

*When Emma finds a dead student at the boarding school where her husband teaches, she's determined to find out what happened. Will natural stubbornness and a Great Books education be enough to help her find the killer — before he finds her?*

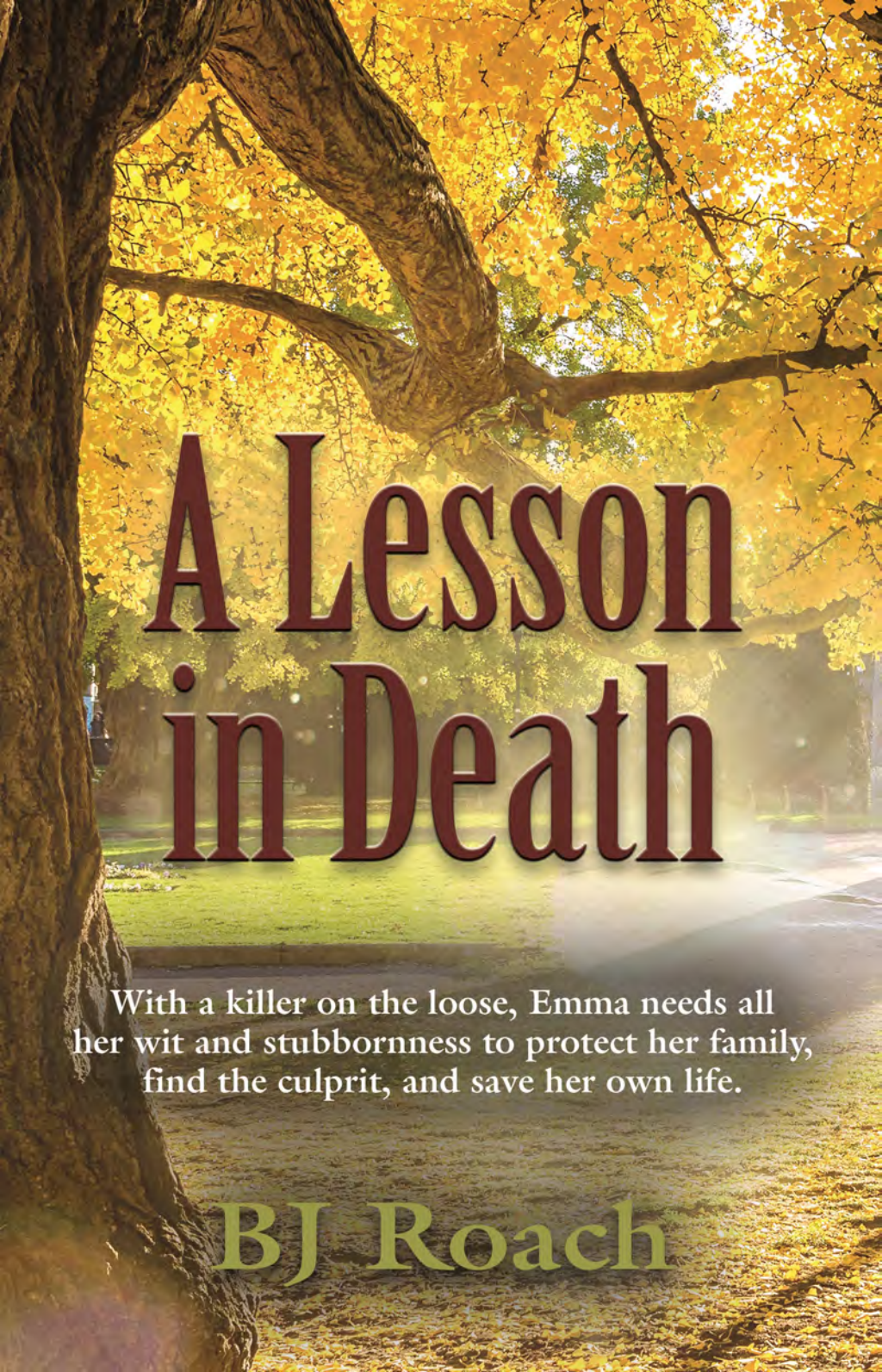
## **A Lesson in Death**

By BJ Roach

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# A Lesson in Death

With a killer on the loose, Emma needs all her wit and stubbornness to protect her family, find the culprit, and save her own life.

BJ Roach

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# Chapter 1

Death may not have been the last thing on my mind that day, but it certainly wasn't the first. It probably wasn't even in the top ten.

I guess I've led a sheltered life. No major traumas, disasters, or sorrows. My biggest problem that day was figuring out how to get a five-year-old, a three-year-old, and four bags of groceries up three flights of stairs. Piece of cake, right?

I'm Emma Callahan, happily married mother of two, editorial entrepreneur, philosophy geek (Socrates is one of my heroes), and columnist for the local Catholic weekly. And until death poked its nose in, I thought my life was pretty darn good.

That day, my husband, Tim, had been too busy to take the kids, so I'd had to go shopping with Maggie and Grace — not my favorite sport. Usually they're pretty good about it when I say "No treats," but today was not one of those days. Everything in the store, it seemed, was irresistibly alluring. I managed to avoid a major melt-down, but only by editing my list down to the absolute necessities. I'd just have to go back again tomorrow.

The ride home was enlivened by the girls singing "Down by the Bay" as loud as they could, over and over and over. Live with it, Emma, I thought. At least they're not fighting. Focus on the scenery. There's a stretch of road along Lake Winnisquam that's especially beautiful this time of year. In another week or so, the leaves would reach their peak of color — luminous reds and oranges that I am not poet enough to describe, though I wish I were. From September into October, the flaming hillsides mellow into rich russets and golds, then gradually disappear until all that's left are the bare bones of

winter. It's heartbreaking, in a way, yet Fall is definitely one of the things I love most about living in central New Hampshire.

Tim and I had lived at Nathan Hale Preparatory School in Centerville for a few years, ever since Maggie was two and Grace was a baby. Since Hale is a boarding school, Tim was on the go 24/7 when school was in session, teaching math and science, coaching sports, and helping supervise the kids in our dorm. But there were perks, including our spacious, rent-free apartment.

Hale may not be a top-ranked school, but it's got some history. It was founded in 1897 by a former Harvard history professor who was a great admirer of the Founding Fathers. His goal was to "instill in young men the virtues necessary for a free and civil society." So the school and all the buildings on campus were named after Revolutionary War figures, including Adams (the main classroom and office building), Washington Hall (the biggest dorm), and three smaller dorms: Madison, Jefferson, and — since the school went coed in the sixties — Ross.

The only drawback to our apartment is that it's on the third floor of Washington. I love our huge old brick building, surrounded that bright blue day with the glowing red, orange and gold of a New Hampshire autumn. But those stairs can be a beast.

