluous voice — WOW! Oh stop it for crying out loud her subconscious voice reprimanded. I have better things to do. She put on one of the late night shows on television and hopped into bed.

Before falling asleep she mentally prepared herself to google airfare prices the next day. She had promised the children she was going to take them to Rome as soon as school ended to see Father Jon. They were beyond excited and Maria's level of excitement was right up there with all the children. Father Jon was already making arrangements for a place where they could stay. It was a lovely villa belonging to a friend who offered his home free of charge. What a wonderful charitable gift thought Maria. The thought of this vacation was a boon to her existence. She hadn't felt so passionate about anything else in months.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Thirty-Seven

School was quickly coming to an end and summer was about to begin. Plane reservations had been made and everyone's passports had just arrived. So far, so good. The biggest chore to complete was buying some new clothes and shoes for the children. They were growing so fast it was hard to keep them in clothes that fit. Even worse was the fact they were so busy with end of the year activities it was hard to find time to shop. Finally, Maria became adamant about picking a day. Time was running short where the shopping could no longer be put off until another day.

Children were funny. Just to mention the word shopping gave them a conniption fit, but when they were actually doing the shopping they had a grand time, plus they were opinionated and this made the chore of shopping for Maria a bigger challenge. Once they were home, they grabbed their stuff, ran to their rooms and modeled the clothes for each other.

Each child had their own sized suitcase on wheels with a handle to help pull their own luggage. They were a sight to behold upon entering the main terminal. They did check their baggage though as Maria did not want the children dragging their suitcases down the aisles of the plane. However, they each had a backpack filled with games and goodies to keep them occupied on the long flight.

Father Jon was there to greet them at the airport when the plane landed. The children all ran to the priest and gave him a huge hug. The children's eyes were bright with excitement when they saw the vast sized van the priest had rented to transport the family around Italy. Everyone enthusiastically climbed into the van in anticipation of getting to their rented villa. The countryside was enchantingly beautiful once they left the traffic behind in Rome. Jon explained how he decided to show the family sites outside the city first and then they were to tour Rome on the days before returning home. During one of those days he had arranged for them to have a meeting with the Pope. At that statement, everyone in the van articulated on the word *WOW* and the *WOWS* became even louder when Father Jon explained how

he took the entire two weeks off on vacation leave in order to be their tour guide.

“Holy Crow,” shouted Gary, “Look at that villa!” Maria had expected a lot of resistance from Gary about taking this trip since he now had a new girl friend, but as it turned out his girlfriend’s family was taking a cruise to the Panama Canal at the same time, so the trip was a no brainer for Gary. The villa was high on a cliff and the view was extraordinary. The children immediately scattered throughout the house selecting their rooms.

Touring Italy for the children was spontaneously fun. One day they toured the ruins of Pompeii, and another they climbed to the top of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. The day they took a more quiet tour down the Adriatic Coast was a pleasant diversion as the children had by now settled down after the many days of excitement. Everyone was fascinated by the orange trees that lined the streets of Sorrento and it seemed like the perfect place to stop for a pleasant respite at one of the outdoor cafes. This was the first time Maria and Father Jon had a chance to chat with one another without interference from the children while they sat at separate tables feeding their faces.

“Jon, how on earth can we ever thank you for this most wonderful trip. We’ll remember it for the rest of our lives. Is there any chance you could be moving back to the states soon? We all miss you so much. I especially miss you.”

“Ah, Maria. I am better here, believe me. I cannot be around you. I just can’t.”

“But why, Jon? I won’t hug or kiss you, I promise.”

“Well, I personally have no control over myself when you are around me. I already told you I love you. I love you in every way possible — physically, mentally, and I’ll even say sexually, if you must know. I just can’t be near you. I love having you here, but I am tortured beyond comprehension. That is my cross to bear. Please understand.”

“Life back home is not the same without you. It is just not the same.” As often happens when children are around, conversations don’t get finished, and that was the case now.

Maria got her next big moment of joy however when her love of art and shopping were appeased while visiting Florence. Father Jon graciously offered to amuse the children while she took the time in Florence for herself. The superb architecture within the city and the masterpiece Renaissance sculptures overwhelmed her, especially Michelangelo’s beautifully muscled Statue of David. Maria later enjoyed shopping unhampered. The children were also escorted to see the Statue, and of course the younger ones giggled about the nude factor, or else averted their eyes.

When back in Rome, the children described running around the Coliseum as awesome, and they demonstrated a reverence for the Pope that Maria didn’t think was possible. But as often happens when people are having a

good time, their days in Rome sadly came to an end. Oddly, Maria was going home, but she felt homesick. Robert would not be there. Nor would Granny be a close phone call away to spend the time chatting together like they often did. The only other person living on this earth that Maria truly loved besides her children and close friends would not be there either. Thank God for the children who quickly distracted her from her morbid thoughts as they said their “thank yous” and “goodbyes” and proceeded to the security check at the airport. With her seatbelt firmly in place Maria settled down to watch a movie about the Three Stooges hoping their silly antics would cheer her morbid soul. In fact, their antics were so bad she had to laugh if only because they were so foolishly imbecilic.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Leaves had turned a brilliant fall color on the small college campus located near Maria's home. She felt invigorated walking to her class among the other students. A mother's conscience goes through many transformations when she decides to go back to school, and Maria was no different. Realizing she had to keep her mind occupied, Maria gave serious contemplation on whether she should return to school to get her Master's Degree. The choice, in reality, seemed almost imperative since so many in this day and age had advanced degrees making a person lacking one almost non-competitive. *Is it fair for me to leave my children while pursuing this degree after all they have had to endure for their young ages?* Maria wisely talked to some counselors and women in the business world. She became more convinced that not only would she benefit from getting an advanced education, but all quickly assured her that the children would be just fine.

As it turned out, Maria only had to go to campus for two hours one night a week since she could take the rest of her classes online. That one night out turned out to be the highlight of Maria's week. Many in Maria's class were about her age or older. The majority of the students though were in their twenties. All the students appeared focused on their studies compared to the classmates she remembered in undergraduate school whose main interest seemed to be the party mode. Discussions were lively and energizing, and often the two hours she spent in class were gone before she knew it. Indeed, the enjoyment she was experiencing could be partially credited to her son Gary who did a great job of making sure the children were always in bed when she returned home.

Walking along with the students always enlivened Maria while comforting her as well since the feel of the campus experience brought back memories of a better time — a pleasurable time filled with happiness.

Approaching the building where her class was held Maria adjusted her backpack off her shoulders in preparation of entering the room on her left when she noticed in the short distance a rather good looking individual

passing to her right. Sadly, the closer he got she noticed it was Mr. Viera and she didn't know what disturbed her more, the fact that he always seemed to be in the same places she was going, or the fact that this man she despised so much always at first hit her with his handsome appearance. *He would be much easier to hate if he were more on the ugly side.* Fortunately, he seemed predisposed and focused on something else and he therefore did not notice her. Maria was happy about that fact.

Because it was so close to the upcoming election, discussion before and after class became extremely emotional and some tempers even flared. There did not seem to be a middle stance in any of the discussions. Either one had to be a Republican or a Democrat, or there seemed to be no in between. She felt most Independents were just saying they were independent to avoid confrontation. Some did ask her for which candidate she was going to vote, and she was fortunate that they all accepted her statement when she said she preferred to keep her vote a private one. The professor had a hard time at the beginning of class getting the students to quiet down and get onto another topic, but after someone mentioned meeting to further the discussion after class they all became settled and immersed in another topic. They all invited Maria to go for coffee after class where the discussion was to continue, but she graciously declined explaining she had small children that required her to get on home.

One young man lingered behind and eventually stepped up his pace to accommodate Maria's step as they progressed down the hallway when they were leaving. He struck up a conversation and walked Maria to her car and while doing so asked her if she might like to go and see a movie with him on the weekend. Her thoughts told her he had to be not much older than her oldest son, but she did not reveal her thoughts to this nice young man. What she did say, however, was that she was recently widowed and really was not yet up to par to consider dating anyone at this point. She hoped that by mentioning this fact that the young man would spread the rumor around and she would not be bothered by any more invitations in the near future. As the young man held her car door open for her while she entered she noticed that old Mr. V again, and this time she felt he was ignoring her instead of acknowledging her presence. "*Moron!*" The young man walked away after saying goodbye and that he would see her next week in class. She made a big fuss about speaking rather loudly for Mr. Jerk to hear, "Looking forward to it." No, I don't like him, but neither do I like the fact that he ignores me. How rude! How very rude!

There was a written note on the kitchen table from Gary saying that Jody had called. Maria was anxious to get started on her assignment which meant doing some research and writing an essay on any result she found. Since part of Maria's assignment had to do with abortion and pregnancy, she could not help but think that Jody might be a good person to call to get a personal "one

on one” interview. She poured herself a glass of cider, took the phone off the handset and dialed Jody’s number. One of the first questions she wanted Jody to answer was what her dad was doing on campus, but she decided against it because Jody might tell her Dad and he might get the impression she was really interested in his whereabouts. What her main concern really was why he always seemed to appear in whatever area Maria happened to be at a particular time because his presence always was one of annoyance to her.

Jody’s baby was due right after the holidays. Plans had been made for Maria to visit the two young *parents to be* the first weekend in January. “I am due the middle of the month, so I should be around by then. I would love you to see how nice our apartment is. You are like a Mom to me Maria. I so enjoy spending time with you, and now that Dad is so busy himself and he no longer objects to my spending time with you, I didn’t want to miss this opportunity to show you our new place.”

“Of course I’ll come to visit Jody. I’ll get a room in a hotel though as I don’t want to make any extra work for you by staying at your place so close to your due date, and that is not negotiable.”

“Well, ok, but if you change your mind, you know you are certainly welcome to stay here with us. Dad has been here a couple of times and has bought us some really nice stuff, but now that he is so busy we don’t get to see him as much.”

That statement from Jody was the perfect opportunity to interject her question as Maria asked, “Why is your Dad so busy?”

“He decided to get his PhD and maybe become a professor at a college deciding to change the course of his life — or so he says.”

“Good for him. I have also gone back to school to get my Masters and I am really enjoying it. And, guess what?”

“What?”

“One of the young students was hitting on me and asked me out on a date.”

“You hot babe. I knew you were one cool Momma. When are you going?”

“Oh, Jody, I told him no. That’s the last thing I am interested in right now.”

“Come on Maria. You have every right to get out there and start dating.”

“Honey, I had such a beautiful marriage. My heart just is not into this dating stuff. My priorities at this point are my children.”

“Speaking as a child of someone who also lost a parent, as long as you love them, your children are going to be fine. You always seemed to have your situation under control. My Dad just had a hard time there for a while and didn’t include us in his sorrow nor did he take the time to think we had our own situations and sorrow to handle. He’s doing much better now, and I swear Maria, he has more women bringing goodies to his house and calling

him for a supposedly good reason that only seems to me to be a manufactured explanation.”

For some odd reason this statement touched Maria with a pang of jealousy. She despised this man a lot, and in her mind he had been so rude she just didn't want anyone being nice to him. Then she thought *Lord why am I acting so juvenile, even if only in my thoughts. Get it together gal.* To Jody she said, “I am happy things are now going so well for you and your Dad.”

“Yes, I am encouraging him to date too. All my friends think my Dad is hot!”

“I do have a few questions to ask you concerning my college assignment. Do you have a few minutes to answer them before we hang up the phone?”

“Ask away!”

Before they were finished, Maria was sure to get some names of hotels in Jody's area so she could make a reservation for the weekend in January when she was going to visit the young couple. Now that she had some good material to add to her report, Maria went to her computer later in the evening and started to type her essay. She then checked her calendar and made a mental list of some gifts to purchase for the upcoming Christmas holidays for her children. Father Jon was going to be coming back for the holidays and that was something to which she could look forward.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Thirty-Nine

For the sixth time, Maria walked into the bathroom and turned on the light switch to no avail. *Darn, such an automatic thing to do and we don't even have any power.* A big nor'easter came through their area with extreme winds pounding the house and what started out as hard rain quickly changed to snow with blizzard proportions. She looked out the window at the huge drifts covering her driveway and put on another sweater to counteract the cold in the house since the power went out. Thank God the storm started late at night when all the children were home and in bed. They are going to be filled with sheer excitement when they see the mounds of snow in the yard knowing that with such a large storm there would definitely be no school. She could hear the wind whistling through the rafters in her attic above her bedroom, and the sound was disconcerting and somewhat frightening. The fact that she had teenage boys was comforting as she tried to imagine this entire stormy scenario without their presence. She knew she would be frightened and even now experienced some aspects of fright. Soon, one of the children would inevitably get up to go to the bathroom and come running to her complaining that the house was cold, not to mention that when they turned on the bathroom light it would not work. How lucky that she had done a lot of baking for the holidays during the day, so they would all have a lot of good munchies to share on their day off from school.

Why did she only think of purchasing a generator once the power in the house went off she asked herself, though she knew nothing about how to operate one or even if getting one to operate were a feasible option. The lights in her next door neighbor's home told her that unlike in her household, they had not only given a generator thought, they had actually purchased one and all of them were probably nice and warm and cozy. At this point it was Gary that awoke and came looking for her. "Some storm, isn't it Mom?"

"Yes honey. I am pretty sure you won't be going to school tomorrow. Help me get some more blankets out of the closet while I hold the flashlight for you. We will pile extra blankets on the children to help keep them warm.

The weather service guys got this one wrong. It wasn't supposed to get here until tomorrow night and here we are twenty-four hours early getting the storm full blast. Thank God I had already done some shopping yesterday."

Maria lit a hurricane lamp that was placed on a table in the upstairs hallway so that if any of the other children awoke they would be able to see their way to the bathroom. She also placed some extra flashlights on the table that they could pick up and use in the bathroom. "Let's try and get some sleep sweetheart. We are going to be kept busy tomorrow removing the mounds of snow from the front walk, and the driveway, so we'll need all the rest we can get."

"Will do Mom! I am tired and should have no problem falling back to sleep, especially with the extra blankets, except that whistling wind noise is enough to drive anyone crazy. Let's hope the others stay asleep."

"Good night Gary."

"Good night Mom."

Sleep did not return easily however for Maria. There were a couple of large trees in her yard that could pose a problem should the wind knock them down in the direction of the house. The trees were not that old where it should be a concern, but one could never predict the wiles of nature. Around seven in the morning, at the usual time the family awoke there was a large enormous bang coming from the back of the house and some of Maria's fears came true when she went to look and saw a mammoth branch had been broken off one of those trees that concerned her and hit her back deck doing considerable damage. The noise got all the children out of bed. Their comments went from concern, to some fear, to sheer joy after they realized all was well and they would not have to go to school that day. Unfortunately, Maria could not prepare the big breakfasts they usually enjoyed on a snowy day off from school due to the power outage, so the menu consisted of cold cereal, milk and orange juice...plus some leftover Halloween candy.

Since the children couldn't laze around and watch television they were all scampering every way imaginable looking for boots, gloves, hats and warm coats. They were determined to get out and dive into the huge snow mounds, yet Maria knew they wouldn't be there long before they would start complaining of being cold and wanting to come back inside again. When you didn't want to create more wash because you had no power to operate the machines, was exactly when more wash was created by the children going in and out all day, changing mittens, hats and pants. This inevitably meant the wash load was going to increase tenfold. One thing that Robert managed to complete while still alive was to build a "mud" area as they liked to call it. The children could disrobe, leave their boots in the room and hang scarves etc., on the wooden rack provided. Give me strength dear Lord Maria kept repeating over and over. She knew it was going to be a long day. Thank God for her sons and for the purchase of the snow blower a few years ago. The

front walk and drive were now clear though Maria doubted that even the mail deliverer could manage to get up the steep hill leading to her house. Without being told, the boys then went to the neighbors' home and cleared their drive and front walkway as well. What a wonderful supportive thing for her boys to do. This was the same neighbor who had offered to bury their cat when Granny was staying with the children shortly after Robert's death. They needed their generator since they were up in years and needed the coziness of a warm house. Their large family was no longer living at home, however many still lived in the area and came to visit often. The lady managed to poke her head out the door and told the boys she had made a big container of hot chocolate for them to take home when they finished. She also told them that by dinner time they should come back with a big pot which she would fill with chili to *warm their little hearts*. The boys got a kick out of her saying that and could not wait to get inside their own home and tell their mom.

After a lunch of peanut butter sandwiches, chips and some nice juicy apples, the smaller children started wrestling on the floor. Maria had the hope of getting a start on her Christmas cards, but it became quickly obvious that this was not going to happen any time soon. In fact, the rough house playing made it clear that in no time at all someone was going to get hurt, so she quickly grabbed a game of monopoly and made them all sit down to play. After many long arguments over which board trinket they would use since they all seemed to want the same one, and almost at the point where Maria thought to herself that this was not going to work, the children began to settle themselves and the competitive game became quite enjoyable. At least it killed a few hours until one of the children spotted some neighbor children outside with their sleds and plastic discs and immediately the game was terminated so they could go and join the group outside. This only happened after a big argument on who won the game of monopoly. Back they went to the mud room to search for items to wear that were not still soaked. This was going to be a horribly long day. Why can't my children be the type who enjoy sitting around reading all day she wondered.

The next time the brood came inside was close enough to dinner time that Bobby brought the big pot over to the neighbors for the chili. She even had some homemade bread ready and her house smelled delectable. The hot chili hit the spot, and the bread was still hot enough so that the butter melted easily. All the children devoured the food like little vultures. While Maria and some of the children were doing the dishes by hand, the power miraculously came back on. "Oh, mercy Lord, thank you, thank you." She sent the children upstairs to take a nice warm bath to help them supposedly relax. That was exactly what her Mom used to tell her. The rest of the evening was easily manageable since the children were all exhausted from a full day of fresh air and playing hard in the snow...enough so that they were quite

content to sit and watch DVD's while cuddled up in their 'jammies' and with blankets wrapped around them.

While the children were busy relaxing in the den, Maria contemplated what they could do as a family to repay the kindness that Father Jon exhibited to them when they toured with him in Italy. Quickly realizing there was nothing she could do that would be comparable in any way or manner, Maria instead thought that for his visit she would just prepare a huge Christmas meal and they could open presents together around the Christmas tree. Father Jon always loved her home cooking and the thought of preparing a nice big meal invigorated Maria's soul. Sometimes, when you could wipe out all the junk you heard in the news and elsewhere and you just focused on the ones you loved the most like your children, your friends, the lovely neighbors and in Maria's case the priest she adored the most, life had a way of looking good. That evening, Maria nestled under her covers at peace with the world, if perhaps only temporarily. The storm had arrived on the one day she would have gone to class, but her work was completed and next week would come soon enough.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Forty

That snowy weekend Maria met with her friends Sunday afternoon at the coffee shop. It had been a while since they had all been together and none of them were at a loss for words. They were all discussing what they would be doing for Thanksgiving and others were complaining that now since the time had changed back to standard time it was getting much too dark way too early.

“My goodness,” said Maria. “I have been so busy with school and planning Christmas I completely forgot what I would be doing for Thanksgiving.” Robert’s parents reacted in ways that Maria thought very strange for having lost their son and considering her children were their only grandchildren. They just picked up and moved to Florida as though escaping their familiar environment would help ease the pain in their hearts. Of course, they were adults and free to do as they pleased, but to be honest, their behavior did irritate Maria. “I had anticipated having the grandparents so close might be a comfort to the children, but once Robert’s parents moved, I began to realize that it was becoming more of a case of *out of sight, out of mind* instead.”

“Well, why don’t you take the initiative Maria and invite yourselves to their home in Florida for Thanksgiving,” asked Rita. “That should help keep them in the minds of your children, and vice versa.”

