

CHILDREN OF BABYLON

BY

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"Friendship is the hardest thing in the world to explain. It's not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learned the meaning of friendship, you really haven't learned anything."

Muhammad Ali

For the Chaparral High School Class of 1978 –
I love you all. No regrets, only great memories.

The characters, events and dialogue in this book are entirely fictitious. Any similarity to actual events and/or to living or deceased people is unintended and coincidental.

Chapter One

The priest sat cross-legged on the floor in the small rectory apartment. His quarters were Spartan; there was barely enough room for a twin bed, a small desk, a telephone, a bookshelf and an ancient nineteen-inch TV. A tiny bathroom with a sink and toilet adjoined the living area.

He didn't need much, the pastor's life was outwardly simple. His only possessions were his books, letters and an overstuffed and well-worn photo album. God provided for him, he lived a life of service, charity and poverty.

The photo album was opened on his lap, and the priest was slowly and carefully turning the pages. He was deliberate, closely studying each image, reanimating memories of a time when no one called him Father Sullivan. When he was just Colin.

"Lord have mercy on me, a sinner," Colin Sullivan prayed aloud. The pictures in the album were of young people, teenagers. They were dressed in polyester suits, satin shirts, bell-bottomed jeans, wife beater tank tops, cheerleader outfits and baseball uniforms.

The photos were faded and dog-eared; obviously handled, mounted and re-mounted many times over the years.

A stunningly beautiful girl was prominent in the priest's collection. She was obviously someone very special to him. She lit up the pages of Father Sullivan's album just as she must have ignited the scene in 1978.

He removed a picture of himself, nearly forty years younger than he was now, kissing the gorgeous girl on a baseball field. On the back of the photo was written, "April 6, 1978. Third no-hitter against East High".

Father Sullivan started to cry again. Half an hour ago he was sure that he was out of tears, but he discovered that as long as he had whiskey, he still had tears. He poured another glass and slugged it down.

"Karen, I can't..." Colin started to reach for the phone, but he pulled back. He knew that he couldn't call her. The time for doing that had long since passed.

Setting the picture of himself and Karen aside, he began to thumb through the album again. There was Scotty, his best friend and catcher; Tiny, a three hundred pound teddy bear; Jenny, the first girl that he kissed back in the fifth grade. The friends of his youth, but more than that - his true family.

Kyle. When Father Sullivan came to his picture, he whispered a rosary and crossed himself. Kyle Hart, so young, so full of promise, so ready to grab the proverbial bull by its horns and ride it forever.

He removed another photo, one of Aimee Hart, Kyle's twin sister. For a moment he stared at it, then he cursed and threw back another shot of alcohol. The priest tore Aimee's picture into little pieces and slammed them into the trash.

Colin listened as Father Reilly entered the adjacent apartment. He heard him open his closet door and switch on the television. It was three p.m., time for Dr. Phil. Father Reilly never missed the Dr. Phil show. Colin Sullivan said a silent

prayer for his friend and brother priest and asked for his forgiveness.

That was really the heart of the matter, forgiveness. Father Sullivan had spent his entire adulthood either seeking it for himself or encouraging others to heed the call to mercy.

Colin's path had been difficult, his faith was tested by extremes. He wasn't sure about much anymore, other than the fact that his heart was broken and his soul was damaged beyond earthly repair. Lord knows he had tried, he always tried, but was trying enough? Why was he so weak? Others had endured far more difficult trials valiantly, steadfast in the face of evil, running the race to the finish, as Saint Paul put it. Why couldn't he?

Colin appreciated that his chief weakness had always been vanity. He knew that the heart of his calling into the religious life was to abandon his longing and live for others, to follow in the footsteps of the Lord. He had labored, so hard and for so long, struggling to cut his ties to the world, to expunge from himself the feelings of loss and loneliness and failure that too often dominated his consciousness.

But now he was thoroughly ruined. Whatever brightness of spirit that was given to him from Above had been blotted out by the blackness of betrayal and by the dry and futile mourning for a love and a life unrealized through no fault of his own.

He closed the album and put it on his bed, setting it beside his neatly boxed collection of decades of letters. He kissed a note for Karen and placed it on the desk.

One advantage of being a priest in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco was that if Colin needed to venture into the criminal underworld, it was literally right outside his door. While the young black man who sold him the pistol looked at him strangely, asking with his eyes and facial expression, "What the hell does a priest need a gun for?", he took Father Sullivan's money and gave him the thirty-eight, along with a box of shells, without judgment or comment.

Colin took a moment to pray. He knew that he was on shaky ground, pleading for absolution before he committed the sin. This was assumption of the worst sort because it involved the taking of what only God had the right to give or take, a human life.

If Father Sullivan still believed in anything, it was in a merciful God. He prayed that Christ would forgive him for his selfishness and understand, as no mortal was capable of understanding, that he could simply no longer bear the pain of living in a world that for him was, and would forever be, hopelessly distorted.

Father Reilly nearly hit the ceiling when he heard the gunshot. Quickly gathering himself, he bolted out of his room and into Colin's to find his friend lying dead on the floor.

"Governor, you have a call from California."

"Nancy, I told you that I am not taking any calls."

"Yes ma'am, I know, but you need to take this one."

"For the love of..." Governor Foster put down her draft speech to the Nevada Gaming Association and reluctantly picked up the receiver.

"This is Governor Foster."

"Governor, this is Sergeant Porter of the San Francisco Police Department. Sorry to disturb you, but I have some terrible news."

My God. San Francisco. Colin. Karen Foster hadn't spoken to Colin Sullivan in over three years, but not a day went by when she didn't think about him.

"Ma'am, Colin Sullivan is dead. He passed away a few minutes ago. Father Sullivan died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head."

Karen Foster dropped the phone and then stood up, but her legs betrayed her. She fell down in a heap. Nancy heard a loud thump and then Karen's wailing. She rushed into the Governor's office and tried to comfort her boss and dear friend, but there was little she could do other than ensuring that no one else saw Karen in such a desperate state.

"You still throw like a little girl, you know that, Tiny? A guy with your size, you ought to knock me over," Scott Armour teased.

"I'll put this ball down, Armour, and then come over there and knock you over."

"Shut up and pitch. You're embarrassing yourself in front of your children. Again."

"Uncle Scotty, please make my dad throw the ball. He just wants to stand out there and talk. I want to play."

Tiny laughed and said, "Listen, young man. Don't pick up any bad habits from your Uncle Scott. You need to mind...my heavens, Angie, what's wrong?"

Angie, Tiny's wife, bolted out of the house and leapt into her husband's massive arms. "It's Colin, Tiny. He's dead. Father Sullivan killed himself a few hours ago."

Tiny, Scott, Angie and the three of Tiny and Angie's six boys that were home all knelt together on the grass and prayed. Their pleas for mercy were made in a state of shock and denial, it was too horrible to be real. Colin Sullivan was their moral compass, their rock, the one person they all ran to seeking comfort and advice, to find Christ. Sorrow didn't begin to describe their feelings; Father Sullivan was loved by the Mancusos and the Armours beyond measure, treasured as a living saint.

Only Scotty knew why this tragedy might have happened, and he did not immediately share his suspicions with his friends.

Chapter Two

January 6, 1978

"Oh, please," Kyle moaned.

"Give me a fucking break," Scott added.

"Come on, it's kind of funny. Lighten up," Amanda argued.

"Next thing you know," Kyle said in a hushed tone, "he'll swear that he worked on RFK's staff in '68 or that he was McGovern's campaign manager in '72."

"Mr. Clark is very experienced. He's a smart man. You guys should stop hassling him."

"Amanda, do you believe everything he says? Even you aren't that gullible," Scott said.

"I am not gullible," Amanda pleaded.

"Okay, Sweetie. Whatever you say."

"I'm not."

"And Karen isn't packin' thirty-eight double ds," Scott joked loud enough to be heard several feet away.

"I heard that," Karen Foster said from two rows over.

Mr. Clark had reached his limit. "Do you folks want to talk about something other than political theory? Thirty-eight double ds? That comment could only be referring to you, Miss Foster. What do your boobs have to do with the Carter campaign of 1976?"

Karen's face turned bright red as the class erupted in laughter. She glared at Kyle and Scott, whose in class jabbering precipitated Mr. Clark's bawdy admonition.

"As I was saying," Mr. Clark continued, "Jimmy Carter emerged from a candidate vacuum in the Democrat party. Close friends of mine, on the national level, were shocked to see a virtually unknown Southern governor emerge as the party's nominee. This week's assignment is to write a three page paper on the state of the Democratic Party in 1976 and to discuss how the factors we have reviewed led to Mr. Carter beating Mr. Ford in the general election fourteen months ago."

The bell rang, the third period was over.

"Do you have it?" Kyle asked.

"Does the Pope live in Rome?" Scott answered sarcastically.

"Let me see it."

Onto an ordinary aerosol can of furniture polish, Kyle Hart's sister, Aimee, had created and glued an elaborate label - partly painted, partly typed. On one side of the label was a caricature of a black bull, squatting human-like and taking a dump. His remains were piled high and steaming. Above the crude but artistic drawing was the caption, "BULLSHIT REPELLANT".

The back of the label read, "Will negate the stench and psychological aggravation caused by conspicuously proclaimed embellishments from Chapman High School Civics teachers. Use with caution - when sprayed on those who have no need to make up stories to impress others, excessive shyness may result."

"I'm gonna slip it into his briefcase. Make sure he doesn't turn around," Kyle said.

"He's talking to Foster, so you know where his eyes are focused. Do it now."

Strolling casually towards Mr. Clark's desk, Kyle Hart knelt and placed the can upright into his teacher's leather case so it was inconspicuous.

"See you, Mr. C," Scott said, as he and Kyle walked out.

"Later, teach," Kyle blurted, barely able to control his laughter.

"Wait up," Amanda said.

"You got any cigs?" Kyle asked.

"Just Benson and Hedges menthol," Amanda answered.

"Gross, but they'll have to do. Spaced on hitting the C-store before school. I'm jonesing."

"Why don't you quit that disgusting habit? A smart guy like you should know better." Scotty Armour was a jock, so he chewed but didn't smoke.

"Why don't you bite me and mind your own business, muscle head," Kyle shot back.

"I'm just saying, you being class Pres and all, Mr. BMOC, you look kind of stupid with a cancer stick in your mouth."

"That so. I'll try to remember that the next time I see you spit out a big black wad of goo after you catch one of Sullivan's fastballs."

"That's different."

"Really. How?"

"I don't swallow the juice and I only chew when I play."

"You play baseball every day, Scotty. I'll bet you rip through four cans of Copenhagen a week, don't you, superstar."

"Why do I bother talking to you, Hart."

"Been wonderin' about that since the first grade."

"Ow." Kyle reacted to getting punched in the arm by Karen, who had finished her conversation with Mr. Clark and joined her friends in the smoking area.

"Don't you two have anything better to discuss than my tits?" Karen asked as she bummed a smoke from Amanda and lit it.

"I really like your tits, Karen," Scott admitted.

"Me too. I find them fascinating. Maybe I'll write a paper on your mammary glands for extra credit. How 'bout, "The Political Significance of Karen's Breasts". Bet you a million if I included bikini top photos Mr. C would give me an A+," Kyle teased.

"Is that all you toddlers think about? Sex? Women's bodies? You're

reptiles."

"And your point is?" Scott asked.

"I have no idea what my point is. I've known you both for too long, I guess. Love you guys too much. You clowns can always make me laugh, even with your clothes on."

"Ouch. Small penis size joke. I'm mortally wounded." Feigning embarrassment, Kyle hung his head as he spoke.

"I'm not offended because such comments obviously do not apply to me," Scott bragged.

"That's not what Colin tells me," Karen responded, coquettishly.

"Your boyfriend," Scott shot back, trying to be heard over the giggling, "has no room to talk. But you already know that."

"You're just jealous."

"Finally, some truth," Scott admitted.

"Where is Colin?" Amanda asked. "He wasn't in health class this morning."

"He has ten more hours of community service left to perform. I think he is picking up trash at Sunset Park. He had to do it today because he's going to some baseball meeting in L.A. next week. Rookie orientation for the Dodgers," Karen explained.

"I thought he was through with all of that court bullshit."

"Nope. But he will be after today, Kyle. Thanks to your pop."

"Yep, have to hand it to him. Dad stepped right up and did the right thing. Go figure."

"Your father is a nice man and a good mayor," Amanda Simpson argued.

"Sweetie. Remember that whole gullible thing we just talked about?"

"You're diggin' that trench deeper, honey," Kyle said.

"Everybody loves your dad except for you," Amanda pleaded.

"And Aimee."

"I guess you are—."

"Amanda, you precious little angel," Kyle Hart said, giving his friend a hug and a kiss on the forehead. "Don't ever change."

The bell rang. The fourth period was starting.

Chapter Three

Mrs. Bynum was nursing her fourth Kahlua and cream of the morning, methodically stroking her calico cat and watching some inane situation comedy re-run on television. Same old, same old. It would likely be noon before she mustered up the energy to change out of her frumpy nightgown and into a tattered sweat suit.

At least she didn't have to talk with her husband or, God forbid, show him affection. Tom Bynum was in Carson City arguing some dreary water rights case before the Nevada Supreme Court, so Aimee was not required to perform even the few tasks that were occasionally required of her - cook a meal, be pleasant and chatty and pretend to give a shit about anything other than loafing and complaining. She hadn't even bothered to answer the phone since lunch time yesterday, although the damn thing wouldn't stop ringing last night. Whatever the persistent caller or callers wanted could wait; Mrs. Bynum was settled into her lethargic routine and had a good buzz on, so she was not interested in what others wanted her to do.

"Ma'am, there is a Mr. Armour here to see you. He says it's important." The maid was reluctant to deliver the message, fearing a tongue lashing from her intoxicated employer, who the maid knew from past experience hated to be disturbed during one of her languid episodes.

Scotty was here. Aimee knew that couldn't be good, he would not stop by spontaneously just to chat. She instructed her maid to have Mr. Armour wait in the living room as she stumbled into her bedroom to freshen up and put on some decent clothes.

"Something wrong with your phone, Aimee?" Scott asked as Aimee Bynum emerged looking bleary and disheveled.

"Good morning to you too," Aimee replied, hoping that Scott would not smell alcohol on her breath or otherwise notice that she had booze for breakfast. The last thing she wanted to hear was another temperance lecture from Scotty Armour.

"I have some bad news," Scott said.

"That makes sense."

"Colin is dead. He killed himself yesterday."

Aimee fell back onto the sofa. She was unable to speak for a few seconds because her liquor-soaked, addled brain did not respond quickly under pressure. Scott offered her no assistance or comfort.

"How? Where did this..." Aimee was rambling, struggling to focus.

"San Francisco, at the rectory of St. Thomas' church. With a handgun. I came here to ask you why, Aimee."

"Me? How the hell should I know?"

"An asshole from that filthy show, what's it called? DirtyLaundry.com? This prick called me last week, asking all the wrong questions."

"Once again, Scotty, what's that got to do with me?"

"Just how stupid do you think I am, Aimee?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

"No, you know what, I don't. I can't believe I'm saying this to Kyle's sister, but here it is - stay the fuck away from me, my family and any of your now former friends. I don't know what's happened to you, Aimee, what drove you to such depravity, but this shit is truly unforgivable. How do you sleep at night?"

"Like a baby."

"Like a baby who has a fifth of scotch and a handful of Valiums in her."

"Are you through berating me, Scotty? What do you know anyway? You think you are so good, so special. None of you gave a damn about me after Kyle died, now you say that I'm cut off from your friendship? When was I ever cut in?"

"How many times have Karen or Amanda come to your rescue, Aimee? All you had to do was ask for help and we were always there for you. Remember when Jenny—."

"You guys did those things for Kyle, not for me."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Do you really believe that?"

"The truth is the truth."

"So that justifies breaking a solemn vow you made to people who loved you, Aimee? People who loved Kyle like a brother? Do you realize what you've done?"

"I haven't done a damn thing, Armour, other than let you in my house. I do regret that."

"Consider your soul, Aimee."

"My soul."

"Yes, your soul. Unless you repent, a sin this grave could send you straight to hell."

"You think Colin is there waiting for me?"

Scotty didn't react to Aimee Bynum's crude invective. Rather, he said nothing as he stood and walked out of the Bynum residence and got into his car. Before he started the engine, he prayed an Our Father, asked Christ to have mercy on Aimee Bynum and begged God to give him the strength to endure this tragedy to be a comfort to those he loved in their hour of need.

"Governor, they're here."

"Send them in, Nancy. No interruptions, please."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Karen," Amanda sobbed. "I can only imagine..." Tears flowed, words stopped. Tiny stood by and waited as Karen and Amanda embraced and cried.

"Come here, honey," Governor Foster said, extending her arms to Tiny. Tony Mancuso then joined his friends in a group hug of pain and mourning.

"Talk to me," Governor Foster begged. "Please tell me why this happened. Was Colin going through some tragedy, some serious problem no one told me about?"

"I don't know, Karen. A few weeks ago we talked on the phone for a couple of hours. As usual, it was all about me, my issues, Debbie leaving me. He said that he would pray for me, made me promise to go to Mass. I swore that I would, but I never did." Amanda couldn't say any more, she started sobbing. Tiny put his arm around her and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"Tiny? I know you and Scotty talked to Colin regularly. Didn't you guys visit him in Frisco last month?" Karen asked.

"Yep, we went up there," Tiny answered, his arm still around Amanda.

"Had a ball. You know how we act when we get together, like kids."

"He wasn't upset about anything? Who would he talk to if something was wrong other than you guys?"

"You," Tiny said.

"Tiny," Karen said weakly, "not anymore. You know that. Colin and I can't..." Now it was Governor Foster's turn to start crying again.

"Scotty knows something," Amanda declared. "He won't tell me what he suspects or knows, but I'm positive that he has a good idea about what was bothering Colin."

"I agree," Tiny said. "Armour went to see Aimee yesterday. When I asked him how she took the news, he said 'not well' and that he was 'sorry as hell that he bothered to go see her'. What do you think that means?"

"Where is Armour?" Karen asked.

"He hopped on a flight to L.A. this morning. Told me he'd be back in Vegas tomorrow," Tiny answered.

"Try his cell?" the Governor asked.

"He told me not to bother, he wouldn't answer it. Said that he'd explain himself when he got back. One more thing."

"Yes?"

"He told me to ask you to stay away from Aimee until he talked with you first."

"Did he now. Since when do I take orders from Scott Armour?"

"Karen, please. I'm sure that Scott has his reasons for asking you to stay away from Aimee."

"That may be true, but—."

Breaking in, the voice from the speaker said, "Governor, sorry. A courier just delivered a letter to you."

"Nancy, I explicitly asked—."

"Yes, ma'am, I know. No interruptions, but unless I'm mistaken I have a letter written to you by Father Sullivan shortly before his death."

Nancy brought in the envelope and set it on Karen's desk.

Chapter Four

April 6, 1978

"Do you think he can do it, Tiny?" Karen asked.

"Wouldn't bet against him, Colin is the best."

"No one has ever done that before, pitch three of them in a season?"

"Not in high school ball in Nevada. I don't know about anywhere else."

On the mound, Colin Sullivan defined imposing. He stood six-foot-three and weighed two hundred and twenty rock hard, muscular pounds. Coupled with his physique, Colin's flaming red hair and full beard created an icon of a brutal Viking warrior, one capable and eager to ransack your village and carry off your wife.

Colin's curveball was a nightmare to right-handed hitters; most didn't have the guts to stay in the box long enough to find out if the ball would break back over the plate and not split their skull. Sullivan's fastball was major league velocity, ninety-five miles per hour plus, and it had movement. His changeup was so deceptive that hitters looked like fools swinging long before the ball crossed the plate. His ERA was less than half a buck.

Three more outs, that's all he needed. Armour had already knocked in four runs with a homer and two doubles, and his Chapman High teammates had tacked on four more. It was the top of the ninth, Sullivan was dominating on his home field. It seemed as if nothing could stop him now.

East High's shortstop, a decent player named Sears, went down swinging on three straight fastballs. Then Imbach, their center fielder, popped out to short. The eighth man in the order was now up with one out to go, a short, skinny Cuban kid named Machi. He had already struck out twice, looking bad each time.

Armour put down one finger, calling for the fastball. Colin shook off the sign. The catcher flashed the fastball sign once more, Colin again shook his head "no". Scotty called time and approached the mound.

"Okay, genius. What are we throwin'?"

"Curves, all curves," Colin answered.

"Why?"

"Too easy with fastballs. Let's make this a challenge."