I had parked the car in our usual spot at the east end of the building and started unbuckling the girls from their car seats while I tried to figure out if I could get everybody and everything upstairs in one trip. Grace rarely made it all the way up without some help, and naturally that day she wanted to be carried. Maggie was being a very superior five-year-old and commenting loudly about how she never needed to be carried (not quite true). I had just decided to drag the kids up and run

back for the bags when Alex Hughes came up and asked if he could help out.

Alex was a senior, and I hadn't had much contact with him before. But this year, he was a proctor in our dorm, so he was living on the same floor as our apartment. Proctors are older students who work with the dorm masters to help to keep things orderly. Some kids can get a little carried away with the responsibility, but from what Tim had told me, Alex was acting more like a big brother to the other boys than a drill sergeant. We were only a month into the school year, so it was a little soon to make judgments, but I was looking forward to getting to know him better.

For now, I was grateful for the offer of help. "Do you mind?" I said. "If you can get the bags for me, I can carry Grace."

"No!" said Grace unexpectedly, "Alex carry me!" I was surprised, because usually she's a little shy around the students.

Alex had a beak of a nose and thick, heavy eyebrows that usually made him look very serious, but his face brightened when he smiled, and his blue eyes sparkled. "Sure, I can carry Grace — that is, if you don't mind, Mrs. Callahan? I can get some of the bags too." Like so many of the kids at Hale, he was fit and strong from playing sports. I envied him that. Even though I was only 28, with two kids, I just couldn't seem to stay in shape the way I used to.

Maggie must have felt left out. "Mommy, my foot hurts. Can you carry me?"

"What do you mean, your foot hurts? It was fine a minute ago," I said. "Honestly, Maggie—"

"I know!" said Alex, "How about if I carry both of you? How fast do you think we can get up the stairs?" He looked at me. "If you can't get all the bags, ma'am, I can come back down for them."

“That’s OK,” I said, “They’re not heavy, just a little awkward. If you’re sure you can get both girls...” But before I’d even finished, he’d scooped up the girls and started up the stairs. I grabbed the bags and followed, listening to the increasing giggles from Maggie and Grace. Alex began the climb at a brisk pace, but about ten steps from the top he slowed down with great dramatic effect.

“Oh no, I don’t know if I can make it,” he gasped, pretending to stagger under their weight as the girls shrieked with laughter. “Which one should I drop first?”

“Not me! Not me!” they both cried, clutching him tightly. It’s a wonder they didn’t choke him. But he made it to the top, set them down gently by the door to our apartment, collapsed with “exhaustion,” and pretended to snore. The girls of course found this incredibly funny. As I reached the top, he got up.

“Thank you so much!” I said. “You saved me from having to make two trips. And you certainly entertained the girls. I never knew you were so good with children!”

“Well, I’ve never spent much time with kids before,” he said, smiling a little shyly, “But lately I’ve been thinking about what it might be like to be a Dad some day. Mr. Callahan is always so great with your kids — I’d kind of like to be like him.”

“Good for you!” I said, “No, girls, Alex is not going to carry you any more, and we need to put the groceries away.” I got the door open and herded them inside. “Thanks again, Alex!”

“Thank you Alex,” the girls echoed.

He bowed deeply with one hand over his heart. “Any time, my ladies!” Then he went off down the hall to his dorm room.

Our apartment was right on the end of the building, and felt gloriously huge compared to some of the places we’d lived in.

(That efficiency in San Francisco wasn't much bigger than our current living room!) When you first entered, Tim's study was on the right — he liked to be close to the hallway so he could keep an ear out for students. The kitchen was on the left. A short hall went past the study and kitchen and into a big, two-room space with rows of windows on the right and left. The right-hand part was the living room, and the left hand part was the girls' playroom. Past those rooms were four bedrooms and two bathrooms. Since there was so much space, the girls each had their own room, and the extra bedroom was my study.

Lucky for me, it was time for Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. I'm not a big fan of TV for kids, but once in a while the distraction is helpful. Today, it would give me a full half hour to put away the groceries and get a little peace and quiet before dinner. And I'd rather they watch reruns of an old classic like Mr. Rogers than some of the other stuff that's on nowadays.

The groceries didn't take long, and then I was torn. The dishes had started to pile up in the sink, but there were some online journals I wanted to catch up on — much more enticing than washing dishes.

I liked being a stay-at-home Mom, but I'd never win any awards for housekeeping. When the kids are around, I'd rather spend time with them, building with blocks, coloring, or reading stories. And when they were asleep or off somewhere else, I had plenty of other things to keep me busy. Between writing my column for the local Catholic weekly and running my freelance business (EC Editorial Services), there were days when I could get pretty overwhelmed. I enjoyed the writing, though, especially those occasions (OK, only three so far) when people have buttonholed me with "Aren't you the woman who writes that column?" And the freelance money may not be much, but with our tight budget, it comes in handy.



Still, there was a limit to how much mess I could stand. With a sigh, I decided the online journals could wait, but the dishes couldn't. I could hear the girls giggling in the other room, and that made me think of our recent encounter with Alex. I was a little surprised at how lighthearted he'd been. Not that he didn't have a sense of humor, but our previous conversations had leaned more toward the serious side. Especially last night — ouch!

At Hale, every Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday were formal dinner nights. Instead of eating cafeteria style, dinner was served family style, with three or four students sharing a table with each faculty family. This semester, Alex was one of the students at our table.

I understood the reason for formal dinners — to give students an opportunity to practice more civilized manners — but I didn't always enjoy them in practice. A lot depended on which students — or “stoodints” as the girls called them — were assigned to sit with us. If they were friendly and didn't mind being nice to the girls, dinner could be very enjoyable. Last night, it had started out OK, but went downhill fast, ending up in a pretty heated discussion between Alex and Owen, another boy at our table.

At first glance, Owen seemed unremarkable. Boarding schools tend to attract a certain type — clean-cut, well-dressed, polite on the surface at least, and Owen was no different. He was about 5' 11” and built more like a football player than a runner, with wide-open eyes and a straight little nose that made him look younger than he was, and rather innocent. Unfortunately, his idea of conversation was anything but innocent, and that was starting to bug me.

Last night's dinner began — as usual — with Owen starting an argument. He'd done the same thing at every formal dinner since school had started, and I'd been his target more

than once. Tim said I rose to the bait far too easily, and he was probably right.

The trouble started just after the school chaplain, Greg Whitman, had said grace. Hale wasn't a religious school, but it was old-fashioned enough to have a tradition of vaguely Christian prayer before meals, as well as a weekly chapel service. Greg was a retired Protestant minister — Methodist, I think — who also taught a “Bible as literature” class.

His prayer was simple, as usual. “Thank you, Lord,” he'd said, “for the gifts you have given us, and for the fellowship we are about to enjoy. Amen.”

