

## Fiction by Erin McGraw

### *Appearance of Scandal*

After the screaming and the poisonous accusations, after the broken vase and rib, after the gonorrhoea, waking up to find Anthony gone was not the hardest thing. It was not the hardest thing to sleep on the fluffy clown rug between the girls' beds, or to come to school to pick up Stephanie the day a rash bloomed across her chest. It was not even so hard to forward Anthony's mail and to review the bar association's list of divorce lawyers, so many of whom Anthony had gone to law school with, and mocked.

The hardest thing was sitting in church, where the scalding sense of failure shot from Beth's hairline to the soles of her feet. Surrounded by intact families with husbands who looked proud of their wives – Anthony had not looked proud, ever – Beth read the ads for funeral homes and CPAs on the back of the bulletin, leafed through the hymnal, distracted herself in every way she

could think of until the hour was over and she could race to the parking lot, always one of the first to gun it out.

"You don't know how hard it is," she said to Father Marino. "If it weren't for the kids, I wouldn't come back here."

"Then thank goodness for the kids," he said.

The easiest thing after Anthony left was Beth's talks with Father Marino. Every week he made room for her in a schedule filled with Social Justice Committee meetings and intramural soccer and the daily hospital visits – needs more legitimate than her small loneliness and sorrow. Every week he opened his office door and produced his cracked-tooth grin, and she saw the sort of boy he must have been, round headed and cocky, sure of the world's affection.

He had long ago captured the affections of everybody at Holy Name. After cranky Father Mestin had retired and nervous Father Torbeiner had been whisked away with so little explanation – people still murmured about him – parishioners recognized their good fortune in Father Marino. He had a friendly habit of snapping off his Roman collar in mid-conversation. "Enough of this. Let's talk." People confided in him – guilty teenagers and angry mothers and the whole Men's Club, which took

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Father Marino on a trout-fishing trip every June from which they returned sunburned, hung over, and sheepishly low on trout. Beth wondered whom Father Marino confided in, but she recognized her curiosity as the question of a freshly divorced woman half in love with her priest, and kept it to herself.

Instead, she told him about her job at the Women's Services office on the weedy outskirts of town. Now she was working as a receptionist and sometime counselor, but she was planning to become a paralegal and, after that, an attorney. "That would kill Anthony," Father Marino said, and she said, "My point exactly."

Anthony had asked her how she, a Catholic, could work in such a place, a question she thought rich, considering that he had been the one with the girlfriend. "The women who go there need help," she said shortly. She wasn't about to give him details on the sullen, exhausted mothers who edged through the office door needing health care, legal advice, babysitters. Sometimes they needed abortions, and Beth counseled them about facilities, a fact she'd confessed to Father Marino and that he told her didn't need to be confessed. More than anything, they worried about their children, and Beth told them with real compassion, "Children are the fear that steals your heart. I know just what you mean."

When she said this her eyes slid to the desk photo of her two daughters, laughing and proud on their new Rollerblades. They were older now, and laughed less. The divorce had hurt them. Ten-year-old Alison threw tantrums like a first grader, and seven-year-old Stephanie refused to read her colorful schoolbooks. Beth told Father Marino about this, too. "Ali screams until she's blue. Anthony would never have stood for it."

"No kidding. He left." He leaned forward, resting his bony elbows on his thighs. Despite his apple-round face, he had a lean frame, freckled skin stretched over long bones. "Don't you feel like screaming?"

"No more than ten times a day. But for the last six months Anthony was home, I wanted to scream all day long, so I should be grateful."

Father Marino shook his head. "You don't ask for enough."

"I ask for plenty," she said. "I just don't get."

"We'll have to see about that," he said.

Beth understood that she should not take Father Marino's vague promises too seriously. Everybody knew that he liked to make promises. He especially liked to make them on the telephone, at night, when people heard the sound of ice cubes rattling in a glass not far from the phone.

There weren't rumors, exactly, and there had been no incident – unlike with Father Toole at St. Agnes who had been pulled over for DUI and was abusive to the officer, when the whole parish council had had to swing its weight to keep the story out of the paper. Still, so many people had run into Father Marino at the Liquor Barn. At so many parties he had gotten tipsy. Holy Name parishioners were accustomed to a priest who took a drink – if anything, they liked the little touch of worldliness – but sometimes when they called the rectory late, they heard a wildness in Father Marino's voice – too much laughter, too-quick sympathy. He spoke very knowledgeably about wine.