"You cocky shit."

"You chicken shit."

"What if you hang one, Koufax? Even this little pissant could hit a hanging curve."

"Well, if you're scared..."

"Just pitch, Sullivan. Don't try this juvenile crap at Dodger Stadium."

"Yea, yea. See you in a minute."

Armour squatted behind the plate. No need to put down a sign, because every pitch was going to be a curve. The infield was at normal depth, the third

baseman cheating in a little bit.

The first curve sent Machi diving to the dirt, but it broke back enough to catch a sliver of the inside part of the plate about belt high.

"Strike one!" the ump yelled.

Machi got up, dusted himself off and stood back in the box.

Scotty noticed that the batter was a little closer to the plate this time as if to say, "I will not be intimidated again."

The second pitch broke sharper than the first but Machi hung in there, swung, and hit a hard ground ball inches foul of third base.

Strike two.

The infield now retreated a couple of steps. Like everyone else at Chapman Field, they expected Colin to throw a fastball in the dirt, or one up near Machi's eyes, and then finish him off with another fastball or change up, most likely resulting in Sullivan's fifteenth strikeout of the game.

Keeping his brash vow, Colin threw another curve. As soon as the ball left his hand he knew that he was in trouble. His hope was that the pitch would end up high and tight, well out of the strike zone, but the damn thing started letter high and right over the plate and it stayed there, a batting practice lob.

Machi was perfectly positioned to take advantage of Colin's mistake. At the last second he squared up, moved his bat in front of him, and laid down a perfect bunt between third base and the mound.

"Fuck!" Armour yelled as he tossed away his mask. No one was expecting a bunt. East High was down eight runs with two outs in the ninth. Everyone knows that you don't bunt for a hit if the pitcher has a no-hitter working in the last two innings. Evidently, Machi didn't give a shit about unwritten rules or baseball decorum.

There was no chance for Roy Lewis, Chapman's accomplished third baseman, to make a play. Machi wasn't a speed demon, but he wasn't a turtle either. Colin was too far away to do anything but watch.

By the time Scott was in a position to make a play, Machi was already three-quarters of the way down the line. Armour made a bare-hand pickup, pivoted one hundred and eighty degrees on his right foot and threw the ball as hard as he could toward first.

It was a "bang-bang" play, but the first base ump didn't hesitate. "Yer out!" the ump screamed.

The two hundred people in the stands screamed in celebration. Their hero had triumphed again, and for the last time in a regular season game at Chapman Field.

"Nice play. You looked like Thurman Munson."

"You threw that last pitch like Sister Mary."

"Yea, well. I knew you had my back."

"Can you believe that pussy bunted?"

"And after I was kind enough to throw him three curves; well, two curves and a floater."

That was all the time Scotty Armour and Colin Sullivan had to talk before they were mobbed by teammates and fans. Tiny grabbed his camera and headed out onto the field. Karen was right behind him.

"Wow," Scott said, as the crowd dispersed enough for them to walk towards the dugout. "What's better? Throwing a no-hitter or being with her?"

Karen Foster had on a tight yellow tube top, white shorts and sandals. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail, her skin a radiant bronze. She looked twenty-five, not seventeen. No part of her body was immature. In a school known for its beautiful girls, she was in a class by herself.

"Is there anything you can't do, Colin?" Karen asked, as she gave him a quick kiss and put her arm around his waist.

"There is nothing that I wouldn't do for you," Colin answered.

"Hey you guys, let me snap a photo. Lay one on her, stud." Tiny took a couple of pictures and then moved off and joined the throng.

Still embracing his girl, Colin said, "Karen, I love you. None of this means a damn thing to me unless you are a part of it."

"I love you too, baby. Now and forever."

"Now and forever," Colin repeated.

Chapter Five

"I can't believe that I dragged you in this place. What was I thinking?" Scott asked.

"Like I would let you come here without me," Kendra answered.

"Please. This skank parade is of no interest to me."

"Uh huh. That's why you can't take your eyes off of that brunette in the black lingerie thingy. She's built, I don't blame you for staring."

"I'm simply curious. Can't help but wonder how a fine woman like that ended up in a dump like this."

"Same way Jenny did, Scotty. These ladies make a ton of money."

"I know, Kendra, but still...Jenny is like my sister, I love her to death, but I've never understood why she chose this profession."

"She's hot, single and works hard. Do you think that her four-bedroom house in Malibu came cheap?"

"But it's so degrading."

"So you say."

"What, you thinking of giving up teaching kindergarten and prancing around a pole in a thong?"

"If I did, would you look at me like you looked at that brunette?"

"Stop it. I lust after no woman other than you."

"You love only me, I know, but you have a penis in perfect working order, I'm happy to say, so you lust after pretty women twenty-four seven. All men are pigs, you're just a domesticated pig."

"Oink, oink."

"Very funny."

"Scotty!" Jenny Righetti yelled as she ran up to the table in the back of her club. "It's so good to see you two. If this clown is mistreating you, Kendra, just let me know. I'll straighten him out."

"Jenny, honey," Scott said after exchanging hugs and kisses. "As much as we love seeing you, this is not a social call."

"I figured. Sorry, I've been tough to reach. Running this place is a lot harder than dancing."

"Colin is dead," Scott said.

"No way. How? Why?"

"The how is by suicide, a gunshot wound to the head. The why is what we are trying to figure out."

"My God, Colin. I don't know what to say..." Jenny started to cry. Scott put his arms around his friend, and the three of them walked back to Jenny's office.

"Scotty," Jenny began, her emotions now more under control, "what happened? How much do you know?"

"When was the last time you checked your messages?"

"E-mail or telephone?"

"Phone."

"Couple of days ago. Like I said, I've been swamped."

"Can you check them for me now, please?"

"Melissa," Jenny said, after pushing the intercom button. "My phone messages, where are they?"

"Under the red paperweight, right side of your desk, Ms. Righetti." Jenny's desk was a mess, a disorganized heap only her assistant could unravel.

"What am I looking for, Scotty?"

"Any messages from a punk named Green, Sy Green."

"DirtyLaundry.com, Sy Green?"

"That's the douche bag."

"I've met him, you know. Sometimes his leeches camp outside our front door, waiting to stick a camera in some celeb's face. Let's see...what? Sy Green, a message from four days ago. How did you know that he was trying to talk with me?"

"He and I had a short conversation."

"Let me guess, you told him to go fuck himself and hung up."

"Yep, but I need you to have a longer discussion with this fool."

"What's going on, Scotty?"

"I think one of us is breaking the promise."

"No way. After all the tears and years? That's why? Colin? My God, does Karen know?"

"Not yet. I'll talk with her when I have all of this sorted out."

"Good luck with that plan, sport. Karen Foster won't wait for you, she'll start digging."

"That's why you need to start dialing."

Using the speaker phone, Jenny placed a call to Sy Green.

"This is Sy Green."

"Jennifer Righetti, returning your call."

"Ms. Righetti, owner of the famous Panther Club. May I call you Jenny?"

"Ms. Righetti or ma'am, please. I'm busy, what do you want?"

"Such hostility. Have we met? I can't recall."

"Once, long ago. Your minions trespass on my property regularly. I'd have them arrested, but that would only give you more publicity."

"A churlish ethics lecture from a strip club owner. How cute."

"What do you want, Green? You're boring me."

"You went to high school with Governor Foster of Nevada, isn't that true?"

"Boy, are you good! Only thousands of people know that."

"Her high school boyfriend was Colin Sullivan, the do-gooder priest up in San Francisco?"

"Amazing, truly mind blowing. Can you tell me who is buried in Grant's tomb?"

"Father Sullivan killed himself yesterday."

"I know."

"Does the Father's suicide have anything to do with something that happened at a Lake Mead high school graduation party in 1978?"

"Typical Sy Green. Stick your hands in the sewer, grab some shit, fling it against the wall and see if it sticks. You're childish and retarded."

"Sensitive people don't use the term 'retarded' anymore. We refer to people with special needs as being 'developmentally disabled'."

"Sorry. You're fucking retarded, and I'm not very PC."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Colin Sullivan was a kind and humble man. I loved him as a brother. He spent his life serving others, helping the poor and the sick. What do you do, Green, besides spread misery and lies?"

"That's not an answer."

"What is it that you think you know, Green?"

"Now you're the one who is fishing."

"Alright, shithead. I'm through wasting my time with you. You've gotten..."

"I have a statement from someone who allegedly, notice how I use the term 'allegedly' Ms. Righetti, was at an infamous high school graduation party in 1978 at Lake Mead. She claims that the public version of what happened that night is inaccurate, that people swore to things that weren't true."

"That so. Who is 'she'?"

"Did I say 'she'? I never said 'she'. If I did, it was an inadvertent slip of the tongue which you should disregard. I said 'source'."

"You're about as subtle as cancer, Green."

"Thank you."

"Here is what I think. Karen Foster is becoming a nationally known political figure. A few years from now she could be President Foster. You have some source who claims that 'she' has some serious dirt on Karen, but you can't get anyone to confirm it. How am I doing so far?"

"Are you a journalist? You should be."

"You want me to say that I was there, which you already know by reviewing court records, and you are about to tell me that I can make some serious cash if my story matches the one 'she' told you. Am I still on track?"

"You ever need a job, come to me first, Ms. Righetti. Nothing gets by you."

"Well, what's her story?"

"You know it doesn't work that way."

"You want me to confirm or deny something that you won't tell me?"

"What happened out there in '78, Ms. Righetti?"

"My memory is poor, Green. Getting worse every day. I'm double nickels now, you know. I've even got an AARP card."

"You wouldn't tell me even if I offered you a million bucks, would you?"

"Did I hear you right, Green? Did you just offer me a million dollars to make up lies about Governor Foster?"

"Nice try. I get it. Friends to the end and all that. The public has a right to know, Ms. Righetti."

"Fuck the public and fuck you too."

"Yea, yea. I'll get someone else to confirm the story. If not, we may run it anyway. One source is enough."

"Have a good team of lawyers, do you Green? You're gonna need 'em baby if you tear into Karen Foster. She is as tough as they come."

"Well, this has been fun. Call me if you change your mind, 'ma'am'."

"Stop by the club sometime, Green. We have a three hundred pound gay bouncer who would love to spend some quality time alone with you in a small room with a locked door."

No response, only dial tone.

"This makes me sick, Scotty."

"I know, it's very hard to believe, but it's true."

"Why? Why would Aimee do such a horrible thing?"

Chapter Six

May 10, 1978

"What do you think?"

"I'm not sold on the white tux, Colin. It makes your head look like it's on fire," Scotty answered.

"I could wear a trash bag and still look better than you. Shut up."

"Is it my fault that you have the reddest hair in the world? Blame mummy and da for that, you Celtic bastard."

"What's that you've got on, Armour? Some Saturday Night Fever prop? You gonna sing *Stayin' Alive* for us?"

"It may be the prom, but who says I gotta dress like I'm going to some Proddy wedding? Style, that's the difference between you and me, Sullivan. I've got some taste and class."

"I've got your taste and class right here," Colin said, as he took his right hand off of the steering wheel and grabbed his crotch.

They laughed. That's the one thing Scotty and Colin always did when they were together. Cut it up, made jokes, tease the shit out of each other. Best friends since grade school, they were inseparable: brothers by choice, not by birth.

Going to the Senior prom together was a foregone conclusion. Colin would be with Karen, as always, but Scotty needed a date. For all of his bravado, Scott Armour was terrified of girls, unless they were his friends, in which case he treated them as equals, buds. But as soon as a young woman showed an interest in him beyond platonic, his hormones kicked in and he morphed into a frightened cub scout, tongue-tied and clumsy. So, to prevent an awkward situation on the night of the big dance, Scotty decided to take Amanda, a very safe choice.

"You know Amanda has never been with a man or even kissed one," Colin stated authoritatively.

"That's pretty obvious."

"You could be the first."

"Get her to switch teams? I'm not sure I'm interested in that, Colin. I think I'd rather watch her go at it with a hot chick."

"Ménage à trois? That would make for a great prom legend."

"She has a crush on your girl, Sullivan. You're the one who should be doin' the freaky thing with them."

"Karen Foster? Do something like be with another girl? Are you nuts? Not in a million years."

"How do you know what goes on behind closed doors?"

"Keep dreamin', studly. Karen is not adventurous. Trust me."

"Funny things happen on prom nights."

"Stories, all stories."

"We'll see. Looks like you're up to bat," Scott said as Colin herded his father's massive white Chrysler Imperial to the curb in front of Karen's house.

Karen Foster and her mom currently resided in a new four bedroom rambler by the Winterwood Golf Course. Gina Foster was a real estate agent and a successful speculator in the booming Vegas housing market. Every few months or so Gina would sell the house she and Karen were living in and they would move to another investment property and start the process over. Karen's father, Tony, wasn't around. Mr. Foster paid his child support and sent cards at Christmas, but otherwise showed little interest in his daughter. A professional musician, he remarried years ago and had a new family to worry about and support.

While their home life appeared to many, especially to Colin's staunchly Catholic parents, to be unstable, it was not. Despite their frequent moves, Gina made sure that her daughter stayed in the same school, with the same friends, even if, before Karen turned sixteen and started driving herself, Gina had to cart her daughter many miles back and forth to attend class and after school activities.

Karen and her mother were close, their bond forged and strengthened through years of battling the world as a team. Gina kept a tight rein on her daughter, knowing full well the dangers that lurked around every corner in Vegas for young women, especially exceptionally pretty ones like Karen.

Gina Foster not only approved of Colin Sullivan dating her daughter, but she also encouraged the relationship. She believed that their feelings for each other were deep and genuine, far beyond a crush or teenage infatuation.

Mom rested easy when Colin and Karen were together because she knew that Karen was safe, in every way, under Colin's care. He would die before letting any harm come to her - he'd told her this more than once and Gina did not doubt his word.

Everyone, including Gina Foster, assumed that Colin and Karen would eventually get married. Gina knew next to nothing about baseball, other than the fact that Colin was excellent at it and that he would most likely make more than a comfortable living as a professional player. If he ended up on the Dodgers, as it appeared that he might, Gina hoped that Colin and Karen would live in Los Angeles and remain close and accessible to her.

"Good evening, ma'am. I've come to see the young lady of the house," Colin said as he bowed and held out a yellow rose in his right hand.

"And who might you be, sir? My daughter does not accept gentleman callers without an appointment." Gina and Colin played this game every so often, the Southern suitor jousting with the family matriarch.

"My intentions are honorable, ma'am. I wish to take your daughter to the ball this evening. With your kind permission, of course."

"The rose is for me, I assume?"

"Yes ma'am. A beautiful flower to match..."

"Mom!" Karen yelled from the back of the house. "Quit screwing around with Colin and get back here! I need your help!"

Gina and Colin laughed as she let him in. "Sometimes I wonder who is in charge around here," Gina Foster said, as she went to help Karen.

A few minutes later, Gina returned saying, "The Princess wants you to close your eyes."

"By all means, anything for my lady," Colin said as he stood and did what he was asked.

Karen walked into the living room from the kitchen and planted a big, wet kiss on Colin. "Okay, honey, you can open your eyes."

Colin had known Karen since the sixth grade. From the first moment he met her Colin was smitten - more than smitten, captured. For him, there was no girl in the world other than her. They had always been the most popular kids, the baseball hero and the beauty queen. Yet despite being relentlessly pursued by would-be romancers, not once since they were twelve did either of them ever give serious thought to the possibility of being with someone else.

By the time of the 1978 Chapman High senior prom, Colin figured he'd seen Karen in every imaginable way since they had basically grown up together.

He was wrong.

The Karen Foster that stood before him now was no longer a girl, she was a vision. Karen rarely wore makeup, there was really no need, but tonight she painted her face and eyes. Her hair was wrapped tightly in a bun. Gina had spent a small fortune, over four hundred dollars, on her prom gown. It was cream colored and custom fitted to Karen's voluptuous body. The dress was low cut in the front and open in the back almost to her waist. She looked like a movie star.

"Well, say something, Colin. How do I look?" Karen asked.

"I, Karen, uh..."

"I think he's speechless dear," Gina said.

"Karen, my God. You're so beautiful." Colin sounded like a little boy, no swagger or jesting.

"You look nice too, baby," Karen complimented. "Glad you went with the white tux."

"Scotty says it makes me look like my head is on fire."

"What does Armour know, I'll be the judge. You're the most handsome man in the world, sweetheart."

"Pictures, pictures. You guys promised." Gina Foster snapped photos of Karen and Colin every chance she got, much to their consternation.

"Colin," Gina Foster said, as she put the camera down. "You better make damn—."

"With my life, ma'am."

"That's what I needed to hear. You two go now, have a blast. Here, Colin, take this." Gina Foster handed Colin three hundred dollars.

"Gina, I can't accept your money. My dad..."

"Please. It is my privilege. Don't argue with me, young man."

"Yes, ma'am."

Gina Foster kissed them both and watched as Colin opened the door and gently helped Karen into the front seat. Those kids were her world. She said a silent prayer for their protection.

"Who hired these bozos?" Jenny complained.

"Aimee, of course," Tiny answered.

"That's the best she could do? Some crappy lounge act that belts out off key disco covers?"

"You're exaggerating. They're not that bad."

"They're not that good, Tiny. It's our prom for hell's sake. I know four or five bands who play for drinks that are better than those cretins."

"Are we dancing anyway? You promised."

"If you step on my feet again, Mancuso, I'm through. You hear me?"

Tiny's face turned bright red. He just stood there awkwardly, his three hundred pound frame bulging through his rented purple tux. The suit was at least two sizes too small for him, but even the Big and Tall store didn't have anything large enough to properly fit Tony "Tiny" Mancuso.

"Tiny, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that, honey. You know what a bitch I am. I love you to death, let's dance." Jenny had a quick temper and a sharp tongue, but also a huge heart. Everyone loved Tony Mancuso, especially Jenny.

"I'll be careful."

"And I'll shut up about the band. And Tiny?"

"Yea?"

"Thanks for taking me to the dance. I mean it."

"You're the one doin' me the favor, Jen. No one would go with me anyway."

"Not true."

"You don't have to lie, Jenny. We're friends. I know you like me even though I'm ugly and fat."

"Someday, Tiny, you'll make a lucky girl very happy. You're a catch, you just don't know it yet."

"Really? You're not just sayin' that stuff to be nice?"

"I'm not nice, Tiny."

"Yes, you are. People get the wrong idea about you, that's all."

"Maybe I should stop dating forty-year-old men and hanging out in clubs all night."

"Maybe you should," Tiny agreed, with a bit of well-intentioned judgment in his tone.

"Come on, handsome," Jenny said, as she grabbed Tiny's hand and lead him to the dance floor.

Chapman High reserved a large conference room at the Desert Inn for

their Senior prom. More than a few of the kids also rented rooms for the night at the hotel, most with their parent's knowledge and blessing to avoid having to drive around town loaded.

Very few of the graduating class of 1978 did not party in one way or another, which was not surprising given that they were raised in a town that was built and prospered as a monument to vice. Alcohol was dispensed liberally in Vegas, even if you were under age. Marijuana was a staple of daily life at Chapman High - cocaine, uppers, downers, especially ludes, were also plentiful.

Yet despite this libertine environment, only a few Chapman High students had serious substance abuse problems. Many of their parents did. Perhaps this was one reason why a degree of temperance existed among them; they weren't stupid, nor were they naive. They had no desire to end up as forty-year-old burnouts, victims of "Vegas Disease" - pathetic losers living in some shitty apartment, dealing cards downtown and hanging out in a seedy neighborhood bar.

Certain nights, however, called for an all-out chemical assault. If you didn't get wasted at the prom, you were either a pious Mormon or a total geek, or both.

"I said no, Kyle," Aimee protested.

"Loosen up. You're among friends. If you get too wasted, all you have to do is go upstairs and crash in the suite."

"No. I'll drink, but no ludes. I don't like being out of control."

"Even tonight? Okay, okay. Don't sweat it, sis."

"Why are you taking Leeann anyway? She is such a prissy little twit."

"Do you really want details, Aimee?"

"She's loose? No way."

"Who said anything about her being loose? She does, however, have quite the crush on me."

"Which you, of course, will exploit to get her to drop her panties."

"And they say I got all of the brains in the family."

"That's disgusting. You're disgusting."

"I'm simply letting nature take its course."

"Nature and a lude."

"Two ludes."

"My brother the big shot. You're just like Dad, you know that? One face in public, another in private. Born to lead."

"I learned from the master."

"Can we go now?"

"Yep," Kyle said as he peeked out through the living room drapes. "The limo is here."