As Catholics, Tim and I had both made the sign of the Cross, and so had Alex, but Owen was a vehement atheist. I'd gotten used to hearing a snide comment about religion at this point, and last night Owen was true to form.

“You know, I've never understood why you keep thanking this God guy for every little thing — especially for meals like this!”

There was nothing particularly wrong with the food, it was just basic cafeteria fare. I shouldn't have said anything, but my mouth got the better of me. “Well, you know,” I'd said cheerfully, “God chastises those he loves.”

Brad and Michael, the other two students at the table, had looked up briefly in confusion. The way they chowed down, the food did not seem to be a chastisement. Tim had chuckled but continued pouring milk for the girls. Alex had said nothing, but Owen had smiled, ready for battle. Crap! I'd thought. You walked right into that one, Emma. Let's try to keep this civil.

“He chastises those he loves, does he?” Owen had said. “Another reason your whole mythology makes no sense at all. If he really loved us, he could have made life a heck of a lot easier, couldn't he?”

I'd been thinking, trying to choose my words carefully, when Alex answered instead.

"I'm curious as to what you mean by 'mythology.' If you mean 'myth' in the sense of an ancient story that explains the world, I can see how you might apply it to Christianity. But if by 'myth' you mean 'a false story,' then you're just being rude."

Let's see if a direct attack will get him, I'd thought. But Owen had been unfazed.

"You may be happy to run your life based on a bunch of fairy stories," he'd said. "But I prefer to use science as a way of understanding the world."

Tim raised his eyebrows. "In that case, you'd better study a little harder for the next Physics quiz."

Owen had taken the comment in stride. "You don't have to be a scientist to appreciate the fact that science can tell us a lot more about life than a religion that was invented by a bunch of ignorant fishermen."

Alex had thought about that for a moment. He had a way of taking people's words seriously — sometimes more seriously than the speaker intended. "You may not have to be a scientist to appreciate science. But you do have to have some basic knowledge of philosophy to understand the limits of what science can tell us. There are truths that can't be discovered in a lab."

"If your idea of truth consists of ridiculous stories about a magical, all-powerful being, you have a weird idea of truth! Frankly, I think Marx was right about religion. It's an opiate, a way of getting people to put up with whatever crap life sends them, so whoever's in power can keep it that way. I know you claim you want to be a priest, but can you seriously say you believe all that nonsense?"

I'd been surprised at that comment — I hadn't known Alex wanted to be a priest. But Alex had become almost stern at that point.

"I don't know a lot about Marx, but it seems like he was trying to turn religion into politics," he'd said. "I have to assume he was either unwilling or unable to understand what religion really is. You do the same thing when you set up a straw man, call it religion, and pretend to knock it down with science. You pretend religion is just magic — that's not what I believe in. And if I do become a priest, it will be because I know that what the Church teaches is truer than anything you'll find in a scientific experiment."

Owen had just laughed. "Don't get so worked up, Preacher boy. I didn't realize you actually believe this stuff. I just figured you were gay. Isn't that why most men become priests? So they can play with little boys?"

Alex's face had gone pale with anger, but before he could answer, Tim broke in.

"That's enough, Owen!" he'd said sternly. "I have no objection to a good debate, but I draw the line at slander." One of Tim's best friends is a priest.

The girls had been chattering with each other through the whole conversation, but they immediately got quiet. They knew something serious was happening when Daddy spoke in that tone of voice. As for Owen, he looked furious, but obedience was a well-ingrained habit at Hale — at least in public. He hadn't said anything further that night.

I was roused from my reverie by squeals of laughter from the girls — Tim was home. His favorite way to greet the girls was by tickling them and swinging them up in the air. It may be a stereotype that dads act differently with kids than moms do, but in my experience it's a stereotype based on truth. I went

out and found Tim with Maggie under one arm and Grace over his shoulder, so I dodged the wiggly girls for a quick kiss.

“How was practice?” I asked. Every teacher at Hale had to help with sports, and this fall Tim was the assistant coach for the girls’ soccer team. “No offense, but you might want to take a shower before dinner.”

He immediately put the girls down. “Oh really? Do you hear that, girls? Mommy thinks I’m stinky! I think Mommy needs a big, stinky hug!”

I tried to hold him off, but I was laughing too hard, and had to submit to a big kiss on the cheek and a rather sweaty hug. The girls loved it.

Tim let me go and grinned. “I’m sorry, it’s so warm today, I was sweating even with just a t-shirt. But I suppose we should enjoy it while it lasts. The leaves are turning, and there’s supposed to be frost again tomorrow night. Winter will be here all too soon.”

I sighed and agreed. The only thing I do not like about living in central New Hampshire is the length — and depth, so to speak — of the winters.

“Enough hugs for now, my ladies,” Tim said. “It’s time for Daddy to get unstinky. We need to dress up for dinner tonight.”

Maggie pouted. “Do we have to sit with the stoodints tonight?”

“Yes, dear, you do, but you can wear a pretty dress,” I said. Pretty dresses were usually a good distraction — Maggie and Grace lived for dressing up. Even so, Maggie was not appeased.

“I don’t like that Owen boy. He makes Mommy grumpy and he eats too much dessert.”

Tim laughed. “Don’t worry, sweetie, I’ll make sure you get plenty of dessert tonight.”

“That’s right,” I said. “And don’t forget, Alex will be there too. You like him, don’t you?”

Maggie nodded eagerly. “I want to sit next to Alex! He’s my favorite!”

“No, I want to sit next to Alex,” Grace said.

“I don’t think Alex wants to sit next to either of you — you both get too messy! Now, let’s get you girls dressed while Daddy takes a shower!”

We went to choose the pretty dresses of the day. Fortunately, even though they didn’t look a lot alike, the same styles and colors worked for them, and Grace didn’t mind wearing Maggie’s hand-me-downs. With luck, that would last a while longer.

At five, Maggie was losing her toddler chubbiness and getting much more angular. With brown eyes and straight, light brown hair, she was the more serious of the two, with a tendency to boss her little sister around. Grace had bright blue eyes, blond curls, and — most of the time — a big dimply smile.

I got them dressed and brushed their hair, then quickly put on a blouse and skirt. Unlike my daughters, I wasn’t really into pretty dresses. Generally, I was the jeans and t-shirt type — I liked comfort. When I did dress up, I aimed for neatness, and occasionally elegance, not high fashion. After two kids, I’m not fat, but my curves don’t seem to be in the places they used to be, if you know what I mean.

I glanced in a mirror to be sure my hair was still braided neatly. My hair is one thing I’m a little vain about. It’s long, down past my waist, and so thick it can take ages to dry. I love the feel of it when it’s loose, but for practical purposes, most of the time I keep it in a single braid down my back.