“I hadn’t even given that some consideration. The children are at an age where they really like to be around home during the holidays relaxing and doing nothing and also being around with their gal and boy pals.”

“Oh, it would only be for a few days. Getting away again would be good for all of you and if Robert’s parents don’t feel like cooking you can offer to take them out to eat. I doubt they would object to that,” interjected Zoe.

“I don’t know. I have so much to do with my school work and preparing for Christmas. It’s a big responsibility buying all those gifts for the children on my own without Robert’s help.”

“I imagine it is honey,” exclaimed Janet. “I have a hard enough time with buying gifts myself, and even though I don’t want to acknowledge it, Jim

does at least give me ideas as to what to purchase, and he will even help me buy the gifts. I must admit this certainly makes it easier for me. However, please know that you can count on any of us for help should you want it.”

“Thanks Janet. I’ll have to go home and have a conversation with the children to see what they think.”

“Sometimes, Maria, as a parent it might be less trouble to just go ahead and decide the matter yourself. Inevitably, you are going to have some children who want to go and others who will not. It will only create controversy which you don’t need.”

“I suppose you are right. Anyway, I was surprised to hear all of you had already made your Thanksgiving plans, and I had not even given it any thought which is so unlike me really.”

At this point, Rita looked towards the coffee shop door and mumbled the word *WOW* supposedly to herself, but all could hear. Rita’s expression caused them all to look in the direction of the door as well.

The light hit the grey spots in Mr. V’s hair in just the right places to enhance his striking appearance as he entered the coffee shop. He looked movie star handsome and the comments coming from all the women were not kept secret as they mouthed *yum yum* and what a *doll* and just pleasing grunts. Surprisingly, he noticed the ladies and actually walked over to them, appearing to be friendlier than Maria had ever seen him before.

“Good afternoon ladies,” he said while tipping his baseball cap into a welcoming salute.

All the women uttered the word hi, and Maria quickly realized the silence that followed was so unlike any of them who usually could not keep their mouths shut.

“It looks like you are taking pleasure in a great afternoon together.”

“We are,” answered Rita.

Placing his cap back on his head he started to walk away while saying, “Well, enjoy.”

The speechless gals all rolled their eyes at each other in favor of what they had just seen, and some even turned their heads to watch him leave.

“Why don’t I ever get a hunk like that to notice me,” said Janet. I’d marry him in a minute.”

“Oh please,” were the words out of Maria’s mouth. “I’ll only concede that he is good looking, but he’s the last person I would ever want to marry. He is just too damn full of himself.”

Rita wanted to know why Maria always said that about Mr. Viera. “You are the only one I know of that always speaks of this very nice man in such a negative manner. Why are you so hostile where he is concerned?”

“It’s his attitude. Sometimes he appears friendly, like today when he comes in and greets us, and other times he acts as though he doesn’t even know who we are, or at least who I am anyway.”

Rita bounced right back saying, “I have never known him to act as if he doesn’t know me. On the contrary, it always appears to me that he goes out of his way to be nice, like today.”

Zoe could not help but say, “Well, that’s because we all know he has a crush on you.”

“Oh, please. I am married after all.”

“That’s doesn’t necessarily stop people.”

“Stop them from what? What are you implying Zoe? He’s a good looking man. There is no denying that, but I happen to be happily married.”

“I don’t mean you necessarily, just that there are people out there that would drop everything for a man with those good looks.”

“I think you need to get your wacky brain in order.”

“OK gals,” was Janet’s reply, “it looks like we could be initiating a big fight...and all over a man we hardly know. Let’s not spoil a good afternoon.”

“You’re right,” said Maria. “Besides, it is getting late, and I should be venturing on home. I think I’ll purchase some goodies for the children before I leave. Let’s do this again really soon. OK?”

They all agreed and Rita said she would arrange their next get together.

Maria went to the counter and picked out some scones and black and white cookies as a treat for the children. After she paid the cashier and left a little tip in the tip jar, she proceeded out of the coffee shop and not knowing who possessed the shoulder with whom she collided at that precise moment, she quickly realized that this person she bumped into was the ever present Mr. V. He looked down at her petite physique as she looked up and noticed it was him. Always him. Always interfering in her life. Always being in the same place she is. Has this man not got a life of his own? God, he irritates me she thought as she quietly said to him, “Oh excuse me. I’m so sorry.” She quickly continued on her way while she heard him murmur, “Not a problem.” God his eyes are so blue, and the way he looked me right in the eyes. Creep!

Once home, Maria poured some milk for the children and handed them their treats. She went to her computer and started looking up airfares to get to Florida. Examining the price of tickets for the airfare would help her to decide if she should even consider the trip. Actually finding some really good fares on a no frills airline, with direct flights no less, Maria became more excited about the prospects of visiting the Florida Andrews. She immediately dialed their number and started the conversation by saying that the children were very interested in coming to visit their grandparents for Thanksgiving, and there was really no need even for them to cook. Maria suggested they all go out to eat. How can they deny their grandchildren wanting to visit though in reality the children did not even know anything about this planned trip? Maria was pleasantly surprised when she heard the excitement in her in-law’s

voices, and she mentally made a note to thank her friends for coming up with the idea for her to visit them.

The family was going to arrive the day before Thanksgiving and stay the long weekend returning late Sunday afternoon. Maria made the plane reservations as soon as she finished her conversation with her in-laws. Then she went and told her children about the trip. Surprisingly, the children appeared to be excited and Maria was happy not to get any negative feedback on the planned trip.

The Florida grandparents seemed absolutely thrilled to see their remaining family members. Children have a way of making even the dullest day appear exciting. They were going to spend one day in Orlando with a trip to Disney World, and they were excited about preparing once again a nice big family dinner with all the usual exciting foods. As soon as they arrived to the lovely ranch house development, Maria's children ran to their designated rooms and changed into their bathing suits and then they went immediately to the recreation center where they instantly jumped into the community's pool. After the huge snow storm back home it was exciting to be able to strip their bodies of cumbersome clothing and to swim their little hearts away. In actuality, the outside temperatures were really not all that warm and Maria's children were the only ones swimming that day. The locals apparently did not think this was exactly swimming weather, but that did not stop her children. Maria even managed to take a dip in the heated pool before going inside to help her in-laws with some "day before" food preparation. Wonderful smells of pumpkin pies cooking and fancy breads baking were already filtering through the home. While realizing that it was always hard to spend any holiday without Robert's presence, Maria felt good about following up on the decision to visit her in-laws. What could have been a time spent in the doldrums of pity and sadness turned into a time of comfort and contentment for all. The children quickly decided that they were going to visit these grandparents a lot. Gosh, they reflected how lucky can anyone be to live so close to Disney World. They were in heaven on earth.

Thanksgiving dinner was fulfilling and fun, and they enjoyed eating at home instead of going out to eat. The grandparents had numerous stories to tell the children about their Dad when he was growing up which brought many laughs as well as serious thoughts. The conversations that included the stories about their Dad were the next best thing to essentially having their Dad sitting right there with them at the table and proved to be a marvelous help in them acquiring an optimistic attitude.

Election Day had come and gone earlier in the month, so that conversation was no longer the priority it had been. Maria knew that her vote would have been quite different from those of her in-laws, so she was happy the election was now in the past and not still in the forefront when the television

happened to be on which was not often since they were all so much on the go.

The lines at Disney World were fairly long, but everyone seemed to take it all in stride. In addition to making use of all the rides and shows, they also had a lot of fun buying goodies at the gift shops courtesy of their grandparents. Maria did not object to this indulgence realizing the gift buying was as much a therapy for the grandparents as it was for the children. With their appetites satiated, the drive home was quiet as the children peacefully reminisced about the fun day and the excitement they would have telling their friends all about the trip when they got home. As soon as their little heads hit the pillow they fell asleep.

The time in Florida went by way too quickly, but there was no denying they all had a good time. At the airport there were promises made to return for another visit in the not too distant future.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Forty-One

Father Jon had spent his Thanksgiving on the outskirts of Rome with some American friends that had rented a home there for the Thanksgiving holiday. While he absolutely loved Italian food, he was equally excited to be able to have a good old fashioned American Thanksgiving dinner with the stuffing he so loved and all the other delicious foods.

Upon returning to the Vatican that evening, he mentally started preparing for his trip back to the states at Christmas time. Maria kept entering his thoughts, and he questioned if she was the real reason he wanted to go back home. Yet, he knew this was not necessarily so because of course he would have gone home for Christmas either way even without his attraction for Maria. Everyone liked to go home for Christmas. Right? The myriad of thoughts about the holidays tortured Jon. How am I going to be able to be around Maria? Then again, I will eventually have to go home at some time or other. I cannot keep avoiding her presence around me. Why God do I love this woman so much? Do you think I love her more than my love for you? Am I wrong in loving Maria? But, God, I can't control these feelings I have for her. Even when I try and shut thoughts of her out of my mind they keep returning to me over and over. Help me please. I appear to be incapable of handling anything that concerns her. Keep me from committing any sins of inappropriateness.

How odd that in present day society the Catholic Church was not necessarily known for priests being in love with women and especially so since the scandals known as the big "Catholic Scandal" that have been so constantly in the forefront of the news. . . the scandal of child molestation. How could my fellow priests ever have committed something so outrageous? Years ago the big stories used to be about celibate priests having love affairs with women, but that certainly was no longer the case. Father Jon wondered what the long term effects of this scandal were going to have on the church's history. He feared that those who expected radical changes would be sorely disappointed, but yet he knew that things as he knew and remembered them would

never go back as they had been. Certainly, church officials were going to have to learn to be more accountable than they had ever been before. That was a given. Yet, Father Jon had learned from experience throughout the years that he had been a priest that no crisis was insurmountable. There were many calamities during the years that had threatened the existence of the church, but despite these calamities the church had never been destroyed. God's spirit always seemed to be the final outcome. Many had been brought to their knees in prayer over these issues. Perhaps that was a good outcome in the long term. Despite the many calamities, while new issues came aboard to threaten the church's very existence, one only had to realize that many new rules in society would probably be challenged or not survive, or perhaps cause chaos later in their own right, but the church had survived for 2,000 years. Hopefully, the priest anticipated that his dilemma for the love of this woman and friend were not insurmountable and he could survive diligently as well.

Jon prayed daily for God to help him find a way to not make Maria such a daily presence in his thoughts. How can we control our thoughts he wondered? Fortunately, he was so busy most of the time at his job he could manage to avoid some of those thoughts, but then there were times like the present where he was driven to such distraction it nearly drove him crazy. What hurt the most was that he really didn't feel free to discuss his situation with anyone. He feared it might make him look weak and eventually prove a detriment to his career and any advancement to a higher ranking for him.

Nevertheless, he was going to make this trip home. He loved Rome and living in Italy, but he had to admit he was somewhat homesick too. He would busy himself selecting gifts for Maria's children. He could not love them more if they had been his own flesh and blood and he thanked God for their presence in his life. To him, it was also obvious that the children felt the same way about him, especially so after their father died. I will not deprive them of some extra happiness during the holiday period. I will just have to learn to be around Maria and not let myself be burdened by having her so close.

The Internet was a big help in selecting age appropriate gift ideas for the children or at least giving Jon some ideas. His intentions were to write down as many ideas as he could find then go to a large and fancy department store and seek the aid of a personal shopper who could help him in this endeavor. He not only wanted age appropriate gifts, but he also wanted gifts defined distinctly by the area in which he now lived. These gifts were to be totally different than anything he would buy in America. They would be distinctive to Italy and something the children would cherish for many years.

That thought helped distract him only a short time from any notions he had in his heart about Maria. Now she was again at the forefront of his mind. Yes, he even thought about holding her in his arms, embracing her body to

his. Her lips were so perfectly shaped and not the huge monstrosity lips that women today seemed to plump to outrageous sizes making their lovely faces look out of proportion and distorted. When he would talk to Maria and look in her eyes, as was appropriate to do, the gaze of her eyes would often cause him to lose concentration and he then would shamefully have to ask her to please repeat what she had just said. No other woman in his entire life had ever made him feel the way she did. No one! This had been ongoing since they were very young children. *Maybe I should have told her so. Maybe I should have asked her to marry me before she met Robert. Ah, but I was afraid she would turn me away. The thought of losing her was almost more than he could bear. Maybe I should not go home for the holidays. Would that be fair to those wonderful children I also love equally as much? Of course not! I must not let my emotions get carried away. I am a sensible mature man after all. God, please help me. Please.*

Sleep was hard to come by that night. He tried to blame it on the huge Thanksgiving dinner he had eaten, but in reality he ultimately knew the real cause. Maria was always the foundation for his thoughts. His judgments were always clouded by thoughts of Maria and he feared this was always going to be true. *I must conquer my feelings in one way or another. I will not be beaten by the views I have of this woman that haunt my every moment. Eventually, my tour in Italy will be finished, and I will have no choice but to go home, so I may as well learn to battle my emotions now. I will survive. We will do well. This trip will be a good one for all of us. I must convince myself that this is so.*

Chapter Forty-Two

The roads were icy as Maria made her way to campus the first school night after the Thanksgiving holiday. Family members always told Maria to be aware, especially later in the evening, of the black ice that can pose such a danger in this type of weather. Usually in the darkness these deadly patches of ice could not be seen clearly and any slight variation of speed when hitting these areas could cause a car to swirl out of control and be lethal. There was concern that classes might be cancelled, but this did not happen. Leaving home early to give herself plenty of time to get to class without incident, Maria managed to get to class way ahead of the scheduled time. She sat down at a desk and opened her book to review some work in case the professor decided to spring an unexpected quiz on them. Deep in concentration, Maria jumped when she heard a deep voice say, “Hello, Maria. Those roads were really a mess getting here tonight, weren’t they?”

Well, I’ll be damned. It was Mr. Viera. He actually spoke to her in a decent manner and even appeared to remember her name. Maybe it’s the weather she thought while answering, “Yes, I almost feared driving here tonight and on the one hand I hoped they would cancel classes, while on the other hand I am glad they did not. I was ready to get back after the holiday.”

“You have wonderful color to your skin. Did you go away over the holiday?”

“Yes, I visited my in-laws in Florida.”

“Well, lucky you. Sometimes I feel like I need to get away, but then something always pops up to prevent me from doing so.”

“I know what you mean, however I just decided lately to make plans and go and worry about the consequences later. Fortunately, for me, the trips have only been good ones without consequence.” Why is this man being so friendly all of a sudden? I guess it could be the fact that right now there is no one else around, so I am as good as anyone to have a conversation.

“Well, good for you. I admire your attitude. I have to go to class now, but listen, if you ever need a ride because you are fearful of the road conditions,

or any reason, don't hesitate to call me since we both seem to come here on the same night."

"Thank you. I'll keep that in mind." At this point several other classmates entered the room and they were all full of conversation about their holidays and admiring Maria's glowing tan. Mr. V was dropped from her thoughts for the time being. When class ended though, Maria did accept a ride home with one of her classmates since the road conditions had deteriorated significantly at this point. She just felt it would be better to leave the car on campus overnight. Hopefully, by morning the weather would get warm enough to get rid of any icy conditions, and she would have Gary bring her over to pick up her car. Driving in inclement weather did not rate high on her scale of things she enjoyed doing.

As her classmate drove into her driveway, Maria could see little faces peaking behind the curtains. Once inside it became quite obvious that the children had all been worried about their Mom and the bad weather conditions. "Were you in an accident Mommy? Where is your car? We were so scared. Don't go to school again when the weather is bad. Please?"

They were all surrounding her while expressing their concerns. "No, sweethearts, my car is fine, and I was not in an accident. I just don't like to drive in this weather, and a classmate drove me home."

"But what's going to happen to your car?"

"It's on campus and will be okay there. Gary or Bobby can take me to get it as soon as the weather gets better."

Usually the children were in bed when she got home from class, but the older boys explained that there was no way the younger ones were going to go to sleep until they knew their Mom was home safe and sound. Maria gave them all a big hug and ushered them upstairs. "Ok, little babes, time to get to bed. Mommy's home and fine and it is time for you to go to sleep."

They were so happy to see their Mom, none of them complained. They brushed their teeth, and she heard them all say their prayers and was overwhelmed when the youngest one said, "Thank you God for getting my Mommy home safe tonight." She again gave them all huge hugs and tucked them under the covers in bed.

Once downstairs she decided to make some hot chocolate and offered to make some for Bobby and Gary too. Bobby said he had to finish a project for school and was going to his room, but Gary decided to join her. They enjoyed a few moments of pleasant conversation when out of the blue Gary said to his mom, "You're a great Mother, Mom. I just thought I should tell you that."

"My goodness, honey, what brought that on? Thank you so much."

"You know, I was watching some television shows today where they were honoring special mothers, and it just made me think about you. I want you to know that you were always a good and special mom even before Dad

died. You have a way of always understanding what we are thinking or trying to say, and you never judge us too harshly or reprimand us too severely when we really screw up. That needs to be recognized. We were all worried about you driving in that mess tonight and I just thought it would be horrible not to tell you what you really mean to us, especially if something should have happened to you.”

“Many times honey, as a parent, we often think we are doing a lousy job where our children are concerned. I, at first, did not even want to take this one night out to take classes and return to school to advance my education. So, those kind words coming out of your mouth — well, I can’t even begin to tell you how much they mean to me. I love you all so much, sometimes it hurts me inside, so again I thank you with a deep gratitude in my heart.”

“You know what’s odd Mom?”

“What honey?”

“In a contest of who might be good parents, it was obvious from the shows I watched where those parents who had experienced either a tragedy, or illness, or extreme poverty, or whatever, were always the parents to win out over all the others. And, perhaps, rightly so because of the hardships they have had to endure. But I could not help but think of the myriad of mothers who are just raising good children in their routine daily lives that will never get recognition for what they do perhaps because they are not poor enough, nor they haven’t lost a spouse, or suffered an extreme illness, but they are really just as good a parent as any of the others. They just are never given credit for what they do as though to say they haven’t endured enough hardship to qualify. That is why I said you were a good Mom even before Dad died. It did not take his death to make you better. You have just always been consistently good and moms like you need to be told this too.”

“Such wise words I hear coming out of the mouth of my beautiful son. You appear to have more wisdom than a lot of adults I know.”

Gary sipped the last of his hot chocolate and got up to bring his cup to the sink. “I’m going up to bed now Mom, but thanks for always being there for us.”

Maria sat at the kitchen table in a daze. Those types of statements coming out of the mouths of your children are just the things that make a parent so proud they want to go and brag about them to everyone they know. Maria learned early on though, that some things are just better left unsaid. They were personal. There was no need to tell anyone about these confidences. Her heart was overwhelmed with love and appreciation for her son’s kind words. She grabbed her own cup and decided to rinse off the few dishes in the sink and put them in the dishwasher. Then she threw a load of clothes in the washing machine and swept the kitchen floor. All of a sudden Maria got this burst of energy. She figured she just had better work it off otherwise sleep would never come.

Glancing in the direction of her answering machine she noticed it was blinking with a message. Pressing the button to listen, she was excited to hear Rita's voice saying they were all going to meet in the morning at her house for coffee instead of driving in the bad weather to the coffee shop. Besides, Rita had said, we all have a lot to discuss and this way, in the privacy of my home, we won't be interrupted or rushed. Maria smiled as she realized how very blessed she was to have such support with her lovely family and friends always there when she needed them, or just for pleasure. She could not wait for morning to arrive.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Forty-Three

The wind was vicious the next morning, but the roads had cleared and school had not been closed. The women all gave a sigh of relief for that fact. They all arrived within minutes of each other and appeared to run into Rita's house giggling and shivering at the same time. "Brrrrr," they said as they went and stood in front of the fire glowing in the fireplace. "Thanks, Rita for lighting the fire. This feels great."

"Not a problem. I just turned on the gas remote."