"I got chills, they're multiplyin', and I'm losin' control, cause the power you're supplyin', it's electrifyin'." A John Travolta and an Olivia Newton John wannabe were doing their best not to butcher the song from Grease, but they weren't succeeding.

"They're horrible, Colin. Who -."

"Aimee."

"That figures. Sometimes I wonder if she was adopted," Karen complained.

"Kyle swears not."

The large meeting room at the D.I. was crammed to capacity with over three hundred soon-to-be graduates and their dates. Almost two thousand kids attended Chapman High, and over four hundred were seniors.

Like every high school, there were cliques. Jocks mostly hung with other jocks, especially football players with other football players; artistic kids clustered, those in the band or in the school's pop music group The Surrey Singers, or the ones into drama or dance; black kids, most bussed in from the projects on the North side of town, were a distinct crew; nerds, both the brainy and the physically and socially awkward types, hung together for their mutual support and protection; Mormons, the ones serious about their faith; Gearheads, the car and motorcycle dudes, including the biker chicks. Everyone seemed to fit in somewhere.

There was no name for the group to which Colin and Karen belonged, but they were the envy of the school. Tiny Mancuso, Scott Armour, Amanda Simpson, Jenny Righetti, Kyle and Aimee Hart, Colin Sullivan and Karen Foster had been close friends since elementary school. For one reason or another they naturally gravitated to each other, and although they freely mixed with other factions, Colin was always included with the jocks, as was Scotty and Tiny, Amanda with the drama kids, their only true allegiance was to each other.

Karen was a "super fox", inaccessible, off limits as Colin's girl. Jenny was gorgeous too, but she didn't date men under thirty and considered most kids her age, especially the girls, to be immature morons. Amanda was cute, very petite and feminine, and everyone knew that she was gay. Aimee was plain physically and otherwise. Girls, for the most part, avoided her and boys only showed an interest in Aimee because of her famous father or popular brother.

Colin was Colin, the Alpha male. Kyle was handsome and as popular as Colin, if not more so. Brash, confident and rich, Kyle Hart was superficially nice to everyone, the consummate politician, but genuinely liked few. Girls to him, other than his friends, were objects to be used and discarded. He never dated a young woman for longer than three months, a hard and fast rule that he never broke, and thus avoided any cumbersome entanglements.

Tiny was a sweetheart of a guy who would do anything for his friends and tried hard to always be polite to others. He was also the best offensive lineman in the state and was headed to play football at Notre Dame in the fall.

Scotty was the solid one, eighteen going on thirty. In any other school he would be the star athlete; he lettered in football, baseball and track, but at Chapman he was Colin's wingman. His greatness was hidden in Colin's shadow, but Scotty did not resent the circumstance. Other than his childlike clumsiness with women, Scott was, by far, the most mature member of the group.

"Hey, is this thing on?" Kyle hollered from the podium. The DJ stopped spinning records as the microphone squealed and came to life.

"Okay. Chapman High! Warriors rule!" Kyle yelled. The room responded with cheers and whistles.

"It's time to crown our King and Queen. Yea? Shut up, Beckman!" Kyle screamed, reacting to a smart ass comment from the throng.

"Did you do it?" Colin asked.

"Of course," Karen answered. "Everyone thought it was a great idea."

"This year our King and Queen were not selected by your votes. Fuck democracy." The students laughed and applauded, no one really cared too much about prom royalty anyway.

"No, this year a few of us - yea, that's right Zippy, me and some other right-thinking people," Kyle teased, responding to the taunts, "a few of us got together, rolled a joint and pounded some brews," more sarcastic jeers from the crowd, "and decided who the two nicest, most decent people were in our class. Since most of you reprobates are self-serving wankers, it wasn't a complicated process." More catcalls and feigned insults.

"This year's prom King is truly deserving of the honor. Who doesn't love this young man? Only every defensive lineman in Clark County, since he's been beating their brains in on Friday nights for the past three years. But other than those idiots, who does not adore our very own moving mountain, our gentle giant, Chapman's Senior Prom King, Tony, 'everyone calls me Tiny so you can too', Mancuso!"

Jenny was in on the deal, but she had said nothing to Tiny. They were in the back sipping some smuggled champagne when Kyle made the announcement.

"M...m...me?" Tiny stuttered, not believing his ears.

"You, cowboy. Hail to the King!" Jenny shouted with a huge grin on her face.

"Is this a joke or something, Jen?"

"No joke, get on up there."

"Everyone knows Colin is the King, Jenny."

"That so? Kyle called your name, not Colin's."

Tiny was jittery and embarrassed, but he trusted his friends. If Kyle and Jenny and Colin made him King, then he was sure that they were not setting him up to look foolish. As he walked toward the podium to accept his crown and await his Queen, the students expressed their approval with a loud chant of 'Tiny!, Tiny!, Tiny!.'

"Who is worthy to reign with such a noble King?" Kyle hollered above the

roar. "Only one young lady is beautiful enough, intelligent enough, sweet enough and, let's face it, brave enough," the seniors snickered at the remark, "to rule over our prom by our beloved King's side. She is new to Chapman High, but first in our hearts. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the belle of our ball, Miss Angela Baxter!"

Angie Baxter didn't have a date for the dance, but she was there as the head of the prom committee. Her father was an Air Force physician, so Angela had been bounced around from base to base as a kid, never staying anywhere long enough to make close friends. In August of 1977 Captain Baxter was transferred to Nellis AFB, so Angela enrolled at Chapman in September. Karen and Jenny took an immediate liking to her and made sure that she was introduced and included in the Chapman High scene.

A few weeks earlier, Angie confided to Karen that she had a crush on Tiny Mancuso. At first, Karen was taken aback by this declaration; Angie was five foot two and weighed a hundred pounds, mousy but cute and had no interest in sports whatsoever, but once she thought about it the match made sense. They were the two most down to earth, humble people she knew. Someday, Karen was somehow sure, they would pop out a bunch of kids, have the house on the block everyone hung out in and be the salt of the earth.

The trouble was, both Tiny and Angie were too timid to talk to each other, each convinced that they were total dweebs and that no one would go out with them in a million years, so what was the point of stepping up and getting rejected?

Colin dropped the hint to Tiny, told him that Angie would really like to go to the prom with him, but Tiny thought Colin was just pumping him up and refused to ask Angie out saying, "Ain't no way she'd go with me."

It was Jenny who suggested that Karen and Colin finagle it so that Tiny and Angie would be prom King and Queen. It seemed the only way to get them together.

Looking clumsy and confused, Tiny stood and waited for Angie to struggle through the crowd. Once they made eye contact, everything changed. Tiny stood up straight, smoothed and tucked his undersized tux as best he could and held out his hand. Angela was blushing, shuffling more than walking, but she too took on a different, more confident air once she held hands with Tiny. As the soon-to-be grads roared their approval, the cheesy band began to play a truly horrible rendition of "*How Deep Is Your Love*", the King and Queen's theme song.

As far as Tiny and Angie were concerned, they were the only two people in the room. He was huge, she was so small - they looked incongruous, to say the least - yet somehow they fit.

The loud talk and banter stopped as the Chapman High seniors paired off and joined in the slow dance. The celebration was clearly moving into another phase.

"Check out those two," Jenny said. "I don't think I've ever seen Tiny look at a girl like that."

“Jealous?” Amanda asked.

“Maybe a little, but I'm more proud than hurt. My big little boy is growing up.”

Chapter Seven

"We should go, Karen. Give you some space," Tiny suggested.

"What I want," Governor Foster replied, "is to go back to yesterday, fly to San Francisco and save Colin. Can you make that happen, Tiny?"

"Karen, I'm so—."

"How about changing the past thirty years while you're at it? Can you do that too?"

"What can we—."

"Do you know how blessed you are, Mr. Mancuso? You spend your life with the person you love, you have the greatest kids in the world, coach football at UNLV. Colin, he's dead. Me, most of me has been dead for years, Tiny. This political horseshit, the fame, I'd trade it all..." Karen Foster couldn't talk anymore. She cried hard tears, loud sobs punctuated by rapid, shallow breaths. Tiny walked over and held her; Amanda sat and watched nervously, unsure what she should or could do to help her friends.

After a few minutes, Karen composed herself enough to speak.

"Read the damn thing, Tiny."

"Karen, these are Colin's last words. The letter is addressed to you, not me."

"Read it."

"That wouldn't be decent. We'll leave, give you some time, hon. Read it when you're in a better frame of mind."

"Read the fucking thing or burn it."

"Okay, Karen, okay. You win, but it's not right."

"What's 'right' about Colin and I, Tiny? Nothing has been right with us since '78. We were cursed."

"Love is not a curse, Karen. Don't say such things," Amanda said.

"Sweetie. The beautiful part of our love was destroyed a long time ago. All that remained was the knowledge that it was gone forever and irreplaceable. That's a curse, not a blessing."

"I would give anything to have what you and Colin had, even for one day."

"Honey," Karen said. "For your sake, I'm so glad that you don't know what the hell you're talking about. Tiny, read the letter."

"Out loud?"

"Yes."

Tiny picked up the envelope and pulled out the note.

"It's a copy, Karen."

"The original is being kept by the police, I'm sure. SOP in suicide cases, until everything is wrapped up."

"It's handwritten."

"Read it, Tiny."

"Karen, my only solace in life has been the knowledge that you have

prospered, that you have become the person and the leader God intended you to be. I know that you love Joseph as much and as well as you are able, but I also know that you will never love anyone as much as you love me. Perhaps now that I am gone your heart will open more to him. I hope so, I pray for that to happen.

"Karen, this is so personal. I mean—."

"Tiny," Karen said, in between tears and gulps of air, "for the love of God read the letter. I can't do this more than once."

"One of us has broken the promise, Karen. Horrible people who do not fear God have contacted me with details that only our friends and we know. They will expose us, Karen. It will be your undoing. All of the sacrifice and hard work of a lifetime will be destroyed for nothing more than a cheap headline. I cannot bear to watch this happen.

"As I search my soul today and prepare to be judged, I know that it is my own weakness that leads me to self-destruction. With Christ's help, I have been able to suffer through the trying days, the difficult years, without you, knowing that you were safe. My pain was assuaged by my work for Him, for the love and comfort I was able to give others yet never able to obtain for myself.

"But now, the weight is too heavy. I'm too weak. All of this, I always told myself, was for some greater purpose, His will, but what good can come from betrayal? What light is shown by blowing out your candle?"

"Forgive me, my love. Please forgive me. I can't live this lie any longer, the lie that I should be anywhere but in your arms.

"Please pray for my soul, Karen. You are the only person who might have the power to get me into Heaven.

"May the peace of Christ overcome your fears and lead you to salvation. Colin."

"Jesus Christ, always Jesus Christ," Karen said, wiping her eyes and sniffing. "I never understood why Colin put such faith in Him. Our blessed Savior hasn't done a damn thing for me."

"Karen, don't make this worse by cursing God," Tiny admonished.

"Why not? He's cursed me."

"Nonsense."

"Tiny, I'm not getting into this now—."

"Good," Tiny interrupted.

"Do I send the State Troopers after Aimee Bynum, or are you going to go get her?"

"Scotty said to wait."

"That wasn't one of the two options I gave you, Tiny."

"Well," Tiny began, now unable to control his anger, "that's how it's going to be, Governor. I love you and I loved Colin, you know that, but sometimes, Karen, you can be such a willful, stubborn..."

"Bitch?" Karen said, finishing Tiny's sentence. "Fine. You've got 'til tomorrow morning. Then I'm going to find Aimee and get some answers."

"Are you Sy Green?" Scotty Armour asked, walking up to the outdoor table at Porters, a trendy L.A. restaurant frequented by celebrities.

"Can't you see I'm eating? Phone my office and make an appointment," Sy snapped, dismissing Scott with his hand.

Scotty said nothing, but he reached down, picked up Sy Green's seared Ahi and green salad and dumped the plate on the floor.

"Now you are through eating," Scott pronounced.

"What the fuck, dude? That's assault. I'll have to do is tell the waiter."

"Shut up and listen, asshole. I'm here to set you straight about Father Colin Sullivan and Karen Foster."

The cafe's staff had noticed the commotion and the spilled food and were coming over to the table. Sy waved them off.

"I'm all ears, Mr.?"

"Armour, Scott Armour."

"Thought I recognized your voice. The last time we talked you called me a vile, vile something or other."

"Vile, scum-sucking pig."

"Well, not everyone is a fan."

"I've known Aimee Hart-Bynum all of my life. She is a troubled woman with a long history of alcohol and substance abuse. Her credibility is highly questionable, to say the least."

"Who is Aimee Hart-Bynum?" Sy asked.

"Please," Scott answered. "No more games. I'm not wired, no one else can hear us. Don't insult my intelligence, Green."

"You must be friends with Jennifer Righetti."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you're both obnoxious and arrogant. Come at me with all of this righteous indignation. Fine, I'll drop the pretense. You lose the sanctimonious bullshit. I've got a business to run, Mr. Armour. None of this is personal."

"That's where you're wrong, Green. This matter could not be more personal."

"So, you tossed my late lunch just to tell me that you are sticking by your story? That 'straightens out' nothing."

"Aimee Bynum is a sick lady, Green. Using her to jack up your ratings is not a wise idea."

"How is it 'unwise', Mr. Armour? Don't threaten me with lawsuits, I've got more lawyers on retainer than you have shirts in your closet."

"Fuck lawyers, Green. You absolutely do not want to mess with me."

"Are you threatening me per—."

"Nope. I promise you that if you run this story, I will visit hell upon you."

Sy moved his chair back; clearly he was not expecting to be physically confronted. Scotty Armour was a bull of a man, a professional athlete years past

his prime, but still in top shape.

"Are you trying to go to jail, Mr. Armour?" Although he was shitting his pants, Sy did his best to sound brave.

"Been there, more than once. Better the fish tank than the ICU."

Sy grabbed his man purse and his phone, stood up and backed away from Scott.

"Anything else you want to say before I leave and file a police report against you?"

"Look at me you worm."

Frozen, Sy's eyes darted around trying to map out the quickest exit route.

"I'm not playing, Green. Go to the cops, run to mommy, go suck your boyfriend's cock, just don't air the story. Mrs. Bynum will recant her lies by tomorrow morning, that I personally guarantee."

Scott stared at Sy as he cowered past him. Green was panicked by the possibility that he might end up face down on the floor alongside his food. Once he was clear, Sy's courage returned along with his tongue. He was talking on his phone and pointing as the paparazzi went nuts, shouting questions and taking pictures.

Armour slipped out the back.

Chapter Eight

Two a.m., May 11, 1978

"We're not going to the suite? Everyone is expecting us."

"I have a better plan, honey."

"Oh yeah?" Colin said as he and Karen walked toward the elevators at the Desert Inn. They shared a long, passionate kiss waiting for the lift to arrive.

"Which floor?"

Karen looked at her room card. "Tenth," she said.

"Tenth it is," Colin said as he punched the correct elevator button.

"What's up, some secret party?"

"Sort of," Karen whispered shyly.

Colin was buzzed and distracted; he'd been drinking beer and champagne and taking hits of pot all night, so reality didn't catch up with him until the elevator door opened on the tenth floor.

"Karen, are we?"

"I love you, Colin," Karen answered, as they walked arm in arm to room 1060. "It's time that I showed you just how much."

While neither Colin nor Karen ever openly talked about having sex, their friends were sure that this lack of confirmation was due to discretion and respect, not abstinence. They were openly affectionate and spent most of their free time together, so everyone assumed that Colin and Karen were making love regularly.

"Do you like what I've done to the place?" Karen asked as they opened the door and went inside the hotel room.

Candles had been placed on the dressers and night tables and they were lit, a bottle of wine was open with two glasses by its side, the bed was turned down.

This explains where you were a half an hour ago," Colin said, his pulse now racing. "But how—."

"I saved the money I made taking care of Mrs. Peterson's stupid dog," Karen laughed. "At the time I wasn't planning this, but it worked out."

"Karen," Colin said as he took her hand in his, "are you sure? You know that I would never pressure you into doing anything you're not ready to do."

"Mr. Sullivan, do you love me?"

"More than life itself."

"When the time is right, will you marry me?"

"Once more?"

"You heard me, honey."

"Are you asking me to marry you? I thought the guy was supposed to do that."

"That's not an answer."

"Once I've got a contract and an income and I'm sure that I can support

you, I will ask you to marry me."

"Ask me now."

"You want to get married tonight, baby?"

"No, silly. But I do want you to ask me and to mean it with all of your heart."

Colin's head was spinning. Talk about your prom night stories.

"Karen Foster, will you marry me?"

"Yes, and I don't care if you are a famous athlete or a fireman. I want you to know that in your heart, baby. I love you, not the baseball hero or the super hunk, but you, Colin, who you are deep inside."

"Karen..."

"I also want you to know that I've never been with anyone else."

"I knew that Ka—."

"I'm not done. I never want to be with anyone else. Ever."

"I..."

"Shh," Karen said as she gently kissed Colin. "No more words."

"What about?"

"I've been on the pill for months, Colin."

"Really?"

"Doc Thomas gave it to me for my bad cramps. I think he also thought for sure that you and I—."

Colin leaned over and kissed Karen forcefully, with purpose. They made out for a few minutes, laughing and teasing each other almost casually, like two puppies playing. Colin removed his shirt, Karen was topless with only her panties on.

"Wait here," she said. "I've got a surprise for you." Karen got up and disappeared into the bathroom.

Colin was anxious and excited, nervous in a beautiful way. He too was a virgin, and he worried that he would fumble, be clumsy and quick. His anatomy was in full force, ready to burst. He took a deep breath, tried to steady himself. As he closed his eyes, he thought about all of the years he had known Karen Foster, how he'd watched her mature from a child to a woman. They were so young, yet they had shared so much — it was almost as if they had been married for years. He knew that he had no reason to be tense; whatever mistakes he made or shortcomings he had Karen would forgive or ignore. They would learn to be lovers together.

When Colin opened his eyes, Karen was standing at the foot of the bed.

"I hope you like this, baby." Karen had on her cheerleader outfit, unzipped and unbuttoned with nothing underneath.

"Do you know how many hours I've spent watching you dance and move around in that uniform?"

"That's why I thought—."

"It's perfect. Come here."

Karen crawled across the bed and on top of Colin. She removed his

underwear and began to massage and play with him. Colin reciprocated, Karen was moist and ready.

He rolled Karen over and looked into her eyes — those beautiful, unique, almost almond-shaped hazel eyes. He paused and kissed her tenderly, brushing her hair to the side and kissing her again.

"I love you, Karen."

"I love you too. Always."

When he entered her, Karen moaned and arched her back. Colin could not believe the thrill of the sensation, the raw excitement. He knew that he was supposed to go slow, to take his time, but that proved impossible.

He pushed, Karen writhed in response. She made more noise and dug her nails into Colin's back. Two minutes after it began, Colin yelled in ecstasy as he climaxed.

She watched him orgasm, delighting in her lover's pleasure. Karen was attracted to Colin's body, but she was fascinated by his face. His bright blue eyes contrasted vividly with his red hair. He had a perfect nose, deep dimples and high cheekbones. Karen loved to watch him play ball, to see the intensity of his expressions as he bared down on a hitter. Now that same intensity was directed at her.

Colin didn't move for a minute; he was spent, but he was also careful to keep his weight off of Karen and on his arms. When he started to stir, Karen stopped him.

"Stay on top of me, honey. Please."

"Okay. I thought I might be hurting you."

"No, baby. I just want to be close to you."

"Sorry, Karen."

"Bout what?"

"I didn't mean to finish so fast. I tried to hold—."

Karen laughed and kissed Colin on the cheek as he held her.

"It was beautiful, Colin. Just like I always imagined it would be. You were great. We're just getting started, anyway."

A few minutes later, Karen showed Colin what she liked and he responded, moving his hand as she told him to. Her passion was soon fulfilled.

"Karen?" Colin asked a minute or so after he finished pleasing Karen.

"Yes, baby."

"I think I'm ready to try it again."

Reaching down and touching him, Karen said, "I'd say so! How long is it supposed to take, for a guy to recover, I mean?"

"No clue, but I know how long it took me. Twenty minutes."

They spent the next twelve hours exploring each other, sharing the intimate pleasures of love. Colin and Karen were one now, bonded physically and spiritually. A future wedding would only be necessary to demonstrate outwardly what each of them knew as an absolute truth, that they were meant for each other and no one else.

Chapter Nine

"Last night was torture. Why didn't you call me back?"

"I left you a message, Karen."