Tim finished his shower and got into one of his formal-dinner suits. He usually wore a sport jacket and slacks for

classes or other school events, but he liked to make an extra effort for formal dinners. Unfortunately, he only had two suits at this point, and one was the suit he wore at our wedding six years ago. It still looked presentable, but it was getting worn, so I'd been watching the sales so I could add at least one more into the rotation. Good suits are expensive, but I did like how he looked in them. They definitely worked well with his trim, runner's physique. And even though he was only about 5'8", since I was on the short side, he was still "tall, dark, and handsome" to me.

I watched him adjust his tie and run a comb through his thick, curly hair and beard. His hair is dark — even darker than mine or Maggie's — but his eyes are blue like Grace's, and they always seem to be smiling. I gave him a quick hug. "I love you!"

"I love you too," he said, kissing me on the cheek, "But we'd better get going. Duty calls!"

Lucky for us — especially in winter — it's easy to get to the school dining hall, since it's in the same building as our apartment, down on the first floor in the central part of the building. As we helped the girls down the stairs and along the hallways, I was hoping that tonight for a change, we could keep the conversation light.

## Chapter 2

So far, so good. Everyone seemed to be on their best behavior. Owen greeted us politely, and Alex jumped up to help Tim settle the girls in their booster seats. Then Grace suddenly said, “Mommy, I need to go pee-pee.”

I sighed, and Brad and Michael snickered.

Tim grinned. “Do you want me to take her?”

“No, I’ll do it.” I’ll never understand why little kids never have to go before they leave the house, but as soon as you’re out in public, you’re scrambling for a rest room. Fortunately, there was one right outside the dining hall.

We got back just as our waiter was bringing the food to the table. This job was rotated among the freshmen, although I knew a few seniors who could stand some experience serving others. Tim began filling plates and tried to start a conversation about football with Brad and Michael. I guess practice took a lot out of them, because as usual they were much more interested in eating than in talking.

As I helped Grace back into her seat, Owen said, “I’m surprised in this day and age to see a couple with a such traditional division of labor, Mrs. C. I thought couples nowadays shared the dirty jobs.” This was the kind of comment that “makes Mommy grumpy,” as Maggie would say. I should have known Owen couldn’t resist trying to push my buttons.

Brad and Michael, sensing trouble, focused on their food. Alex looked a little quizzical, but didn’t say anything. Tim just laughed.

“Don’t worry, Owen, I’ve done plenty of potty duty.” He reached over and tousled Grace’s hair, and she stopped chasing peas around her plate long enough to give her daddy a sweet three-year-old grin. “Although I’m not sure what you mean by



a traditional division of labor. My dad did his share of diapers, and that was twenty-five and more years ago.”

Owen smiled in response to Tim, but kept watching me out of the corner of his eye. “Bravo for your dad! He sounds like someone who embraced the modern approach to parenting, who wasn’t tied down by antiquated ideas about differences between mothers and fathers.”

“I don’t know about that,” Tim said. “Parents may share certain chores, but that doesn’t mean mothers and fathers are the same. Although I learned many things from my mother, my father taught me about discipline and sacrifice in a way she never could. He taught me how to be a man.”

Owen’s smile became more of a sneer. “Oh come now, Mr. Callahan, surely you’re not trying to say that men are more disciplined than women! Not in front of Mrs. C!”

Before I could respond with my own snide remark, Alex spoke up. “I think Mr. C has a point,” he said. “When I think of my own parents, Dad was always rough and tumble, encouraging me to be independent. If I skinned my knee, Dad would tell me to be brave, while Mom would run for the bandages. On the other hand, it was Mom who managed to civilize my wilder instincts.”

Owen looked annoyed. “So your experience is supposed to define relationships for the rest of us? How scientific! Although since you intend to renounce parenthood, Preacher, I don’t see why you even care.”

Uh oh. This was getting a little too close to last night’s conversation. Time for my two cents.

“Actually, Owen, a true understanding of fatherhood is critical for a priest. We don’t call them “father” for nothing.”

Alex grinned, but Owen shook his head. “Really, Mrs. C, you people have such a binary understanding of the world. Men and women, fathers and mothers, good and evil, black and

white — what arbitrary divisions! Can't you see that the real world is shade upon shade of gray?"

"Gray?" I answered. "Is that how you see the world? I don't see it that way at all. Yes, there's darkness, but it's also full of light. And the distinctions we make are what help us see the true beauty of it all."

Alex nodded. "I agree. And Owen, those differences you mentioned — they're not arbitrary, they're critical to understanding the world. How can we understand what's good if we don't reject what's evil?"

Owen just laughed. "Good, evil, whatever — none of that matters. The only thing that does matter in this world is power. A real man is ready to use his power to get what he wants without worrying about the consequences. That's what my father taught me."

"But you can't ignore the consequences," Alex said. "A man needs to be strong and tough, but he also needs to know what that strength is for: protecting the innocent, and doing what's right." He smiled ruefully. "And when we do mess up, we need to face up to our sins, and try to do better."

"What a dreary life you plan to lead, Preacher!" Owen said. "Sitting around, thinking about your sins. I'll face up to my sins all right — and make sure I commit the best ones over and over again!"

"Now you sound like a cheap talk-radio host," I said. "Some sins may seem like fun, but sooner or later, they'll come back to bite you. Never mind rules or punishments, sins are bad for us because they're not the way we're meant to live."

"I've heard that line before, and I'm not buying it," Owen said. "And I'm not going to let a bunch of priests tell me how to live. I plan to get as much fun out of life as I can. My father taught me that crime only counts if you get caught. And I don't ever plan to get caught."

I spoke without thinking. “Do you really think fun and happiness are the same thing? It sounds like an awfully selfish way to live.”

Owen just smiled. “Maybe. But it’s better than spending my life kowtowing to a couple of rug rats.”

Just then, the waiter came back with dessert. Thank God. I had the feeling we were on the verge of another nasty argument. By the time we finished passing the plates, Brad and Michael had inhaled their dinners and were finally ready to say a word or two about the upcoming football game. Owen was quiet, but Alex and Tim joined in.

Unfortunately, Owen got his revenge. Somehow, he managed to get the biggest piece of cake. Maggie would not be happy. Thank goodness formal dinner was only three times a week.

As everyone dug in to their cake, the dean of students, Bob Benedict, went up to the podium to make a few announcements. “Here comes good old Bobby,” Owen said under his breath. Tim silenced him with a sharp look.

I was surprised. It was unusual for a Hale student to be so disrespectful to a teacher — at least in public. And yeah, Bob was kind of an odd guy and a bit of a loner, but he seemed to carry his authority as dean pretty well. Of course, since that authority included discipline, maybe he and Owen had had some run-ins. I didn’t know Bob very well — he was older than Tim and me, in his late forties, at least — but he didn’t seem the type to put up with much backtalk.

Announcements done, the bell rang to end the meal, and most of the students raced off to enjoy what little free time they had before getting back to their studies. I was squatting down, trying to wipe some of the frosting off Grace’s hands. And face. And hair. I was amused to see that Owen lingered for a moment, watching with horrified fascination.