"Ah yes, it looks so real I forgot you had a gas fireplace. Gosh, look at you Maria. I envy your tanned coloring," chatted Zoe. "Obviously Florida was good for you. Did the children accept the trip without problems?"

"Oh, gosh yes. I want to thank you guys for the suggestion to spend time with my in-laws. We all had a marvelous time. Everyone is also talking about my tan, but this time it was the easiest tan I ever got without even trying. We spent time at the pool every day when we weren't sightseeing, but I never really positioned myself out under the sun the way I used to do. However, I guess I didn't need to because I tanned so easily anyway."

Janet interjected, "Well, honey, you do look enchanting and only you can look so good with windblown hair."

"Yea, right," Maria answered sarcastically.

Rita got to the main topic of discussion that had been the headlines in the news for a week or so before Thanksgiving and that topic was the General and his girlfriend. "Just what do you guys make of the whole mess?"

"Ah, men," said Zoe, "that thing between their legs seems to rule their whole demeanor."

Rita said, "You don't have to be gross to get your point across."

Zoe came out with a most provocative statement that gave them all food for thought when she said, "These men in powerful positions are always said to be strong, but in my opinion a really strong man would not succumb to his desires in that manner. It takes more manly guts to walk away than to give in."

“Good thought there kiddo.”

“The woman is this case lost equally as much as the General did. Let’s face it. Her career path and education equaled his in every way and manor and by the time she would have reached his age she too might have held a powerful government position. Now, her career is probably going to be shortened quicker, and she will most likely suffer more than he ever will. That’s just the nature of things.”

“Sadly, a man will lose his mind over his appendage, but a woman of the caliber of this lover lost hers over a supposition of competition from an equally as pretty woman to boot. Her ego could not take it, and this caused her to send those stupid e-mails. People can have a lot of brain and brawn, but often they lack complete common sense. I feel sorry for both the spouses of these two egotistical people.” Maria appeared deep in thought after her brilliant offering to the conversation.

“I heard a famous author comment on television this morning when asked why someone so supposedly intelligent would let down his guard in this manner, especially someone in the public eye. What amazes me really is that none of these people have enough common sense to realize that what they are doing will get out in this media age and they will easily become the headline news of the day.”

“How did the author respond?”

“He said he remembered when he first started out in his career he was told to never put himself in a compromising position. Makes sense doesn’t it? If you are overseas and away from your family, don’t spend time alone with a woman or man or lover of any sex for that matter. Just don’t compromise yourself. I suppose ego thinks only of the conquest, but you can bet that once they have reached the ultimate sexual goal they will kick themselves a thousand fold.”

Janet responded by saying, “Isn’t this the greatest? We never have to gossip about neighbors or friends because the jerks at the top always give us fodder about which to speak. I love it.”

“Yea, I love it too,” said Zoe.

“That reminds me guys,” said Maria. “I think your Mr. Viera has a real Jekyll and Hyde personality.”

Janet let out a huge laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“I was thinking of an episode of one of those Housewives of Whatever shows where one of the women was referring to Jekyll and Hyde, except she said Hekyll and Jyde and no one even corrected her, and then a few weeks later she said the same thing all over again. I sat there by myself and just cracked up. But, I’m sorry, I interrupted your story.”

“At school the other night, probably because I was the only one around, he actually came and spoke to me. In fact, he said if I ever needed a ride he

would give me one. I frankly think he thought he had to speak to me since it would have been awkward not to since no one else was around.”

“Oh, just get over your prejudice towards him Maria,” said Rita. He is really a nice guy, and I wonder why he always comes up in our conversations.”

“Because, can you think of another man that is always around?”

“Actually, no. Whatever!”

Zoe brought the conversation back to the present with a comment on divorce. “Someone really should do a survey on divorces. Society tends to group all divorces in the same category as the separation of the marriage of a man and a wife. However, maybe the people who do get divorces should never have married in the first place. I know that was true in my case. You get all overpowered by everyone having a wedding and you get the feeling you should join the group. I really was not that crazy about the guy I married and our marriage reflected that. Others grab the first guy that comes along that shows them any interest like they are afraid to let that person out of site because they might be also out of mind.”

“A lot of what you say has merit,” said Maria. “Society makes fun when people want to have all the bells and whistles in their relationships as is often portrayed in the media and to some extent I think there is some validity to this. I know that when I met Robert I could not get him out of my mind. He was in my every thought and those thoughts nearly drove me crazy, both sexually and emotionally. I wanted to spend every minute with him and this continued to the day he died. We seemed to be addicted to each other and there would be nothing that could alter this unless the person changed and became abusive or controlling to name a few things that might make the change or alter the love of someone.”

“Didn’t you guys ever have an argument or a fight?” Janet was munching on a brownie when she interjected this question, and the crumbs fell all over the floor. All the mothers instantly grabbed something to clean the mess.

“Of course! Who says if you disagree with someone you can’t still love them? That is just so ridiculous. In fact, I feel our differences made our marriage exciting. It added some spice to our lives. You know, some people get married to someone because it might be an “in” to a career opportunity, or the person they marry has money and they feel they will advance themselves by marrying these individuals. Then somewhere down the line they meet someone else who does make every bone in their body tingle and the original spouse no longer looks so appealing. Those are the people who often end up getting divorces. There is no one model that fits all marriages because people all get married for different reasons.”

“Lord, Maria,” said Rita, “sometimes you make so much sense I think you should have been a psychologist or a psychiatrist. Doing a study as you said might bring up some interesting results unless the people that would be

interviewed would not tell the truth. However, I guess that could happen in any study.”

“Gee, I would love to meet a man that would tingle all my bells and whistles,” cried Zoe.

Janet laughed while saying, “I hear most women are looking for men in the wrong places. They put so much effort into where they think they might meet someone when often all they have to do is go to their local grocery store. I remember reading about a handsome Baltimore Oriole baseball player who did just that — he met his wife at the grocery store.”

“Oh geez,” said Zoe, “I guess I had better watch what I wear when I buy groceries from here on in instead of looking like a dump in my sweats.”

The gals all got a good laugh out of that description because they all realized there was so much truth to that statement. Their conversations continued to about the time school would finish for the day. They all hated to leave, but they all knew they would meet again soon. That was the best part of their friendship. They made a point of getting together and not putting off meeting until another day because that day might never come. Some of them were going to see each other at a school band concert the next evening. There was never a shortage of things to do or see where the young mothers were concerned.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Forty-Four

Classes at the local college would be finished two weeks before Christmas. This proved to be an extreme relief for Maria. Prior to that date, Maria worked hard writing her last essay for the semester and preparing for her final exam. When she did take a break, it was to make any food for Christmas ahead of time and freeze it, so the period after the semester was over could be spent putting the final touches on her Christmas shopping for her family. Online shopping had already helped to ease some of the burden, so what remained would not prove to be such an overwhelming task.

All the children were excited that Father Jon would be in town. Maria confessed to herself that she too was looking forward to his visit. As children, the two of them were like two peas in a pod constantly running in and out of each other's homes. They were both equally as excited about seeing what Santa had brought to the other as they were about what gifts Santa had brought to themselves. For many years during that time era, newcomers to the area assumed they were brother and sister they were seen together so frequently.

In the midst of all the preparation and excitement, Maria had desired to get her Christmas decorating done the first weekend after Thanksgiving, but both her sons were going on a church trip to the hurricane damaged Jersey shore. They had helped to collect food and clothing for the survivors of the horrible devastation caused by Sandy, the name given to that particular storm and a name that would never be used again for any other hurricane. While proud that her boys volunteered their services to help others, Maria could not help but think how she surely could have used their help in selecting and setting up their Christmas tree. Then she was hit with remorse for what she attributed to herself were feelings of selfishness. Her subconscious chastised herself by stating it would only be one more week in her life compared to the mental, physical and monetary hardships the victims would be enduring possibly for the rest of their lives if only from just the sheer shock of what had transpired.

When the weekend did arrive, Maria drove the boys to the church parking lot where the bus was waiting to be loaded. Upon arriving back at home, Maria went to her basement and decided she could at least put up the Christmas accessories and table decorations. The younger children were fascinated by all the paraphernalia and were bombarding their mother with questions about each piece. All of them worked long and hard and by dinner time the house was transformed into a marvelous holiday wonderland. Pizza was ordered. The rest of the evening they would relax and watch a children appropriate DVD. The empty boxes could be brought down to the basement the next morning. After the children were in bed and just as Maria was ready to collapse in her lounge chair to read a book, the telephone rang.

After saying hello and hearing Jon speak, Maria said, "Hi, Jon. It's wonderful to hear your voice."

"Same here Maria."

"Plans have been made to spend Christmas Eve with you as well as Christmas Day when we will have our Christmas gift exchange and enjoy a big holiday meal together. The children and I will be attending the four o'clock Children's Mass and Christmas Pageant on Christmas Eve."

"How about you make dinner reservations at Bartolucci's restaurant after I do the six o'clock Mass that evening, say about seven-thirty. The treat will be on me. There is absolutely no need for you to cook on both Christmas Eve and Christmas day."

"You bet I will. That sounds wonderful to me, and you don't have to tell me twice."

"Great, then. I'm so anxious to be coming home. Oddly, I feel a little homesick at times though Christmas celebrated in Rome can be so beautiful. I can't wait to see you all."

"Same here Jon. Have a safe trip, and we all can't wait to see you too. Bye now."

"Goodbye, Maria."

The last evening of class in December, Maria was one of the first to finish her final exam. She was putting on her coat in preparation of leaving the class when Mr. Viera popped his head into the classroom doorway and motioned with the wave of his hand for Maria to come towards him. Acknowledging his gesture, Maria gathered her books and followed him to a bench in the hallway.

"Hi Maria. I'll only keep you a minute, but I have something that concerns me, and I thought maybe you could help."

"I'll certainly try. What's up?"

"The past few weeks I've been mentoring a young female student per our professor's instructions as he thought this young lady could make use of my expertise on a subject matter we've been discussing in class. The advising part has gone well, but the more we meet, the more personally aggressive she

has become. She is wearing more revealing and provocative clothing while moving her body closer to mine. At first I thought I was just an old man imagining things, especially so since her work has actually improved quite a bit since our sessions. I rather wished that it was indeed my imagination. However, the last two times she has started to touch either my arm or my leg, and she stops me in the hallway to ask all kinds of questions.”

“What did you want from me? If you want me to talk to her, I frankly would prefer not to do so.”

“Oh, no, I guess since you are familiar with the classroom atmosphere you could tell me if this is just my imagination working overtime, or if this young lady might really be making a pass at me.”

“Mr. Viera,” Maria started to say when he interrupted her by saying, “Please call me Eric.”

“Oh certainly. I guess I never learned your first name. You’re a good looking man and according to my young son, you have a way of making the youngsters feel special.” Maria could not believe she actually called him good looking to his face. “I would guess this young lady is misinterpreting your kindness...she is doing this either consciously or unconsciously.”

“Lord, that’s the last thing I want or need to happen. I am so not interested in anyone. The memories of my late wife are still too fresh in my mind.”

“I know exactly the feeling. One of the younger male students asked me on a date, but I squashed any hope of that happening and asked him to spread the message that I wasn’t available.”

Eric got a slight tinge of jealousy when he heard those words about another student asking Maria to go on a date. That was not a reaction he expected and he momentarily lost his composure. When he recovered, he asked Maria if she had any recommendations.

“Since this semester is essentially over, perhaps you could just stop your tutoring sessions.”

“I was to meet with her four more times though.”

“I don’t think you should. Tell her something has come up and you’ll have to cancel all remaining sessions. Also, tell your professor you can’t meet with her anymore and suggest that the professor provide her with another tutor.”

“If you think that’s what I should do, then it’s done.” His mind was haunted by the fact that perhaps Maria was not the intruder on his life that he originally perceived. “Sorry if I bothered you Maria. Thanks so much for your advice.”

“You are quite welcome. Have a nice holiday.” By then her other classmates had finished their exams and were coming over to her to question her about some of the answers she gave on the test.

Eric watched all of her classmates gather around and cater to Maria and eventually persuade her to go to the coffee shop with them by saying, “Just

this one time please? Just help us celebrate the end of the semester, please?” Eric was bothered by the fact that he almost had envy for Maria’s popularity and the fact they were going to be with her.

“Who’s the handsome hunk of a man?” The other students were unrelenting in badgering Maria with questions, but the holiday atmosphere permeated the air and they all had fun at the coffee shop relieved that they had completed a semester and happy to know they could celebrate the holidays without any dark clouds hanging over their heads. At least that was true for those who were sure they had passed their exams.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Forty-Five

Every morsel of food that could have been fixed ahead of time was prepared and in the freezer. The grades for the semester had been posted, and Maria got an A for the year plus an A on her essay. The gifts were purchased and wrapped to include stuff for the children's stockings. Maria could not recall a time when she was finished so early. Therefore, it made no sense that her mood was so lousy. Every time she heard a sad song, whether in a store or at home, tears came to her eyes. This was a happy time of year, so it made no sense to be sad. Of course thoughts of Robert and his absence in their lives was indeed a major factor on her sullen mood, but none of her feelings made sense. Maria tried so hard to always be positive and not be one of those grumpy old widows who always acted like the world owed them a ton of sympathy every time a holiday rolled around.

During the days leading up to Christmas the family kept busy doing fun things, so it was not as though they were sitting around moping. They went to the local dinner theater to see a performance of *The Nutcracker*; attended some holiday parties, and they even took one day to have a portrait taken of the children for the Christmas card. The portrait was quite a challenge deciding what they should wear and the color scheme they would use. Much consideration was given to the thought of if Maria should be included in the picture and she decided, without the aid of her children, that her presence would only highlight the fact that Robert was missing, so she had one taken all alone and one photograph taken with just the four children. Her portrait would not be used on her Christmas card which would just include the children.

Despite doing everything happy imaginable, Maria's sadness continued. None of it made sense considering that everyone surrounding Maria appeared to be perfectly content. At first some thought was given to seeing a physician, but then this thought was immediately dismissed as being silly.

One bitter cold afternoon, Maria was sitting in her sun room enjoying a cup of hot chocolate. While glancing at the beauty of a colorful bird perched

upon her white picket fence she wondered about her somber mood. Her mind drifted to one summer when she was a child and she was asked to go to the beach for an entire week with her neighbor's family. Everyone was so happy until one day on the beach the neighbor girl's father got a sharp pain in his chest. Someone dialed 911, but by the time the medics arrived the father had collapsed and died. Was happiness always followed by tragedy? Was it the doomsday type prediction that precipitated Maria's thoughts, the ramifications of which caused her to feel this sadness? One minute the family was so happy, enjoying the beach, playing games, eating crabs, building castles in the sand, and then in a moment's notice they were filled with a devastating sadness. However, Maria's aching heart did not disappear and the sadness began to manifest in Maria's face, so the next day she finally succumbed to seeing her doctor only to find out that her new blood pressure medication had altered her mood. Once she stopped taking it and changed to another drug, she felt more normal once again. The timing could not have been better since Christmas was upon them.

Gathered around a large table at Bartolucci's restaurant Christmas Eve, the family was having a grand time bantering back and forth enjoying the festive mood commingled with the smell of delicious Italian food. A cold brush of wind blew into the room as the door opened. The entrance of Father Jon through the doorway created quite a stir not only among the members of Maria's family but by the populace at large in the restaurant. His graying sideburns, dark suit and white priestly collar along with his superb posture was breathtaking creating a vision of epic proportions as though he were some type of exquisite creature. An undercurrent of noise rumbled through the room at the priest's appearance causing Maria's family to feel extra privileged to have Jon walk straight to their table. Hugs were shared among Maria's group causing the waiter to backtrack momentarily from taking their order. Eventually, the atmosphere settled, drinks were provided and everyone studied their menu in preparation of ordering. All claimed to be starving.

The children's pageant they had attended earlier in the day provided much material for discussion as well as some good laughs. One of the little angels started crying and her parents had to go and take her off of the altar. Another child grabbed the ceramic baby Jesus out of the crib holding it tightly to his chest. Some children who spoke could barely be heard while others spoke so loudly many parishioners jumped in their seats at the extreme noise.

With their stomachs satiated, and amid Christmas wishes to the restaurant staff and to each other, the family left for home. After all, Santa would be arriving soon enough and all were looking forward to Christmas day which would arrive way too soon. Early the next morning and in somewhat of a daze, Maria rushed down to the kitchen to put the turkey in the oven while

the children gathered to view the gifts brought by Santa. Before going back upstairs, Maria lit the tree lights and opened the blinds to let in the early morning light. Once upstairs, the children gathered around her, Bob set up the video camera and the procession began. The children nearly tripped over each other running down the stairs grabbing the gifts to see who got what. As the gifts were being unwrapped, the children eventually calmed down and enjoyed the entire process. Filling a need for some type of jolt to her system, Maria took a break to make a cup of coffee and some hot chocolate for the children. At this point the older boys were helping to assemble one of the toys and all were giving their input. The pressure of being in charge of everything sometimes proved overwhelming to Maria, but she kept telling herself to only think positive thoughts. This was only family after all so that no matter what occurred, right or wrong, it was not going to prove to be that drastic.

By late morning most of the gifts had been unwrapped, and there was a pleasant lull while everyone sat back to enjoy what they received. Some had scarves wrapped around their necks with hats on their heads while still in their pajamas. It did not matter if the scarves were meant to be worn outside. Inside scarf or outside scarf they were still draped around their necks. When it got close to one o'clock in the afternoon, Maria scooted them upstairs to get dressed telling them that Father Jon would be arriving soon. That was enough information to get them moving. The meal was well on its way to completion and the aromas in the house were delightful.

Chapter Forty-Six

Christmas proved to be everything the family expected. Father Jon's selections of gifts from Italy were the icing on the cake. After the wonderful dinner in the early afternoon, Father Jon convinced the children to let their Mom rest while he supervised and helped to clean the kitchen. The rest of the afternoon they played many of the games the children received, or they just sat around and talked, and if anyone got a new item of clothing they were wearing it to include those aforementioned scarves that were meant to be worn outside.

The presence of their deceased father was very much felt throughout the day when one child or the other would remember something silly that their father used to do or say which would make them giggle or downright explode laughing while rolling on the floor. Father Jon had some good stories of his own to tell about Robert. His stories fascinated the children who did not imagine anyone else could know their father as well as they did. That fact really got their interest as they bombarded Jon with all kinds of questions. Maria listened with enthusiasm as Jon brought back memories from their childhood which in retrospect seemed like such happy times looking back as they reminisced. Watching the priest with the children, she could not help but notice his handsome appearance. Maria had a love for this man that she could not describe. Once she remembered reading a wonderful statement by an author whose name she never knew that ended by saying love was what was known but could not be defined, and what was felt but could not be expressed! She used to think the phrase was one meant only for that of a true lover, but she now realized it could as well be for a love of another sort. At this moment, Maria could not define her love for Jon, but love him she did.

Later that evening when the children were cozily asleep in their beds, Maria and Jon were drinking some wine and enjoying some deep conversation. "You really helped to make our holidays so special Jon. I just can't thank you enough."

“Ah Maria. The pleasure is all mine. Thank you so much for including me. I don’t know how much longer I can stay tonight. I must confess that being around you drives me out of my mind.” Her beauty overwhelmed him, and he constantly found himself asking for God’s forgiveness for not only the sincere love he had for Maria as though she were an adored member of his family, but he could not deny the sexual tension that also pervaded his being...telling God his thoughts were not intentional, but he could not seem to rid himself of the feelings.

Completely oblivious to the true meaning of what Father Jon was implying, Maria answered “Yes, I drive the kids out of their minds too.”