"Telling me that you'd be here at nine a.m., that wasn't—."

"Do we have to do this? Butt heads? I'm sorry if—."

"You're right, Scotty. As always, I'm forever apologizing to you."

Armour let Karen's condescending emotional jab land unreturned. He wanted to focus on the immediate problem and not be distracted.

"Please, talk to me," Karen begged.

"I don't know why, but Aimee has decided to break the promise. She has already given some sort of statement to Sy Green, the DirtyLaundry.com guy."

"Tiny and Amanda suspected as much."

"We need to go see Aimee. Together."

"I agree, Scott. That still doesn't explain why Colin killed himself."

"It doesn't? I was told that he wrote you a letter."

"Read it yourself," Karen instructed, handing Scott Colin's suicide note. He took a minute and read the short missive.

"It couldn't be more clear, Karen."

"Colin Sullivan was a priest. Believe me I know, better than anyone else, how seriously he took his vows, how deeply he believed in God. Suicide is a grave sin to you Catholics, isn't it? You can go to Hell for doing that."

Despite his best intentions, Scott Armour was drawn back against his will into the emotional quagmire that too often defined his turbulent relationship with Karen Foster.

"Why do you do this, Karen?"

"Do what?"

"Poke at me, start the same old argument over and over again."

"I'm not trying to start an argument, I'm trying to understand why Colin shot himself."

"This is old ground, Karen."

"Because he loved me more than anything else in this world, or even in the next? As always, he had a funny way of showing it, Scotty."

"A funny sort of...Karen, my God. Don't go down this road. Not today."

"Is there a better day? What day would that be, Scott?"

"Colin did what he did, always, out of love. He worshipped you, Karen."

"He blew his brains out because he worshipped me? He condemned me to a childless marriage because he worshipped me? He chose the Church over me because he worshipped me?"

"Are you through?"

"What, no pithy response? Defend him, your brother, my soul mate."

"The Saints will defend him, Karen. All I can do is love him."

Karen Foster started to say something else, to throw more salt in the

wound, but she could no longer mask her grief with anger. She broke down — not sadness, but collapse. Scotty Armour was the only person in the world, other than Colin, whom she trusted enough to reveal her true self to, to be totally vulnerable.

"Scotty...I...I wasn't there for him. I...was...never." Karen's words struggled out between her groans of agony.

Scott walked around the Governor's desk and held her tightly, as a brother would console a sister. He moved her to the couch, wrapped his arms around her and kissed her forehead, gently rocking her back and forth. Minutes passed. They said nothing.

"Why do you put up with me?" Karen asked, finally composed enough to break the silence.

"Because I love you. Because I love Colin. Karen, listen to me, please."

Karen's face, still beautiful and perfect at the age of fifty-six, was streaked with tear-damaged mascara and makeup. She lifted her head off of Scotty's chest and looked up at him.

"I will never abandon you. Neither will Tiny, Jenny or Amanda. No matter what, we will be there for you. We'll get through this together, as a family."

"Not yet, Scotty."

"Not yet?"

"Please don't let me go, not just yet. Hold me for a little longer. Please."

"Sure, Karen. I'm sorry, I'm not the best—."

"There you go apologizing to me again, Mr. Armour."

The morning light invaded Governor Foster's office. The brightness reflected off of Karen's polished glass bookshelves, highlighting photographs of her with powerful politicians and the rich and famous. Empty images, Karen thought as she took comfort in Scotty's embrace. Hollow icons of a life spent pursuing a dream not meant for her, an evil consequence falsely portrayed as God's will.

"Your friends are assholes, Mrs. Bynum."

"They're not my friends," Aimee replied.

"Whatever. Not one of your 'friends' will corroborate your story. They say that you're a lush and pill popper; a "disgusting liar," that's what Amanda Simpson called you."

"About all this, Mr. Green. I've been thinking it through and maybe it's not such a good idea after all."

"What?"

"Maybe I shouldn't say anything."

"You're kidding, right? Humor?"

"Do I sound like I'm joking?"

"Have you read our contract?"

"No, I hate all of that legal bullcrap. Between my father and my husband, they've bored me to death with that garbage all my life."

"You should read our agreement, what you signed."

"I don't need fifty grand that bad, Mr. Green. I'll give you back your money."

"Okay, I'll take it, but it changes nothing."

"If I refuse to go on the record, what do you have? Nothing."

"You are stupid, just like Mr. Armour said you were."

"Scotty came to see you?"

"Yesterday. He threw my lunch on the ground and threatened to hurt me. Fucking bully."

"Scott Armour sought you out and told you—."

"He said that if I ran the story he would 'visit hell upon me'."

"Well, then I am doing you a huge favor by reneging."

"Okay, I'll bite. I know a few things about Scotty Armour. He's no Mafia goon."

"Not even the Mafia would mess with Scotty. They're smarter than that. You, obviously, are not."

"Is this when I'm supposed to get scared?"

"I thought that you did your homework, Sy. You read the statements in Colin's case, figured out all on your own that we were probably covering for someone. Did you even Google Scotty Armour?"

"Why? I know enough. Former major league baseball player, a catcher for the Padres. Big time Catholic, he's a deacon in his church. Head of Southern Nevada Catholic Charities. Loves kids, dogs, America and apple pie. How am I doing so far?"

"Bill McGuire."

"Who?"

"Bill McGuire. Know who he is?"

"No. Should I?"

"Tony, no, Toby House? Know him?"

"Get to the point, Mrs. Bynum."

"If you piss off Scott Armour and he believes that he is 'righteous', that's the term he uses, he will not hesitate to beat your ass. Not a punch in the nose and goodbye, but an old fashioned throttling. He'll figure you had it coming. Jail, prison, lawsuits - Scotty could care less about that shit. He's the real deal, Sy. John freaking Wayne."

"These two guys, Bill Mc what and Tony—."

"McGuire and Toby House. McGuire attacked Jenny Righetti back in '91, lumped her up and tried to rape her. House was a dirty cop, he framed Amanda's kid brother on a phony dope charge. Scotty "handled" those situations, Sy. McGuire spent six months in a cast, House is in a wheelchair. Permanently. If he handles you, give me a shout from the hospital."

"I just filed a police report on Mr. Armour. I'm pressing charges for

assault."

"I thought you said all he did was threaten you."

"He did enough. The cops will arrest him, the D.A. will charge him."

"Wow!" Aimee exclaimed, caustically laughing. "Good luck, pal. My bet is that you'll never see it coming, the payback that's headed your way. As for us, we're through. I've changed my mind. I won't say anything on camera."

"Yes, you will."

"You're not listening, Green."

"And you're not reading, Mrs. Bynum. Our agreement permits me to tape record and broadcast all of our conversations; this one too, by the way. I'll put your picture on the screen and press play. It'll be a riot."

"You wouldn't. No way."

"Oh, bank on it, sister. I don't think I need anyone else to confirm your story — your 'friend' Mr. Armour's antics and your attempted recantation are validation enough. How's tomorrow night sound?"

"You're bluffing."

"Why would I? No need, the tapes are so juicy. Scandal and coverup, threats and intimidation. The networks will grab the story, put it on the nightly news. Tremendous publicity, ratings through the roof."

"Please," Aimee begged. "I'm sorry, I never should—."

"Too late, what's done is done. Keep the fifty k, baby. You've earned it."

Mrs. Bynum dropped her handheld phone onto the marble tile floor of her kitchen, where it shattered with a loud crack into several pieces. Reaching into the cabinet, Aimee pulled out an unopened bottle of scotch and a glass.

Even temporary sobriety was no longer an option. Aimee wondered how much whiskey she would have to drink before the demons in her mind that relentlessly tortured her faded into blackness.

Chapter Ten

May 28, 1978

Graduation Night

"I'm sweating like a pig," Jenny complained. "Please tell me why we couldn't do this in the gym."

"Not enough seats, supposedly. I think tradition was the bigger factor though," Kyle explained.

"Aren't you hot?" Jenny asked.

"I'm immune to the heat. Native desert rat. I put on a coat when it drops below ninety."

"Kyle, about last night. I don't want you to get the wrong idea or anything. I was smashed, you were there, things just—."

"Are we still friends?"

"I hope so. I want to be."

"Good. Just checking. Then I don't have to play games with you, do I?"

"No."

"Jen, you are one foxy babe, sexy as hell. I've wanted to jump your bones since the eighth grade. No offense, but I don't need a girlfriend. I would like to take you up to Dad's cabin at Brian Head and wear you out. Maybe several weekends."

"Friends with benefits?"

"Fuck buddies."

"How touching. You're just like all the other guys I date except they have houses, ski boats and TransAms."

"They have wives too, Jen."

"Touche'."

"Are we cool?"

"Totally."

"Later tonight then, on my dad's boat. You and I can slip down to the master suite and get naked."

"What, you think I'm that easy? That you can have me whenever you want me, like some dog on a leash?"

"Are you into leashes, baby? I've got some toys if you—."

"Don't push it, Kyle."

"Hey!" Karen called out as she and Colin approached and sat down next to Kyle and Jenny. "Where's Amanda?"

"She's not coming, Karen," Jenny answered.

"Sweetie isn't coming to her own graduation? Bullshit, where is she, I'll go right now and—."

"Her mom is in the hospital, Karen. Amanda's dad, well, you know. It's not

the first time."

"That son of a bitch, that no good, drunk ass motherf—."

"That's him. We should stop by the hospital after the ceremony and kidnap Amanda before we head to the lake. If her mother is stable," Jenny suggested.

"Did the police arrest the creep?"

"Karen," Colin reminded, as he gently touched her hand, "Amanda's father is a cop."

"What's up guys?" Scotty and Tiny were still dressed in jeans and T-shirts and soaked with sweat. They were part of the crew that assembled the stage for the graduation ceremony.

"You were supposed to be done an hour ago," Karen said.

"Tiny's a bit slow, took longer than we thought."

"Me? My back hurts from carrying you, muscle head. I'm slow. That's a crock of—."

"You're dripping on me, Tiny."

"Sorry, Jen."

"Go hop in the shower, honey. Take Scott with you. You can wash his back," Jenny teased.

"Watch for Angie, Jen. Save her a seat."

"We're holding a place for her, Tiny. Now get out of here, you stink."

"Tiny's in love," Kyle smugly observed once Mancuso and Armour were out of earshot. "It's so cute. Very Disney."

"Don't make fun of Tiny, Kyle."

"Sensitive? Jealous?"

"Kyle," Jenny said, "your charm has limits and you've reached them."

Leaning over, Kyle whispered in Jen's ear, "I think it's really cool that Tiny and Angie are together. I'm happy for them both, but I've got an image to maintain, babe. Mr. Insensitive can't get mushy."

"You're really a romantic fool at heart?"

"Don't tell anyone."

"Your secret is safe with me."

"Karen Foster," Mrs. Butler, Chapman High's longest tenured teacher, deliberately pronounced into the microphone. Stepping up to the dais, Karen accepted her diploma from Principal Mannion. She followed the line of new grads back to her seat next to Colin.

One by one they paraded in alphabetic order to accept their sheepskin, their symbol that childhood was over, their cue that it was time to engage the world as proto-adults.

"Aimee Hart," Mrs. Butler enunciated, followed immediately by "Kyle Hart." A large group of people in the reviewing stands stood and cheered and flashbulbs popped. A camera crew from a local television station sprang to life

and filmed Mayor Oscar Hart and his wife Penny as they hugged and kissed and celebrated the achievements of their children for the benefit of the nightly news.

Anthony Mancuso's name was announced. Tiny's parents and his seven brothers and sisters screamed at the top of their lungs. They were so proud, and with good reason; for a family as Catholic as the Mancusos, to have a son or a brother receive a scholarship to play football for the Fighting Irish was an honor akin to the priesthood. Jenny's name was called, as was Amanda's, although she wasn't present to accept her diploma.

"Colin Sullivan," Mrs. Butler declared with enthusiasm. Half of the people in the stands stood and clapped their hands. The entire graduating class also enthusiastically expressed their tribute.

It was Colin, everyone was sure, who would define Chapman High's class of 1978. He was declared the number one high school baseball prospect by *The Sporting News* and was on every scout's top ten list nationwide. Speculation was that Colin might only need half a season in minors before he would be ready for the big show. The Dodgers traded a capable, veteran first baseman to the hapless Braves for the right to the first pick in the draft, which they used to select Colin Sullivan. A bonus check for \$200,000 was waiting for Colin at the offices of L.A.'s AAA affiliate in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He was scheduled to report to the Dukes on June twelfth.

"That was embarrassing," Colin admitted as he sat down.

Karen responded, "Better the crowd loves you than hates you."

"I don't think I'd like being booed."

"Get ready for that, honey. You won't win every game in the pros."

"That so? Never would have guessed that, darlin'."

"Don't get smart with me, mister. I'll take you over my knee."

"I thought that's what you—."

"Shh," Karen said as she squeezed Colin's hand. "What we do is private."

Although they wanted to, they couldn't just bolt once the ceremony concluded. There were hands to shake, cheeks to kiss, goodbyes to be said. It had taken nearly an hour before everyone was ready to go.

"I can't believe I lost," Scott bitched as he started the twelve seat passenger van Oscar Hart had procured for his children's use on graduation night.

"Low card is the designated driver. Bad time to pull a deuce, studly," Kyle teased.

"That was your deck, wasn't it, Hart?"

"As a proud American and a recent graduate of a fine institution of educational excellence, I humbly refuse to answer that question on the grounds that I'm guilty as hell."

"You rigged it, so you could party."

"What can I say? I'm a weasel, Scotty." Kyle's voice went high-pitched as he took a hit off of a joint. "Always scheming."

"Drive!" Colin, Tiny and Karen all shouted in unison. Contrary to his half-hearted grumbling, Scotty wasn't mad. In fact, he wanted to be the pilot, to look out for his buddies. He didn't drink or smoke much anyway, Scott Armour preferred a sober mind. No one actually ever said it, but it was understood - Scott was their leader, not Colin. He was responsible for saving them from themselves when the booze and the drugs flowed a little too freely and someone hit the fool button. It was Armour who leapt from behind the plate, or from behind the bar, when some knucklehead tried to pick a fight with the great Colin Sullivan. He guarded Karen, Jenny and Amanda like they were his sisters. Kyle's smart mouth never got him into serious trouble because Scotty was always there to back him up.

Nobody in their right mind ever messed with Scott Armour or one of his friends. The consequences were simply too severe.

"Sweetie. What good can you do by staying here? Your mom is okay, you heard the doctor," Karen reasoned as she, Jenny and Colin talked with Amanda in the ER waiting room at Sunrise Hospital.

"Did you see her head, Karen? He hit her with a wine bottle. She needed twenty stitches."

"Your father is a punk bastard. My dad says...oh, sorry, Sweetie." Colin shut up because Karen poked him in the ribs.

"He's still my father, Colin."

"Yes, for sure. Sorry."

"He's my father and I know better than you what a punk bastard he is, Colin. He can't hold his liquor."

"That's a lame excuse, Sweetie."

"I know, Karen. I know."

"Your aunt is here, right? She's in with your mom now?" Jenny asked.

"She's in there, mad as hell and ready to kill my dad. Lydia always has despised pop."

"She loves her sister and you too, I'd imagine," Jenny offered.

"Look, Sweetie, it's your grad night. You will never have another one. I know your mom, Amanda. Sydney would not want you sitting here worrying about her, she'd want you to enjoy yourself."

"I told Lydia that you guys were coming. She said that I should go, that she would stay with mom."

"Where's your dad?" Colin asked.

"Driving around in a black and white, working his shift, if you can believe that."

"Like I said, I'll shut up."

"I'll go tell Aunt Lyd that I'm leaving, check on mom one last time. Can you guys hang out for a few minutes?"

"Take your time, Sweetie. We'll be right here," Karen said, reassuringly. She kissed Amanda on the cheek and gave her a firm hug.

"Doesn't Al know somebody who could deal with this piece of shit? What is this, the third time he's hurt her since Christmas?" Colin asked.

"You want me to ask my dad to put a hit out on a cop? Are you fucking crazy?" Jenny answered.

"Since when does your pop give a rat's ass about cops?"

"You watch too many movies, Colin."

"I'm not saying that he should kill the creep, just knock some sense into him. A wake-up call."

"Assault a Las Vegas policeman. My dad is on thin ice as it is, Colin."

"Ten years ago this would have been handled, your mom protected."

"This is the seventies. Vegas is changing," Jenny said.

"For the worse," Colin offered.

"You ask him, then. He thinks you walk on water."

"I just might."

Karen shot Colin a look that he knew meant, "If you say one more word it will be your last."

"Fine. I'll wait in the van. You ladies handle things in here. What do I know anyway." Colin gave Karen a quick peck on the lips and left. Amanda reappeared a moment later.

"Let's go. Mom is awake, babbling like a damn fool. She is already saying how 'George didn't mean it' and 'It was all my fault.' I'm tired of it, Karen. Sick to death of this stupid game they play."

"Sweetie, I'm so sorry."

"I don't want to be sorry for either of them anymore. To hell with this bullshit."

It was ten p.m. when the van turned off of Boulder Highway and onto Lake Mead Boulevard and headed South towards the marina. They were running a little late because they stopped to pick up a few supplies - a keg of Bud, three bottles of tequila, an ounce of pot, a baggie full of ludes and a huge deli tray.

Other than Scotty, who was sober as a judge, the crew was wasted, partying hard. They knew that it was likely to be their last night together for awhile because some of them were going in different directions - Colin to the Dukes, Tiny to an exclusive football camp in Indiana, Jenny to Europe to backpack from England to Greece with her older sister.

"Okay, I got one. Remember sixth grade, Mr. Bissell's class? That Spanish girl, Rosemarie, Rosalee?" Colin asked.

"Rosie. What a doll. You guys were so cruel to her," Aimee whined.

"We were, weren't we," Colin agreed.

"You're proud of that?" Aimee asked.

"Aimee, we were twelve. Twelve. Little kids?"

"That's no excuse for meanness."

"Shut up, Aimee. And while you're at it, lighten up too," Kyle barked.

"Bite me, brother."

"Continue, Colin. Ignore my stupid sister," Kyle said.

"Was it you, Tiny, who—," Colin asked.

"It was me."

"Why did you put rotten eggs in her desk?" Colin asked.

"She wouldn't pay attention to me, that's why."

"Good enough reason in my book," Kyle mockingly concurred.

"Who told Mrs. Lovinger?" Colin wanted to know.

"No one fessed up, but I have my suspicions," Kyle said, staring at Aimee.

"Why me? Find someone else to blame once in awhile, will you?"

"It was you. I'll be damned," Colin said, as he slugged down another shot of Cuervo. "Anyway, Tiny walked to the principal's office, head hangin' low, all misty-eyed. As soon as recess started, Scotty and I went over there, to the window, where we could hear everything."

"This is embarrassing," Tiny said.

"Tiny is in there pleading with the old witch, 'I didn't do it, it wasn't me', but Lovie was havin' none of it. Then she tells him to drop his pants down to his skivvies and bend over."

"So that's why..." Karen said, smiling.

"Ol' Tiny, he wasn't going to let Lovie whack him with that paddle, no sir. So he—."

"Colin, come on, man," Tiny begged.

"So he bolts out of the room, pants still down to his ankles, and trips on the step. How many teeth did you lose when you hit the cement?"

"Three," Tiny confessed.

"Blood everywhere. Now, Bissell, he thinks that Lovie beat up Tiny or something. He's mortified, the prissy little Nancy boy. He prances around, runs to the nurse, raises all sorts of hell, but Tiny, now he's pissed."

"Oh geez," Tiny groaned.

"So Tiny boy goes back into the principal's office, bleedin' like a stuck pig all over everything, grabs that paddle of hers and yells—."

"Nobody hits me except my dad!" Karen broke in. "From this part on, I saw what happened. Tiny flings the thing as hard as he can across the room and it shatters the window as it flies out onto the yard."

"Busted window, blood all over the place, people runnin' all around and what does Tiny do next?" Colin said, continuing his narration.

"He sits down and cries, right smack dab in the middle of Lovie's office, spraying blood and tears all over the carpet and the furniture," Scott added from the driver's seat.

"The old lady got fired over that mess," Tiny said. "I kinda felt bad about it."

"Lovinger had no right to hit children," Karen opined. "I don't care if it was '72. She should have known better."

"Spin the bottle," Jenny said, changing the subject. "How many times did we play that game?"

"What year?" Colin asked.

"How 'bout the eighth grade, the last time we played."

"Do we have to—."

"What? We only reminisce about my finest moments?" Tiny argued.