“I guess you aren’t very used to little kids,” I said, smiling.

“No. Fortunately, my mother aborted all my siblings.”

My jaw dropped — literally. How do you respond to a comment like that? I shooed the girls off toward a corner of the room where their friends were gathering and stood up, hoping they at least hadn’t understood.

“Cat got your tongue?” Owen said. “And here I thought you always had an answer for everything! But then, you’re Catholic, right? I suppose that means you think you’re ‘pro-life.’ Surely you’ve met people who are pro-choice before?”

I took a breath. I wasn’t used to such a full-on attack. “Of course I have. Just not anyone who was as gleeful about it as you seem to be. And I don’t see how you can talk about your mother like that.”

“Oh, Mother wouldn’t mind. It’s only the truth, after all. Besides, why should she be forced to have a kid when she didn’t want one? Children are so inconvenient. That’s why I’ve always supported a woman’s right to choose. And in Mother’s case, I can’t help but think she chose pretty well. I’d hate to have to share my inheritance with a bunch of other brats.”

I knew he was trying to make me lose my temper, but I couldn’t help myself. “I don’t believe you for a minute,” I snapped. “And if I did, I’d just feel sorry for you.”

He laughed. “Sorry for me? Why?”

“Because if my mother had gotten rid of all my siblings, I’d always have to wonder: How easy would it be for her to get rid of me?”

“Touché. But don’t worry. She may have high expectations, but I’ve never failed her yet.” The smug look on his face was infuriating. “You know, you’re really quite pretty when you’re angry.”

I tried to collect myself. Tim was on the other side of the room, and no one else was nearby. I didn’t want to make a

scene, but this was a bit much. “I beg your pardon? Is this how you talk to your teachers? Maybe we should go have a chat with Mr. Benedict.”

“Oh, I don’t think old Bobby would be much help. But if you’re looking for a fight, go for it. I should warn you, though — I don’t like to lose. And you have no idea what I’m capable of.” Then he turned and left.

Tim came back to the table. “Are you OK? You look upset.”

“I’ll tell you later. Let’s get the girls upstairs.”

Back at the apartment, since Tim wasn’t on duty, he got the girls ready for bed. Story time with Daddy was always a treat. His dramatic renditions of the simplest story raised giggles I could hear all the way in the kitchen. The only problem is, I could never convince him that getting them all excited is not the best way to settle them down for the night.

Still, I felt so lucky to be with a man like Tim. So many of our students have parents who are divorced, or who send their kids to boarding school because they don’t want to take the time to be parents. Tim, on the other hand, had always considered fatherhood to be an awesome responsibility — in the strict sense of the word as well as the casual sense. He was determined to be the best father he could be, not just for the girls’ sake, but to make his own father proud.

While Tim and kids were busy with story-time, I finished cleaning up the kitchen and threw in a load of laundry. Then I went in to Maggie’s room and found Tim sprawled on the bed, covered in little girls. They were shrieking “Tickle Daddy! Tickle Daddy!” while he pretended to protest.

I laughed. “Can I join the party?”

“Sure,” Tim said. “Girls, it’s time to ... tickle Mommy!”

I plopped onto the bed, and for the next five minutes, everybody got tickled thoroughly. Finally, I said, “OK, I think that’s enough. Time for bed.”

Maggie climbed onto Tim’s lap and Grace cuddled onto mine, and we started the quieter part of our bedtime routine. First, we said the Our Father and Hail Mary, more or less together. Maggie knows all the words, but Grace is a little shaky on some.

Then the girls did their “God blesses” — “God bless Mommy, Daddy, Grace, Grandma” — pretty much everyone they knew. That night, Maggie even included Alex.

Finally, Maggie said “Sing the gypsy song.” I started, and Tim’s husky tenor backed me up: “The gypsy rover came over the hill, down through the valley so shady...” By the last chorus, Grace was almost asleep. I leaned over and kissed Maggie, then took Grace to her own bed, breathing in that little-girl sweetness as I cradled her in my arms.

Once they were both asleep, Tim and I curled up on the couch for some rare quiet time of our own. I was still thinking about the conversation at dinner, and not sure what to say about Owen’s parting comments.

“Honestly, Tim, I don’t know what to think about Owen. It’s not that I mind a good debate — you of all people should know that.” Tim laughed. We’d had some rare debates in college. I hit him with a pillow and continued.

“The problem is, I don’t think Owen really wants to have a discussion, he just wants to needle us. Last night I was furious with him and what he said about Alex, although I will say Alex stood up to him way more patiently than I would have. And tonight, he was deliberately trying to annoy us — or at least me.”

Tim pulled at his beard thoughtfully. “Believe me, Emma, I understand. And I appreciate how hard it can be to keep your temper. But I think it’s up to us to keep the conversation civil.”

“We certainly can’t depend on him to do it.” I was feeling pouty.

“Try not to be so hard on him. Remember, he’s only seventeen.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you didn’t hear what he said to me after dinner.” I told him about the abortion comment, and he was quiet for a while. Tim felt as strongly as I did about abortion.

I’d been vaguely pro-choice in college. I could imagine the difficulties some women face, and I figured, who am I to judge another woman’s situation? Then I heard Maggie’s heartbeat for the first time. I was only a couple months’ pregnant, no baby bump yet, no movement inside. It had hardly seemed real until that moment. I was carrying a baby. It was amazing. Then I realized that I could legally go and stop that heartbeat, for any reason or no reason, and I never felt the same way about abortion again.

I looked at Tim. “I know a lot of people take the idea of abortion pretty lightly, but Owen was almost reveling in it. Do you think he was telling the truth? Or was he just trying to shock me?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had much contact with him, but in spite of his popularity, he’s always seemed to me like he’s unhappy. He’s always looking for attention, usually in a good way, but I wonder if maybe he needs it to help himself feel important.”

“After what he said tonight, I have to wonder about his childhood. I mean, if it’s true, why would a mother tell her child that she’d gotten rid of all his siblings?”

“True,” Tim said. “I met his parents last year, and I wasn’t impressed. His father is some kind of fancy corporate lawyer. About the only time he got off his cell phone was to make sure Owen had achieved an appropriate amount of prestige. He sounded like he wanted to be sure he was getting his money’s worth. And the mom was kind of creepy, very fashionable, very polished, but like ice, if you know what I mean. It can’t have been fun growing up with them.” Tim sighed. “At least he’s not in our dorm — you only have to deal with him at dinner.”

I harrumphed, and he gave me a little squeeze. “Try to be patient, sweetie. I know it’s hard to face an argument at every formal dinner. Owen’s a smart kid, he just doesn’t seem to have had anyone to help him direct his talents. He could probably use a few adults in his life who actually listen to him, even if we don’t agree with him.”