Beth's own mother had drunk too much, and had died of it. Beth knew the signs. Still, she didn't blame Father Marino. Lately, when the girls were at Anthony's condo, Beth had been learn-

ing about the stillness of an empty house, how a person could wade through loneliness as if through mud. One night she'd sat in front of the blank TV until one in the morning, unwilling to turn it on because eventually she'd have to turn it off again and hear the silence sweep back down. Who could be surprised if Father Marino took a snort too much now and then?

Nevertheless, when the Parish Life Committee started planning Father's birthday party, Beth voted with those who said the only liquor should be jug wine, and not too much of that. Already teens from the youth group were writing a skit, and the Men's Club had planned a roast. It would be the sort of evening that a pastor should enjoy, and Beth meant to make sure Father Marino enjoyed it. "Sorry," she said to Frank Burding, who wanted to bring his special punch. "This is family entertainment."

"What are you, the den mother?"

"That would make you a Boy Scout?" She meant it as a joke. Father Marino would have laughed.

Maybe Frank had a party for Father before the party, or maybe Father had a little party for himself. But as soon as he entered the parish hall, to applause, Beth could see how his eyes wandered and slid. "Happy birthday to me," he said at the door.

"How old are you, Father?" said Amy Burding.

"A gentleman never tells."

"You're not a gentleman. You're a priest."

"And that is where my troubles began."

Amy didn't so much laugh as cough, and Father Marino, companionable, did too. Beth strolled over to the refreshments table. It pained her to watch her pastor pretend to be sober.

The party was moving now. All over the hall people were laughing, and a pile of gifts sat near the door. Beth knew what some of them were – two pounds of smoked trout from the Men's Club, a soft wool cardigan from the Altar Society. From Beth, a card that said only "Happy birthday." She was confident that he would be able to read into it her larger feelings – if not tonight, then tomorrow. For now, she busied herself with refreshments, cutting cake and making sure everyone had a napkin. She spotted Father approaching her but didn't meet his gleaming eyes until he said, "Can a fella get a Sprite around here?"

"I think we can manage that."

He hoisted the can she handed him. "Alcohol zero percent. Do you approve of me?"

Beth glanced up, but no one was standing quite close enough to hear. "For now."

"What a whip cracker you are."

"My ex-husband said the same thing."

"He was a jerk. Forgive me, but I always thought so."

"I forgive you." She ambled toward the end of the table, away from the knot of people beside the wine. If she had been more concerned for his reputation, or her own, she would have led him into the group. Already she could see the flickering glances, parishioners noting how Father Marino spoke so closely to the divorcée.

"You forgive. That's a great virtue."

"I forgive *you*. Anybody else is on a wait-and-see basis."

"I'll bet it's a long line. The only thing people should want is to be forgiven by you. Well, not the only thing." His face was blazing, light pouring out of the skin, and Beth knew exactly how she and the priest looked at that moment.

“Your appearance of scandal is going off the chart,” she said.

“‘Appearance.’ I get the name without the game.” In answer to her look, he added, “From *Clever Phrases For All Occasions*. It’s a cheat book for priests, to make us look like we’ve got the common touch.”

“As if you needed it. Everybody loves you.”

“Beth doesn’t love me.”

She felt the blush spreading across her face and throat, ignited by dismay and drumming, triumphant joy. “Of course I love you,” she murmured. “You know that.”

“And what does your love lead you to do? Pour me a Sprite?”

“Hush.”

He lowered his voice, which was almost worse; Beth had to lean close to hear him. “I wasn’t going to come tonight. I could have called somebody and said that I had the flu or there was a crisis at the hospital. My feet fell off. But I knew you would be here. Knowing I would see you here I got up and put on my clothes. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Would you shut *up*?”

“People have to make choices in their lives. Anthony made one when he left you. He found a door in his life and opened it.”

“Thanks for the reminder.”

“But he opened a door in my life, too. All I have to do is walk through. Should I do that, Beth?”

“You should open your presents, go home and sleep.” She was proud of the evenness of her voice over a heart that was clanging like a fire alarm. “You need to get a grip.”

“I’m trying.” He brushed his hand across his glistening eyes. “I’m trying to hold on. But it’s up to you now, not me. Will you hold on to me, too?”