"Whatever," Colin snorted.

"I'll tell this one, I love this story," Karen said.

"Bet you do," Scott said.

"That was the first time I smoked pot," Karen admitted. "I remember feeling like I was floating or something. Not out of control, but definitely loose."

"Now don't make this story out to be more than it really was, dear," Colin whined.

"You and Scotty getting into a fist fight? Nobody who knows you two today would ever believe that could happen."

"Who won?" Aimee wanted to know. She was not present during the event.

"I'd call it a tie," Kyle stated.

"It was only a tie because Tiny stepped in and kept me from kicking Colin's ass," Scotty bragged.

"I might have surprised you," Colin said.

"Doubt that, Koufax. You're a lover, not a fighter."

"That's for sure," Karen whispered in Colin's ear. They laughed and kissed.

"Anywho, as I recall Colin didn't want to play because he didn't want me to play," Karen began.

"You're right," Colin concurred.

"But I wanted to go for it. The only guy I'd ever kissed was Colin. The pot made me brave. I was curious."

"You wanted to kiss Scotty. Admit it," Colin said.

"Yes, I did."

"Floozie," Colin teased.

"So I kinda half spun, half placed the bottle on Scott, leaned over and laid one on him."

"Ah, the memories," Colin joked.

"What was it like, kissing Scott?" Jenny asked.

"Like kissing my brother, but I didn't know that until I did it."

"Thanks, Karen. Thanks a lot," Scott groused.

"You are a very handsome man, Mr. Armour. You're just too blind to see it. Women swoon over you," Karen said.

"She's not lying, Scott. Trust me," Jenny agreed.

"Sure. Pump me up, flatter me. I'm the old third wheel."

"Carla Grossan," Jenny said.

"What about Carla?" Scotty asked.

"The girl adores you, she'd drink your bath water."

"Not interested."

"Why not? For heaven's sake, Carla is a doll, don't you think so, Colin?" Jenny asked.

"Nice ass, decent legs, ugly face, a little light on top. She's okay, nothin' special," Colin answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Wow. Paying close attention, are we?" Karen noticed.

"Only for Scotty's benefit. He can do better."

"So harsh. You guys rate us all, do you? Hair, face, tits, ass - that's all we are to you, isn't it, objects."

"Like you don't size up men, Jen. Give me a break," Kyle said.

"Of course. I'm picky, but it isn't all about looks."

"Yea, they have to be older than your dad and richer than Howard Hughes, huh," Aimee taunted.

"Frigid bitch," Jenny mumbled.

"What did you call—."

"Hey!" Karen yelled, interrupting to forestall trouble. "I was telling a story here."

"Please, continue. We digress," Kyle said.

"So, I sit back down, think nothing of it, but Colin leaps across our little circle tackles Scotty and starts swinging."

"He hit nothin' but air," Scott bragged.

"Oh, I landed at least two solid shots," Colin argued.

"In your dreams."

"And all the time he's hollerin' 'Don't you ever!' over and over again," Jenny added.

"What can I say? No one messes with my girl."

"She kissed me, remember? I was an innocent victim," Scott pleaded.

"Victim my ass, you were asking for it."

"Everyone had a crush on Karen Foster at one time or another, Colin," Scott said.

"Well, you didn't do it again, did you?"

"I felt so bad," Karen confessed. "I wasn't thinking, but I learned two valuable lessons."

"Do tell," Jenny said.

"Kissing anyone but Colin is not something I ever want to do."

"I love you, dear," Colin cracked, batting his eyes.

"Love you too, babe, and I need to be careful when I smoke weed. It kinda makes me, well, you know."

"Horny?" Jenny said.

"Amorous."

"Here," Jenny said, tossing an unlit joint towards Aimee. "Smoke this."

Maybe it will help."

"Why do you think I need help?" Aimee asked in a snide tone.

"Because you need to date someone besides your dildo, honey. Get a life."

"Just because I don't sleep with every man who will buy me a piece of jewelry—."

"Hey, sometimes a necklace or a ring is called for, you know, to show a man's appreciation," Kyle argued.

"You're as bad as they are, brother. Worse."

"Thank you."

"Don't listen to them, Aimee. You just be who you are. Date if you want to or wait for a while. No two people are the same." Karen always tried to make peace, to salve Aimee's emotional wounds.

"Easy for you to say," Aimee shot back.

"Excuse me?"

"Miss Drop Dead Gorgeous, every guy in the world would kill to be with you, in love with the coolest stud in school. You're giving me advice? If I looked like you life would be easy. Please."

"Whoa there, Aimee. Be a good girl," Colin scolded.

"Yea, sis. Mellow out. You're just too tempting, so we pick on you a little, but we love you," Kyle said.

Whispering in Colin's ear, Jenny said, "Can we pull over and dump her out? Let Aimee party with the rattlesnakes."

"You've got my vote," Colin agreed.

Oscar Hart had been the mayor of Las Vegas since 1972, but in a previous life he was a high-profile defense lawyer who represented the finest felons Sin City had to offer. While the mayor's current salary was scant, financially he was set for life - hence his desire to pursue public service and morph from Mafia mouthpiece into the Honorable Mr. Hart.

The boat was a left over from Oscar's high-flying days, a sixty foot, one hundred thousand dollar gift from a Kansas City client whose last name ended in a vowel and proudly bore the moniker "Bobby the Brat". The mayor rarely used it, except for the occasional tryst with some bimbo young enough to be his daughter. It was the scene of many a Chapman High party, so the craft was semi-legendary.

"We're going to move, start the engine and cruise away? At night?" Aimee asked.

"Boat. Water. Engine. Boat floats on water, propeller turns."

"Kyle, for hell's sake. Quit fuckin' around. When is the last time you drove this thing?"

"A month ago. Scotty and I took her out for a test run."

"In the daytime."

"Daytime, smaytime. We're going to those three little islands, no more than a few miles from here. BFD."

"Kyle, I don't think—."

Kyle forcefully grabbed Aimee by the arm and pulled her into the galley, where they could talk alone.

"Alright, Aimee. You know what, I'm really sick of your crap. I know that you're a bitch, but damn girl, you need to shut up. I'm tired of defending you, telling everyone that you're just a grouch and not a complete asshole."

"Kyle, why can't--."

Slamming his fist against the refrigerator, Kyle cut off his sister. "No more, Aimee. If you don't want to be here with your best and only, I might add, friends on grad night, then fucking leave. Take the van and go home or go to hell. But you will not bring me and everyone else down with your bullshit. Enough."

"Okay. I'm sorry. You know how I can get."

"You're my sister, Aimee, and I love you. But damn it, sometimes...just chill out. Please. Relax and have fun."

"Alright."

"One more thing."

"There's something else?"

"Don't poke at Jen. She likes you when you behave."

"Why, are you poking at Jenny?"

Kyle didn't answer, he just stared at Aimee with the kind of look he learned from his father, the kind that meant "don't ask me any more questions".

"I'll be damned. I knew it."

"Aimee."

"Yes, I'm good. Little Miss Happy. Give me a lude."

"That's my girl."

"Shine that spotlight over there," Kyle said to Scotty, who was assisting him on the bridge.

"What are we looking for?"

"A mooring ball."

"I don't remember seeing one of those around here when we scouted the place."

"Pop says it's out here, so it's out here."

They floated by slowly, scanning the black water and steering clear of the rocks. Suddenly, there it was, a bright orange mooring ball right below a twenty-foot cliff.

"Thank you, Mayor Hart," Scott said.

"The lake is forty feet deep around here and we are hidden from the shore and sheltered from the wind."

"Home sweet home."

Chapter Eleven

May 29, 1978

Two a.m.

"Those summer nights are callin', stone in love. Can't help myself I'm fallin', stone in love..."

"New Journey? I haven't heard that song before" Jenny shouted, trying to be heard over the excessively amplified sound system blasting music throughout the boat.

"Bootleg concert tape," Kyle answered.

"They rock," Jenny said.

"So do you."

"Kyle." Jenny moved Kyle into a small alcove near the bridge so they could talk without screaming. "I'm not sure that..."

Kyle Hart kissed Jenny, not forcefully but tenderly, with more affection than lust.

"You were saying," Kyle said.

"Please don't play games with me, Kyle. If this is just sex, then..."

He kissed her again, even more delicately this time, running his fingers gently through her long, flowing blonde hair.

"Kyle..."

"I'm a jerk, you know that, right? A no good son of a politician, shallow and untrustworthy."

"And I'm Miss Eighteen trying to be forty. A madam in the making."

"Not to me you're not."

"Who am I to you?"

"Beautiful Jenny Righetti, with those dorky, thick black glasses you used to wear in the seventh grade, making eyes at me across the lunchroom."

"I never made eyes at you."

"Liar."

"Okay, but only a couple of times."

"I don't think about you in the same way that I think about other girls."

"This should be interesting."

"Both of us, Jen, we never have, never will, lack for attention. People pursue us, we don't pursue them."

"The fox, not the hound."

"What?"

"Something my dad told me. Go on, I'm listening."

Kyle stopped for a moment and kissed Jenny once more, a long, deep kiss as he lightly touched her breast and caressed her face.

"We're the same," Kyle pronounced. "Two of a kind."

"I'm not rich, Kyle, no matter what you all think. My dad's tough guy days

are over. He's a regular person now; goes to work, comes home, feeds the dog, kisses mom."

"Money has nothing to do with it, Jenny. How many guys that you wanted to date have you dated? Ever been rejected?"

"Well, there was one—."

"Jen, stop it. Who are you talking to?"

"I was going to say that the only guy I really wanted to be with and never could be was, well, was you."

"It's the same for me. I was always afraid to tell you how I felt because I figured since you knew who I really was, the last thing you would want to do is be with me."

"You really mean that, don't you."

"Every word."

"What about all your 'fuck buddy' talk. You don't want a girlfriend and—."

"That's what everyone expects Kyle Hart to say."

"You aren't the person you pretend to be, are you."

"Are you?"

"Yes and no."

"My answer exactly."

"Which means what, Kyle?"

"Which means that I think, no, I'm sure that I'm in love with you, Jennifer Righetti. I'm also sure that I always have been, it just took this long for me to realize it, to admit it."

This time, Jen took the lead, wrapping herself around Kyle, pulling them back onto the wet bar as their embrace rapidly became more erotic.

"Colin and I find that a bedroom with a...honey, what do you call that flat, wood thingy with a handle?"

"A door," Colin said, snickering.

"Yea, a door," Karen said, giggling. "In a bedroom behind a locked door, that's where we do it. But then we don't like an audience."

"Busted," Kyle confessed.

"Totally," Karen agreed.

"You guys were going to tell us about this when?" Colin asked.

"It's kind of a new thing," Jen said, embarrassed but apparently very happy.

"We came searching for you two because we're going to swim over to the island and start a bonfire," Colin said.

Kyle looked at Jenny, in a way that he had never looked at her or any other girl before, declaring with his eyes that he loved her, then said, "Whatever Jen wants to do is cool with me."

"Holy smokes. I'm impressed, blown away," Karen complimented.

"Me too," Jenny agreed. "Who would have thought?"

"Actually, Tiny told me a long time ago that you two would end up together," Colin said.

"Now you're telling stories, honey," Karen said.

"No, for real. He knew that sooner or later it would happen. I didn't think so, but I'm not exactly the love doctor."

"You're my love doctor, sugar," Karen teased as she wrapped her arms around Colin.

"Okay," Jenny said, as she climbed off of the counter, buttoned her jean shorts and straightened her halter top. "Are we taking a raft?"

"Sure," Colin said.

"Then please toss us in a sleeping bag. We'll stay over there. Wouldn't want to keep you guys awake all night. I get kinda noisy."

"Too much information," Karen said, laughing.

"You stud," Colin whispered as he, Kyle, Jen and Karen walked to the back of the boat. "Another notch on the belt. Jenny Righetti. Your legend grows, Kyle."

"It's not like that, Colin."

"Kyle. I've known you forever. It's cool, man. Jenny can look after herself, no one will think that you—."

"Like I said, it's not like that, Colin. Jenny really means something to me."

"Are you telling me that Jen actually melted that ice cube in your chest? You love her? No shit?"

"Is it really that hard to believe?"

"Honestly? Yes."

"Well, you guys better start believing it because...hey, what the hell was that?"

Close by, either on the island or on shore, a pack of coyotes yapped and howled, obviously cornering some early morning snack.

"Coyotes," Colin answered. "I hate those ugly things."

"Can they swim?" Kyle wondered.

"All dogs can swim, can't they?"

"Well then, we better take this," Kyle said, removing his father's thirty-eight from the drawer. He also grabbed a box of shells.

"You're going to shoot a coyote?"

"If one of those mangy mutts comes anywhere near us, he's buzzard food."

"My hero."

"You won't think it's so amusing when one of those bastards sneaks up on you and growls. Those suckers have some grisly teeth."

"Just don't blast yourself in the foot, Dirty Harry," Colin said.

By the time they reached the island, it was almost three thirty a.m. The swim reinvigorated them. They stoked up the fire until the flames shot ten feet in the air, and they continued to party, smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol and popping ludes with abandon. Only Scott Armour was semi-sober, but even he was now imbibing, reveling in their celebration of friendship and their rite of passage into adulthood.

May 29, 1978
Four thirty a.m.

"You couldn't hit your ass with both hands, Hart," Tiny proclaimed.

"Says you, helmet head," Kyle retorted.

"How many times have you actually fired that pistol, Kyle?"

"Enough."

"Bullshit. Talk. All talk. Talk, talk, talk."

"What do you know, Mr. Offensive Lineman?"

"I know how to shoot a gun, that's for sure."

"A rifle and a handgun are two different things, Mancuso. Just because you've murdered a few Bambis doesn't mean you know how to handle a Roscoe."

"What's a Roscoe?" Jenny asked.

"A made up movie name fake mobsters use for a gun," Colin answered.

"It's not a made up...Anyway, you children keep away from Daddy's 'Roscoe', it's not a toy."

"Listen to my brother calling us children. He's the biggest kid I know."

"Aimee, shut the fuck up."

"Whoa, big bad brother. Whoa."

"Lemme see it," Karen said, slurring her words.

"Baby, you don't—," Colin said.

"Ah, come on, Colin. I just wanna touch it."

"Is that how it started, big guy? She just wanted to 'touch it'?" Jenny joked.

"I just wanna touch it," Karen repeated.

"You're smashed, honey."

"Please. Pretty please. Just lemme hold it. You guys have all had a turn. Not fair."

"She always gets like this, Colin? Turns into a toddler when she gets ripped?"

"You be quiet, Jen-ee-fur. I just wanna hold the gun. It's my turn."

"Give her the 'Roscoe', Kyle," Colin said.

"No, I'm putting it back—."

"Let her hold the damn thing. What harm can she do with an unloaded gun?" Colin reasoned.

"Yea, girls can shoot guns, too. Boys think they're so smart."

Kyle handed Karen the gun. When he did a coyote howled, loud enough to make them believe that the creature might be on the island with them.

"Give it back, Karen," Kyle said.

"No, I just got it. Lemme have a turn."

"That fucking coyote might be on the other side of those rocks. Now quit

messing around and give me the gun," Kyle demanded.

"No! If he pops out, I'll blast him! Bang! Bang!"

"Colin, handle this," Kyle said, a bit panicky.

"Karen, give me the gun, baby," Colin said. "You're shitfaced. Let's go back to the boat and crash."

"I can do it, honey. Watch me! I can shoot a gun."

"Karen...Kyle, you took the shells out, right? We never shot at those cans. You..."

"Fuck! Karen! Put the gun down!" Kyle demanded.

"I can do it baby, watch me!"

Karen Foster had no experience with guns, she had never held one before, much less fired off a round. The coyote sprang suddenly from the blackness, and as it did it bared its teeth and snarled. They could hear another two or three others making noise a few feet behind the lead animal, but they could not see them.

Aimee was less than ten feet away from the beast, sitting by Tiny. Mancuso stood, picked up Aimee with his right arm and dragged her away from the dog and towards the raft. Jenny was standing by Colin, between him and the fire. Instinctively, once Tiny took Aimee out of harm's way, everyone froze. They were all wasted and tired, which reduced their ability to react quickly and think clearly.

After a few seconds, Kyle slowly moved towards Karen, as did Colin. The coyote reacted by circling behind Kyle, growling as he did.

"What the hell!" Scotty yelled as he emerged into the firelight, re-entering the camp site from the lakeside where he had been relieving himself.

Startled, the coyote jumped when Scott called out and, deliberately or not, seemed to be menacing Kyle.

"I'll shoot him! Bang! Bang!" Karen shouted, lost in a dazed fog of inebriated confusion. She was clearly not taking the weapon in her hand or the threat from the coyote seriously.

She pointed the pistol at the angry dog and pulled the trigger. Karen never expected the gun to fire, she was playing a game she thought was safe.

The recoil jerked her hand a foot to the right, sending the slug away from its intended target. Karen dropped the thirty-eight. The coyotes scattered, frightened away by the explosion of the shot.

"Kyle!" Aimee screamed as she ran to her brother who was lying face down on the sand and not moving.

Scotty and Colin beat Aimee to Kyle's side and flipped him over. His "Chapman High" emblazoned t-shirt was soaked red with blood gushing from a bullet wound visible mid-chest. Kyle Hart wasn't responding to their shouts, he had no pulse and he wasn't breathing.

Chapter Twelve

"She's where?" Scott Armour asked the jittery housekeeper.

"Sleeping. In the back room on the sofa, Senor Armour. She drink too much."

"What's new," Karen said.

"You come to arrest Mrs. Bynum, Governor?"

"No, Miss Rodriguez. These men are my bodyguards. Where I go, they go."

"Too bad. A few nights in the jail might do her some good."

"Amen to that," Scott agreed.

"Wake her up, please. What we have to say to her cannot wait."

"Ma'am, Mrs. Bynum gets very upset when I wake her. She will fire me."

"Well, we wouldn't want that now, would we," Karen said as she and Scotty walked towards the room where Aimee was sleeping. "You men stay out here and don't come barging in when you hear shouting. Understood?"

"Yes, Governor," the troopers responded.

Aimee Bynum was lying askew on the oversized sofa, her head uncomfortably dangling off the cushion, her soiled and scruffy nightgown pulled up to her waist and tangled. A half full glass of scotch teetered on the edge of the coffee table. It was evident that she had collapsed in a stupor and did not gently fall asleep. Aimee was snoring loudly and drooling from the side of her mouth.

"Not a pretty sight," Karen commented as she reached for an empty cup from the bar and filled it with cold tap water.

"I don't know what to...Karen, hold up, maybe we..."

Karen Foster flung the cup of water onto Aimee's face. She stirred but did not wake. Karen repeated the act, this time slowly pouring it directly on Aimee's forehead.

"Wha' the hell!" Aimee screeched. "The fuck is..." When Aimee opened her eyes and gained something close to consciousness, she saw Karen and stopped blabbering. Scotty helped her sit up.

"Coffee?" Scotty asked.

"Why do people always offer drunks coffee? So stupid, it doesn't help," Aimee responded.

"How about cyanide, or a pistol so you can put yourself out of our misery," Karen offered.

"Karen, I'm so sorry about Colin. I really mean...Scott, be a dear and hand me that drink, will you?"

"This one?" Scott asked, holding up the half-full tumbler from the table.

"Sure."

Scotty reached over and picked up Aimee's scotch, but he poured it out on the carpet rather than hand it to her.

"I'll just make another."

"And I'll just bitch slap you, you pathetic lush," Scott snapped.

Aimee didn't move, she was apparently deterred by Scotty's very credible bravado.

"Start talking, Aimee. What have you done?" Karen accused.

"It's too late..." Lamenting now began in earnest. Aimee wailed and prattled incoherently, rocking back and forth like a schizophrenic. Scott let her rave for a bit, but then he slapped Aimee with authority, not once, but twice. Then he grabbed her with both hands and shook her. She stopped crying and seemed to be trying to focus.

"Karen asked you a question. Answer it," Armour ordered.

"You guys already know," Aimee confessed. "I told Sy Green what actually happened on grad night. I tried to take it back, I really did. I said that I wasn't going to go through with it. He said that he had taped our conversations and that our contract..."

"You signed a contract with Sy Green?" Karen asked, incredulously.

"Yes."

"Where is it?" Armour asked.

"Right there," Aimee said, pointing at the table across the room. Scotty stood, walked over and retrieved the document.

"Green says that he's going to run the story, I guess tomorrow night, on his TV show. It didn't help that you threatened him, Scott."

"I did not threaten him. I made him a promise."