“I’ll try,” I said, “But it won’t be easy. I just wish his name wasn’t Plato.”

Tim laughed. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Oh come on, you know I loved reading Plato. Socrates is still one of my heroes. Every time I hear Owen’s full name, it just grates on me. He doesn’t deserve it.”

Tim was laughing so hard I had to smile. “Fine, be that way.” I gave him a kiss. “You should get to bed. I need to work a little more on my article. It’s due Thursday.”

“OK dear,” he said, yawning. “Just try not to stay up too late.”

As I mentioned before, I’m a writer. For the past year or so I’d been writing a column for the *Weekly Word*, a newspaper published by the Catholic Diocese of Concord, New Hampshire. It wasn’t a big paper — we were a pretty small diocese. And I knew it was petty, not to mention old-fashioned,



but seeing my words in real print, however limited the audience, was so much cooler than just writing a blog. Plus, they paid me. Not much, but it made me feel like a pro.

My column was called *Thoughts Along the Way*. I wrote about the everyday challenges of being Catholic, married, and raising kids. My perspective was a little different because, unlike Tim, I wasn't raised Catholic. When we got married, I agreed to raise the kids as Catholics, mainly because of the naive notion that Catholics were less vague about their beliefs than the Protestants I grew up with. I didn't convert until after Grace was born, but that's another story.

I got the idea for the articles because after I became Catholic, life got a lot more complicated. I kept running into situations where I kind of knew what the Church wanted me to do, but I wasn't really sure how to translate doctrine into everyday life. And the articles seemed to be popular, so I guess I wasn't the only one.

In my writing, I tended to go back and forth between the serious and the fluffy, and this week's definitely leaned on the fluffy side. It started off with a conversation I'd had with Grace. We were looking at a crucifix, and I asked her if she knew who that was on the cross. She said yes, it's Jesus. Anti-idolatry alarm bells from my Protestant upbringing went off in my head, so I said, "You know this isn't the real Jesus, right?"

"Of course it's not," she said, "The real Jesus is much bigger."

The trick in the article was to tell the story without getting all preachy about how Jesus is big enough for all of us, and without getting sappy about the wisdom of three-year-olds, blah blah blah. So I was trying to make it more about me and my Protestant alarm bells, and to keep it light by making fun of myself, which is usually pretty easy to do. But tonight I wasn't

making much headway. I kept tinkering around with it, but it wasn't coming out right.

I was thinking about calling it a night when I heard a knock at the door. It was 10:45, just 15 minutes until lights out. Awfully late for a social call. When I opened the door, Alex was there, looking a little worried.

“Hi Mrs. C, sorry to bother you so late. Is Mr. C here?”

“I'm sorry, Alex, he wasn't on duty tonight so he went to bed early. I think Mr. Benedict has duty tonight — is it something he can help you with?”

He flushed. “Uh, no, I don't think so. Mr. Benedict is, well, I really need Mr. C. I need some, um, advice about something, and I know I can trust him. I guess I can catch him tomorrow. Thanks anyway.”

“Is it important? I could wake him up.” I hated to do it, but Tim would want me to if there was a real problem.

Alex shook his head. “No, it can wait. Thanks, Mrs. C.”

As I shut the door, I thought about my article again. Should I try to finish it? No, that could wait for tomorrow too. Today's only Tuesday, and it's not due until Thursday.

Ah, procrastination. Where would we be without you?

## Chapter 3

Wednesday afternoon, and I was still tinkering with that article. As usual when a deadline approached, everything I was writing seemed trite or stupid. Or maybe trite AND stupid. Why was I doing this anyway? Nobody was going to read it. I should just give up.

The girls were at a friend's house so I could have some peace and quiet to concentrate, but that wasn't working either. Usually on Wednesdays the dorm was quiet, with most of the students off at sports practice or games. But today someone was playing music at top volume, so loud I could hear it all the way inside our apartment. I tried to ignore it for a while, but finally I just couldn't take it any more. How was I supposed to write with all this noise?

I saved my document — such as it was — and stormed out of the apartment and down the hallway. Outside the apartment, the noise was truly deafening. It must be coming from one of these first rooms, I thought, but I was wrong. I went farther and farther down the hall searching for the source, and getting madder and madder. I finally found it six rooms down — Alex Hughes' room. The door was ajar, so I went right in.

“Alex? What the hell?” I could barely hear myself speak. I didn't see him right away, so I went right to the desk and yanked the iPod out of the dock. The music stopped, but my ears were still ringing and I was still angry. I swung around. Where was he?

Then I saw his arm. The rest of him was hidden in the darkness of the closet. What was he doing in there? And why did he seem so much taller than usual?

I took a step closer. “Alex?” Then I realized. He was hanging from a hook just inside the closet, on the same wall as

the door. A rope around his neck, his face distorted, tongue sticking out — “No, no, no!”

I was holding him, trying to lift him, but he was a more than six inches taller than me, and the hook was too high to reach. Somehow I shifted him enough to pull the rope off the hook and he fell to the floor. I clawed the rope off his neck, threw it across the room and started doing CPR. He was still warm, he couldn't be dead, he was still warm. I screamed for help, and remembered my phone. I dug it out of my pocket and called 911, still trying to do the compressions, trying to talk without sobbing. The operator promised that help was on the way, that she'd call the school, that someone would be there soon. But it seemed like a long, long time before they came.

The EMTs had pushed me out into the hallway by the time Tim got there. The headmaster, Walter Ennis, was right behind him. Bob Benedict had come in with the EMTs and was inside Alex's room. There had been a lot of noise at first, shouts about there being no pulse, something about a defibrillator and an airway. But it was quiet now. Bob came out, pale with shock, tears running down his cheeks.

“He's gone,” he said, shaking his head, “There was nothing they could do.”

Tim held me tight and I tried to suppress my sobs, to maintain some kind of control. The headmaster took refuge in action.

“Thanks for getting here so quickly, Bob,” he said. “And you too, Emma. Nothing like this has ever happened at Hale before. We should get the students together, tell them all at once, as soon as possible, before rumors get started.”

One of the EMTs came out of the room, Bill Capparelli. I knew him as the father of one of our day students, and I'd

shaken his hand many times at Mass. He looked grim, but professionally calm.

“I’m so sorry about this, Mr. Ennis. It was just too late. Even by the time you got here, Emma,” he said, looking at me with concern, “I don’t think there was anything you could have done.”

“What’s next?” Walter said. “What do you need me to do?”

“The police will want to take a look before we move him,” Bill answered. “They’ll probably want to talk to you too, Emma. And someone will have to notify the family.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Walter said, “I’ll make sure to keep other students out of here until you’re done. And I’ll talk to the chaplain — I think it’s best if either he or I inform the family, if that’s OK.”

“I’m sure that’s fine,” said Bill.