Father Jon realized Maria misinterpreted what he was saying, but he let it go feeling it best not to highlight the real meaning. “I love being in Rome, but I do miss family and friends, so this holiday has been a pleasant break. When I return to Rome the Pope will be doing some traveling and I am to travel ahead of him to do some advance planning. I am really looking forward to the travel and the work, so that will be a good incentive for me to want to return to Italy. Before you know it, my assignment in Rome will be completed, and I’ll be returning home. Think positively I always say.”

“We must have learned to think positively when we were young because I am always telling myself and the children the same. What do you make of all this talk about the end of the world coming, and is your view from the perspective of a priest or as a normal citizen?”

The church does tell us that we should always be prepared to meet our Savior, so I can’t separate my priestly self from, as you say, a normal citizen because my teachings have been ingrained in my persona. If you feel as I do, you just don’t worry about the end of the world. If you are asking me if you think this will be the end of the world, I do not. Every year calendars come to an end. On January the first a new calendar begins all over. The same holds true for the Mayan calendar which at first precipitated this whole idea of the world ending. We will continue to have disasters like floods and earthquakes which will seem very much like the end of the world to those experiencing them; otherwise I believe things will remain the same.

“I really don’t even like talking about it to be honest because little children have big ears. I didn’t want them to worry needlessly.”

“Wise decision.”

“Do you really think there is a heaven we will go to when we die?”

“Yes, I really do.”

“I wish I could convince myself that were true. Sometimes I believe it, and other times I’m not so sure. It must be wonderful to have your unquestioning belief.”

“In some parts of my faith I do believe unquestionably. In others, I have lots of questions lately.”

“What do you question?” Maria asked this as though it could not be true.

“It’s too personal to reveal.”

“Even to your little old childhood friend?”

Jon gave a chuckle when he said, “Especially to my sweet little childhood friend.”

For a while they just sat there staring into one another’s eyes until Father Jon felt a sudden pull to go towards Maria and embrace her. Instead he asked Maria to please bring him his coat. “I have had a lot of invites that will keep me very busy the rest of the week, but I am going to save one afternoon to take the children to see that new 3D movie.”

“Oh, I know. They have told me all about it. Since 3D doesn’t interest me I am going to spend some quiet time by myself on the day you go.”

While Maria’s statement touched him with disappointment on the one hand, on the other hand he felt a sense of relief she would not be in such close proximity sitting in a theater.

Bundling himself in his coat, hat and gloves, Jon gave Maria a quick hug while saying thank you for a wonderful day. The cold fresh air invigorated him jarring him back to reality because only he knew that for those brief hours he could imagine living the life of a spouse of a beautiful woman and being the father of those great children.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Forty-Seven

Just a few weeks before Christmas, one of the most horrible tragedies imaginable overtook the country and the world in such a manner as to leave everyone in a state of shock. This happened when on a quiet morning a young man walked into a school in Connecticut with multiple firearms, some of which were weapons of mass destruction and killed young innocent kindergarten children and several teachers. Lately, this type of tragedy appeared to occur on a more frequent basis and no one was able to make any sense of it. As one newscaster said, we have always had mentally challenged people and we have always had guns, but this type of atrocity did not occur in the past and everyone wondered why it was happening now. Certainly the violent games that children can currently play on their home computers where shooting multiple victims was rewarded had to unquestionably be part of the problem. Many also wonder why anyone would need a semi-automatic rifle. Some claim they should not even be used when hunting animals. Gun control became a volatile topic. Everything appeared to be beyond comprehension. Some in the little town took down their holiday decorations before Christmas because somehow the brightness, beautiful colors, brilliant lights and the depiction of happiness seemed incongruous and out of sorts.

Rita's sister had a child at the school and Rita's three friends were on the phone frequently that day with worry about the whereabouts of the child. This horrible tragedy certainly had a lot to do with Maria's depression before the holidays too. Thankfully, in due time, the family and friends found out that the child had run away from the carnage somehow with some other children and she ran up to a school bus driver who contacted a policeman, and he was eventually able to contact her parents. The relatives had been frantically searching everywhere they could imagine for her. Many parents went to the school only to ultimately find out that their child was not a survivor. Society at large could not begin to contemplate such horror.

Today was going to be the first day the friends were going to meet after the holidays, and this was certainly going to be a topic of conversation. The

gals were meeting for lunch this second week in January of 2013. Maria was going to visit Jody the coming weekend and she was all packed and ready to go.

A tiny cozy café in the middle of Olde Towne was chosen as their meeting place. Many of the women came in from the cold sporting their new gifts of apparel like the new shapes of scarves where one could insert one end of the scarf through an opening, or they had on a new sweater, gloves or a hat. They all looked colorful and happy as they admired each other's gifts. They had plenty about which to talk, but eventually the topic of the horrible tragedy became the primary topic of conversation. Rita explained how her family had managed to convince her sister and her family to leave Connecticut during this horrible time over the holidays, to come and stay with them. While her sister was grateful for the invite and they did pack and come immediately, the transition was hard on everyone. Every show or song on television depicted the happiness of the holidays with merry songs and glistening Christmas tree lights and bright colors showing happy families enjoying big feasts and opening presents. Rita made sure she gave her sister minor chores like helping to set the big table, and sometimes she asked the children to take over as she was going to take her sister out in the fresh air and let her talk. Rita never initiated the conversation on those walks, but instead waited for her sister to come forth with whatever concerned her and her emotions. Often they would be half way into their walk before they even spoke one word to one another, but when the conversation started it was intense and revealing of all the strong feelings or agitations caused by their very strong emotions about the revulsion they both felt, about whether good gun controls would have prevented this tragedy, or even if the school needed better security. No answers could be found though and in this fact alone frustration pervaded their hearts.

Rita was also concerned about her brother-in-law, she told the girls. He just sat all day watching a separate television set and every sporting event imaginable. Rita's own husband and children would often join him, but they were concerned because he seemed to avoid any mention at all of what had occurred. Rita's sister often said she felt guilty about having a child that survived the tragedy which everyone knew made no sense. There was a woman on television who had survived the tsunami tragedy a few years ago when asked the question if she felt guilty who said she did not feel guilty but only pain for those who did not survive. This statement however, did not help Rita's sister who vehemently pronounced her guilt over and over. "How can I justify the fact that our child survived and other parents' children did not?"

Zoe mentioned that she once had a friend who went through something similarly tragic and her feelings of guilt became all consuming and impeded her normal day to day functioning so much so that it destroyed a once good marriage. Each spouse was blaming the other by saying things like, "You

should have prevented her from riding that bike, or the other would say you should have checked the back of the car before driving.” The accusations along with their guilt were more than either could take and counseling did not help. It was all so very sad because prior to their child’s death they always gave the impression they were at least two of the happiest people on earth, but the blame game became more than either could take. No matter how anyone tried to tell them, that at least in their case it was just an occurrence that was no one’s fault, neither my friend nor her husband bought that sentiment. They felt it may well have been prevented, and for all we know, maybe that was a possibility.

Janet said that it was too bad they could not realize that having their child die certainly was not a choice either would have made, even if there had been an option to prevent it. “We all do stupid things sometimes that might have had bad consequences, and fortunately in most cases nothing bad happens. I would just think that knowing the deed was not intentional would have meant something, but then again how can I be so sure since I so far thankfully have not done something of that caliber with those bad results to make me perhaps react in the way your friends did.”

“I know in many cases at this level of hurt people need help and more often than not don’t seek it,” chimed in Maria. “I could be guilty of that myself I suppose. I know well enough that when I have complex feelings I really should seek professional advice, but I don’t always do that.”

Rita explained how her sister kept having flashbacks of how she heard about the shootings through a neighbor that stopped by the house. My sister was ironically happy at the moment exercising while watching one of her favorite morning television shows. Now the memory of it all keeps coming back to haunt my sister. They are back home now, and I have heard it said that sometimes getting back to the setting of the tragedy is helpful in getting survivors and their families to be able to better express themselves and get it all out in the open. Rita was not sure however because she still had a hard time getting her sister to confide her feelings to her when Rita would initiate a phone call to check on things.

“Not to change the subject, Maria,” said Janet, “but how did you do last semester, and how did the family enjoy having Father Jon back home for the holidays?”

“All my family was so completely enamored by Father Jon. The only thing that would have made our holidays more perfect would have been to still have Robert alive. Since this couldn’t be so, Jon had enough stories to tell about their father, and the two of us growing up together, that these wonderful memories will always be etched in their minds because they are such good memories, and they were often things the children had not heard before. Also, I wish you could have seen the gifts he brought the children from Europe. They were all age perfect and specific to Italy mostly and

unlike anything that could have been purchased here. We all had a difficult time when Jon had to leave. As for my school work, I passed with flying colors and I am looking forward to starting the next semester.”

“I don’t know how you do it Maria.” The thought of going back to school to Zoe, in any way, shape or form was beyond her comprehension. “Right now there doesn’t seem to be a free minute in any of my days, and I wonder how on earth I would ever find time to study, if I ever chose to go back to school. I feel the same way about people who just decide to pick up and leave an area and move someplace else. What makes them think they will be happy in the next place? I love it where I am and never want to move.”

Janet replied that while her family had not had to make many moves in her lifetime, many with her husband’s profession moved frequently, and they seemed to adjust just fine. “Sometimes, I think going to someplace new and enticing would be exciting.”

“These days, any major move, without getting a big increase in salary, could be detrimental to finding a house of equal size and stature and while you can buy homes that are a lot cheaper in many areas of the country, jobs in those areas just don’t pay as much,” said Zoe. “And, besides, the grass is always greener on the other side of the street they always say.”

“I know that as beautiful as Italy is and all of Europe for that matter, Father Jon does mention that he often gets a feeling of homesickness. When we were over there having fun touring all the wonderful sites, I found this hard to believe, but yet I had my family with me and that probably makes a difference too,” Maria mentioned as she gazed off and then was interrupted by the waitress asking her if she wanted any more coffee.

Nationally, the country was experiencing the so called fiscal cliff, or to lengthen the short worded version it was a double whammy of major tax increases and federal spending cuts pundits claimed would strike the country if those increases and cuts were not stalled ahead of time. Many were concerned about their household budgets. Changing the subject, each discussed their own particular holiday celebration which drew comments of awe, and laughter as well, when they listened to particular antics mothers told about some of the younger children in the families.

“Which reminds me,” said Janet. “I thought we weren’t going to exchange gifts anymore. I thought that was what we all agreed to do.”

Zoe exclaimed, “I know, but then I would get shopping and see something and think how one of you would like it, and I find it hard to stop giving to you guys.”

“Ahh,” Maria added. “None of us needs another thing to add to our accumulation of stuff, and anything you guys give me I find just too hard to get rid of in a timely fashion.”

Janet replied that she had the same problem.

“Maybe we could all buy a toy gift for a poor child, bring it to our luncheon at holiday time for all to see, and then wrap it to give away,” thought Rita.

Zoe asked if they all had to decide today. It was getting late and they were getting tired and it was a little hard concentrating in the noisy atmosphere of the café. After listening to Zoe, they all decided to put their decision on gift giving on hold to be decided another day perhaps at their next meeting. Fortunately, the waitress had agreed to give them all separate checks. Having separate checks always made paying their bill so much easier that having to grab their calculators, ask for the menu again to check prices especially of the drinks, and paying separately also gave those who wanted to gain points on their credit cards more freedom to do so than when they all paid one combined bill. Out in the parking lot they all gave each other “a group hug” and wished each other only good things in the New Year.

On the drive home, each reflected on their wonderful friendships and they were so thankful that they had each other in their lives. Sometimes they did have their little disagreements, but they knew the benefits of having good honest friends who had the sincerity to always tell you the truth without pretense. Maybe sometimes it hurt to hear what a friend had to say, but in the long run they realized that whatever was said was only done with the best of intentions, and they knew that good friends could survive this give and take and flourish from it.

LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Forty-Eight

Traveling at a good steady speed on the busy highway, Maria was enjoying being alone for what seemed like the first time in ages. The sun was shining brightly which often made it difficult to see clearly unless the visor was positioned correctly to avoid the glare. Without any snow on the ground in this cold month of January, and being in the warmth of the car instead of outside where temperatures were in the thirties, the scenery outside gave the illusion of spring on the horizon instead of knowing spring was a good two and half months away. Even some of the grass had tinges of green still there. Glancing at her GPS that was situated in a holder she noticed that the satellite was lost temporarily and she felt somewhat uncomfortable wondering if this meant her cell phone probably was not working as well. How quickly we become accustomed to having these electronics take over our lives as though they were invisible companions. For Maria, knowing that these electronics were working properly was like having a crutch to comfort her with the feeling that with the phone's use she had a certain amount of security that she could always call for help. Now, without it, there was a small amount of concern should an emergency occur. Instead, she popped in a CD and temporarily distracted herself knowing that it was still day time. Certainly, it was not as though she were on a remote country road. As she approached the exit to go towards Jody's apartment she became excited about seeing this young pregnant friend, a child really like one of her own.

Finding a place to park, she fluffed her hair in the car mirror and moistened her lips with another coat of lipstick, grabbed her purse and looked for Jody's apartment number. Excited, she pushed the door button and waited with anticipation. After the second time of pushing the button with no answer, she decided to knock on the door. Oddly, there was still no answer. When she looked at her phone to attempt to reach Jody, Maria noticed several messages that must have arrived when the satellite service was gone. She walked back to the car and followed the tips she always read about by locking her car doors before checking the messages on her phone, even

though she knew sitting in the parked car was supposedly not wise either. There was a message from Jody's husband. Jody's water had broken and she had gone to the hospital. He asked Maria to return the call and he would then give her the hospital address.

Tyler told Maria he would be waiting in the lobby for her. Parking was a problem, so Maria decided to make use of the valet parking that was available. Tyler did not sound like his usual self causing Maria to be concerned about Jody's condition, but she decided not to mention that fact. Perhaps he just had the concern of any new father about his wife and baby. Her feelings though were further confirmed and gave her even more concern when she saw the look on Tyler's face. Apparently there was a problem with the umbilical cord and at this point Maria was worried too though she did not tell Tyler. She did ask him if he had called Jody's Dad or his parents.

"My parents are on a cruise. They made sure the cruise would be back by Jody's due date, and now this."

"These situations occur quite frequently. Babies have a mind of their own. You know the saying about the best laid plans of mice and men often go astray."

Tyler looked at Maria with a frown on his face. *Oh Lord*, she thought, *he has no idea what I just said. Talk about a generation gap. Didn't he read the book in high school?* Instead Maria said, I was essentially trying to say that no matter how hard you plan, situations happen to completely turn the apple cart. *Geez, there I go again with the apple cart.*

Graciously, Tyler finally said, "Oh yea, now I get what you mean. Anyway, they won't be here." At that point the doctor arrived and asked to speak to Tyler. Maria never did find out if Eric had been contacted or not.

When the doctor left and Tyler walked back towards Maria, she could not help but notice the ashen look upon his face. Noticing this precarious look upon Tyler's face caused Maria herself to become frightened. "They are going to do a Caesarean any minute now. I am so scared for Jody."

"Modern medicine is so advanced in this day and age Tyler, I am sure Jody will be fine. Don't worry honey. Why don't you accompany me to the hospital chapel? I feel the need to say some prayers, and I would prefer not to go alone. I so easily get lost in the mix of all these corridors."

"Sure, it will keep my mind occupied while they operate on Jody. This was not how I pictured the birth of our child."

The hospital was busy and the amount of people passing them on the different floors reflected this. Some people had somber looks on their face while others appeared overjoyed carrying inflated helium balloons congratulating new baby boys or girls, or saying get well. There was one group huddled together in a sort of group embrace, and in the midst of the group someone could be heard crying. As they entered the chapel it was otherwise vacant except for the two of them. Tyler seemed out of place in the peaceful

atmosphere where sun glistened through the stained glass windows. The quietness and solace of this charming chapel seemed incongruous to the atmosphere that saturated the rest of the hospital. Maria walked forward and knelt in the second pew while Tyler stayed near the back of the small chapel. Eventually, he took a seat in the back row and watched Maria bless herself. Tyler's mind began running on overtime. *Maybe it wouldn't hurt for me to ask this God everyone talks about to take care of my wife and baby. What could it hurt? Should I close my eyes? I don't know what is proper, but I think I could better concentrate with my eyes closed.* Tyler mouthed the words to God telling him how scared he was and asking him to please take care of Jody and his baby. Over and over again he kept saying please, please, please and he could feel his eyes filling with tears. *Oh, I don't want Mrs. Andrews to see me crying, and again he asked God for help to also keep the tears from streaming down his face.* He noticed Maria go from kneeling to sitting in the pew, and all of a sudden Tyler was overcome with a peace he had never experienced before. *Is this what religious people feel when they talk to God? If that is the case, it's not so bad really.*

Voices were heard of other people entering the chapel. It was at this point that Maria got up out of the pew, genuflected out of habit and walked back towards Tyler. "Would you like to get something to eat Tyler?"

"No, but I could sure use a cup of coffee."

"If you'll steer me in the direction of the cafeteria, I am going to get a bite to eat so I can reinforce myself. It has been a while since I've had anything to eat. From the cafeteria I think I'll have no problem getting back to Jody's floor since they are both in the same wing of the hospital. You can go back and check on things, and when I'm finished I'll bring you a cup of coffee."

"Thanks, Mrs. Andrews. Also, thanks for taking me to the chapel. For some odd reason I am feeling a lot better now. Or perhaps I feel fortified and stronger to be able to deal with this situation."

"That's great Tyler. I think we both needed some peaceful reassurance and that was the perfect place to get some encouragement in this otherwise hectic atmosphere."

Chapter Forty-Nine

Ever since Eric received the phone call from Tyler he was beside himself with worry and then tried talking himself out of his worrisome thoughts by making plans for his family and pets while he planned to be away. He was not aware that this was the weekend Maria had planned to visit his daughter, and he knew that Tyler's parents were on a cruise, so he hastily ran around attempting to get everything in control at home in order to take off a few days to be with the children. He secretly, amongst his preparations, kept saying little prayers to God asking him please to help his daughter and he also felt that his prayers were selfish. Truth be told, he was more worried about losing his daughter and the affect it would have on him. Somehow, Eric did not think he would ever survive something happening to Jody so soon after losing his wife. Of course he was worried about Jody too, but reprimanded himself for what he deemed to be his otherwise egocentric thoughts. Fortunately, for him, there were more than enough women in the neighborhood to come to his aid, so making plans for his family was the easiest thing he had to do. Since this was a weekend, planning to take a few days off from work proved to be more of a chore, but ultimately everything was done and Eric began to pull his car out of the driveway.

Oh how he wished that his wife were still alive at this moment. Women just seemed to have the proper instincts to control any type of precarious situation. Being in command of his job, working hard, studying to improve himself, taking care of the family cars, and managing any malfunctioning or required repairs to his home all came naturally to him. These were duties he had no qualms about handling. Tasks requiring emotion proved to be another factor. How could he soothe his daughter who might be hurt, or sad? How? What if the baby should die? How could he explain such a tragedy to his child? Periods such as this were times when he felt like such a failure as a man. *Men are supposed to be strong and able to handle everything, and that was exactly my attitude until my wife died. I do believe some of my powers died within me the day I lost my wife.* He was never much of a hugger. To his

wife, yes he was. She always was grabbing the children and giving them big hugs and huge kisses. In comparison, Eric always felt so reserved. He pondered that it must have been his mid-western background to cause him such reserve. For example, he wondered, what if something did happen to Jody? *What would I do to comfort Tyler? Oh for crying out loud, I must stop my stupid thinking and take each situation as it comes. I am such a control freak attempting to solve problems that haven't even yet occurred.*

The gas gauge in his car showed the tank to be half full, so he decided to pull into the next gas station to fill the tank, use the men's room and buy some snacks to ease the boring car ride. Getting in what he hoped was the shortest cashier line; he had picked up two Hershey bars, some Mounds bars and a package of nuts. Deciding he probably should get something healthy too besides the candy and coffee he ordered; at the last minute he picked up a banana thinking he could probably use some extra potassium. Back in the car, Eric put on the country music station, removed the wrapping on a Hershey bar, and continued on his trip. Fortunately, as he turned into the hospital parking lot, someone was pulling out of a decent parking spot not far from the entrance. Well, that's a good sign.