"Believe me, I told Sy that he should take you seriously. He said that he filed a complaint against you for assault, that you would be arrested."

"Scotty?" Karen asked.

"Never touched the creep. I was rough on his lunch."

"We'll deal with that later. Aimee, for the love of God, why? What possessed you to do such a horrible thing?"

"I'm sick of it. The lies, all the damn lies."

"Sell that crap to someone else, sister. That's bullshit," Armour replied.

"You think that you know everything, don't you. Got it all figured out. The world is black and white, right and wrong. Try being me for a day, then tell me how smart you are."

"So, out of the blue, you decided to pick up the phone and call Sy Green and tell him your story."

"Not out of the blue, Karen. My life is infected with lies — my father was a liar, so was Kyle, so is my worthless husband, so are all of my phony friends. The biggest lie in my life was what we said about how Kyle died. I thought, she told me, that—"

"Wait, wait, wait," Scott stammered. "Who the hell is 'she'?"

"My therapist."

"Please, Aimee. Don't tell me that you've been bearing your soul to Martha."

"You don't love your sister-in-law? She sure has a warm spot in her heart

for you."

"Aimee. Lord in Heaven have mercy. You told Martha about how Kyle died?"

"Yes."

"Scotty, this makes sense now."

"Sure as hell does."

"What?" Aimee asked.

"Martha Bergeson played you for a sucker, Aimee. That 'therapist', what a sick joke it is to call her a therapist, hates me with a passion. She's been trying to destroy me for years and you gave her the means to do it. She could care less about you, Aimee."

"She hates you? No she doesn't. This isn't all about you, Karen. Martha was trying to help me heal."

"Wow, okay. We're done here, Scott."

"Not yet." Scott Armour pulled an envelope out of his back pocket. "This is an affidavit, Aimee. It says that you swear, under oath, that the statements you made back in 1978 about what happened on grad night were true and that the story you told about Karen shooting Kyle was a lie. Sign it, now. I'll get it notarized at the office."

"You want me to lie? Again? You're a piece of work, Scott Armour. How do you go to Mass, preach in church, pretend to be a Catholic? Fucking hypocrite."

"Do you honestly think that I'm going to debate morality with you, Aimee?"

"No, I think that you'll probably just slap me again if I don't sign."

Armour did not respond, he didn't have to. Aimee signed the affidavit.

"Are you functioning now girl, listening to me?" Karen asked.

"Don't be so dramatic, I'm not a child."

"Aimee, so help me, I..." Karen paused, took a deep breath and regained her composure. "Please tell me that you want this nightmare to end."

"I do want it to be over, Karen."

"Good. All you have to do is keep quiet and stay out of sight. Can you do that?"

"I'll bring her a couple of cases of Ireland's best and bottle of downers. She'll lie low."

"Fuck you, Armour."

"Not in a million years, bitch."

"Enough!" Karen yelled. "Quit it, both of you. This insanity has to stop. Colin is dead, Aimee. Dead. You've brought my family into this, my husband's family, all of us are at risk. How many people do you want to destroy?"

"Other than me?"

"Poor Aimee. Sad, spoiled little rich snot, Aimee. You don't even rise to the level of pathetic, you—."

"Scotty! Stop it!" Karen screamed. When she did, one of her bodyguards burst in.

"It's alright, Steve. I'm okay. I warned you that we would make some noise. Please, wait out there."

"Yes, Governor. I'm sorry to interrupt, but I heard—."

"I understand. No harm was done. Thank you."

The trooper closed the door behind him as he left.

"Aimee, I mean it. Not another word about this to anyone. Especially to Martha. This isn't just about you, or me, or Colin. We have to consider everyone involved."

"Keep him away from me, Karen," Aimee said, pointing at Scott.

"Done. You keep your mouth shut."

"What about?"

"I'll talk to Tom," Karen promised.

"Before—."

"Before Green runs the story, yes, Aimee."

"He won't be running any story, Karen. I guarantee you," Armour vowed.

"Scotty, please. Let's go."

Aimee Bynum had a few more drinks and went back to sleep. Miss Rodriguez straightened her out on the sofa and put a blanket over her when she came in to clean late in the afternoon.

Chapter Thirteen

"Hunt and Hunt."

"Joesph Hunt, please. This is Karen Foster."

"Joesph Hunt's office."

"Maureen, how are you dear? How's life in Manhattan?"

"Karen! Hi, sweetheart. Joe's been worried sick about you. I was very sorry to hear about Father Sullivan. I know you two go way back."

"Thank you, honey. It was quite a shock."

"Joe picked a lousy time to be in New York. He's booked on the morning flight back to Vegas."

"Well...hey, is he in?"

"Joe is on site, but I have strict orders to patch you through the moment you called."

"Thanks, Maureen. My best to your family."

Karen waited apprehensively as Maureen connected her with her husband via a radio system.

"Karen?"

"Joe, hi."

"I'm so sorry, baby. I love you."

"It still doesn't seem real, Joe. I'm having a hard time with this, in more ways than one."

"I'll be home before lunch tomorrow."

"Joseph, if I asked you not to hurry home, would that offend you?"

"I guess it's a little too late to worry about that now."

"Forgive me. I'm sorry. Beyond sorry, Joe. You aren't a good man, you're a great man. Far better than I deserve."

"Karen, you're scaring me. Tell me what's going on."

"I need to ask you something first. Did you know that Martha was counseling Aimee Bynum?"

"No. Should I have?"

"Martha hasn't said anything to you about Aimee or about me recently? Anything serious?"

"I don't speak with Martha very often, as you well know. Anything she said to me about you I would tell you. Immediately."

Of course you would, Karen thought. Joseph Hunt was a devoted husband and a deeply moral man. Karen was able to be with him and respected him because of his strength of character.

"Joe, something serious is happening. It is related to Colin's suicide and to my past. I need to deal with this, Joe, and deal with it right now, without distractions."

"I'm listening."

"Give me some time to work through the problem, Joe."

"Why can't I help you?"

"You can. Stay where you are, pray for me. I know they need you there right now. Are you close?"

"Couple of hundred feet."

"Any complications?"

"None. Well, none so far."

"Then see it through, honey. Come back in a few days. You can help me most by giving me some space and, this is critical, Joseph."

"Okay."

"Please don't talk with Martha or Aimee Bynum or anyone from the media until I tell you to."

"Karen, for God's sake. What's going on?"

"Do you trust me?"

"Of course, you know that I do."

"Then, please, do what I ask."

"Is Scotty helping you?"

"He is."

"Thank Christ, some comfort at last."

"Joseph, we need to talk. Really talk. You need to know that I never, ever wanted to hurt you or deceive you."

"Karen, now I'm terrified. What am I—."

"Joe, stay in New York."

"Why do I feel like you're shutting me out, Karen?"

"I'm not shutting you out, Joe. I'm protecting you."

"From what?"

"I've got to go. I'll call you back tonight. You'll be home, at the apartment?"

"After ten."

"I'll call you then."

"I love you, Karen Foster."

"You too, honey."

"That was unpleasant," Scott said as Karen hung up the phone.

"Not as unpleasant as it will be when I tell him that his wife committed manslaughter and suborned perjury."

"He won't care about any of that, Karen."

"Are you nuts? How—."

"All Joseph Hunt ever cared about is you. He loves you every bit as much as Colin did."

"I know."

"Then what will devastate the man is when you tell him that you're leaving him."

"Who said anything about me leaving Joseph?"

"Do you love him?"

"Scotty, I—."

"Simple question. Do you love him?"

"No, not like he loves me. That's just not possible."

"He knew that when he asked you to marry him, Karen. Joe always believed that over time your affection for him would grow, blossom into passion."

"So why would I leave him?"

"Because you're honest and lying to yourself and to him is getting tougher. Colin's death, Aimee's scheming, this whole mess is accelerating the inevitable."

"Is it that obvious?"

"Only to me, Karen. Only to me."

"I'm sorry, Governor. Dr. Bergeson is in session right now."

"Then do that poor patient a huge favor and tell him or her that their therapy is over for the day. Clear this waiting room, too."

"Governor Foster. Do you have a court order?"

"I have two big fellas with guns over there and a bunch more who will march in here on my command. Tell your employer to lose her patient and get the fuck out here."

Karen's conversation with the receptionist was shouted, so the five people sitting in Dr. Bergeson's waiting room quickly left on their own accord. A few seconds later, Martha Bergeson and her patient emerged.

"Lori, I'm so sorry. I will call you as soon as I finish with this...with whatever this is," Martha said, glaring at Karen.

"We need to talk," Karen commanded.

"Do I have a choice?" Martha asked, staring at the troopers.

"Sure. We can chat here, now, or tomorrow morning at the jailhouse after you spend a night with the ladies."

"You're going to arrest me? On what charge?" Martha challenged.

"I'll come up with a good one. As you know, I'm a very creative liar."

"Well, since you've gone to all this trouble..." Martha said, extending her arm towards her open office door.

Karen wasn't exactly sure how long Martha Bergeson had hated her, whether it was from the moment they first met or shortly after that. The reasons for this cattiness had evolved over time. Martha despised all attractive women, primarily because she was extremely homely. She had always resented feminine beauty and all of the status and privileges it naturally endowed upon its host.

While Martha Bergeson was emotionally and spiritually destitute, she was also highly perceptive, and it didn't take her long to figure out that her brother was madly in love with a woman who did not feel the same about him. She did believe that Karen genuinely cared for Joseph, but the adoration was entirely one-sided.

Joe Hunt was a good man, the best, Martha knew. She had always loved her older brother, although her affection was never returned in depth or intensity. When Karen came into Joe's life, Martha faded even further in her brother's

priorities.

She tried to tell him, before Joe and Karen got married, that he was making a terrible mistake, that beautiful and perfect Karen Foster had remained single well past the age of forty for a reason - she was in love with an unobtainable man. She paid a private investigator thousands of dollars to discover this, to unravel the mystery of Karen Foster's seemingly incongruous detachment.

Joseph Hunt was not only uninterested in what his sister had to say, he deeply resented Martha for spying on his beloved. He knew all about Colin Sullivan, Joe told her, and who was she to make such harsh judgments about the woman he loved.

The vitriol intensified over the years, reaching a zenith when Karen refused to bear Joseph a child, claiming that she was too old to be a mother at forty-three. Martha confronted Karen about this at a family gathering. She called her a 'selfish liar' and 'unworthy' of her brother's love. Since that time, relations between Martha and Karen and Joe had been strained and limited. Communications were perfunctory, direct contact avoided whenever possible given the bounds of decorum.

"Martha, I won't be here very long."

"Good news. Thanks."

"Don't bother telling Joseph Aimee Bynum's grad night story. I—."

"What are you talking about?"

"Please," Karen said, exasperated. "It's been a long couple of days. Don't insult my intelligence."

"How about your conscience?"

"You? Lecturing me?" Karen took a deep breath and refocused. "Aimee recanted. In writing, under oath."

"If I knew what you were talking about this conversation might be more productive."

Karen caught on. "You're recording this, aren't you? Now, that is a crime in Nevada, Dr. Bergeson. Cough up the tape."

"Your paranoia is raging, Governor. Why would I want to record our conversation?"

"Steve, please come in here. Now," Karen said, pushing the talk button on her mobile phone.

"Yes ma'am," Trooper Steve said as he walked in.

"I want you to toss this office, Officer Crane. Dr. Bergeson has been surreptitiously recording our meeting. I want the tape."

"I'll need some help."

"Go get it."

"Fine," Martha said, relenting. "Your bluff worked. Top drawer of the credenza."

Officer Crane opened the cabinet and not so gently yanked out digital recording equipment, wires dangling.

"Oh, I wasn't bluffing, Martha. That's it, one device? You wouldn't be hiding another one from me, would you?"

"Just this." Dr. Bergeson tossed her hand held dictation machine to Trooper Crane.

"Thank you, Steven. Find a trash can outside and deposit those items in it, please."

"Yes, Governor," Trooper Crane said as he left.

"That stuff is worth over—."

"Shut up, Martha. I'm still leaning towards having you arrested."

"Why are you here, Karen? No one else to harass today?"

"You and I are going to square things between us. Right here and right now."

"Not likely."

"Why? Even if you actually believed Aimee's story, why? The media? Those bastards at Dirty Laundry.com?"

"Do you think Joe would listen to me otherwise? Has he ever? I told him a long time ago that you would break his heart, that you were a snotty, shallow glamour girl with an attitude who bluffed her way through law school."

"Don't you see how much this will hurt your brother?"

"Better to swallow some bitter medicine now than die of a terminal disease later. And since we are putting all of our cards on the table, I didn't press Aimee Bynum for dirt on you, she told me the whole story unprompted. Do you have any idea of the torment you and your friends have put that woman through? It's scandalous, you should be ashamed."

"No way Aimee Bynum came up with the idea of going public on her own. I'm not buying that, Martha."

"Oh, I'll take credit for the DirtyLaundry.com TV show idea. It was brilliant, I have to admit."

"Martha, for the love of Christ."

"What's the matter, princess? Now that your prince is dead is your fantasy world gone along with him?"

"You better watch your mouth, bitch, or I—."

"My brother thinks that you walk on water, that you're some kind of living saint. What a fool he has been to love and trust you but that's almost over."

"You taped Aimee."

"Of course."

"Went into—."

"Every detail."

"So your plan is?"

"My plan is to wait for the right moment and then tell Joe everything. I've got more than the tapes, Karen. A hell of a lot more."

"Why am I not shocked?"

"I know that you and your boyfriend the priest were screwing like wild rabbits behind Joe's back. Stolen weekends, trysts, very sleazy."

"Martha, that's a lie, total bunk. As for the whole Aimee Bynum story, as I told you, it's over. She recanted and she has less than no credibility anyway. You have no right to accuse me of cheating on Joseph. That's bullshit and I won't tolerate it."

"You're delusional, Karen. You need help."

"I need help alright. You know, Martha, I came here mad as hell, but I'm not angry anymore. I'm sick to my stomach, disgusted. How anyone can harbor such hatred towards someone who has done nothing to them at all is sad. Your soul is polluted with filth."

"Are we done yet?"

"Joseph will not speak with you before he talks to me, Martha. I'm going to tell him everything. Your blackmail scheme has nowhere to go."

"We'll see, and I'm not blackmailing you. This is payback, retribution, not blackmail."

"Payback for what?"

"For ruining my brother's life."

"I did not ruin your brother's life, Martha."

"You will."

Karen had another sharp response on the tip of her tongue, but she didn't offer it. A hard dose of reality hit her, an epiphany.

"My God, Martha."

"Is this where I get hauled off to jail?"

"No. This is where I leave you to your misery and I go deal with mine."

Chapter Fourteen

May 29, 1978

Dawn

Aimee, Jennifer, Karen, Amanda, Colin and Scott had returned to the boat, leaving Tiny behind with Kyle's body on the island. Aimee was raving, out of control.

"We did everything we could, Aimee. You..."

"Shut up, Jennifer! Shut up! That stupid bitch killed my brother!" Aimee screeched.

"It was an accident. You saw what happened. You were there."

"Stop covering for her! She murdered Kyle!"

"Where are the cops?" Scotty asked.

"No sign of them yet, but it won't be long," Jennifer responded, as she scanned the horizon with binoculars.

"Where's Karen?" Colin wanted to know.

"She's lying down in the master bedroom. Poor thing is in shock," Jenny answered.

"Poor thing? Poor thing? That fucking stupid slut killed Kyle!" Aimee was hysterical, blustering.

Ignoring Aimee, Colin ordered, "Scott, get Karen up here now. We need to talk before the police get here. Tiny already knows what I'm going to say, but the rest of us need to get our story straight."

Although it had only been a couple of hours since they had quit partying, the shock of the shooting had sobered them up. After radioing for help, Scott managed the cleanup effort. All that remained of their considerable stash was a half-full keg of beer and an open bottle of tequila. The marijuana and the barbiturates were resting on the lake bottom.

As soon as Karen made it to the main cabin, Colin said, "We don't have much time, so everyone needs to listen to me. Karen, you with us?"

"Kyle, I'm so..." Karen began to cry, the horror still had its grip on her. She wasn't fully present.

Colin grabbed her, not violently, but with some force. "Honey, you've got to pay attention. Your life depends on it."

"Okay, Colin." Karen did her best to sit up and concentrate.

"First things first. This is the mayor's boat. We didn't do anything out here but drink beer and tequila. No drugs. Everyone understand? Mayor Hart is going to take major shit for this above and beyond having to deal with Kyle's death. We don't need to make things worse for him."

"Or us," Jen added.

"Or us," Colin agreed. "So, we drank beer and tequila, nothing else. Clear?"

All heads nodded yes.

"Now, the important part. We have to tell the cops the same story — I was fooling around with the gun when I accidentally shot Kyle. I was drunk, didn't know what I was doing. It was a mistake."

"Colin, you can't do that. It was..."

"Karen, I love you. You're my responsibility. I told Kyle to give you the gun and that was stupid. This never would have happened if I'd been thinking, using my brain instead of feeding my head."

"Colin, honey, I could never..."

"Colin, honey, I could never," Aimee mocked. "You're going to cover for her? She should pay for what she did."

"You won't go along with this, Aimee? That's what you're telling us?" Scott asked.

"Kyle is dead! Dead, you morons!" Aimee screamed.

"Yes, Kyle is dead, Aimee. We all know that, we're all sorry. We're all to blame for that, if you ask me. Kyle too."

"Colin, I don't hate you. I know that you loved Kyle like a brother. But how can you say that Kyle is to blame?" Aimee asked.

"He insisted on bringing the gun to the island. He loaded it and then forgot to unload it, because he was high. He gave a loaded gun to a wasted girl who knew nothing about guns."

"This is horseshit. Karen is responsible. She should pay."

"No, Aimee, it's not going down that way," Scott said with authority.

"You can't make me lie!"

"No, but we can all say that it was you, that you shot Kyle."

"I want to say something." Amanda Simpson had said nothing until now, on the island or on the boat, other than to express her dismay over the shooting.

"Okay, Sweetie. Talk fast, the cops will be here soon," Scott said.

"Colin is right. It was an accident and all of us are to blame. If he thinks it's better for him to take the hit for this then okay. All I want to know is, why him? Why not Tiny or Scotty or me?"

"Tiny and Scott both volunteered, you guys should know that," Colin began, "but this falls on me. Karen is my responsibility, but above and beyond that I'm the guy they will let off the easiest. We all know why, because of baseball. I'm the superstar jock, the only one of us who has the pull to get through this with minimum damage."

"Kyle would want us to do the right thing, Aimee. Kyle would never hurt Karen," Amanda added.

"It's a lie. A damn, ugly lie."

"Is it?" Colin asked. "Aimee, your brother's death was a freak accident. What happened to Karen could have happened to any one of us, including you."

"But it didn't, it happened to her."

"No, Colin shot Kyle. On accident," Amanda said. Everyone but Aimee and Karen expressed agreement.

"So, either I go along with this or you guys all point the finger at me?"

"That's it, Aimee. Now you understand," Colin said.

"Wait a minute," Karen broke in, suddenly clearer headed. "Don't I have a say in what we do? I shot Kyle, I didn't mean to, I was trying to hit the coyote, I didn't even think the damn thing was loaded. But it doesn't matter, it's still my fault."

"Honey," Colin said. "Do you know what will happen to you if you tell the cops the truth?"

"They'll arrest her and charge her with murder and throw her cute ass in prison!" Aimee yelled.

"Did you hear that, Karen? Were you listening? Aimee is right, that's exactly what will happen," Colin said. "You know what else? College, a career, all of that will be gone too. You'll forever be branded, life will never be the same again."

"Won't all those bad things happen to you, honey?" Karen asked.

"Maybe, but I can throw a hundred mile per hour fastball and a curve that bends three feet. My reputation is already tarnished. I just got through doing my community service for a DUI, remember?"

"I can't let you do this, Colin. I love..."

"It's done, Karen."

"Yes, Karen, it's done," Scotty repeated, with emphasis.

"So I don't get a say in this?"

"Tell me I'm wrong, baby. Tell me how I could live with myself if I let this mountain fall on you?"

"Why do you think it's any different for me? How am I supposed to—."

"Debate is closed," Jennifer pronounced. "Cherries on the water, three o'clock."

"Aimee, look at me," Scott Armour directed. "Colin shot Kyle on accident. He was fooling around with the gun and it went off while we were sitting around the fire. Are we clear?"

"Or else?"

"Or else, you and your brother were arguing and you shot him. You were drunk and pissed off and you didn't know what you were doing."

"You wouldn't."