At least those were the words Beth thought she heard. Noise banged through the high-ceilinged, uncarpeted room, matching the din inside her skull. She wanted to ask Father Marino to repeat himself, but it seemed crass to ask a man to declare himself twice. Anthony had hardly done it once.

“Yes,” she said.

“Excuse me, you two,” said Amy Burding, materializing beside Beth. “Can I steal Father away? The kids are ready to start their skit.”

“Of course,” he said. “I’ve been looking forward to it. I’ve been looking forward to everything tonight.”

“We hope so, Father,” Amy said, steering him away. “We wanted to give you exactly what you wanted.” Not a glance back at Beth. Not one.

Following that night, when she did not sleep, she woke the girls with the promise of chocolate French toast, usually only a special-event breakfast. She saw them onto the bus from the front porch, then called the Women’s Services office and told them she had the flu. Waiting for the phone to ring, she took apart and scrubbed the stove hood. She removed the china from the hutch and washed it, piece by piece.

By noon she was polishing the chandelier. The house’s silence turned her joyful anticipation into unease and then, as the afternoon lengthened, into panic. Beth could well imagine the guilt Father Marino might be experiencing, the jolting fear – or, worse, the uneasy memory. He mustn’t shut her away from him. Not now of all times. At 2:10, before the girls came home, she reached for the phone.

She was prepared for a diminished voice, but he was full of sass. “Thanks for the card. I put it on the mantel, to remind me that I’m getting decrepit.”

“Did you enjoy your party?”

“I love parties. But I don’t think the kids showed me enough respect. At the next Youth Fellowship we’re going to have a sensitivity session on the word ‘geezer.’”

“That wasn’t the part of the evening I paid most attention to.”

“Did I miss something?”

“You. Asked me to go away with you.”

Though he laughed, the stiffness in his voice was instant. “Every single guy in this parish should want to go away with you.”

“You said opportunities make new doors in our lives. All we have to do is walk through.”

“Maybe Frank Burding? He was feeling his oats.”

“You said you were trying to hold on.” She couldn’t get her mouth to stop. “You asked me to hold onto you.”

“Listen, Beth. Everyone understands how difficult things have been for you.”

The hand holding the telephone against Beth’s ear began to shake, and her brain was flooded with bright heat. “Do you have any idea what you have done?” she said.

“I haven’t done anything,” he said.

“You’re not listening to me.”

After she hung up, Beth sat at the kitchen table for a very long time. She smiled when Ali and Stephanie clattered in. Sensing an advantage, they asked if they could play now and do homework later, and she nodded.

Every inch of her – skin, organs – ached, and her lungs seemed to have narrowed to the circumference of a thread. What she could hardly tolerate was the unfairness.

As a boy, Father Marino – Joseph, the man’s name was Joseph – had once won a competition for flying a toy airplane further than any of the other boys. His prize was a movie pass, which he used to see *Carnal Knowledge*. The movie was for-

bidden to every child he knew, but the theater, when he entered, was filled with furtive ten-year-olds. As a teenager, he had driven a violent green Buick and wore his hair down to his shoulders. He liked peanut butter and honey sandwiches, and linguini *con vongole*. All this Father Marino had told her, and every detail she had cherished.

In the end, he had given Beth nothing. She’d been an imbecile to believe otherwise.

For the next two weeks she answered the telephone at Women’s Services with tight courtesy, hearing but not able to amend the sharpness in her manner. The clients who came in asked to talk to other counselors.

Her daughters shied away from her, though she spent extra time with them, listening to Stephanie’s endless stories and sitting up with Alison to watch the girl’s favorite TV show. The handsome doctor saved one life after another, in the operating room and beside a hospital bed and at the scene of a car wreck, where thrilling, photogenic mouth-to-mouth resuscitation was called for. When Alison asked if Beth would volunteer for resuscitation from the doctor, the first question the girl had volunteered in weeks, Beth nodded curtly, and Alison didn’t ask anymore.

Had she been able to talk to Father Marino as she used to, Beth could have told him that she was trying to listen to her daughters, to walk a narrow bridge of love and communication through this dark time. She and her priest could have talked about darkness, which always implied, somewhere, the presence of light.

When the girls got home from school they slung their backpacks into the living room and raced back outside to join the other children, sometimes not both-

ering to call out a greeting to her. Standing in the doorway, Beth grew angry, then felt her heart soften painfully at the sound of their squealing laughter, blocks away. Soon, she thought, picking up Alison's backpack, she would have to remind them to take sweaters, as the October afternoons faded. Soon. Not yet.