By this time, the operation had already been completed on Jody and she had just been brought back to her room. Eric did not know that Jody by now had a beautiful, healthy baby girl. He also did not know that both the baby and the mother had been in quite a bit of danger at one time during the delivery. Thankfully, that was all now in the past and Eric would only hear the good news.

After Tyler spent some time with his wife who by now had tons of questions about the baby, Tyler decided to go to the nursery to see if he could get some answers to Jody's questions. Sitting at Jody's bedside, Maria took over the job of caring for her. She gently took a warm cloth and smoothly rotated it across Jody's forehead and her rosy cheeks, primping Jody's hair as she went along with her other hand so that it wasn't hanging in her face. She dipped a small sponge in cold water and put it on Jody's parched lips. The whole time she was caring for Jody in this manner, she spoke softly and sweetly to her saying things like, "You did a great job Jody. I got a brief glimpse at your darling baby girl and she is indeed beautiful. That baby is going to be one lucky little girl with beautiful parents like you and Tyler."

What Maria did not know was that Eric had reached the doorway to Jody's room. Upon hearing Maria's voice, Eric abruptly stopped. He peeked around the door and was fascinated as he watched the caring manner in which Maria was treating his daughter while momentarily wondering what on earth she was doing here. That woman always seemed to be doing things involving his own life, and to Eric it did not make sense. Perhaps ten or so minutes passed before he proceeded to enter the room causing Maria to jump when she saw him.

"I'm sorry Maria. I didn't mean to frighten you." He bent over the bed and grabbed Jody's hand while leaning over to kiss her on the forehead. "Hi, beautiful! How did everything go for you?"

"Oh, Daddy, you didn't hear?"

"Hear what? I just got here."

"You're a grandpa. Tyler and I have a beautiful baby girl."

"That's wonderful news honey. Where is Tyler by the way?"

"He went to the nursery to check on little Claire. We decided to name her after Mom."

"Wow, I didn't expect that at all. You guys are awesome, and I am deeply touched."

As Eric quit leaning over the bed and proceeded to get back to a standing position, Maria started to stand at the same time. For a brief moment both faces were inches apart and they glared into one another's eyes. She's beautiful, Eric thought, while Maria was too flustered at that point to think anything.

What she did do was say, "I'll go to the nursery and relieve Tyler so he can come and greet you Eric." *Get me out of this room fast. I can't remember feeling these emotions in years. In fact, I don't even know what kind of emotions I am feeling at this point. I need to leave and get out of this hospital, pronto.* By the time she reached the nursery however her emotions had calmed some and she couldn't wait to see the baby and tell Tyler his father-in-law had arrived. Tyler was anxious to get back to see Jody and Eric, and Maria sat in the rocker provided by the nurse after putting on a special gown and washing her hands with the proper soap from the dispenser. The nurse placed the darling bundle in Maria's arms. Claire's cheeks had a soft rosy glow and occasionally she would slowly open one eye as though to peek at this person holding her. *Cherub lips* are what came to mind as the baby fought to get the nipple of the bottle Maria was holding in her mouth. Upon her head was a precious pink knit cap. The child's receiving blankets were pink colored with little white fluffy sheep spattered all over in a non-existent pattern. Maria had forgotten how good it felt to hold a precious little baby. Ultimately, the baby finished eating and fell asleep in Maria's arms. Maria herself also fell asleep, so the nurse decided to leave the two of them right where they were until one or the other awoke. That is the way Eric found his darling granddaughter in the arms of what he could now see was this stunning woman. As most men noticed about Maria, her hair had no consistency to it and was not smooth, but flyaway in appearance and not in the normal straight style of the day. It looked rather wild with soft curls framing Maria's soft features. He could have stayed staring at the two lovely females for the rest of the evening, until the baby started to stir, and Maria in a disoriented state opened her eyes. She noticed Eric staring down at the two of them and overheard the nurse saying to him, "Do you want to hold the baby sir? I'll

take him from your wife.” His face flushed with embarrassment and Maria, now fully awake, said, “Oh, we are not married. I am a friend of the family.”

“Oh, sorry about that, but you sure would make a cute couple.”

Flustered, Eric thought that some people just didn’t know when to shut up.

Maria did not wait for the nurse to take the baby but handed the bundle over to Eric herself. She said she was going to go and say goodbye to Jody and get on over to the hotel. It had been a long day. The nurse told Eric it was time for the baby to get back into the nursery for some tests, so to just get a good look and tomorrow he could spend more time with her. “After you take off the gown Maria, wait for me since I can’t stay now anyway.” As Maria threw her gown in the soiled basket she wondered what Eric wanted with her. She was tired and really wanted to check in at her hotel before it got too late.

When Maria earlier had left Jody to go and see the baby, the first words out of Eric’s mouth to Jody were, “What is she doing here?”

“Maria was coming to visit for the weekend. We were supposed to have two more weeks before Claire was due, and I wanted Maria to come and see how cute our apartment is.”

“Is she staying with you at your apartment, otherwise I will have to find a place to stay?”

“No, we asked her, but she insisted we didn’t need the extra work of a guest and made hotel reservations.”

Well, I will stay with you guys if you don’t mind, and then I will get in a maid before I leave and have her change the linens on all the beds and just get the place shining before you and the baby come home.”

“Thanks, Dad. It’s not necessary, but both Tyler and I will certainly appreciate it.”

“I’ll even stock your fridge and cabinets with some good food.”

“Boy, everybody should have a Dad like you.”

So, when Eric entered the area where Maria was waiting, he already knew why she was at the hospital and that she would be staying at a hotel. He removed his gown and told Maria he would escort her to the hotel feeling that since this area was unfamiliar territory he wanted to be sure she got to the hotel safely.

“Oh, that’s not at all necessary.”

“I know that, but please indulge me.”

Maria had to admit it felt good to have someone be so concerned about her. “Well, if you insist, then thank you for that. Where are you parked? I used valet parking so if you meet me at that point I’ll get the address of where I am staying and one of us can follow the other there.”

Jody was asleep when they got back to the room, so Maria gave Tyler a sweet kiss and a hug and said she would come to see them again tomorrow. Tyler thanked Maria for all her help. “I don’t know what I would have done

without you, and thanks for taking me to the chapel. That experience helped a lot.”

“You are quite welcome buddy. Take care of that wife of yours now.”

Eric told Tyler he would use the key they gave him to get into their apartment after seeing that Maria got safely to her hotel. He then grabbed Tyler by the hand, pulling him closer and then patting him on the back in a huge bear hug. “Thanks kiddo for making me one happy Granddad. You guys did a great job.”

Tyler had a huge proud grin on his face, said goodbye, and then went to lie on the bed next to his wife. Before anyone could say baby he was sound asleep next to Jody and the nurse who later came in didn’t have the heart to tell him to move.

When Eric and Maria got to the hotel, he walked into the lobby with her to make sure she had no problem with her reservations. He helped take her luggage to her room and grabbed her hand in a handshake. “Thanks, Maria,” he said looking straight into her eyes. Truth be told he wanted to grab her and hold and kiss her, but knew he couldn’t do that. Instead, he shook her hand, told her to get a good night’s sleep and said he would see her tomorrow. Maria closed the door behind her and momentarily wished Eric was following her inside the room. She would have preferred his company, but also knew she was tired and she still wanted to call the children before getting into bed. They were all so excited to hear about the new baby and were really in disbelief to think the baby had already arrived. Gary assured his Mom that all was well and told her not to worry. Maria said she would probably be home around three o’clock on Monday, but she also would be calling them Sunday as well to check on things.

Chapter Fifty

Thinking it would be better to have the family members spend some time alone on Sunday morning, Maria decided not to go to the hospital until she had some lunch. Eric kept checking the room door every time a nurse or doctor came into the room secretly hoping that one of those people would be Maria. *What is happening to me? All of a sudden I feel like a young kid with a crush.* He thought of Maria the whole night back at the children's apartment and didn't sleep well at all. The hug and kiss she gave Tyler when they left last night did not go unnoticed. Claire came to mind as Eric thought, stereotypical or not, that women have a natural instinct to know how to handle most any type of situation. Around noon he did go down to the cafeteria, not so much because he was hungry since he had made Tyler a hearty and big breakfast of pancakes, sausage and eggs, but more because he felt if he got out of the room Maria might somehow get there faster. *Could this woman really have a place in my life? There was a time not too long ago where I didn't even think I liked her, so these feelings I am having now are very confusing. For so long I missed my wife. I never ever thought I would want or need another woman — ever. Yet now, I have those same feelings I originally used to have just for Claire. How can this be?*

When he got back to the room, Maria was entering at the same time wearing a white furry beret and white down coat and high black boots. A red scarf was fluffed around her neck and her appearance mimicked a delectable sweet dessert, something to be enjoyed and devoured. When Maria greeted Eric, her smile took his breath away further exciting his inner body. He waved his hand to indicate Maria should enter the room first. There was Jody propped upright in her bed looking full of life and vivacious, like a new person with her hair uniquely coiffed and her lips covered with a soft pink lipstick. Such a young and beautiful mother thought Maria. There was a lot to be said for children having young parents that were full of energy and patience. They might not have the money of a parent more mature in years, but what did the baby know about money. As long as their needs were cared for

and met, and they were loved a lot, wasn't that really all that was important in the long run? Tyler, who had been seated next to Jody, got up to greet the two adults. The conversation was lively between the four of them as though they were a family or at least long time friends, and the afternoon flew by with each taking time to visit the precious little baby. At one time during their conversation Jody recalled that the main reason for Maria to come was to see their apartment, and so far this had not happened. Eric said, "Why don't we take a break Maria and leave these two lovebirds to themselves for a while. I have a key and will give you a tour of the apartment."

"I would love that if it is ok with you and Tyler?" She inquired of Jody.

"That's a great idea Dad. I hope you guys left it clean."

"Don't worry. If they didn't, I'll be happy to straighten it out for you."

College courses became their topic of conversation in the ride to the apartment in Eric's car. The conversation flowed easily and Maria began to realize that her animosity toward this man was not as relevant, and instead she actually felt quite comfortable with him. They never seemed to be at a loss for words, and in reality they certainly had a lot in common. One other thing she enjoyed about Eric too was that he was such a gentleman. While enjoying the independence women had in today's society, it felt good to have someone open the car door for her and little things of that order. She certainly was not expecting this gesture. The only reason she hadn't yet opened her own door was because it took her a while to gather the gifts she brought the children for their apartment, and her purse. Before she knew it, Eric had come around to her side of the car and opened the door for her and then made sure she entered the apartment first. "Wow," said Maria. "This apartment is amazing with all the built in shelves." The way the furniture was arranged enhanced the room size making everything look bigger than it actually was.

"Tyler and I installed those shelves one weekend when I came to visit."

Maria gave Eric a little shove while she patted him on the arm and said, "I'm impressed," sort of indicating with her expression that she didn't believe him capable of such a chore.

"Hey, you. I'm serious."

"Well, then. I am doubly impressed."

Maria did dry the dishes that had been washed and placed on the counter and put them away, fluffed some pillows and made Eric's hide-a-bed. Eric temporarily sat down to catch the score of one of the football games when he noticed Maria bending over to fix his bed. He couldn't keep his eyes off that bottom, so round and perfect inside those jeans. *God, I am really getting a bad case of something here. I had better compose myself.* Instead he said, "Why are you making the bed? I am only going to climb back into it again tonight."

"It's just a maternal thing mothers do, and besides it made the apartment look messy."

“It did?”

“Oh, men. What’s with you guys anyway?”

“Ok, OK, I guess it does look better in here now. You must have a special touch.”

“Of course I do.”

“Hmm, some day I’d like to find out.”

“What did you say?”

“Oh, nothing, I was just thinking out loud.”

“Can we leave now Eric and stop at the drug store on the way back to the hospital? I want to pick up a few things for Jody for the apartment, and you can take them back to the apartment tonight when you go.”

“Sure can.”

Surprisingly, Eric got out of the car and went into the drug store with Maria. He glanced at some sport magazines while secretly watching her every move. He felt as though he were becoming obsessed with her. In fact, he was sure of it.

Back at the hospital they were watching the weather report and the weather called for snow in the afternoon. Hearing that, Maria told them all she would say goodbye tonight as she thought it best to leave in the morning before the snow storm. They all agreed it was the wise thing to do. Eric was going to probably stay the full week, and especially until Jody came home with the baby. He wanted to observe how the children managed on their own functioning without assistance. Should he notice they were having a problem he was going to hire a nurse until Tyler’s parents were back in town since he knew that when they arrived they were coming to stay with the children a while. That fact made him feel good. This time Tyler offered to escort Maria back to the hotel. Both Eric and Maria were secretly hoping that Eric would do so, but neither had the heart to tell that to Tyler. So, Maria said her goodbyes that evening after telling Jody and Tyler how much she loved their apartment. They all told her to drive carefully and Jody asked Maria to call her once she got home which Maria agreed to do.

Chapter Fifty-One

Traffic for the first portion of her trip proved to be a nightmare. Maria suspected that everyone was leaving early to avoid getting caught in the storm. Once she got close to home and took the familiar back roads things quieted down, and the last leg of her trip was uneventful. All the children were waiting at the door to greet her since she had called them about ten minutes prior to arriving home. Their sweet faces were a sight to behold. They all started speaking at once and Maria had to ask them to slow down. When she was at the drug store she found some trinkets specific to the college town that she bought for each of the children. She immediately grabbed them out of her bag and gave them to the children and this managed to quiet them and she could then carry on a better conversation.

Enrollment for the following semester had already been completed. That evening after the children were in bed, Maria went on the computer to order some of the books she would need for her next semester's classes. This kept her pretty busy since some of her books were hard to find and she had to search several different sites. Eventually, the task was finished. She took a shower and collapsed in bed from sheer exhaustion, but instead of falling asleep as she anticipated, she instead started thinking of Eric. He was no longer that jerk. Nor was he that conceited individual...that horrible Mr. Viera. She knew one thing though, until she was sure what was going on, she was not going to mention one word of these new feelings to her group of friends. No way. She wouldn't be able to take the teasing and she did not want them talking her into anything until she herself felt secure in her emotions. *Besides, how do I know he even feels the same way about me? How do I know?* She tried reading in bed, but that didn't help. Neither did watching television. She kept glancing at the clock. One in the morning. Then two. Three thirty. Four. By four thirty she fell into a sound sleep and when it was time for the children to awaken at six thirty, Maria was in a stupor. Gary entered his Mom's room and shook her gently while saying, "Mom, Mom."

Maria imagined the noise to be a dream and continued to sleep. Feeling compassion for his Mom, Gary got the other children out of bed and made them a quick breakfast. They were just getting ready to put on their coats to go out the door. Unfortunately, the snow didn't last or accumulate enough to call off school. Only then did Maria get up to go to the bathroom, noticed the time on the clock and jumped so fast she nearly fell. "Children, children. Are you awake?"

"They are fine Mom. Come down and kiss them goodbye."

Heavens. This can't be. I never miss waking my children. What is happening to me?

Once they were out the door, Maria made herself a nice cup of coffee with her Keurig coffee maker. What a blessing that turned out to be as opposed to brewing coffee the old fashioned way. There was no time to sit and reminisce however since the phone started ringing. First it was Rita, then Zoe, then Janet. That literally shot the whole morning. She almost felt guilty trying to hide her feelings for Mr. V. Many times she nearly let the words slip out of her mouth, but she was determined. They decided to all go for a walk that afternoon, so essentially the whole day was going to be shot. There was wash to do and mail to sort. Gary did a lot while she was gone, but she did tell him to leave the wash until she came home. Her main concern was that he concentrate on the children. One thing the friends never did though was put off being together. One could always clean the house, but spending time with friends was so much more important....like taking time to smell the roses. This simple statement never became more apparent than what happened at the end of that week.

The friends' walk was lively and they had a lot of things about which to gossip. Often Zoe rather spent a lot of their time on her own personal problems as though the others did not have things as important. For the most part, the rest of the gals let her ramble on about "this and that" unless she got obnoxious and then one or the other would speak up to her. There was a meeting with one of the children's teachers later in the week, and the ever present grocery shopping. The week flew by and Friday afternoon the temperatures outside were really cold. That morning there had been a lot of accidents with cars skidding on the black ice that had formed. Maria felt good sitting in front of her television set with a hot drink and intended to enjoy this hour before the children returned home from school. About fifteen minutes into the television show she was watching, the phone rang. Maria checked the caller ID. It was a local number, but the ID said caller unknown. Usually she didn't pick up the phone, but for some reason this time she did. "Hello."

A pleasantly deep and familiar man's voice replied, "Hello, Maria?"

"Who's calling please?"

"This is Eric Viera."

“Eric, I thought your voice sounded familiar,” she said, but she thought he sounded strange. “Is something wrong?”

“Oh, Maria. I don’t know how to tell you this?”

“Oh, God, Eric. What happened? I’m scared. Is something wrong?”

“I’m afraid so Maria. I guess I had just better come out and tell you that Tyler was on his way to school this morning and his car hit a patch of ice causing it to run into a bridge abutment. He’s dead Maria. Tyler died.” The sound of his voice diminished as he spoke, and Maria really couldn’t comprehend what he was saying.

“What? What did you say Eric? I’m sorry, I didn’t get what you said.”

Eric’s devastated voice repeated what he had said, but Maria still didn’t get it. She was afraid to say anything else so remained quiet and listened to Eric breathing through the receiver. After a few moments, his voice settled, and all he said this time was, “Tyler is dead.”

At this point, the children came home from school and bolted through the front door, but they quickly stopped when they saw their mother drop the phone and hold her head.

“What’s wrong Mommie? What happened?” She could see they were scared, but she couldn’t speak. Gary noticed the phone off the receiver and picked it up and said, “Hello?” He was half expecting not to find someone there, but a voice answered explaining that it was Mr. Viera calling to tell his Mom that Jody’s husband Tyler had died that morning in a car crash. Gary looked white upon hearing the message, but he maintained control of himself and thanked Mr. Viera for calling and said when his Mom felt up to it he would have her return the call. Gary ran to grab a hold of his mother. “Are you ok Mom? Can I get you something?”

Realizing she had to compose herself for her children’s sake, Maria stood up assuring Gary that she was fine. “What happened Mommie?”

“Children, sometimes bad things happen. This morning our friend Jody’s husband was killed in a car crash, and Mommie is very sad.”

“Why was he killed Mommie?”

“Sweetheart, I don’t know why this happened. Right now it doesn’t make sense to me either. We’ll have to trust that there is some reason for this that we don’t understand. For now, let’s not ask why but instead show each other a lot of love because we are all very sad right at this time.”

Some still did ask her why, while others tried to calm those who kept asking. Maria took them to the kitchen for some milk and cookies and at least for the time being things quieted a little.

Maria knew she needed to contact Jody and Eric not only to see what she could do to help, but just to try and understand the shock of what happened. How could this be? Tyler was such a lovely child, so alive just a few days ago. Will I ever understand? Poor Jody. Poor little Claire. Oh my God! This was going to be hard with the children hanging around, so she called her

friends and explained that she needed their help. They all came over immediately and helped the children with their homework, or played games while Maria went to the den, closed the doors and called Eric. She only had his home phone number from when her son played ball, but when she called that number she only got the answering machine. She didn't leave a message, but instead checked her caller ID for the last number called and tried it. Eric answered the phone.