No one had to answer. Every set of eyes told Aimee the same thing, they sure as hell would do it.

"Okay, okay. Kyle is dead. I can't fucking believe it," Aimee said, as she started to sob.

"It'll be alright, Aimee. Shh. You'll see, we'll get through this. Kyle would have wanted it this way, you know that." Amanda held Aimee Hart as she cried, trying her best to offer her comfort and support.

Chapter Fifteen

May 30, 1978

"Father John, Penny is devastated. What can I do to help her? I feel powerless."

"Oscar, Christ will comfort your wife as He comforts all who seek His mercy. It is at these moments, these difficult times, when our faith is most tested."

"I respect you, Father, but you know that I'm not a religious man. I believe in God, but—."

"But what, Oscar? You won't accept the Lord's grace when you need it the most?"

"Please tell Penny these things, Father. She really needs you now."

"But you don't?"

"Father, thank you for coming over and blessing Penny. Would you also check on Aimee?"

"Of course, she is?"

"Back bedroom, Father. Fourth door on the right, down that hallway," Oscar Hart directed.

The priest did as he was asked, without further question or comment. Mayor Hart had people waiting for him in his home office, so he turned his attention to them.

"Chief Riley."

"My condolences, Mayor. Kyle was an exceptional young man."

"Mr. Sheppard."

"Oscar, my family and I are praying for you and Penny and Aimee."

"Where are we? What do we know?"

"Preliminary tests indicate that the gun the kids turned over to us is the weapon that fired the shot that killed Kyle."

"Okay. No surprise."

"No surprise. The thirty-eight is registered to you, Mayor. I know there was some question in your mind about that," Chief Riley continued.

"When I was elected, I had all of my guns registered, I thought. Glad to see that I was thorough."

"Kyle and his buddies had been drinking," District Attorney Sheppard added. "We took open containers into evidence. The kids made no attempt to deny it."

"Where did they get the alcohol?"

"We're running that down now, Mayor," the Chief said.

"Do you believe that this was an accident? That the Sullivan boy was fooling around and the gun went off? What does your gut tell you?"

"According to Sullivan and Armour, information we verified by talking to

the rest of the kids on the boat and by interviewing some of their friends from school, this group, Miss Foster, Miss Righetti, Miss Simpson, Mr. Armour, Mr. Sullivan, Mr. Mancuso, Kyle and Aimee, are a tight-knit bunch, best of friends."

"We have no reason to suspect that Kyle was shot intentionally, Oscar," Mr. Sheppard said.

"But?" Oscar Hart asked.

"But this is a very touchy situation, your Honor. These kids, I guess they're not really kids because they are all eighteen, were partying on your boat. The weapon belonged to you. Did you give them permission to use the boat for the party, Oscar?"

"I did."

"That makes the situation even dicier."

"I'm aware of that, Mr. Sheppard."

"Politically, sir, this could be a disaster. The newspapers are all over this and the national wire services have also picked up the story. 'Baseball phenom shoots Mayor's kid at drunken teenage grad night party'. Enticing lead."

"Law and order isn't your strongest suit, Mayor. This mess will only exacerbate those perceptions. 'Mob lawyer Mayor's gun used to shoot his own son at wild teenage blowout'. Ugly."

"What do you fellas suggest? Damage control?"

"Come down like a ton of bricks on Colin Sullivan. Charge him with manslaughter or negligent homicide. Crucify the kid, deflect the attention away from you," Sheppard proposed.

"We have probable cause to arrest him," Chief Riley added. "He has admitted to the shooting, confessed that he'd been drinking."

"You gentlemen know that Colin is one of the best high school baseball players in America. He's a local icon. I've said very nice things about him, especially—."

"Especially when you went to bat for him on the DUI he got last year," Sheppard said, interrupting. "Colin Sullivan has had his chance, Mayor. He was let off with a tap, not even a slap, on his wrist and still he was irresponsible, binge drinking, playing with guns. Your son is dead, Mayor, and Colin Sullivan is to blame."

"Mr. Sheppard, I built this house with the money I made representing dangerous criminals. You know as well as I do that Sullivan is a good kid, he's no delinquent. Hell, all of these youngsters drink and smoke weed."

"That's not relevant, Oscar."

"Fuck you say! How is Colin Sullivan's character irrelevant?"

"What matters," Mr. Sheppard continued, "is that if you do not fry Colin Sullivan, the media will fry you. Say goodbye to the statehouse in '80."

"Judas goat, make the kid a Judas goat. You're a heartless bastard, Dan."

"I learned from the best."

"He's just one kid, Oscar. True, he can throw a baseball through a brick wall, but he's still just one kid," Chief Riley opined.

"A kid that killed your boy, Oscar. Don't forget that. You're not persecuting anybody, the prosecution will be one hundred percent righteous. We have a confession, for hell's sake."

"I'm supposed to?"

"You're going to become the new crusader for teenage responsibility. 'Protect our children. Bring back sobriety and respect'. I'll find the person that sold them the booze and arrest them, too," Riley said.

"So I—."

"So we come out of this disaster with a positive, politically. Onward and upward."

"Don't you want some payback, Oscar?" Dan Sheppard asked.

"Payback? For what? An accident? Colin is Kyle's friend, he damned sure wasn't trying to hurt him. Payback. You guys are something else. Cops and prosecutors live in their own little world."

"What world is it that you live in, Mr. Mayor?" Chief Riley asked.

"The real one, Chief." Oscar Hart sighed. He knew that Dan Sheppard and Phil Riley were right. Both men were Oscar's cronies, handpicked by him for their current positions. As Oscar's fortunes went, so did theirs. Working for the flamboyant and popular mayor of Sin City was cool, but they had far greater ambitions.

"We do what, when, Dan?"

"I'll throw together an indictment, issue an arrest warrant in a few days. Until then, sit tight and grieve, Mr. Mayor. Console your wife and daughter. Hell, we should let Sullivan go to the funeral and then pop him. Good press."

"How much time is Colin looking at?"

"He'll get five years, do something like two."

"Damn shame," Phil Riley said.

"Yes, it is," Mayor Hart agreed. "I've lost my son and now I have to pinch this poor kid for a stupid mistake."

"Yea, that too, but that's not what's bothering me."

"Oh?"

"I'm a Dodger fan, Oscar. Sullivan could have really helped us. Arms like his don't grow on trees."

"Kids like Kyle don't grow on trees either, Phil," Dan Sheppard snapped. "My conscience is clear."

"I wish mine was," Oscar said, as he stood to leave.

Long ago Oscar Hart had put his conscience on the back shelf, where it sat gathering dust as he used whatever means at his disposal to set guilty men free. He deeply loved his wife and children, the pain he felt over the loss of his son was real and intense, but it did not overcome his ability to reason, to do what was required when it was required, regardless of the circumstances.

He had learned this detachment from his Mafia clients. He understood how essential it was to exercise the emotional control necessary to smile, chat with a man at lunch and then still be able to blow his brains out after dinner if that

is what you had to do to advance your interests.

Oscar and his cohorts would show Colin Sullivan no mercy. Not because they wanted to make an example out of the boy, or to mete out harsh justice or even for revenge. Colin had to be crushed only because it was the most expedient course of action, the optimum solution to a delicate problem.

Chapter Sixteen

"It sounds too good to be true, Jen. How reliable is this information?" Scott wanted to know.

"So I thought, until yesterday morning. I'm more confident now."

"Run it by me again. Slowly," Scott said.

"Denise Tillet has been a dancer here for five years. We're friends, not close, but I like her. She isn't an airhead, she's honest, and so on. On occasion we do something socially, like lunch or dinner. She told me about Roger, her gay brother. Totally spaced that he lived with Sy Green."

"Until three months ago."

"Right. They had some lovers' spat, broke up. Denise said that Sy was the hurt one, Roger was relieved."

"Disgusting, but whatever. Continue."

"Until you and Kendra came to see me two days ago I could have cared less about Sy Green. So, in the shock of the moment, I forgot about Roger, his connection with Green."

"I'm following."

"Yesterday I go and see Mr. Tillet. He lives in West Hollywood now that he's been banished from Sy's mansion."

"West Hollywood. What a surprise."

"You need to grow up and get past this homophobia of yours, Scotty. You're better than that."

"Stick to the subject please, Jen."

"Roger isn't very happy with Mr. Green. Considerable resentment. He feels used, degraded. Want details?"

"Nada. Gay porn is not my thing."

"Sy Green had Roger review some of his business affairs; Tillet is a CPA, but not Sy's CPA. Mr. Green has evidently been very aggressive with his tax avoidance strategy, using an offshore bank to shield his income. Green has hidden millions from the IRS by having his revenues flow directly to his own Cayman Island bank. He pulled out his income in the form of loans from the bank. I'm no expert, but..."

"I know something about that type of set-up, Jennifer. Ballplayers have used the scheme. It's risky."

"Damn risky, according to Roger. Two years ago he advised Sy to stop doing it, that he was risking a criminal indictment if the IRS ever investigated. So, according to Tillet, Sy weaned himself off of the tax-free teat a while back."

"He's not using the Cayman bank anymore?"

"Not according to Roger. As of a few months ago, Sy was paying his taxes on his income."

"But?"

"But he hasn't repaid any of the paper transaction loans he made from his

bank to himself, much less any potential tax obligation those loans created."

"The Feds?"

"Not involved, at least not yet."

"The statute of limitations on tax issues is?"

"Five years or possibly more, says Roger."

"Why hasn't Tillet turned him in, ratted him out, if he's so pissed off at Sy?"

"Ah, love and hope spring eternal. Poor Roger is conflicted."

"Oh boy. Soap opera."

"Yep, but Roger sure was blabby with me and, you'll love this, he has paperwork."

"No shit. Do share."

Jennifer removed a file folder from her desk drawer. "What we have here, my friend, is evidence that Sy's solely owned U.S. Corporation, DirtyLaundry Enterprises, was using this see-through bank of his to launder money."

"How much money?"

"The spreadsheets and statements show five million over a fourteen month period, but this arrangement went on for more than five years."

"Twenty-five mill in unreported income?"

"Potentially. Or, the whole thing could be legal. Maybe even if it's not kosher, the Feds would consider it to be a civil matter and want money, not blood."

"How do we control Mr. Tillet? Get him to play ball for our team."

"That involves Denise."

"Go on."

"Roger told me all of this on the condition that I wouldn't use it against Sy, or show it to anyone but you, without his permission."

"Such trust."

"Gay men like me."

"Go figure."

"Denise wants to open a restaurant. If I agree to help her — a loan, advice, mentoring, all legit — he'll let us use the information to pressure Sy."

"What did you tell Roger about our problem?"

"Only that Sy was going to defame a friend of ours and we wanted to stop him."

"Roger would?"

"Agreed to keep his mouth shut unless the IRS or some other Gman puts him under oath."

"Jen, this is blackmail, pure and simple. If we do this, we're at risk."

"Is it worth it, Scotty?"

"What do you think?"

"I despise that little prick. Sy Green could never get what he deserves, in my book. When I think about Colin, heartbroken, all alone in that tiny room of his, believing that Karen would be destroyed—."

"Sy Green isn't responsible for Colin's death, Jennifer."

"What? Are you—."

"Colin was responsible for his death, and for his life."

"Then why are we?"

"Because Father Sullivan was the best priest I've ever known, and I've known hundreds. Because Colin Sullivan, the man, was my brother, my best friend. Because Karen Foster is the only sister I'll ever have."

"You are the simplest person I know, Scotty. I mean that as a compliment — not a compliment, high praise."

"Some things never change, Jennifer. I love all you guys, you know that."

"Scott Armour. Amanda says that you're gallant, like a noble medieval knight."

"I look after my own, without hesitation or exception."

"So we do this because?"

"Because no good can come from exposing our past, only evil. We owe it to Colin's memory, to his legacy as a priest in God's Church. We owe it to Karen, Lord knows she's been through hell for thirty years. Maybe now we can get some closure for her, help her to heal."

"Will it work? Sy could say 'fuck you' and run to the FBI, have us arrested and charged and take his chances with the IRS."

"He could, but he won't."

"What makes you so sure, Scotty?"

"Sy Green is a coward. I know the type. I'll make damn sure that he's petrified of me, even more than the tax man."

"Then I'm in."

"Be sure, honey. Don't feel pressured by me. I'm not trying to do that, Jen. I would never do that."

"I know," Jennifer Righetti said as she leaned over and kissed Scott on the cheek. "You aren't the only one who loves Karen and Colin, Scotty, and I trust you and your instincts."

"What we do, Jen, stays with you, Mr. Tillet and me. Karen, Amanda, even Tiny need to be kept in the dark. If this goes sour, we have to protect them."

"Sir Armour, with his sword and shield, defending his realm from the infidels."

"Sorry, Jen, but you can't be my fair maiden. Kendra already has that part."

"I never was a fair maiden, Scotty. Do you have any openings for a scarlet woman?"

"Later this afternoon then?"

"Yep. Green will be here at three."

"I'm surprised that you agreed to see me, Ms. Righetti. Why the sudden change of heart?"

"Something has come up. The situation has changed."

"Well, it's too late to include you in the first story, it's already in the can for broadcast tonight. But I'll need follow-up material, that will be crucial. What is this 'bombshell' you want to drop, and how much will it cost me?"

"The good news, Sy, is that it will cost you nothing. The bad news is that my 'bombshell' involves you, not Karen Foster."

"I see. Playing games, are we? Thank you for wasting my time," Sy said as he stood to leave.

"Do you know Conrad Williamson?"

"Who? Again?"

"Mr. Conrad Williamson, Special Agent in Charge, Criminal Division, Internal Revenue Service, Los Angeles office."

Sy sat back down. "Only by reputation. This is relevant to our discussion because?"

"Connie is a sweetheart of a man, for a cop. Married, three kids, same wife for fifteen years. He gets a little bored though, indulges in some healthy male recreation from time to time." Jennifer handed Sy a diamond tennis bracelet. "Read the inscription."

"For Vegas, for us, forever. Love, Connie.' So what?"

"Connie likes me, Sy."

"Good for you. Are you offering me a fresh story? IRS corruption?"

"I had lunch with an old friend of yours yesterday, Sy."

"Yeah?"

"I think it was a mistake to cheat on Roger with that underwear model. Dumber still to get caught. You should have come to me, I wrote the book on discretion. I could have helped you."

Sy removed his jewel encrusted designer glasses and nervously wiped them with a tissue. Then he stood, turned and walked towards the window in Jennifer's office.

"You people impress me. I mean that sincerely. You're going to a lot of trouble for nothing, though. The story will air tonight. In half an hour we send it down the line. It's out of my hands."

"Sounds like it's still in your hands, Sy. For a few minutes more."

"Sounds like you want to be arrested, like your pal Mr. Armour. Have the police cuffed and booked him yet?"

"That's never going to happen, douche bag," Scott said, emerging from behind a closet door in the back of Jennifer's office.

At the sound of Scott's voice, Sy Green flinched and moved quickly beside Jennifer. His fear was heightened by the baseball bat in Armour's hands.

"I gave this to Jen back in '85. Remember, honey?"

"Sure do. You hit two homers with that bat in the same game."

"That was also the day that I met Kendra."

"That's right! How could I forget."

"Sy, sit down. No one is going to hurt you. Not yet, anyway."

Green tentatively moved towards a chair, which he slid to the side of Jennifer's desk so he didn't have to turn his back on Scott.

"Sy, all we want you to do is use your head. Do the right thing, for yourself," Jennifer said.

"We know all about your offshore banking deal, Green. Roger gave us statements, spreadsheets, the works," Scott added.

"Do you clowns know that I'm a lawyer? I don't practice anymore, but I'm well versed in criminal law. Blackmail, extortion, this strong-armed crap — you jerks could get ten years at Club Fed."

"Shut up, Sy," Scott said as he slapped the barrel of the bat against the back of the sofa. "Listen more, talk less."

Sy's eyes opened wide as he watched Scotty pace back and forth across Jennifer's office.

"Do you know why I won't be arrested for assaulting your lunch, Sy?" Scott asked.

Sy moved his head sideways indicating "no".

"Because the DA here in Ventura County is Paul Walters. Do you know him, Sy?" Jennifer asked.

Sy again moved his head signaling "no".

"Paul is a rabid, a real over the top nuts Padre fan. I brought him a couple of baseballs, one signed by Gwynn, the other by Hoffman. We sat in his office this morning, had a cup of coffee and a nice chat," Scott said.

"My attorney is—" Sy was suddenly able to speak again.

"Your attorney? Phil Kornberg? That's him, right Sy?" Jennifer asked.

"Of course he is, Jen. Kornberg is famous, a first rate mouthpiece. Nothing but the best for Sy," Scott answered.

"So you got Walters to drop a piddly ass assault charge against you. Big deal. Let's see you pull that off with the Feds. Don't tell me that the U.S. Attorney is a Padre fan too," Sy said.

"No, but he and Connie are tight, best friends from what I'm told," Jennifer added.

"If I were you, Sy," Scott said, as he raised his bat to a cocked position as if he was about to swing at a pitch, "I'd worry about what the U.S. Attorney will do to you, not what he might do to us."

Sy didn't miss Scott's signal, he winced and moved his chair back a couple of feet.

"Your Cayman bank tax dodge may or may not be legit, Sy," Jennifer said. "We know that, so do you, but are you willing to risk an indictment just to broadcast lies about Karen?"

"You idiots are truly clueless. If I don't run the story someone else will. You're trying to defuse a bomb that's already exploded. It's well past too late. My staff — editors, on-air personalities, technicians, all of them — have seen the piece. There are probably copies of it floating around. If I kill it, it becomes white hot."

"Remember what I told you, Sy? Back at the restaurant?"

"How could I forget."

"Then make it your business to find and destroy every copy of this story. Have Mr. Kornberg earn his generous retainer and threaten your employees with financial ruin if they leak it."

"And if I don't?" Sy asked, trying to sound brave, but failing.

"Then I will take this bat, swing it at full force and split your skull. You'll be eating your dinner through a straw and driveling like a retard for the rest of your miserable life."

Sy Green's world was Armani suits and three martini lunches, power moves executed by document, posturing and publicity and legal maneuvers. He had reported on thugs, or wanna be thug pretender rappers, for years, but always kept his personal distance. Sy was out of his element and scared to death. He feared, and was beginning to believe, that Scott Armour just might be the one person no one should screw with under any circumstances.

"Are you going to beat me, right here and now?"

"No, well I hope not. I don't want to bust you up, but I will. Please do not doubt my word, Green. I'm the most dangerous motherfucker you'll ever meet."

Jen looked at Sy and nodded her head, confirming Scott's bold assertion.

"What guarantee do I have that you guys, Roger too, won't go to the Feds even if I kill the story?"

"None," Scott admitted, "but why don't you keep one copy of the story as insurance."

"And you still have the—."

"Baseball bat, that's right," Scott said.

"Fine. I'll do it. I cannot promise you that no one else will run the piece. Secrets don't last long in my business."

"If the story comes out anywhere else, Sy, we will blame you. The consequences for you will be the same," Scott pronounced.

"Don't you think you better use your phone, Sy? You're running out of time," Jen said.

Sy Green called his people and instructed them to substitute another piece for the Karen Foster story, re-edit the show and send it to their affiliates thirty minutes late. He called Phil Kornberg and asked him to meet him at the studio in an hour.

"Anything else?" Sy snidely asked.

"Keep your word, Sy. I will. Believe that," Scott said.

"You know that your friend the priest was no saint," Sy said, as he rose to leave. "You guys don't seem interested in the other part of the story."

"I'll bite, but I know better," Jennifer said.

"The Governor and the Father were having an affair. The shrink, Dr., Dr..."

"Bergeson," Scott interjected.

"Yea, Bergeson. She hired a PI, had Karen Foster followed. She visited San Francisco regularly. We have film of her sneaking into Sullivan's church in

disguise. She booked rental cars and hotel rooms under phony names, was seen with Colin's friends and his Bishop, ate dinner with—."

"Shut up, asshole. I'm getting the urge to take a swing," Scott said as he lifted the bat to his shoulder once more.

"Fine. What's it to me anyway. You Catholics are a bizarre bunch. Pedophiles, priests with girlfriends and secret families, mafia ties to the Vatican—"

"Put a sock in it, Sy," Jennifer said.

"No, let him prattle on, honey. I'm so interested in what some faggot atheist has to say about the Church. Fascinated."

"You. Everyone thinks you're such a hero. All-American guy, model citizen. You're just a bully, a street gangster."