She shivered. From a distance, she heard a high, long shriek – a child, screaming to be screaming, making noise because she could. Beth listened to the keening for a few moments in furious sympathy. Then she was through the living room, out of her house, running as fast as she could, but not fast enough.

On a neighbor's lawn Alison sprawled under a drooping fir, her neck propped painfully on a root. There was no blood. Her knees jerked, out of rhythm with her screams, and above her the tree stretched like a column, thirty feet at least. No telling how far she had fallen.

"Hush, sweetheart. Hush, baby girl. I'm right here. You're all right." Beth touched her daughter's shoulder while her brain, frosty with terror, ran down the table of contents from the first-aid manual she'd memorized for work: shock, head trauma, neck injury. She looked around for Stephanie, but the littler girl was not in sight – either hiding from her mother or lying at the bottom of her own tree.

"Listen, Ali. Stop crying, baby. I'm going back to the house. I'm going to make a phone call. I'll be right back. Don't cry, angel. You'll see."

A brave girl, Anthony's favorite, Alison tried to stop screaming, though her body shuddered with every racking breath. Smudged across the back of one dirty hand were the remains of a face she had drawn at school, its smile showing a single tooth. Beth bent to kiss that hand. Then she stumbled to the neighbor's house and planned the next hours: first

the ambulance, then the emergency room. Then Anthony. Already, underneath her fear, she felt the stirring of guilt. She understood that it would only grow, a fact that in her terrified eyes seemed natural and right.

Alison had fallen head first, her arms outstretched before her. Both her wrists were snapped, but her back was untouched; she was able to walk out of the emergency room, tapping her casts together. Later, when she could, Beth planned to make jokes about Superman. First she had to stop shaking.

In the emergency room and in X-ray, doctors and technicians and three nurses told Beth how lucky Alison had been. "You should have a party," said the radiology attendant, her Hispanic accent softening her vowels. "You should celebrate." Beth thanked her and turned away. The woman meant well.

Only Anthony understood. "I keep imagining her dropping out of that tree. When I think of what could have happened –" he said.

"Stop," she said. "Save yourself the anguish."

In the pause she could imagine his crooked smile. "I thought you wanted me to have anguish."

"I do. But not about this." She made her own flickering, rueful smile. She had read the articles by women who claimed their ex-husbands had become their best friends. Beth believed those women were deluded, but nevertheless, she saw how intimacy between two people was never quite erased.

"I miss," he said, and cleared his throat. "I miss the girls. I think it's time for us to talk about custody."

"We did that already."

"Circumstances have changed."

"Don't be a jackass, Anthony. It was an accident."

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

Through the sudden roaring in her ears, Beth tried to scrutinize Anthony’s voice, but, lawyer trained, it revealed nothing. He routinely worked fourteen hours a day. He couldn’t think of changing the girls’ custody unless he was getting married again.

He said, “It’s time to move on.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” The words were out before she could reel them back, and his laugh was honestly mirthful. “It’s a great big world, Beth,” he said. “Get out a little.”

Predictably, Alison was a handful that night. Holding up her casts, she refused to attempt even the tasks she could manage, bullying Beth into feeding her and brushing her teeth. Stephanie took her sister’s cue and tugged at her mother, whining about television and school and a diorama for her reading class until Beth’s remaining speck of patience exploded. By nine o’clock both of the girls were in bed, tucked in so hard they couldn’t move. The house was filled with their raging resentment, the emotion that would make their lives easier when their father announced his news. What was the name of the girls’ step-mother-to-be? Beth had read that men were drawn to sibilant names – Susan, Cheryl. She fixed herself a glass of water with a splash of Dewar’s from a bottle Anthony had left. When the doorbell rang at nine-thirty, she was remembering with irritation that two of Anthony’s secretaries had been named Sandra.

Father Marino said, “I came as soon as I heard. You should have called me when you got to the hospital.”

“She was in good hands,” Beth said, barely able to hear herself over the slamming of her heart. “Come in.” She went to the kitchen and brought him a Sprite, which he smiled at and set aside. Almost

certainly he had been drinking. He wouldn’t be here otherwise.

“People are saying it was a miracle that she fell just right,” he said.

“She was lucky,” Beth said.