“Bob, if you could stay here until the police are done? I’ll get everything else moving.” He looked at me. I had managed to quiet the sobs, but I was still shaking. “Tim, you go ahead and take Emma back to your apartment. Bob will let the police know where to find you.”

“Thanks, Walter,” Tim said quietly. “Just — just let me know when you need me.”

There’s a reason they call resident faculty “dorm parents.” Not being on the faculty, I wasn’t very close to most of the students, but for Tim, they were like his own kids, especially the ones who lived on our hallway. Even when he wasn’t officially on dorm duty, he always made a point to check in with every boy, every day, to get a feel for how they were doing. Were they healthy? Sick? Homesick? Stressed out? That kind of care was part of what made Tim a great teacher.

I couldn’t imagine what Tim must be feeling. I had just been getting to know Alex, but Tim had known him well. Even

so, he held back his own feelings as he helped me back to the apartment.

We sat down gingerly on the couch, Tim's arm still around me. I felt like something — the world, the couch, I don't know, something — would fall to pieces if I wasn't careful. Tim gave me a squeeze and took my hand in his.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" His voice was quiet, amazingly calm. It helped me focus, to fight off the urge to scream.

I gripped his hand and huddled under that strong, protecting arm. Out in the hall, there were noises, probably the police arriving. I took a breath, tried to make sense.

"It — his music was loud. I went down to yell at him, and there he was. I tried, I really tried, Tim..." The tears came again, and we just sat there for a while. There wasn't really much more I could say.

Twenty or thirty minutes later, there was a knock on the door. Tim got up to answer it, and came back with Mike Silva, the chief of police. In a little town like Centerville, this kind of event was a pretty big deal. Besides, there weren't that many people on the force who had experience with major crimes.

The chief was an older man, in his forties or fifties, with sad brown eyes and dark hair well seasoned with gray — a former Boston policeman, if I remembered correctly. I'd seen him before, but never talked to him.

"They tell me you found him, Mrs. Callahan," he said gently, pulling up a chair by the couch. "Such a tragedy! I thought I'd get away from this sort of thing when I left the big city, but I guess wherever there are people, there's the potential for tragedy. Can you tell me what happened?" He took a notebook and pen from his jacket pocket.

Tim sat down again next to me, and I took his hand again gratefully. I was feeling a little less shaky, but it was good to have something firm to hang on to.

“I was here in the apartment,” I said, “working on some writing, when I realized someone was playing music really loud. They’re usually pretty good about keeping the volume down, but this was loud enough that it started to bug me, you know? I tried to ignore it, but it was bothering me more and more. It was hard to concentrate. So I went out to get him to turn it down.”

“How long was it from the time you first noticed the music until you went out to complain?” the chief asked.

“At least fifteen or twenty minutes.”

“Did you know where it was coming from?”

“No, it was so loud I thought it would be in one of the rooms close by. I was surprised when I had to go all the way down the hall.”

“Hughes’ room is the sixth door on the right when you’re coming from this apartment, correct?” Silva said. “How did you know it was that room? Was the door open or closed?”

“The door was open just a few inches, so I went right in. I didn’t see him at first — I just looked quickly at the desk and the bed. I saw the iPod on the desk, so I pulled it out of the dock and stopped the noise. When...when I turned around from the desk, that’s when I saw him.”

“Before you continue, Mrs. Callahan, can you tell me, do you often go into students’ rooms? Even if they’re not there?”

Tim stiffened. “I can assure you, Chief Silva, students are well aware that faculty can enter, and even search, their rooms at any time. They have no expectation of privacy.”

“That may be true,” said the chief, “But your wife isn’t faculty, is she?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, “Because I almost never go into a student’s room unless I’m invited. Even today, if the door had been shut, I would have knocked, and then called the office to get them to send someone up to do something about the music.”

“Thank you,” the chief said, “And believe me, I’m not trying to accuse you of anything. But in these cases, well, it’s better for the school if proper procedures have been followed. Can you tell me what you saw when you looked around the room? Not just the boy, but anything else you might have noticed.”

I thought for a bit. “I would say, it was a little messy, but not super messy. The bed had been made, but then messed up, he’d probably been sitting on it. There were some books and papers on the desk, next to the laptop, not stacked neatly, just in a big pile. And I think there were a couple more books on the bed, as well as a robe or sweater or something. The closet door was open, but it blocked the view into the closet. I think that’s why I didn’t see him at first.”

“I know it’s hard, but can you describe how he looked when you first saw him?”

It **was** hard. I took a deep breath. “There was a hook, like something you’d hang clothes on, inside the closet, to the left of the door, on the wall between the closet and the room. He was hanging from that, with the rope around his neck. He’s pretty tall, his feet were barely above the floor, and his face —” I gulped down a sob, “His face was all dark, his tongue sticking out. I, I grabbed him, tried to lift him, but he was so heavy. I thought if I could get the pressure off his neck, maybe...Anyway, I must have lifted him a little because the rope came off the hook, and he fell on the floor. He wasn’t breathing, and I couldn’t feel a heartbeat, so I started CPR. I had my phone in my pocket, so I called 911.”



“Thank you, Mrs. Callahan,” the chief said. “Did you notice anything else? Anything he might have used to stand on? A chair or stool?”

“No, but there were some suitcases, I remember kicking them when I was trying to get him down.”

“Do you know how long it was between when you saw him and when you started CPR?”

“Not long, not more than a minute. And I tried to keep doing it, even when I was calling 911. He was still warm! If I’d gotten there sooner...”

The chief leaned over and patted my knee in a fatherly way, his eyes even sadder than before. “It wasn’t your fault, Mrs. Callahan. You did your best.”

“I just don’t understand it,” I said. “Why would he do this? Just yesterday, he was joking with my daughters, and he seemed so happy. I can’t believe he would do this.”

“It’s true,” Tim said, “I would never have picked Alex as someone likely to kill himself. He didn’t seem the type.”

“How well did you know him, Mr. Callahan?” said the chief.

“Pretty much as well as I know any of the students,” Tim answered. “This is our fourth year here. Alex was in my sophomore geometry class our second year, and last year he was in my algebra II class, so I knew him academically. This was the first year he was in our dorm — I generally get to know the dorm boys a little better. Alex never confided in me about personal issues, but like I said, from what I knew of him, he didn’t seem the type to do something like this.”

“These things don’t always go according to type,” the chief said, putting away his notebook and standing up. “Right now, it seems pretty clear what happened. The experts will be able to tell us for sure within a week or two.”

We shook hands with the chief and Tim walked him to the door.

The rest of the day went by in a blur. Tim wanted to stay with me, but I knew they'd need him to help deal with the student reaction, so I told him to go. The girls were still playing with friends at another faculty apartment, so Tim walked me over there as soon as the police had all gone. Then he went off to lend a hand.