"Hi Eric. This is Maria. God help me. What happened?"

"Oh, Maria. I just came home today. Tyler's parents came home from their cruise Sunday and drove straight to Jody's. They have a hotel room and were going to stay several weeks to help her with the baby, and when I left, Tyler's Mom planned to spend the first few nights at the apartment to help during night feedings or if the baby didn't sleep at night. Tyler left early for school while it was quite cold and icy outside. By midmorning when I left, the roads were fine. I made it home in good time. I wasn't even home for a full hour when the phone call came from Tyler's Dad. I guess the medics and police had a hard time finding his identification after the accident so it took a while to notify someone. I turned around and went right back to the apartment immediately, and that is where I am now."

"How is Jody?"

"She's beside herself. I don't know how to console her. Do you think you could come back? Tyler's parents are in equally as bad shape, and I am at a complete loss as to what to do. At least the Chaplain from the college has come and offered his help, but the parents aren't sure yet where they want their son to be buried. No one ever expects to bury a child. I do understand from the police who investigated that Tyler hadn't even been speeding. The accident was a freak one plain and simple."

"I'll have to make more arrangements for my family Eric. I'll drive out in the morning. Could you please make reservations for me at the same hotel? They should have my credit card number on file."

"I'll take care of it, don't worry about the money. You are so good with Jody, she really needs you right now, and I know I would feel much better if you were here."

"See you tomorrow Eric, and try to get a good night's rest. I think we are all going to need that."

"Good night Maria, and thanks."

Zoe, Rita and Janet had already prepared supper for the children — minestrone soup and grilled cheese, orange juice and raspberries for dessert. They were playing in their rooms when Maria came out of the den. The friends all had these sad dismal looks on their faces, but oddly they did not bombard Maria with questions. Instead they watched her go to the kitchen to get a glass of water and then come back to the living room to sit down. Everyone was in shock when they heard the story. "Oh, his poor parents," said Zoe.

“Just imagine coming back from a fun trip to something like that. I can’t really.”

Arrangements were made for the friends to pick up the children after school and they would take turns with sleepovers at Maria’s home in order for the children’s lives to maintain some type of normalcy while Maria was gone. Those women who didn’t have husbands at home would just bring their own children to Maria’s for the one or two nights this was going to involve.

“Thanks guys. You are such great friends. I can always count on you. Pray that the Lord gives us all strength, especially for Jody and Tyler’s parents.”

Never did Maria feel so much trepidation as she did on the drive to Jody’s. What could she possibly do to help? She remembered how she felt when Robert died, and these thoughts caused her heart to feel even worse for the poor young mother. Maria barely got her car parked when Eric opened the apartment door and was out to greet her embracing her in a hearty hug. He explained how Jody and Tyler’s parents were at the funeral parlor making selections and decisions. A nurse was inside with baby Claire.

“How is Jody, Eric?”

“I am surprised at the strength she is exhibiting now that she has had some time to have it all sink in, and Tyler’s parents are pillars of strength. I don’t know how they do it.”

“When they all return, I’ll take you over to the hotel so you can get settled.”

Inside, the apartment had been transformed with all kinds of baby paraphernalia. The nurse had just fed the baby and was holding a quite contented little darling. “Could I hold her?”

Maria was handed the baby by the nurse and immediately she embraced her close to her heart. Poor little darling will have to start out her young life without a Daddy. Thank heavens there are two loving grandfathers as sort of substitutes to offer the child some type of male influence. Though the television set was on and the sound had been muted, this didn’t keep Eric from sitting there staring at the picture. Strain was etched all over his face. Maria had an urge to reach out to Eric and somehow offer him some solace, but she realized there was really nothing she could do to help. Inherently she knew this, so they both just sat there with Eric staring at the television and Maria holding the baby close to her heart while the nurse was doing something in the kitchen of the small unit. They sat this way over an hour until they heard car doors slam and knew that Tyler’s family had returned. Maria went to hand the baby to the nurse, and as soon as Jody walked in she grabbed her in a smothering embrace. Tears streamed down both their faces and Eric seemed out of his element. Then Maria hugged both parents while exclaim-

ing how very sorry she was. “I know darling,” were the kind words out of Tyler’s Mom’s mouth. When the Dad spoke it was to tell everyone that all the plans for the funeral had been made. Surprisingly, it was to be the next day in the afternoon on the college campus. “The sooner we get this over with, the better it will be for everyone. We are staying in the area for the rest of this semester to help Jody get through school. She will need an education to be able to care for this baby. The nurse has also agreed to stay and live in with Jody at least until the baby is four months old.”

Maria glanced at Jody whom she thought was either in a daze, or she was super composed because nothing her father-in-law said appeared to put her in shock mode. Perhaps it was good to get her right back to school since that was their intention when Tyler was alive, but Maria worried how she was going to manage this. Nevertheless, the parents seemed to have everything under control, and she was thankful for that fact.

“Do you mind if I take a nap Maria? I am so happy you came, but right now I am so exhausted I can’t function. After my nap I want to sit and have a talk with you since I know you can understand what it is I’m going through.”

“Sure, honey. You get some rest. Your Dad is going to take me over to the hotel where I will stay tonight and tomorrow night, and I’ll leave the day after the funeral since you all have done some marvelous planning already. I see you have a lot of mail to go through. I will help you with that after you awaken, and I’ll help to write any thank you notes that might be indicated at this time. Now, get on into bed. My orders!”

Jody gave Maria a sweet smile and walked to her room where the baby was sleeping in her bassinet. The nurse had been told to get the baby out of the room if she heard her fuss in order for Jody to get at least an hour of sleep, if not more.

Eric informed Maria he would be staying at the same hotel where she was staying as would Tyler’s parents. Since the nurse had been hired to spend the night, he felt it awkward to stay in Jody’s apartment. “I feel like I need a nap too,” he told Maria after Maria was checked in at the hotel. “How about I meet you in the lobby in about an hour and a half and we’ll go to Starbucks and get some coffee and a snack? I noticed one about a block from Jody’s apartment.”

Gary had left a message on Maria’s cell phone. As soon as she got settled in her room Maria called him back. He needed to have some papers signed by the end of the next week and he wondered how long his mother would be gone. “I’ll be home in two days honey. The funeral is tomorrow afternoon.” They made some other idle chit chat before saying goodbye and after Maria learned that all the children were fine.

Feeling sleepy herself she took off her heavy outer cloths and put on the terry cloth robe offered for guests of the hotel and laid down upon the bed. Before she realized it, she fell sound asleep. The relief of seeing how well

everything was under control offered her a release that had been missing since she heard the news of Tyler's death. When she awoke she had fifteen minutes to get ready before meeting Eric in the lobby. Sleeping peacefully would have been just the medicine the doctor ordered. Maria felt invigorated and better prepared to handle whatever happened next.

Seated at Starbucks, they shared a scone and slowly sipped their coffee. For a while Eric grabbed Maria's two hands across the table and held them while they talked. "Thanks so much for coming. You can't realize how much of a God send you are to me. I wasn't prepared for our friendship, and I certainly was not out to replace my wife in any way or manner, so these words are hard for me to say right now."

"I know Eric. These last few days I have also been overwhelmed by some very powerful emotions too. However, I also know we are both going through the worst kind of tragedy possible and our emotions are raw and vulnerable. Everything is happening too fast. Some of what we feel may be just due to circumstance. We should not get carried away."

"Circumstance has nothing to do with my feelings for you young lady. None at all! I won't push you though. We need especially to get through tomorrow."

"I am totally amazed at how well Tyler's parents are taking this tragedy. I don't know if I could be as calm and thorough as they are."

"I think some of it is shock. They are pushing themselves to work, work and plan, plan, because when they act this way they are kept busy and the hurt is not so bad. At least that is how I used to operate. Once all the planning is done, real life will set in, and then things might prove to be a lot more difficult."

"I suppose. I just don't know. I had my Granny to help and my good friend Father Jon. I really used to take it out on him."

"Oh the priest! I can't imagine him liking me at all. I realize now I wasn't very nice to either of you that day at the church."

"You can say that again."

"Goodness," he jested, "You don't have to agree with me on that."

"Plain and simple. You were not very nice that day," but she smiled when she said it.

"Ok, Ok, I get the message."

The respite of talking about something else beside the funeral was a great tension reliever and also gave each a sense of what they both were going through at the time when Jody ran away. Eventually they got up and journeyed back to the apartment. The baby was looking bigger already. It was obvious she was the perfect little creature to lighten their hearts from an otherwise solemn situation.

Maria proved a big help in reading the notes and informing and writing thank you notes to those who had sent some type of material condolence. She

even wrote special notes to the people who sent endearing words about the deceased because their effort in doing so seemed worthy of acknowledgment. Tyler's Dad ordered Chinese food for dinner that evening. Student friends of the young couple stopped by to pay their respects and they all left together for the viewing at the funeral parlor that evening. While it was called a viewing, the casket would be closed. This was to be the only gathering at the funeral parlor. The Chaplain also was in attendance to say a few prayers. Many were to help at the funeral the next day and pall bearers were assigned to carry the casket. One of the young ladies was going to play the guitar.

The funeral went off without any problems the following day. It had been beautifully planned. Jody insisted she wanted the baby at her Daddy's funeral, so the nurse came along with the child. Though Claire was awake throughout the entire ceremony she uncharacteristically, for a baby that age, did not let out not even one little peep. The college offered the student lounge for a reception dinner after the ceremony which fulfilled their plans for eating that evening. Before returning to the hotel Maria said her goodbyes to Jody and promised to keep in touch. Her intentions were to leave early the next morning. Eric offered to buy Maria a glass of wine at the bar upon their return from the busy day. The temptation to kiss Maria was almost beyond his control. When he walked Maria up to her room she gave Eric a quick peck on the cheek and quickly said goodnight. She did not trust herself at that point either and handled the matter in the best way she could. Eric briefly grabbed her face and brushed his lips against Maria's and she so wanted to continue that kiss, but she let her mind and not her body rule the night, got the door to her room open, peeked at Eric through a crack in the door and said her good nights. "Call me," she said instead.

Eric stood looking at the door for about five minutes before leaving and going down to his own room. He got no sleep that night at all. The next day with Maria gone, and the sadness pervading Jody's apartment, the somber mood came back to haunt Eric. *I have such mixed feelings. I am falling in love while my daughter has lost her love. I feel guilty in wanting this pleasure. This beautiful woman haunts me, and I grow weak with lust. Then I look at my daughter's sad eyes and feel such culpability for having any happy feelings at all. What would my daughter think of me loving another woman so soon after having lost her mother and now her husband? I don't want my daughter to hate me in any way, shape or manner. When I get back to my home I am going to step inside that St. Gregory's church and ask for guidance. I don't think Father Jon is there at the moment, so I won't have to deal with him. I suppose it wouldn't hurt for me to tell the priest that I'm sorry — that is if he even cares. Well, of course he cares, if it is still haunting my mind to a degree it had to have had some effect on him. Besides, I know I was rude and for that alone an apology is required. Well, that will have to be another day I guess since he is no longer in the country. Truth be told though, I don't*

even like to hear Maria talk about this Father Jon person. It is quite obvious he has some special place in Maria's heart and frankly, yes I'll admit it, I am jealous.

Eric needed to get his mind back in focus. There were quite a few things that still needed to be done in Jody's apartment before he left to go home. Without Tyler around to do these minor chores Eric promised himself he should make a trip to see his daughter at least once a month, if not more.

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Chapter Fifty-Two

Children have a way of getting on with life after an upset and Maria's children were no different. Their attitude rubbed off on her and there was so much going on with teacher conferences, and for herself to get ready for the next semester, that this all proved to be a good distraction. The friends had met one day in the middle of the week for a walk and this time they came back to Maria's house for some coffee and goodies. Jody, the baby, her in-laws, and Tyler's death saturated their conversation. Robert could never understand how they could take what he thought was a simple topic and carry on and on for hours. He used to wonder what the heck they found to discuss. Towards the end of the week Maria called Jody, but they didn't get to talk too long because the baby was fussing and she and the nurse were going to take her to the doctor. "I just wanted to check on you dear."

"I'm doing ok. It is hard and hurts a lot though. It sure feels good talking to you Maria and thanks for all your help. I wasn't sure I told you that when you were here."

"Goodness, you don't need to thank me. I was glad to help in any way possible. I'll call back in a few days."

That evening there was a concert at the school. A large crowd had gathered around the refreshments that were set up on a table in the hallway outside the classroom. Maria grabbed for a glass of lemonade and a cookie and in doing so bumped into someone. She immediately turned around to apologize and of course it was Eric equally as surprised. Was it really circumstance that always seemed to cause the two of them to bump into each other? Without thinking, Eric bent down and kissed Maria quickly on the lips. "Oh, wow, I'm sorry. That just happened without thought."

Maria's cheeks flushed bright red as she glanced around to see if anyone else noticed. Though apparently, no one did. She whispered, "What are you doing Eric?"

"Don't know. I just don't know what came over me, but you know what?"

"No, what?"

“I feel like doing it again.”

“Whoa, oh no you don’t.”

“Oh yes I do.”

Maria backed away from Eric and told him she would see him later. The fifteen minute intermission had ended by then.

“I didn’t even know you were here. I meant to call you earlier, but this week has been hectic.”

“I know Eric. Same here. See you soon.”

They both looked for each other when the concert was over, but they never did cross paths again that evening.

Maria’s insides were all twisted. All she thought about was that very quick and simple kiss. Oh how much she wanted more. *What is happening to me? How can I just turn around and start liking a man who just a few months ago repulsed me. Well, she chastised herself, I guess I shouldn’t say repulsed. I never disliked him that much, but he sure used to get me angry lots of times. Maybe my friends were right, perhaps secretly I always had this crush on him and just didn’t want to admit it. Oh Robert. Don’t be mad at me. I’ll always love you my darling, and that is why I am so yearning to have someone fill your place. We had so many good things together, and I miss that terribly. We never talked about one of us dying since we were both so young. I wouldn’t want to dishonor you by falling for someone else, but I must admit that I think I have done just that. Oh, what would my children think? Oh nonsense, Eric was just probably being silly, so I had better stop getting myself in such a tizzy over him.*

When she was getting ready for bed that evening, she went into the bathroom to brush her teeth. Looking in the mirror she thought she saw a few gray hairs. Now what I am going to do about them? She decided to stand there and pull them out, and it hurt. As she was disrobing she gave her body the once over in the mirror. Not too bad, but was it good enough for another man? Oh Lord, I just don’t know if I can deal with all of this rubbish. Maybe being in a status quo situation is not so bad. Who needs a man anyway?

The phone rang. Either it was bad news or Father Jon. Hopefully the call was the latter choice, and when she looked at the caller ID she was happy to see that it was Father Jon. Both of them had decided this late hour would be best for him to call and just talk without interference from the family. He told her his assignment had been extended for six months to a year depending on several factors. The father was thrilled and sad all at the same time. Jon inquired about the children and most of all he wondered about Maria. Their conversation was usually very general concerning family, local gossip and topics in the news. Maria loved these little tete a tetes. After all, Jon was the only one left from her childhood, and she adored him. Hoping he would be coming home to stay for good, Maria was somewhat disappointed for the priest when she heard his time in Rome had been extended, but she gracious-

ly pretended to be happy for him because he apparently was going to be doing something prestigious. She realized she hadn't paid her full attention when he explained the reason why he couldn't yet come home but left it at that. She thought to herself how frequently she does not give people their full attention when they speak, so she often only gets half the story. Oh well, I manage.....yet in this case her own thoughts actually made her miss a lot of what Father Jon said just now. When the phone conversation ended, Maria climbed into bed. Her mind was whirling with all that had occurred. *Was it possible to love two men? Could she really say she loved the priest the same way she thought she loved Eric? It was close, except society told her not to love a priest — but he is my buddy, my confidant. Why shouldn't I love him? Who made up these rules anyway about priests getting married?* Well, right now, neither man was available. She was going to bed alone. So, her first prayer was that she get her mind off of the guys and on to paying the bills or some other mundane chore that manages to always fill her daily life. Instead, her mind drifted to Jody. *Who suffers more she wondered.... the very young bride who had not been with her lover very long, or the older bride who had many years of marriage behind her. Then again, what about those wonderful elderly couples married fifty or sixty years? That, she decided, had to be the worst, even though age dictates you won't necessarily be around. Yet, these older people had built up so many more dreams, and faced so many challenges together. One had to hurt a lot when after fifty or so years the person you adored the most was no longer there to help you carry on.* God, why are my thoughts so morbid? Start counting sheep for crying out loud. She heard one of the children get up to go to the bathroom. Usually they slept through the night which caused Maria to wonder when in the devil was the last time in her life that she slept through the night. Realizing she wasn't going to fall asleep, she grabbed a book, propped up her pillow, turned on the bedside table lamp and started to read. In a few minutes, she had dropped the book and had fallen sound asleep.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Both Eric and Maria were busy with their school work, plus Eric was constantly taking time to go and see Jody. They both thought of each other constantly, but time restraints and family obligations prevented them from seeing each other, let alone having the time to talk on the phone. Maria realized she still had a lot of old fashioned traditions, so she withheld herself from calling Eric or sending him any texts. Guilt feelings were torturing Eric. He tried to justify his feelings for Maria, yet when he talked to Jody and felt her pain he felt ashamed of his mind-set and attempted to put his thoughts about Maria on the back burner. What neither Maria nor Eric comprehended was the fact that if either had told their children about their attraction for one another, the children would have embraced the idea with flourish. Jody loved Maria like a mother, and Maria's little baseball player thought his coach Mr. V was the best ever. In fact, for Jody, a uniting of Maria and Eric could have easily been the medicine she needed to help ease her pain at the loss of her husband.

Finally, spring break rolled around. This year both the public school and the college were celebrating spring break at the same time which was not usually the case. Maria just wanted to stay home with the children, sleep late every day, maybe go out for breakfast/brunch late every morning, perhaps see a movie if they could all agree on one and just take life easy. Jody's in-laws were going to take Jody and Claire to their second home in Florida for the break, so Eric essentially was going to be staying home as well and hopefully relaxing. Maybe I should ask Maria for a date one night he thought. Yes, that is what I am going to do and he immediately picked up the phone to call her. Somehow expecting that it might be Eric on the line, Maria promptly answered the phone, "Hello, Mr. Viera," she said to him after he identified himself.

"My, aren't we being formal tonight?"

Maria laughed into the phone. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this call?"

“Young, beautiful lady”

“Oh wow!”

“A little overboard? Well, then how about a date this Wednesday evening for dinner and a movie?”

“That sounds delightful Eric, and Wednesday would be perfect.”

“I’ll email you several movies that I might want to see that are playing at the theaters and you can make the choice for the movie while I pick the restaurant. We’ll decide what time I will come to get you once we find out the movie times.”

“Thanks Eric. I shall look forward to Wednesday.” They made a bit of small talk before terminating the call.

Elation would not have been an exaggeration one little bit to describe Maria’s feelings.

“Why do you look so happy Mom? You have a big smile on your face?”

“I do?”

“Yeaaaa.”

“Mr. Viera just called me and asked me to go a movie and dinner Wednesday night.”

“Mommie’s got a boyfriend, na na na na na na!”

“Oh, don’t be silly. We’re just going to the movie together. Sometimes adults need to spend time with other adults.”

“Yea, right!”

The children easily slept late every morning during spring break, and Maria felt there was a lot of good to be said for staying home to appreciate this free time. Secretly, she couldn’t wait until Wednesday rolled around. Many thoughts filled Maria’s mind that week, not the least of which was what she was going to wear on date night. In one of her emails to Eric she found out he was going to wear jeans. This simplified her decision as she decided to do the same while wearing a sweater that showed the best part of her figure. She had a pretty teal blue sweater that would do just the trick.