“Same thing.” Father Marino leaned toward her. “How are *you*?”

To her horror, she felt her face crumple and tears race to her eyes. “Terrible,” she whispered.

“It’s too hard,” he said. “No one should have to go through what you’ve been through. You of all people.”

“Please stop.”

“I should, I know,” Father Marino said. “I just want to talk to you. Every day I want to pick up the phone. ‘Did you see that sunset? Did you see that double play? Did you see that god-awful hat Louise Skipper wore to Mass?’ The second I saw it I thought about how you would laugh. Everything I look at brings me back to you.”

“And here I am,” Beth said. “The priest’s friend. Poor thing, she doesn’t get out much.”

“What can we do?” he said. “We have no choices left.”

His voice lapped happily at its softness, like a pet cat given its cup of cream. Angrily, she got up and poured him a scotch. He looked at her hand, not her face, when she gave it to him. “I need you,” he said.

“This is hardly the time.”

“I need you to talk to someone. A woman I know,” he said, and for a moment she was convinced that her heart stopped beating. She had not realized that another disappointment could be so stunning.

He said, “You’re the only person I trust. I told her to talk to you at Women’s Services, but you won’t be there now that Alison’s home.”

“Is this woman you know pregnant?”

“Yes.” The hand that raised his glass

to his mouth was unsteady, and scotch sloshed onto his chin.

“Oh, Joseph,” she said, and watched him flinch. “What have you done?” Something, maybe the half-finger of Dewar’s, was affecting her ability to focus. Father Marino’s face was a watery blur, but the room around him – the green chair, the knife-pleat curtains, the Sunday newspaper that Stephanie had cut into pieces the size of fingernail clippings – was sharp and hard as glass.

“The thing that always drew me to you was your kindness,” he was saying. “Even when things were at their worst, you had the impulse for giving and helping. I could turn to you.”

She cleared her rippling voice. “Anthony had two names for me: Cupcake and Frau Gestapo. You’d be surprised how early he moved from one to the other.”

He looked around at the mostly tidy room. “You’ve turned my life inside out. You never meant to, I know.”

“For Pete’s sake, Joseph,” she said. “What do you think I am?”

Because he was looking at the photos of the girls on the wall, she couldn’t see his face. “People call me Father.”

When he turned back nothing had changed – not his watery eyes, or his trembling, swollen mouth. She could see that he was filled with regret and she wished, as she had wished so many times, that she could keep her heart from opening to him like a mollusk. She said, “Your friend might have been pregnant before. I know you don’t want to think about it, but that’s the pattern with certain women.” Seeing Father Marino’s wrecked expression, Beth couldn’t keep her voice from softening. She hoped he did not take encouragement from that. “What’s her name?”

“Cecily. Cessy.” He smiled. “I liked playing with her name. Cessation. C-Span.”

*Cesspool*, Beth thought, but said instead, “Adoption services need babies.”

“Not this one,” he whispered, and then, “Do you want me to pay you for counseling her?”

In the moment before the insult took hold, her uncooperative brain pondered all she was owed. Father Marino could not pay those debts. “Anthony’s got a girlfriend,” she said. “Talk to him. Tell him that she’s endangering his position in the church. Tell him she’s got the clap. Tell him you’ll withhold communion.”

“I don’t think anybody’s been able to do that since the 1500s.”

“It’s less than you’re asking of me.”

The speech hung formally in the air between them. Beth slipped from the fire of her anger into wooly embarrassment, which would probably mean that she would talk to Cessy and draw her a map to the nearest clinic, fifty miles away. Father Marino said slowly, “When did this happen to you? Was it me?” His face looked strangely excited, which Beth thought was the wrong reaction. She was about to tell him so, but Alison cried out, the hoarse squawk that signaled a nightmare. “Please go home now,” she said.

“I can go in and talk to her.”

Too easily, Beth could imagine her daughter’s terror if she woke to the sight of her priest bending over the bed. “It’s time to go home.”

“You’ll help me?”

“I have to talk about adoption. It’s the law.”

“That’s not what she needs to know.”

“I’m sure you’re right. I’m sorry, Father. My daughter needs me.” She steered him toward the door, then hurried to her child, who was crying but not feverish. Beth smoothed back Alison’s clumped hair and said, “Father Marino was here. He wants you to get better right away.”

“Is he still here?” Alison said.



“I told him to go home.”