Jack and Caroline Bruno were our two best friends among the faculty, and they happened to have two little girls, ages six and four, who got along really well with Maggie and Grace. Caroline and I often arranged play dates to give each other a little kid-free time.

When I got there, Caroline gave me a big hug — she'd heard the news already. Then she got me some tea, and we sat in the kitchen, whispering so the kids wouldn't hear. I was not ready to think about how to tell the girls about this.

"It's so sad," Caroline said. "Especially since, well, it would be sad no matter who this happened to, but Alex was always such a great kid."

Jack and Caroline had been at Hale longer than we had, and they probably knew Alex better than I did, so I didn't want to quibble with her. But suicide is not something that just happens to you. I still couldn't reconcile it with the boy I had just started to get to know.

In faculty-speak, a "great kid" could just be someone who doesn't cause trouble. I felt like Alex was more than that. In the short time I'd known him, I sensed some of the same integrity and trustworthiness that had drawn me to Tim, back when we were in college.

"I still can't believe he could have done such a thing," I said.

“Especially since he always used to talk about becoming a priest,” Caroline said. “I mean, I’m not Catholic, but the Church doesn’t approve of suicide, does it?”

“No, not at all. And from our dinner conversations, I’d thought Alex was very serious about his faith. That’s what makes it even more puzzling. Something awful must have happened, to make him take such a drastic step.”

We were both quiet for a moment, then something odd occurred to me.

“Caroline, you said Alex used to talk about becoming a priest. I know Owen has been teasing him about that at dinner, so I guess it wasn’t a secret. Did he talk about it a lot?”

“Oh yeah, he’s talked about that since freshman year. Some of the other boys used to tease him, but Jack thought he was a good influence. I mean, he’d do things like challenge guys who started in with locker-room talk, or defend a kid who was being bullied. And he was always active with community projects.”

“I’m glad to know he did more than just talk about his faith!” I said. “But it’s funny — yesterday he told me he was thinking about having kids. I wonder if he changed his mind.”

“Do you think giving up on being a priest would make him, well, do this?” Caroline asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “All I know is, yesterday he seemed perfectly cheerful. Except...” I suddenly remembered that late-night visit.

“Except what?”

“I’m not sure what was up, but last night Alex stopped by, looking for Tim. He seemed upset. Tim had gone to bed, so Alex was going to talk to him this morning, but I forgot to ask Tim what it was all about.”

Caroline’s eyes widened with excitement. “Do you think that could have been the reason?”

I bit my lip. Could that have been the reason? If so, was Alex's death at least partly my fault? "I don't know. Whatever it was, he didn't seem to be all that upset. If he had been, I would have woken up Tim right away."

Caroline patted my hand. "I'm sure you would have, honey. Don't beat yourself up about it. It wasn't anyone's fault."

Cold comfort. The fact remained, Alex had killed himself. And if we could have stopped him, then we had to share the blame.

The afternoon dragged on. Neither Caroline or I could face the dining hall, so we gave the kids some dinner at her place, and I took the girls home after that. Baths and bedtime were a good distraction for a while, then I settled on the couch with a glass of wine to wait for Tim.

He finally got in around eleven, looking exhausted. I poured another glass and handed it to him. "Are you OK?"

"No," he said, and I could see the tears in his eyes. "I've been trying to be calm, to help the kids, but it's been hard." He took a long swallow of wine.

"Walter told them?"

"Yes. He got everyone who was around the campus into the chapel, then as kids came back from practice or games he funneled them there too and made the announcement before dinner. There were only thirty or forty kids at away games, so he met the buses when they got back and talked to them then."

"What was the reaction?"

"A lot of tears, from the girls especially, but from a lot of the boys too. Alex wasn't just well liked, he was respected, you know? No matter what the situation, you could really count on him to set a good example. ..." He started to cry. I reached out to hug him, but he suddenly put his wine glass on the coffee table with a bang and began to pace back and forth.

“I don’t know if I can do this, Emma. How am I supposed to help kids deal with this, when I don’t know how to handle it myself?”

He stopped pacing, trying to get a grip on his frustration. “I’m not sure what was worse, kids crying, or the jerks who have to try to make a joke out of everything.” He saw my look, and said, “Oh yeah, there were a few of those. I’m hoping it was just their awkward way of trying to deal with their emotions, but it didn’t help.”

He sat down on the couch, leaned back and rubbed his bleary eyes. “I just wish I had some answers for them.”

I put my arms around him and held him close, trying to give back some of that strength he’d given me earlier. “So we still don’t know why?”

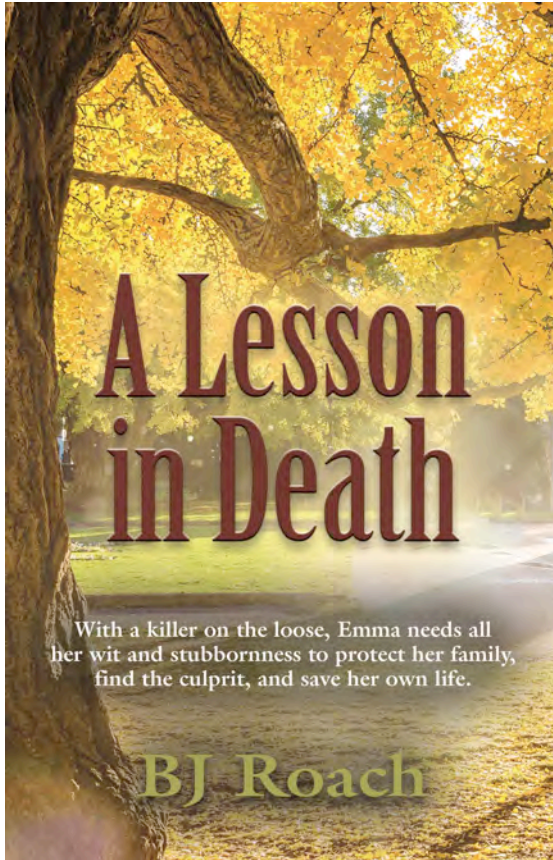
“No. If the police found a note, they haven’t told us. They may be waiting to tell the family.”

I hesitated, but I had to ask. “Did you talk to Alex this morning? Remember, I said he stopped by last night?”

He shook his head. “I was planning to catch him at breakfast, but there was a minor scuffle between some freshmen and I had to help haul them to the Dean’s office.” He looked at me sharply. “You don’t think that was the reason?”

“No, of course not. He didn’t seem all that upset. Not enough to...But then, there doesn’t seem to be any other reason, either. It just doesn’t make sense.” I started to cry again as we held each other close.

Dear God, I prayed, please help us understand. Tim started crying again too. We cried a lot that night. There didn’t seem to be much else we could do.



*When Emma finds a dead student at the boarding school where her husband teaches, she's determined to find out what happened. Will natural stubbornness and a Great Books education be enough to help her find the killer — before he finds her?*

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