Wednesday evening when she heard Eric’s car pull into the driveway, she stood at the window behind the upstairs blinds peeking at him as he got out of the car. Oh my God, Oh Lord, wow, he is so handsome, so casual, so tall, so hunky. Her body began to quiver and her knees felt weak. Gary answered the door, and she could hear the two male voices speaking softly. Composing herself, Maria managed one last glance in the mirror and proceeded on down the stairs.

“You look great Mom.”

All the children were at the bottom of the stairs. *This is worse than when my parents used to look over my boyfriends when I was a teen.*

“She sure does,” said Eric. “I promise I won’t bring your Mom home too late.”

“Be good guys. After dinner and before the movie, I’ll call to check on you. Be good now. Bye.”

“Bye Mom. Bye Eric.”

On the way to the restaurant they talked about Jody, and both were happy she had the chance to get away with her in-laws. School took up a lot of their conversation while at the restaurant. When Maria called the children after dinner, they sounded just fine which put her mind at ease.

Maria had chosen a love comedy type of movie which created the perfect pleasant frame of mind they both needed after the solemn moods they had been experiencing. After the show, they went to a quiet little place to get some dessert and were fortunate enough to get a back booth where they had a modicum of privacy. Instead of sitting across from one another they sat side by side and secretly they both were overcome by intimate feelings neither had experienced since their spouses had died. They had no problem sharing their desserts off the same plate and each realized these were approaches they wanted to experience once again instinctively knowing that what they felt was indeed special and rare. Momentarily, Maria’s mind-set told her how very lucky she was to be experiencing these types of emotions for the second time in her life. Incidents like this might never be felt by some people, but here they were marvelously occurring to her once again. Eric was just plain downright overwhelmed with this woman and he wanted as much of her as he could get.

“To be honest Eric, I did not like you at all when I first met you after Jody’s accident. I thought you to be arrogant, rude and somewhat of a snob. Though, I would not deny your incredibly good looks.”

“No kidding, really? I always had the impression people thought I was a good guy.” Eric said this with the most adorable faked hurt look on his face that only managed to endear him more to Maria.

Actually, my three lady friends all liked you and told me you were a good guy. I was the only one who had negative feelings about you. In fact, they all said they thought you had a crush on our red headed friend.”

“Yea, she’s a hottie!”

Maria punched him in the arm when he said that.

“You brought her up. You want me to lie?”

“Did you like her the best of all of us?”

“It wasn’t a competition Maria. All your friends are good looking women, and in all honesty, to me you are the one that attracted me the most. However, you looked so much like my wife that for some reason this annoyed me terribly. First of all, I thought you were still married. I had no knowledge of your being a widow. I was jealous of the husband I thought you had. That you would go home with him every night while I went home to an empty bed. That I had responsibility for all my children, while I thought you had a husband at home to discuss any problems about them with him. I rebelled

against knowing you, and when my daughter befriended you I was furious with her and also furious with myself for not being able to enjoy the one person with whom my daughter had been able to experience a relationship. My body was filled with a love/hate affiliation for you. I would see you and my body told me how much I wanted you to be close to me. I wanted to hug you, kiss you, yes love you Maria. I also hated you because I knew I couldn't have you. Everywhere I went you seemed to be there. I felt possessive for my space thinking you had your nerve being in the same place."

Maria couldn't take her eyes off of Eric. Neither could she believe the words she was hearing come out of his mouth. Her facial expressions went from frowns, to astonishment, to showing complete and utter awe for what he was saying.

Finally, when he slowed down the conversation she said, "I had no idea Eric. None! I guess I was really experiencing everything you went through except I would not have known what I was feeling had you not just expressed it all so beautifully. Not so much that you reminded me of Robert because you really don't, but all the rest of that stuff. I felt it too."

Typical of most people, Eric not so much paid attention to what Maria said with the exception of he did not remind Maria of Robert and he began to wonder what Robert had that he was lacking. *What was so special about Robert anyway? Could he not compare? At that moment he felt like a teen again, but not in a good sense. He was a teen with all the anxieties they deal with everyday, especially a male teen attempting to start a relationship with the most beautiful girl in school, and all of a sudden he felt a tinge of inadequacy.* "Ok, what's wrong with me? You are going to turn me down, aren't you? I am not as good as your husband, and I could never compare. Right?"

Maria sat staring at him with disbelief. How could she convince him otherwise? This simply was not true at all. Eric and Robert were just different in their personalities and appearance, but both were great men in their own way and equally as handsome. It felt good to be able to love a complete opposite. She started to say something, but instead was so overcome with emotion she brought her head close to Eric's and began kissing him softly on the lips. Eric was at first shocked, but acquiesced soon enough and returned the kiss with every bit of passion he could muster. They didn't want to stop, but unfortunately the waitress came by at that time, and the hour was late. They shyly apologized to the waitress as though they were caught doing something wrong. Eric asked for the check. The waitress walked away quietly saying, "Get a room!"

Walking to the car was hard and driving home even worse. They were both wishing the evening could go on forever, but family obligations came to the forefront and Eric knew he had to get Maria home to her family. "Send

me a text when you get home Eric. Now I have another person to worry about,” she said with an endearing smile.

Many weeks passed and it was obvious this new relationship was meant to be forever. They saw each other as often as practicable and slowly began to make plans for a future together. Eric was still worried about telling Jody. His guilt on the matter kept infusing him and causing him to wonder how he could react in this manner by being so happy in love when his daughter was still so sad, but the time came when he knew he had to tell his daughter. Since Jody’s in-laws were going away one weekend, Eric decided he would go and spend the weekend with Jody. Claire was just so adorable with her chubby little cheeks and sweet personality. Her jibber jabber method of speaking touched his heart. Leaving Maria for the entire weekend was going to be torture, but he was looking forward to seeing his daughter and precious granddaughter. This was the weekend to let Jody know his feelings about Maria. He prayed the reveal would work in his favor, but one never ever could predict the results of such a reveal.

Friday evening Eric and Jody enjoyed pizza together at home. Eric played with the baby for what seemed like hours, and when Claire went to bed he and Jody watched a movie. Eric could not get the nerve to say anything that night. Tomorrow it would have to be done. Saturday morning after Eric made Jody a breakfast of chocolate chip waffles and bacon they put the baby in a stroller and walked around the neighborhood. Many of the neighbors walked down to their sidewalks to have a look at Claire and remark at her beauty and how much she had grown in such a short time. When the family returned home, Eric fed the baby while Jody made the two of them tuna fish sandwiches. Claire went in for her nap, and Eric knew this would be the time he had to tell Jody about Maria.

“Come sit here near me Sweetheart. I want to talk to you about something.”

“You sound serious Dad. I hope you don’t have bad news.”

“Well, it depends on your reaction to what I have to say.”

Jody looked at her Dad quizzically and got a knot in her stomach. *What now she wondered. Does he have cancer or something like that? I can’t take much more of that type of news.*

“You know Maria,” he started.

“Well, that’s a silly statement. Of course I do. Did something happen to her?” *Oh, please, don’t let something happen to Maria too.*

Blurt it out he told himself. Just tell her and worry about the reaction later. “I’m in love with Maria. Very much in love with her.”

“Whaaaat?”

Oh boy, this is worse than I thought.

“I think I want to marry Maria.”

For the longest time Jody just sat there digesting her Dad's words and then she jumped up and Eric thought she was going to run away and cry. Instead she ran to him and put her arms around her Dad giving him a huge hug. "That's the best news I have heard in ages. I love Maria. It will be so good to have a mother again. No one can take Mom's place, but Maria would certainly be my first choice for that honor."

"Oh, honey, you don't know how good this makes me feel. I was so worried."

"You've got to be kidding Dad. How could you be concerned? I loved Maria before you did. She's perfect. I am so happy for you and for all of us. When's the big day?"

"Ha, as soon as I find out I'll let you know. We sort of talked about getting married, but now I can officially ask her. I hope she says yes."

"I have no doubt she will say yes."

"I also hope her children feel as good about it as you do."

"Well, I certainly hope so too. Her children always seemed like such nice kids, and I know they were very popular at school. When are you going to pop the big question?"

"The first chance I get next week. Do you think I should plan to take her out to eat at a nice restaurant and make this special for the two of us?"

"That would be nice Dad."

"I guess I should get in touch with her children first and see what they think, and then ask them if they can keep a secret."

"Well, since you gave me that honor, I think it would be nice if you gave them the same consideration."

"I'll call Gary and tell him I have a secret to tell the children about their mother and that I will stop over the night Maria is at school to tell them all."

"That's a good idea Dad. Oh, I am so excited. I can't wait to hear what she says."

With the relief of telling Jody out of the way the rest of the weekend was a charm, and while Eric was reluctant to leave his daughter knowing she would be alone one night before her in-laws returned, Jody had reached a point of confidence that handling the baby seemed like second nature. Knowing this, Eric felt relieved and excited about getting home to see Maria and updating her family on his intentions.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Gary had been called by Eric earlier in the week, and he made plans to come over to Maria's house the night he knew she would be in school saying that he specifically wanted to talk to all the children, but he told Gary not to mention it to them, nor to let his Mom know he was going to be there that night. Gary easily agreed and tonight was the night Eric was to meet with Maria's children. If they felt even half as happy as Jody felt when she heard the news, it would make Eric feel reasonably good. In that event, he could always hope they would appreciate him even more once they got to know him better. One never knew where children were concerned and he did have many concerns on his drive over to Maria's house. When he rang the doorbell all the children wondered who was coming and they all ran together to open it. "Calm down, calm down," said Gary as he opened the door. The children had strict instructions to never open the door themselves. That job was left only to Gary. When they saw Eric they were all excited and this managed to be a big booster for his ego.

One of them said, "Mommy's not here."

"I know. I came over just to see you this time. I have something I want to tell you. Why don't you all sit on the big couch and listen."

Excited and obedient, they all did as Eric requested and sat on the couch waiting.

"What would you think if I asked your Mommy to marry me?"

"Reaaaaaly?"

"Yup. I am thinking of doing just that, but first I wanted to be sure you would want me as a Daddy."

"I had a Daddy once and then he died."

"I know sweetheart, and that is very sad. My children lost their Mommy and that was sad too."

One of them said, "Well, maybe God killed them so you both could find another Mommy or Daddy."

“God didn’t kill them honey. Sometimes things just happen and we don’t always have a reason, but you may be right in that God wanted us to meet each other so we wouldn’t feel lonely anymore.”

The two older boys got up to shake Eric’s hand and to tell him they would be thrilled to have him marry their Mom.

When the younger children saw this they got up and started jumping around with excitement. They began yelling with enthusiasm, “We’re going to have a Daddy again.” The youngest one turned on the stereo and started playing a Jersey Boys’ song. They were laughing and dancing and Eric fell right into their good mood and as a guy who loved dancing he took turns twirling them around and doing some bumping and grinding himself.

What none of them realized that night was that Maria had only to take a test this particular evening at school and once she was finished she could go on home, so she had pulled into the driveway when she saw Eric’s car. Trepidation filled her heart thinking something was wrong, but also the house was noisy and she could hear loud music coming from inside. She decided to peek inside the window to see what all the commotion was about and was pleasantly surprised to see the children dancing with Eric and whoa, she thought, look at him move those hips. Who would have thought? Quietly, she opened the front door and stepped inside. It was so noisy that no one heard her at first, but then Eric spotted her and immediately stopped his motions feeling somewhat embarrassed to be caught in such a compromising position. However, before he could explain or tell a little white lie, one of the children blurted out, “Yea, Mommy, Mr. V is going to be our new Daddy.”

Eric wanted to die he felt so humiliated. Maria just stood there with a frown on her face questioning what she was hearing.

“Let me explain Maria. Please give me a chance to explain.”

Gary knew instinctively to get the children gathered and ready for bed. He told them to give a good night kiss to Maria and Eric and he ushered them upstairs. They ran upstairs without a problem, but kept yelling on the way up there, “We’re going to have a new Daddy,” over and over again.

Maria stood there speechless just staring at Eric.

“My plans were to take you out to a fancy restaurant this week and ask you to please marry me. I just wanted to tell the children first. Jody was so happy when I told her as were my other children whom I told when I got back home, and I thought I should test your children’s emotions as well. We didn’t know you would be home so early Maria. I want to crawl into a hole and die.”

“Well, I would much prefer you to stand there and start wiggling those hips once again. That was rather cute and enticing. Also, I would be more than happy to marry you. I thought you would never ask.”

“Lord, how lucky can one guy get? The most beautiful gal in the world said she would be my wife, and the beautiful children from both our families are coming right along with this wonderful gift package.”

Maria walked up to Eric and they immediately embraced and then had a most passionate kiss. “God, I feel blessed Maria to have found you.”

“Same here honey. I wish Granny were alive to share this wonderful moment with us and Father Jon too.”

Oh no thought Eric. I rather dread telling the priest. I still resent any affection Maria might show for that rather good looking man in those somehow sexy black clothes. Something else about which to worry!

They went to the kitchen for some coffee and sweets and began discussing plans for their future. What one might have thought would be so simple was more complicated than anyone would imagine. One of the biggest problems was the fact they both owned elegant homes and they needed to decide which one to sell and where they would live. Might it be better to sell them both and buy or build a new one? Another choice would be to rent one for a while. Maybe in a few years one of the children might like to buy it or Jody for that matter. Realizing the hour was late and knowing they could definitely not make all the decisions in one evening they decided to call it a night. They did agree on a wedding date though. Maria wanted the date to coincide with when Father Jon would be back in the states, while Eric wanted to marry her yesterday. Ultimately, he acquiesced and Maria was going to call Jon and get the details about his return and set the date around a few weeks after he was back in the states. They embraced, kissed again and whispered sweet nothings, and Eric departed. On the way home he expressed his desires to no one in particular that he was happy he wouldn't have to say many good nights in separation, but eventually they would get together really soon.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Slowly, but surely, plans seemed to fall in place. Maria intended to call Father Jon early in the week, but as it was he called her first. He was so looking forward to coming back to the states to see his love and was anxious to tell her he had a confirmation date. They talked for quite some time before Maria was able to tell him about her pending marriage. “I’m getting married Jon and would so like for you to perform the wedding ceremony.”

There was a long silence. Father Jon was not sure he heard Maria correctly, so he quietly tried to digest what she said. Finally he said, “Did I hear you say you were getting married Maria?”

Wondering why the priest took so long to reply when he asked her that question she attributed it to the fact he had not heard her correctly and she answered, “That’s exactly what I said.”

Jon’s stomach churned. He almost did not want to know the name of the groom. No one was good enough for his Maria, but he inquisitively asked, “Who’s the lucky man?”

“You remember Mr. Viera, or Eric, don’t you Jon?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Why him?”

Maria was a little offended at those words, but then remembered the last time the priest saw Eric was not necessarily on the best of terms. “He’s really a nice guy Jon. We all just got off on the wrong foot.”

“I’ll say. I just can’t imagine this union Maria.”

“Jon, Eric was still suffering from having recently lost his wife,” Maria said defensively and somewhat annoyed. When Jody started to give him trouble and he thought I was the reason for it — well, it was just at a time he wasn’t thinking rationally. Once I really got to meet him I found him to be an entirely different person than what I perceived.”

“Hmm, apparently!”

“I so didn’t expect this reaction from you, and I feel a little hurt. I was hoping you would be thrilled for me.”

Smacked into reality by Maria's statement he immediately said, "I am happy for you Maria. Forgive me. I was in a state of shock I guess not expecting to hear this news, nor did I even know you were seeing someone. Don't you think it odd you never mentioned him to me before this?"

"Perhaps so Jon, but frankly I didn't give it that much thought. I have been seeing him about six months and I am crazy about him. I just was not sure he felt the same way. I wasn't hiding a thing. When the two of us talk with each other Jon, we usually have so many other things about which to speak. Well, nevertheless that is the situation. I really can't wait to have you see just what a great guy he is, and I do hope you will honor my request."

"Of course, Maria, I will be honored to officiate at your wedding. Keep me posted on all the details."

"First we need a specific date as to when you will move back to the states and then we are going to set a date for two weeks after you are home. I am hoping you will use your influence to be sure we can manage that date at St. Gregory's parish. Eric is not Catholic, but he has no objections to marrying me in the church and he even said he would consider studying the religion in the hope of someday converting to our faith."

"He must really love you to make that sacrifice Maria. God Bless you both." He gave her the date he would be back, and she told him that she and Eric would pick him up at the airport.

Jon sat quietly in his room once their conversation was over and thought, and thought, and thought. Oddly, a certain peace came over him and this was not a feeling he expected at all. The love of his life was marrying another man and all of a sudden he could relax and not have the worry of her being alone. When Maria was without a man, Jon always had a feeling she needed him. She became his concern and he wanted to care for her in every conceivable way. However, he was bothered by the physical emotions he had for Maria. Had she remained single those emotions would have continued to torture him because he not only wanted to please her physically, but he had the urge to complete the ultimate sexual act himself. And it was a need he did not know how to conquer because it was against everything he had been taught and against every pledge he had made to his religion, and to his God. All of a sudden the pressure was off of him once again as it had been when Robert was alive. Jon always knew that as much as he loved Maria, his lustful thoughts were always set aside because there was a man in Maria's life and he never had any intention of changing that fact. God has answered my prayers he thought. My deity did not answer these prayers of mine in a way I would have imagined, but answered they were indeed. We pray and we wait. At times it seems like forever that any individual prayer will ever be answered. We hope for a timely response when we pray, but many occasions the prayer is not answered in a way or manner that we had hoped. Certainly, Jon felt this way for months trying to anticipate a conclusion to his expecta-

tions, physical urges and sincere love for this woman. However, a good conclusion never seemed to be on the horizon. How in God's name was this ever going to be solved? Jon did not want to leave the Priesthood, and he did not want to go against his priestly vows. The outcome of Maria getting married put his mind at ease in a way he never would have anticipated. *I'm free once again. Thank you God! Thank you.*

That was not the reaction I was expecting, Maria told herself after her phone conversation. *Maybe I should have told Jon about Eric before announcing the wedding plans, but frankly it just did not enter my mind with everything else going on in our lives...Tyler's death, enrolling in a new semester at school, buying books for school, handling the many concerns of her own children.* In the long run though, Maria knew that if Father Jon said he was happy for them as a couple, he meant it. Jon was not the type to tell little white lies to comfort people. She fell asleep happy that night knowing that the chore of getting someone to officiate the wedding was complete. Tomorrow morning she was going to tell her friends, and she was excited about that.

The temperature was freezing when the girls started out on their early morning walk the next day. Yet, the day was clear, the sun was shining in the brilliant blue sky, and they all felt recharged in the cold, fresh air.

Janet had an older son who along with his girlfriend had recently purchased a home which they were now renting. The son and his engaged girlfriend would be marrying in about ten months, the whole family was excited, and Janet could not wait to tell her friends the news. The girls all gave Janet a hug and told her how thrilled they were to hear about the upcoming wedding. "I am so proud of them never living together all this time. Each child was still living with their own parents," stressed Janet.

Of course, Zoe was not going to let that statement go by. "Oh give be a break please Janet, puleeze."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"Are you implying because they live at home still they have not been having sex?"

"Well, what do you think?"

"I think that you are trying to convey something that is totally and utterly false."

"Well, they don't live together."

"I know that. I also know that they have openly taken trips out of state together. You are not going to stand there and tell me they got separate hotel rooms, and if they did not, I won't believe that staying in the same room they didn't have sex. Who is everyone trying to fool here attempting to keep their reputation clean by duping us with erroneous information?"

"Why are you so angry about this?"

“Because you started it by implying they are celibate at this point, and we all know it is not so. Some of us have children living with others and I have heard you talk about those situations implying that your children were so perfect because they followed society’s old rules. I am not going to have my children scorned under false impressions for your children.”