“I guess I should feel special that Father came to see me. Even if I didn’t see him.”

“You don’t need to see him,” Beth said. “I can tell you everything you missed.”

After twelve years, Father Marino mostly remembered Beth in nights of brilliant, corrosive dreams, from which he woke up sizzling. On those nights he rolled out of bed and counted off push-ups until his arms gave out, then drank glass after glass of water. He’d been taught the techniques in rehab, and they helped.

Beth had left the parish not long after Alison’s wrists healed, and the bishop had offered Father Marino a sort of vacation – six months at a facility in Mexico, drinking iced tea under swags of purple bougainvillea where green hummingbirds darted as if stitching the air. The other priests talked ceaselessly about margaritas and piña coladas. “Even a beer,” muttered Father Spurling, Thad. “Wouldn’t you sell your own mother?”

“Don’t think about it,” said Father Marino.

“If you start talking to me about detachment, I’ll take that slice of lemon and shove it up your nose.”

Father Marino felt sorry for the other man, who one night at dinner had clenched his water glass so hard he snapped its stem. “I’m lucky, that’s all. You wouldn’t believe the things I can not think about.”

During the sharing sessions, he acknowledged his misdeeds: Cessy; the blurry nights; the inappropriate jokes; and Beth, a misdeed he didn’t know how to name. He wished he had more. Other priests described their police records and suspended driver’s licenses. Thad Spurling had walked out of a depart-

ment store carrying three silk shirts still on their hangers – one, he recalled wistfully, had been yellow. Of all the men there, only Father Marino had never been transferred to another parish.

He had broken no marriage, created no crisis, not even dented a fender. His whole life nothing had happened, just as nothing was happening now. Like a boy having a tantrum in an empty room, he had struck furiously at the air around him, and hadn’t been able to scrape a knuckle. He should have been grateful, but a peevish sense of loss spread through him. At the end of a sharing session, the priests were encouraged to shake hands or embrace, but Father Marino walked stiffly out, stiffening further when he saw Father Spurling’s approving face.

He came home after his six months, and a noisy crowd waited for him at the rectory with balloons and cake and sweet punch. Frank Burding offered him a soft drink. This was how it would be from now on, Father Marino realized with a spark of fury, but then the spark winked out, and that was all.

Gradually he understood that Anthony had bankrolled the holiday. Anthony never stopped attending Mass at Holy Name, and he donated handsomely to the Bishop’s Annual Appeal. His law firm bought advertising space on the church’s weekly bulletin. He passed two years in admirable parish service before making a private appointment with Father Marino, and then he started talking as soon as he sat down. He was ready to marry again. He was ready to make a lifetime commitment, in his own eyes and the eyes of the Church. But first he needed to have his marriage to Beth – never a real marriage, Anthony said – annulled. “I can’t do anything about that,” Father Marino said. “Do you think I have pull? I don’t.”

“I know,” Anthony said. “I went to the chancery office and read up on procedure. But you can speak for me.”

“They want statements from people who knew both parties. Who knew the marriage well.”

“Beth talked to you enough,” Anthony said. He did not bother to smile, so Father Marino didn’t either.

After Anthony left, Father Marino read through the questionnaire Anthony had left – six pages – with mounting dismay. Why had Anthony and Beth decided to marry? it asked. What occurred on their wedding night? Did Father Marino have reason to believe that the marriage had been entered into without proper understanding? He couldn’t begin to answer the questions, although he would answer them anyway. To the paragraph asking about his qualification to make such judgments, he wrote, *I was their priest.*

The annulment was granted fourteen months later, and Anthony leased Father Marino a new car. “This will help you get around, Father. It’s for the good of the parish.”

“Like everything you do,” Father Marino said. Anthony looked surprised, but he didn’t fire back. Nobody ever did. Sometimes Father Marino lay in bed, appalled at himself for having told Marnie Francis that her son wasn’t smart enough to go to medical school, Elaine Williamson that she was drinking too much. But Marnie’s son did go to medical school – in the Dominican Republic, yes, but he still came back and passed his boards – and Elaine kept right on drinking. Was there a word for a man whose acts were uniquely useless?

Catching himself, Father Marino poured a glass of water, downed it, and poured another. The parish relied on him to baptize infants and bury the dead. Who could mark life’s way stations, if not Father Marino? Now, for in-

stance, this steamy morning in July, he was needed to officiate at the wedding of Anthony’s oldest daughter.

*Alison*, Father Marino reminded himself, taking deep breaths of the sacristy’s waxy air. He slipped the heavy green vestment over his head and waited for the storm of memories. But he had to strain to recall the girl, her scowl and dual casts, and her mother. Then he remembered Cecily, who had gone away after her abortion – her second, as Beth had guessed. Father Marino had been relieved to learn that, and then ashamed, and then relief had turned to forgetfulness. In the end, nothing had changed.

The rented organist started in on the familiar measures of “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring,” and Father Marino strode onto the altar. Anthony’s new wife billowed out of the pew beside her three teenage sons. Behind her sat Beth, a slim blur dressed in blue. The night before, at the rehearsal dinner, she had shaken Father Marino’s hand. Then she and her new husband had joined her daughter’s table, while Father Marino spent the evening in conversation with the groom’s great-aunt.

Impatient now, he watched Beth read every word of the wedding program. Nothing would have changed if, the night before, he had pulled up a chair beside her, fingered her bright hair, and whispered to her through the meal. Nothing if he had sipped from her glass of champagne – his first drink in eleven years. Nothing if he had followed her home. Still he would be standing in these hot robes, and still she would drive away with her dull husband after the reception. They were all trapped, every one of them, but he, the priest, was trapped in the smallest room of all.

“Hi,” he said when the couple stood before him. “Here’s the big day. Did you get any sleep last night?”

“No,” said the groom ruefully, getting a chuckle from the congregation.

“That’s all right. You’ll sleep from here on in. You might sleep more than you ever meant to.”

Hearing his words slip into dangerous waters, Father Marino hurried into the wedding liturgy. He generally riffed a lot at weddings, making warm jokes about pets or the new wedding china. It was one of the reasons couples wanted him. But now he stuck to the succession of formal blessings and invocations. To do so was steadying, and he felt his heart settle down. Before him stood Alison and her groom, their shining eyes impatient. From the pews the congregation looked on with mild affection, perhaps half hearing the weighty words about trust and steadfastness. Beth sat beside her husband and looked at Father Marino, her face like stone. Anthony had been the one to insist that the wedding be held here. Father Marino would not, he knew, have been Beth’s choice.

Holding Alison and the groom’s hands, Father Marino looked up from his prayer book. “People think weddings are about permanence, but that’s not right. Vows change us. In five years you won’t be who you are now, or even who you’d meant to be. In twenty years you won’t recognize yourselves. Here you are, looking beautiful, standing on the altar. Can you know what comes next?”

“The blessing of the rings,” Alison said, her clear voice so like her mother’s that Father Marino closed his eyes for a moment. The memories that had eluded him earlier were now showering down. He had loved his office because Beth came there. He had loved his office telephone because he talked to Beth on it.

“You’re in a hurry,” he said, and the congregation laughed. “That’s good. You should be holding your arms wide open. Today is the day to embrace your future.” The groom, who had a roguish

side, pulled Alison into a showy clasp, and Father Marino stepped back and led the quick applause for the couple, forestalling the biddies who would later complain that the ceremony had lacked dignity.

“They’re examples to us all, these two,” he said. “Why don’t we follow their lead? There’s no better day than a wedding for a hug.” In the pews, people relaxed and smiled at one another. This was not so different from the weekly Exchange of Peace at Mass, so no one was surprised to see Father Marino fondly embrace first bride, then groom, then move down from the altar to the first few pews. Working the crowd. He was famous for it.

Even Beth must have been softened. When he rustled to her, she raised her smiling face to his, and he had the sudden, hectic thought that he could kiss her mouth. What could possibly happen? Father Marino hesitated, then lunged, but at the last second Beth turned, and his lips dragged merely across her cheek. Even then he clung to her for a moment past propriety, until he heard Anthony stand. Only then did Father Marino, his heart plunging, let Beth go.

Anthony’s big arms were already open. He clasped the priest in a real *abbraccio* that was as much a blow as an embrace, and that whacked the air from Father Marino’s lungs. Then Anthony turned to kiss his wife, Beth to her husband, and other members of the congregation murmured and touched cheeks. On the altar, Alison and her groom kissed again, as prettily as dolls. Shaken, Father Marino watched what he had set in motion. All around him people embraced. Happiness sang through the hot church air. He felt it himself. Meanwhile, the feel of Beth’s lips dissolved from his face.