Maria could not help but intervene at this point. “Why do we do this lately? We take good news and always end up in a fight for some reason.”

“Come on Maria. You know that Janet’s remark was out of place with its implications.”

“You know what? Both of you should leave those kids’ lives to themselves. They have to live with any consequences they make and because they are adults it is really not any of our business, and I mean that for you as well Janet. Now, I have some good news. I am also getting married in a matter of weeks, and I have not been sleeping with the future groom. So there!”

“What?” They all said in unison.

Rita spoke, “We know you have been seeing Mr. Hunk. Can we presume he is the future groom?”

“You certainly may. I feel like a young kid again when I am around him.”

“Ok, now, don’t go making us jealous,” said Zoe.

Irritation knew no bounds and the statement made by Zoe irritated Janet once again. “Why in God’s name would you say something like that Zoe?” Maria just lost Robert not too long ago. None of us ever had to go through that. Why can’t you just be happy for her?”

Zoe softened, “I’m sorry Maria. Janet’s right. I really am very happy for you. Again my mouth spoke before my brain has a chance to think things through.”

“Don’t worry about it Zoe. Maybe the cold weather is getting to us. Let’s jog for five minutes, and then we can get back to walking and choose a conversation where we won’t fight.”

After the five minutes of jogging, they were back to walking again and enjoyed the time pounding Janet and Maria all about any future wedding plans. All the girls were excited to hear Father Jon would be back for good and even more excited to know he was going to officiate at Maria’s wedding.

Chapter Fifty-Six

Simple things in life, and the planning for them, give people reasons for living. Maria and Eric found this straightforward manner of living rejuvenated them both. Ordinary chores that used to be cumbersome or boring were now invigorating. Guest lists, types of flowers, what clothes to wear, color schemes all became the topics of the day. Often this extra planning stressed a lot of people, but the two love birds appeared to thrive on choices. The more choices they had to make, the better their mood. One obvious outcome of all this planning was that the two worked so well together with their easy going dispositions, this surely had to be a plus when they were eventually married. Eric couldn't keep his hands off of Maria, but she was resolute that this was all he was going to get. Yes, she was of a younger generation, but her upbringing adhered to her and belied the outrageous morals of her generation or what several in today's society perceived to be outrageous. Plus, she wanted to set a standard for her own children. Of course, when the two of them were alone, her children would not have known the difference. Maria knew this herself though, and for her the knowing of what she was doing was enough to not succumb to her emotions. Fortunately, Eric respected her wishes though it drove him crazy. To Eric, Maria was beautiful, compassionate, intelligent and loving. How lucky, he thought, for one man to experience this type of woman twice in a lifetime. Just a year ago he was so devastated and disordered. His children were rebelling against him, and he thought there was nothing to look forward to in his future. Wisely, Eric knew enough to not attribute all of his good fortune to the two of them finally getting together. Volunteering to be a Little League coach was certainly a good start in his endeavor to begin to pick him up out of the doldrums. Focusing on the children instead of one's self was a good lesson to be learned by anyone. Certainly, going back to college was a major plus in more ways than one. First of all, this extra education was going to help establish him in a line of work more suitable to his nature. Getting out of the house, studying subjects that he for once in his life enjoyed, were all pluses for his psyche, and one

unquestionably could not deny that being out and about on campus led him to see Maria. Also, he saw her in a way he had never anticipated. Maybe this was somehow in God's plan for the two of them, since both did decide to acquire more schooling at about the same stage in their lives. Nevertheless, Eric could not wait until this woman was really a part of him, where they could go home together to the same house, make a home with the two blended families and eventually end up in the same bed.

Eric's mind drifted as he thought of his four children. Jody was the oldest and the other three were all boys, so the combined household was going to be full of young males. Eric's three boys were close in age to Maria's younger three and having new playmates proved to be a plus. The attitude of both sets of children in the way they accepted their new "parents to be" was a real blessing. Non-acceptance could have been easily one of the biggest obstacles they would have had to endure, but instead, everyone seemed pleased with the new arrangements they were making. Eric's children were going to have the biggest burden because it had been decided they would all move into Maria's house. The home was in the process of being renovated to accommodate the new guests. All children each were used to their own room and both Eric and Maria saw no reason why this shouldn't remain the same, so part of the upstairs was being remodeled, and best of all a new bathroom was added to the upper level area.

The college that Jody and Tyler had been attending had a really good online program. After completing her first year of classes, Jody was going to move back to town where she would have a lot of help babysitting. The plan was for her to live in her father's house while taking online classes so she could be home most days with her little darling Claire. In supposition, perhaps it seemed that the transition for everyone was going much too easy and anyone who kept looking for something dark to occur might have easily been expecting such a prospect. No anxiety was going to manage to disturb either Jody or her Dad. As far as they were concerned, they had already been to Hell and back several times. Nothing short of a natural disaster was going to disrupt their planning.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Father Jon was finally back in town to stay, and this evening the engaged couple was hosting a welcome home party for the priest. Since the church was having a larger group to entertain the newly returned priest, the party given by Maria and Eric was to be more intimate with a few close friends, and that definitely included Zoe, Janet, and Rita.

Eric walked into Maria's home with several six packs of beer and cases of soda. The gals had been cooking all week and today was no exception. It was a Friday evening and the party was to be held the next night. Jody was in town for the party, and as Eric entered the kitchen he noticed darling Claire sitting in her high chair munching on some type of cracker. The baby laughed when she saw her Grandpa and he immediately put the cases in the pantry and went to take Claire out of the highchair. A friendly baby, she went to anyone willing to take her while she jibber jabbered her own little language.

Eric nuzzled the chubby child's tiny neck area while reiterating to her that he was a lucky grandpa to have such a beautiful granddaughter. I love you so much, little sweetheart, I love you, I love you, I love you he kept repeating as he held her above his head moving around in circles. Maria heard the commotion in the kitchen and upon checking the source she quietly stood unobserved in the doorway admiring her husband to be and future grandchild. Naturally, she thought they were both gorgeous, and watching Eric adore his granddaughter only made Maria love him more. A loud sneeze erupted from Maria causing Eric to spot her and he danced over towards Maria with the baby and hugged them both at once. He also managed to plant a very passionate kiss on Maria's precious lips. Before he knew it everyone had entered the kitchen and they all decided to make some tacos since many claimed to be starving. The home was lively and everyone was pitching in to either chop veggies, get out the salsa and whatever else needed doing — there appeared to be a task for one and all.

Marking off her list of chores to do for the party, Maria was happy to see that most everything that needed to be completed had been done. Party time

was coming, and she was anxious to see Father Jon. He was always there for every important function in her life and in the lives of her family. Therefore, it was especially important to have him home to celebrate this blending of her family and her marriage to Eric. Maria's emotions, where the priest was concerned, were always high pitched and on a level way out of the clouds. There were times she herself wondered about perhaps loving the priest physically, and this thought certainly occurred more so after Robert had died. After all, he would have made a wonderful spouse to any woman with his caring disposition and his outrageous good looks to boot. These feelings used to really bother Maria as she thought them inappropriate in every sense of the word. Now, the more she thought about that mindset and way of thinking she rather thought she only experienced these emotions because she was young and vulnerable, and who, after all, was more available than the priest. Religiously, of course, while in Rome he was not available to her at all, but in retrospect perhaps that was part of the appeal. She could yearn for him without these cravings coming to fruition. Once Eric came along somehow this coveting of one so dear to her returned to a level more suitable to the situation. Maria almost answered her own question that had been nagging her. Yes, one indeed could love two people at the same time and pretty much almost equally if one were to take the physical aspect out of the equation. Could true love really be considered love though without the physical aspect? Fortunately, her love for Jon no longer had to be a concern. She could love him fully as one of the most important people in her life and she could love Eric fully enraptured by his whole being. Eric delighted her in ways unimaginable, and the freedom to love him was all her own. In reality, Maria realized she had experienced this same type of love for Robert, so essentially one could claim she was in love with three people, but of course Robert was no longer living and she was thinking in terms of loving two people at one time. Father Jon and Eric, her two loves, were not in competition and they never need be. In her heart, Maria felt like one of the luckiest women in the world to have this wonderful experience of being able to love two men in a manner so as to not hurt either. *God has been good to me*, she thought.

Party night arrived. Each of Maria's friends exuded a beauty all their own. Dressed to the hilt they lit up the room when they all entered at the same time. Zoe had on a shiny silvery top and a tight black skirt. Her hair had soft waves instead of the severe straightness that most young girls and young women wore in this day and age. Rita's red hair on the other hand had been slicked down to eliminate her natural curls and with her emerald green silk blouse she was ravishing. Janet wore one of those newly styled dresses that were said to make women look slimmer and usually had dark side panels while being lighter every place else. Already slim in appearance, the dress nevertheless accomplished its goal and she indeed looked even more curva-

ceous and lovely. Her hair was pulled back rather severely as only Jody could wear it and still look so darn good. Tiny ringlets covered her face. Eric whispered to his almost new wife, “You and your gal pals have got to be some of the best looking in town.” Maria could not help but smile and feel a sense of pride that these gorgeous women were her closest friends.

Shortly thereafter Father Jon made his entrance, which was equally astounding in somehow causing any bystander a little shock and awe at this handsome physical creature. Dressed in that black suit and white collar and filling the doorway with his athletic physique he emanated a heavenly aura. Maria always felt black to be a sexy color, especially on a man. *Hmm, do people like priests and nuns ever refer to things like a color as being sexy?* Maria even remembered her sexy thought after attending church the last weekend when they listened to a recording made by their Bishop asking for money for a cause. Eric had told Maria the Bishop had such a pleasant manly voice it almost made him want to donate money — but he followed up with a smirk on his face when he assured Maria that the urge passed quickly. “Odd you should say that Eric, because even I thought about his voice, but not in a monetary sense. My thoughts rather considered the Bishop’s voice as sounding masculine, soothing and comforting. I even thought he sounded sexy and then worried I should not be thinking that about a Bishop.”

“Sexy??? Wow, should I be jealous? The Bishop? Sexy?”

Maria pounded Eric in the arm. “Give me a break; it was just a quick thought.”

He grabbed Maria and wrapped her in his arms at the time saying, “When you think those thoughts in the future, may you always think of me.”

“Honey, those thoughts constantly whirl around in my head a thousand times a day.”

“About me?”

“No, about the Bishop.” she punched Eric in the arm again and told him not to be so silly.

“In reality Maria, I hope neither of us ever becomes so desensitized or so old we can’t appreciate another person in a loving and even sexual way.”

“How right you are. To think one of our previous Presidents, Jimmy Carter, was criticized for having lustful feelings for others. No one ever doubted he loved his wife fully. He is human after all.”

During the evening the festivities were lively. For a while they made two teams and played some charades which created a lot of laughs. Then for dessert a delicious cake was served that had a picture of Italy with an arrow pointed to another map of the United States. Written on the cake were the words *WELCOME HOME FATHER JON*.

One time, leaving the kitchen as Maria entered; Eric grabbed Maria and gave her a big hug and kiss whispering that he thought their first party that

they gave together was a huge success. Maria heard someone approaching and laughed the words, “Not now, Babe.”

Walking back into the den Father Jon was the only one sitting there. Eric nearly turned around and exited the room. Once most of the other guests left the party, the women had gathered in the kitchen to help clean.

Awkward would be the word that came to mind for the two men. Twice, to break the quiet in the room they both attempted to say something at the same time. That odd situation only managed to make each of them feel even more uncomfortable.

Finally, Father Jon said to Eric, “I hope you take good care of Maria. She is the love of my life.”

Eric looked shockingly at the priest. “Love of your life? I thought priests were not supposed to love anyone.”

“Oh, how condescending can one individual be? We take a vow of celibacy. Not one of being forbidden to love.”

Raising his right hand as to indicate he wanted Father Jon to stop, Eric attempted to express how sorry he was to mouth such a statement, but even doing that caused him to be ill at ease. “Father, er, Jon, er, What the heck am I supposed to call you anyway? My calling you Father seems totally inappropriate even though I now have more respect for your religion after my friendship with Maria than I ever had for any religion in my life time. In fact, I might even convert some day in the future. That possibility is not totally out of the question. Anyway, I just can’t get myself to call you Father Jon, so what would you suggest?”

“Jon is fine with me. Maybe there are other religious clergy who may not like the omission of the word Father. I really don’t know. However, that is fine with me and very acceptable if that is what you choose to call me.”

“I, personally, can see why any male or anyone else for that matter would adore Maria. She is very easy to love. Even her feistiness is appealing to me which I have observed the more I get to know her. I almost find that part of her even more alluring.”

“I know exactly what you mean. I just love Maria when she gets her ire up over a situation.” There was a fondness one could detect on Father Jon’s face as he spoke about this aspect of Maria. “Her beautiful hair becomes unraveled just like her personality, and she is at her most beautiful like that.”

“You do have her disposition down to a capital D.”

“Maria and I go back a long way Eric. That is something the two of us will share until our dying day that no one else will ever understand. In one sense we are like brother and sister, but our feelings go beyond that.”

“I can understand that. Some brothers and sisters don’t even like each other. It is obvious to anyone who knows the two of you that you both are captivated by each other.”

“She was the only one my age in the neighborhood, and her Granny and Mom and Dad treated me like I was their own son. I always adored Maria, but I was a typical male child with all my insecurities where girls were concerned. My imagination never let me think myself good enough for her. I put her on my own imaginary pedestal the heights of which I never felt confident enough to achieve, especially in the case of Maria. If we were misbehaving, our parents had no qualms about disciplining us knowing freely that the other family would never think to question their doing so. Yet, that in itself is not the answer either because many families had the same type of rapport when I was a child. To me, Maria always stood out among all the other kids on the block, and it was obvious I was not the only little boy who thought this way when she was around. We all acted like complete jerks when we were around her, but the wonderful aspect of all of this is that Maria was so completely oblivious of our emotions.”

As Father Jon continued telling his tale about their younger years, Eric finally began to relax as he repositioned himself less in a combative mode and instead in a more comfortable leisurely position.

Jon continued, “That is probably what endeared me to her the most is that she did not have one conceited bone in her sumptuous body.” The word sumptuous was enough to have Eric raise his head and look the priest in the eyes, but the priest was unaware as he appeared lost in thought. “I was always slow in asking her to the prom and even in asking her to marry me.” John verbally spoke his remembrances.

“Marry you? You actually thought of marrying Maria?”

“Oh, if you only knew! I so wanted her to be my wife and for us to have a house full of children, while we owned a neatly painted little ranch house with the inevitable white picket fence. That dream never came to a realization in any way, shape or form. She met Robert and that took care of all my passions. Fortunately for me, I had another passion that was almost equally as strong as my love for Maria, and that was my love for my religion. There was always this conflict in my heart of on the one hand wanting to marry Maria, and on the other hand becoming a priest. How I wished at the time my religion would have allowed me to do both, but it quickly became obvious that wasn’t going to happen. Those conflicts are probably what slowed me down in attempting to ask Maria the all important question of being my wife. Then, Robert came into the picture. He obviously had no other conflicts and did not hesitate one minute in trying to make Maria completely his as quickly as possible.”

Eric looked up again from his relaxed position momentarily feeling a pang of jealousy for this Robert guy. *Lord, this woman affects every sentiment I’ve ever experienced, from ones of jealousy, passion, love, devotion, covetousness, obsession, you name it.*

Continuing his conversation almost as though Eric were not even in the room, “I understood that when Maria accepted Robert’s proposal, I became almost oddly enough relieved....and I thought in my own mind....this is exactly what I am feeling now with Maria getting married to you Eric — relieved.” Being a deeply religious man, Jon attributed his relief as the answer from God for all the conflicts he had been experiencing up to this moment. Finally, he said to Eric, “In my heart I know you are a good man Eric and I am really happy Maria and you got together. I anticipate that you will have a marvelous marriage and continue to raise both sets of children in an adoring and special way. The children are lucky too. When I first met you at the church that one day you came barreling in with all sorts of accusations, I frankly did not like you one little bit. In many ways you almost frightened me, and I didn’t want to think of you being around Maria. When she told me you were the one she was going to marry, I thought she needed a brain fix.”

Laughter erupted from Eric as he said, “I bet that shocked you.”

“Ah, but now I have met your better side.”

“I was really in a sad state of mind after the loss of my wife. The thought of raising my children without her help nearly drove me out of my mind. I took all my emotions out on my daughter Jody, yet sadly she was the one who always showed me the most compassion. Naturally she finally rebelled, and when she befriended Maria I became uncharacteristically envious of their relationship. I began to feel I wasn’t good enough for my daughter. It was terrible Jon, just terrible.”

Jon nodded, “Where Maria is concerned we are just two messed up individuals.”

This statement made Eric laugh again and then they were both disrupted in their conversation when the gals came back in the room.

Abruptly the two men rather stood to attention and Father Jon said to Maria, “That was a wonderful party. I can’t thank you and Eric enough, and I am very happy for the two of you. I cannot fully express how great I feel to be home again amongst my friends.” He went around giving all the women a good-bye hug, and as he did so to Zoe she rolled her eyes in ecstasy over his shoulder causing the friends to giggle. “There’s that giggle again. I remember you Maria and Jody always managing to giggle after I would say or do something and you never did tell me what was so funny.”

“Ah, father, if you only knew.”

Somehow, everything seemed to fall in place. The upstairs renovation of the house was done in record time, the wedding went off without a hitch, Father Jon was working his way up to a fantastic promotion in the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and the combined Viera family had settled into a daily pleasant routine.

Maria once again had a rare moment to herself, and she was mentally going over all that had paved the way to this day. The wedding had been lovely. Smiles came to her face when she remembered all the shenanigans leading up to the wedding and during the wedding itself. Amazingly, everything so far was good where the children were concerned. They managed to appreciate their privacy in their own rooms after school doing their homework and were lively and animated around the dinner table somehow each respecting what the others had to say. Of course, Maria knew that life would not always be so tranquil and jolly. Only someone very naïve would consider such a thought. However, that was not a reason she should not at least enjoy the moment as it was now in the present.

Atypical quiet moments like the one Maria was experiencing needed to be savored, and what better way than to sit down on her couch and watch a little television even though it was in the middle of the day, and perhaps she could even enjoy a nice hot cup of coffee. Déjà vu struck her soul immediately when what should she see crawling along her couch but one of those strange looking stink bugs. The last one she remembered presented itself after a sad occasion, but the years that followed its appearance turned out to be good. She felt this to be some kind of an omen. Life, love and acquired knowledge had given Maria a modicum of maturity. Everything she handled lately was done with a calm and serene approach. No longer was Mrs. Viera disturbed by this silly bug. Filled with twists and turns and ups and downs like a roller coaster ride, life was far from perfect and Maria knew that all too well. Despite the many challenges people faced every day Maria recognized that for this one moment life was good, and she was grateful. Thank God!

Discussion Questions

1. Do older people like Granny have an inner premonition about what members of their family may be feeling?
2. Are these premonitions because they have more wisdom, or are they due to the fact that they are older?
3. Can our inhibitions when young prohibit us from loving the person most right for us?
4. Can we be completely oblivious to someone's attraction to us?
5. Do you think it is possible for true love to come again after the death of a spouse?
6. Did Father Jon do the right thing when he asked for a transfer?
7. Why did Jody develop such an attachment to Maria?
8. Do you feel Eric's negative feelings towards Maria were justified?
9. Is it possible for two people who originally hated each other to then turn it around and find love with the person they once hated?
10. Can true friends, like Maria's gal pals, always be up front and honest with each other even when what they have to say could possibly be hurtful?
11. Barring another life tragedy like Robert's death, do you think the relationship between Maria and Eric will be enduring?