"Sy, I'll admit," Scott said as he opened the door to Jennifer's office and motioned for Sy to leave, "that at times I'm more Old Testament than New. The wrath of God is a powerful, terrible thing. Pray that you never experience it."

Sy left without saying another word.

"Well, what do you think? Will he kill the story?" Jennifer asked after Scotty closed her office door.

"It's dead, for now. Green's right though, no guarantees. The genie may be out of the bottle."

"What about Colin and Karen. Do you think?"

"No."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Colin would not break his celibacy vow. Karen wouldn't cheat on Joseph, either. Never happened."

"For such a smart guy, you've got a lot to learn about human nature, Scotty."

"Oh yeah? School me."

"Every time Karen makes love to Joe she's thinking about Colin. She sees his face, not Joseph's, when she dreams."

"I don't doubt that Jen, but—."

"The heart wants what the heart wants, Scotty. It's not logical or rational."

"No, well some of us anyway, aren't ruled solely by our flesh."

"Meaning?"

"Father Sullivan killed himself not over the guilt he felt about an illicit love affair, but because he couldn't be with the one woman, the one person he was meant to spend his life with. His heart broke every single day, honey, every day. Aimee's betrayal was the tipping point, not the cause. Colin couldn't live in two worlds anymore, so he did the only thing left for him to do. He went home."

"But he was such a good priest, Scotty. Colin never judged me, he only helped me. Do you know how many broken women I've sent to him over the past twenty years? Dozens. Many of them are alive and well today only because he cared. Father Sullivan took the time to repair broken lives, to be a friend to the desperate, to people nobody wanted. That's pure love. How can someone like

that commit suicide?"

"Colin had the gift, no doubt. But just because he could show love to and forgive others does not mean that he was happy or at peace with himself. He told me once that he was haunted by his unborn children. Imagine a priest saying that."

"I'm not sure that I follow."

"Colin believed that he and Karen were destined to be husband and wife, that being a priest was not truly his vocation; it was an accident, a circumstance that he made the best of, not his true path."

"Even after decades?"

"My brother considered himself to be a failure, that he had somehow cheated Karen out of the life she deserved, that he had ruined her."

"Colin saved Karen's life. She would be nothing without his sacrifice."

"They both achieved so much, yet both of them were unhappy most of the time. I don't understand it all, Jen. Even they didn't know why they were the way they were or why they made certain choices. What's the old saying? 'Men make plans and God laughs'."

"Do you think God was cruel to them, Scotty?"

"I stopped asking questions like that years ago, honey."

"I'm glad I never married."

"I'd be lost without Kendra. Hopelessly headed to hell."

"We're so different, you and I."

"But we both love our friends."

"That we do, Sir Armour, that we do."

"Governor Foster. Please accept my condolences. You must be in agony."

"As must you, Bishop Antonelli. Thank you for seeing me on such short notice."

"Of course. As I have told you many times before, I am your friend as well as your confessor."

Karen pulled out a handkerchief from her purse and dabbed her eyes. "I'm afraid that I'll be needing this, Bishop. Please have patience with me. I'm struggling."

"My daughter, do you want to move to the confessional?"

"No, well, not yet."

"Wherever you are most comfortable, my dear."

"Since I'm not Catholic, can we be a bit less formal? I'd like to ask you some questions, if that is appropriate, Bishop."

"We don't have to be too formal, as you put it, but there may be questions you have that I cannot answer. I'll try, given my constraints."

"Did you speak with Colin recently?"

"Yes. He confessed at least once a week, sometimes more. We also

talked in my office, occasionally over a meal."

"What was he thinking, I mean why would—."

"You know that I cannot share those conversations with you Governor, nor with anyone else."

"Even if Colin told you something outside of confession?"

Bishop Antonelli reached into his jacket, pulled out his smoking materials, loaded and lit his pipe. "I can tell you this; I did not know that he was contemplating suicide. Had I known, or even suspected, we would have... Let's just say steps would have been taken. We would have intervened."

"I'm so confused, Bishop. Hurt and confused. For the first time in my life, I'm having bad thoughts about Colin. I'm angry with him, resentful. I feel like he did this to punish me."

"To punish you?"

"He never said it, but I always felt like he blamed me."

"For what?"

"For everything."

"That's not true. I'm comfortable sharing that with you."

"Do you know about the whole media scandal mess? That our secret was going to be exposed?"

The Bishop said nothing, he could not.

"I understand, Bishop," Karen said, interpreting his silence. "Those assholes — oh, my gosh, excuse my language."

"I've seen that nasty TV program, Governor. Your language is appropriate."

Karen smiled. She straddled two worlds spiritually. Her husband was an earnest Baptist. Most of his family, other than his repugnant sister, were reserved in their use of language and excessively concerned with appearances. She couldn't imagine Joe's pastor cursing. But all her life Karen had been surrounded by Catholics. She definitely felt more at ease with them, with their earthy style and more colorful use of language which struck her as being genuine and unpretentious.

"I was told last night that the story on Colin and I will not be broadcast."

"Ever?"

"Well, ever is a long time, Bishop. It seems that the threat has passed for the moment."

"How does that make you feel, my dear?"

"Relieved, but also angry. I've lived with this burden for so long."

"I know. We've discussed it thoroughly."

"Why? Why did he do it? I'm furious with him! Now I'm left here, with all this guilt, this pain and he's gone! Damn him!"

"You feel alone, truly alone for the first time in your life."

"Yes," Karen admitted, now weeping. "I have no one left."

"You have your husband, your friends."

"That's not the same...they're not the same."

"You must seek Christ, Karen. The only way to gain a measure of real peace in this world is through Him."

"Bishop," Karen said, after taking a few deep breaths, "God hates me. I'm not sure why, what I did exactly to merit His scorn, but God despises me."

"Jesus loves you, my daughter. Our trials are not an indication of His disdain for us, but rather opportunities to seek His mercy."

"You sound like Colin."

"There is a reason for that, Governor. We serve the same Master."

"I don't know what to do. Help me."

"It is not possible for me to give you, to give anyone, faith. All that I can do is encourage you, lift you up, speak the words of life to you. You must walk through the door God has opened, He will not shove you through against your will."

"I cannot stay married to Joseph, Bishop. It's not fair to him, and it's not right."

"Karen, I know that you're not Catholic, but my advice to you is the same as if you were - what God has joined together, let no human being separate."

"I agree with you, Bishop. Totally."

"Yes? If that is so then..." Bishop Antonelli stopped, caught himself. He understood what Karen was trying to tell him. "Then what you have done to Joseph is a grave sin, Karen. Even given the best of motives and intentions, which I'm sure that you had, you have perpetrated a great evil upon a good and decent man."

"I know. I'm ashamed of myself, Bishop. Truly ashamed."

"We must move to the confessional. You need healing, my dear."

Bishop Antonelli put his arm around Karen as they left his office and walked through the main chapel at St. Thomas' to the confessionals. He too was distraught over Colin's death and felt remorseful, and a bit guilty, about his role in their tragedy. Had he given them both the best advice, been a proper shepherd? He had always had his doubts - Colin Sullivan and Karen Foster challenged his abilities as a pastor, to be able to distinguish right from wrong, a blessing from a curse, to properly lead them towards salvation, not destruction.

The woman he was escorting to the sacrament of reconciliation was broken, drifting, lost. The world thought she had it all – beauty, money, fame, a devoted spouse, but the truth was that Karen Foster had nothing left in this world that she truly valued other than her friends.

Chapter Seventeen

August 1978

"Where have you been?" Peter Sullivan asked accusingly.

"At St. Viator's, playing ball with the kids. It's Wednesday, Pop. You know where I go on Wednesday mornings," Colin answered.

"Did you call in?"

"Yes, of course. Father Tony let me use the phone."

"Good. We don't need any more drama around here, Colin. I'm not sure that your mother could stand it."

"Pop, what do you want me to say?"

"What can you say? You've wrecked your life and destroyed your mother. It's too late for talk."

Colin didn't respond. Arguing with his father only intensified his torture. His life was surreal, who and what he was had changed. He prayed for the strength to see it through, to ride out the storm in the hope that the flood would not wash his world entirely away.

"Come here, Colin. I want you to read this," Peter Sullivan said, handing Colin some papers as he approached. It was a bill, a fee for services rendered from Woodburn & Woodburn, attorneys at law.

"Fifteen thousand dollars, Colin. That's most of our savings and this isn't over yet."

"Then don't pay it, Pop. I told you that I don't need a lawyer."

"When you get drunk and shoot someone, you need a lawyer."

"What difference does it make? I'm guilty, I'll plead guilty. It's in God's hands. Father Tony says that—."

"Father Tony! To hell with that dago! What the fuck does that wop know about anything!" Peter Sullivan was cursing and yelling again, sins he usually avoided before 'the tragedy', as the local press now referred to the shooting.

"Colin, sometimes. I mean sometimes it seems like you just don't get it."

"I get it."

"No Dodger contract. Prison. You're headed to jail, son."

"Professional baseball isn't going out of business anytime soon and we don't know about prison yet, pop."

"Yes, we do."

"What happened?"

"Nate called. They received the plea offer."

Colin had been waiting for weeks for a formal plea offer from the District Attorney. Everything hinged on the state's disposition.

"Well?"

"A five-year sentence. Involuntary manslaughter. According to Nate, they wanted to charge you with murder two, which would have meant seven to ten. He

says that he convinced them that wouldn't stand on appeal. Now tell me again how you don't need a lawyer."

"Five years?" Colin had to sit down. "How long do I actually have to be in prison?"

"Two years, unless you have problems, get in more trouble."

This was the worst case scenario, or nearly so, come to fruition. Colin's lawyer, Nate Woodburn, by reputation one of Vegas' finest criminal defenders, told Colin and his parents that there was a "wide range of possible outcomes". The attitude of the prosecution was "the sole determining factor", according to Woodburn. Colin was at their mercy. He could receive probation, perhaps even a misdemeanor charge, and move on with his life with only a relatively minor hiccup. Or they could lay the wood to him and ruin everything.

"Are you really so shocked, Colin? You killed the mayor's son. What did you expect, the keys to the city? A fucking celebration parade?"

"I thought that Mayor Hart might, I mean—."

"Hart has been blasting you in the papers, Colin. Called you everything but a white man. We read them together, I—."

"I know, Pop, I know. I'd hoped that he was just blustering, talking crap for the crowd. Politics."

"You're eighteen, boy! What do you know about politics! It's over, Colin. Don't you get it? You murdered your future when you shot Kyle. And for what? Boozing? Drugs? Partying with that silly girl of yours? I really thought that I raised you better. I brought you up to be a responsible person, someone with some sense. You took a life, Colin. Now we have to pay."

"I'm sorry, Pop. I really mean that. But you don't understand, I mean, how could you possibly—."

"I don't understand? What don't I understand? One minute my son is a hero, the best ballplayer in the country, the next he's a convict. Your mother is absolutely heartbroken, all of her—."

"Hopes and dreams? No, your hopes and dreams Pop, and mine too, but not hers."

"You better watch—."

"I better watch what? My mouth? What you gonna do? Hit me? Please. I know this hurts you, I can't tell you how sorry I am, but I think you're more worried about yourself than you are about me."

Peter Sullivan stopped talking. When he was angry, boiling with rage, he went completely silent. Colin had seen this behavior before, it was rare but not unprecedented.

"Sure. Clam up. That helps."

Colin walked into his bedroom, changed clothes and came back to the den, where his father was now sitting in his favorite chair staring out the window. A single tear was rolling down his cheek.

"Pop, I love you. I know this is hard. Trust God," Colin said as he left the house to meet Scott, who was waiting for him in his car in the driveway.

"You need to eat something, dear," Gina Foster said, doing her best to coax her daughter into at least trying her lunch.

"I'm not hungry, Mom. But thanks, maybe later."

"Is Colin coming over?"

"He'll be here soon."

"Do you want me to leave, honey?"

"No. Not today. Scotty is with him. We need to talk."

"Did you go down to—."

"Not yet."

"But you have to register for school by Friday, Karen. It only takes an hour or so."

"Mom, stop it. Please don't pester me."

"Karen, Colin said that he wants you to go to college."

"I'll sign up for UNLV when I'm ready. Right now, school is the last thing on my mind."

"Tell me, please."

"Tell you what?"

"What really happened the night Kyle died."

"How many times can I tell you? Colin, Scotty, Amanda, we all explained how—."

"Yes, you all told me the same lie."

"Why do you think we are lying?"

"Because Colin Sullivan, even if he were drunk, would never fool around with a gun. Not like that, anyway. And your stories are inconsistent."

"Our stories are not inconsistent."

"Jen said that Colin was waving the gun around and it went off, Aimee said that Colin was startled by a coyote howling and accidentally squeezed the trigger and Amanda said that the thing just fired."

"Mom. You're a cop now? Colin was drunk and he wasn't paying attention. A coyote howled. None of us were sober."

"I'm a salesperson, honey. I make a living by studying people and I know you kids better than anyone. I don't doubt for a minute that it was an accident, but what really happened?"

"Where did all this come from, Mom? You never said anything before about having doubts."

"You're in agony, honey. I know part of that is a concern for Colin and your future together, but it is also something more. Tell me."

"No."

"No, you won't tell me what actually happened or no, I'm wrong."

"You love Colin, don't you, Mom?"

"You know I do, Karen."

"Then don't ask me any more questions. I can't ..." Karen choked up and couldn't finish her sentence.

"I'm sorry, sugar. You'll tell me when you're ready. I shouldn't have pushed you." Gina put her arm around her daughter and kissed her forehead.

Gina's consolation of Karen was interrupted by the doorbell. Colin and Scotty had arrived.

"Thanks for picking me up, Sweetie," Tiny said.

"No problem. I missed you."

"Missed you too, Amanda." Tony gave his friend a kiss and a hug as they headed toward baggage claim.

"When does Angie get home?" Amanda asked.

"Two weeks. Her father thinks that he cut their vacation short so that she could be here to say good-bye."

"You guys haven't told him yet?"

"Nope. We figured that it was best to wait. Angie wanted to go on one last father-daughter fishing trip before we got married."

"But your parents know."

"Yes. They're thrilled. They love Angie."

"You've told Notre Dame?"

"It's a Catholic school, Sweetie. As long as we're married, they are more than cool with it."

"Don't you have to study, take a test or something, to become a Catholic?"

"Not a test, but you do have to learn the basics and be baptized and confirmed."

"She's done all that?"

"We're going to get married on a Tuesday. She will receive the sacraments the Sunday before."

"Tiny, forgive me for asking, but is Angie, you know?"

"No, but I kinda wonder why not."

"You two have been?"

"It's unbelievable, Sweetie. I never knew what I was missing."

"You're sure, Tony? I mean really sure? Two months isn't a very long time to get to know someone."

"Guess what we did on our third date. We named our kids, all eight of 'em."

"Go on. No way."

"God wants us to get married. We both knew it from the start. I know that sounds weird to you."

"Not weird, wonderful. I wish it would happen to me."

"Not to change the subject, but..."

"We don't know anything yet."

"I talked to Colin last week. He was really down. Low."

"Tiny," Amanda said, as she pulled him aside into an empty gate area where they could talk in private. "Are you sure that we're doing the right thing? Totally sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"We're lying, Tony. I mean I know why and all, but we are still lying."

"What are we lying about?"

"Colin didn't--."

"Did Kyle die accidentally? No one tried to kill him, did they?"

"No, that's for sure."

"So, no one is lying about that."

"No one."

"We had all been partying, right?"

"I see where you're going with this, Tony. And I agree, we are all to blame, to a degree. But the fact is that—."

"The fact is that Colin Sullivan stepped up and took Karen's place on the cross. Who are we to judge or second guess that? We should admire his courage, his love."

"You don't sound like the Tiny Mancuso I knew," Amanda said as she squeezed his hand. "The boy is gone, you're all man."

Tiny blushed. Attention from women was new to him and he loved it, but it made him uncomfortable.

They walked back to the aisle and continued to make their way through the terminal.

"Tiny, one more thing."

"Yes, Sweetie?"

"Does someone have the right to take your cross?"

Anthony Mancuso didn't immediately answer Amanda's question. He hadn't thought about the matter in those terms, seeing it only through the lens of mercy and courage.

"I don't know, Sweetie," Tiny eventually answered, moments later. "Maybe God will tell us."

"Five years."

"I only have to do two, Karen."

"Honey, you're going to prison."

"We always knew that was a possibility. I'm disappointed, scared, but—."

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, I can't let you do this, Colin."

"Don't go there, Karen," Scott said. "That choice has been made."

"You guys made that decision without asking me. I was told, not asked, remember?"

"I love you, Karen," Colin said, tears in his eyes. "Let me do this. It's right, it's what I'm supposed to do."

"I shot Kyle Hart," Karen declared in a loud voice.

"Hey, keep it down," Scott admonished, "your mother is around here somewhere and she's not deaf."

"Have you told your mom, honey? Please tell me if she—."

"I told her the same story we told the cops, but she suspects that we are lying, Colin."

"Why?"

"Mother's intuition, I guess. She can read me almost as well as you can, baby."

"How is everyone else doing, Scotty?" Karen asked.

"Amanda picked up Tiny from the airport this morning. They're both cool, worried as hell about Colin, but cool. Jen called me the other day. She's in Greece, with her sister. As for Aimee, well..."

"Scott and I have had to remind her of her promise," Colin said. "That girl is flaky, but she's scared that we'll turn on her and since I confessed no one is pressing Aimee, asking questions we don't want to be asked."

"How soon?"

"To?"

"How soon do you have to go to prison?"

"Probably next month sometime."

"Colin, what am I supposed to do? I don't know how I'm going to make it. I can't go on living without you." Colin wrapped his arms around Karen and tried to comfort her.

"It's time for me to leave, Colin," Scott said. "How long are you supposed to be at my house?"

"Until eight."

"Got it. I'll remember."

"Scotty, I'm sorry," Karen said.

"For what?"

"I've never really told you how much I appreciate all that you have done for—."

"Hey, stop that," Scott said, as he got up. "I'm only doing what I should. Colin is the hero, not me."

"All the same, I love you. You're not only Colin's best friend but mine too."

"Walk with me?" Karen asked shortly after Scott left.

"Where are we going?"

"Down past the driving range, to that little stand of trees by the wash. It's not so hot down there."

"Okay, baby. Let's go."

Gina Foster felt terrible, for more reasons than one. She respected her daughter's privacy and trusted her, but she had to know the truth. Concealed in the den closet, ear pressed against the slightly cracked door, she listened and

learned.

Colin had indeed kept his word to her, he had and was protecting Karen with his life. Where did such men come from? Gina silently asked herself as she emerged from her hiding place after Colin and Karen left. She was awestruck by his matter-of-fact courage and the depth of his love for her daughter.

Gina vowed to keep their secret, and not just because it kept Karen safe from the prosecutor, but because she felt a profound sense, knowingness, that she was now part of something that only God had the right to judge.

Chapter Eighteen

The Governor of the State of Nevada was supposed to reside in Carson City, at the executive mansion, but Karen Foster eschewed the "dreary dump", what she privately called Nevada's official Governor's manor, and stayed in Las Vegas unless the legislature was in session or other official business required her to be there.

She loved her Southern Nevada home, which sat on three acres and overlooked the Rhodes Ranch golf course in the far northwest corner of the valley. It was a six thousand square foot showpiece, but it was not ostentatious. Joe gave her a deep pocket and a free hand when they built the house five years earlier. Karen chose elegant, but unpretentious furnishings. The artwork was first class but sparse — the main piece being a huge landscape painted by Amanda Simpson which hung in the entryway. The first level was done in hardwood floors and tile and was adorned with beautiful, custom made area rugs. The second floor was carpeted with textured walls finished in muted tones.

Tranquility, that's the feeling Karen tried to create in her home. An island in the storm, a place of refuge and retreat.

Now she was intent on tearing down what she had worked so hard to build.

Karen was nestled into her favorite chair in the sitting room, sipping on a cup of Earl Grey tea. Yesterday she shut off the phones and bolted the door, telling everyone, friends and staff alike, that she desperately needed solitude.

She spent her cloistered day taking a long bath, doing her nails, curling her hair, reading magazines, piddling around the house. Every so often she had to stop and fight back against the pain, tell the anger that it would not get the best of her. She was determined to pull herself together, to try and act composed, at least until Colin's funeral when she was sure that her emotions would overpower her.

Karen finished her tea and walked downstairs to get another cup. It was nine a.m. Joe would be home in less than an hour.

He was expecting to return to a distraught wife who was battling with circumstances and demons she would not fully explain. Karen knew that Joseph would drop everything to attend to her needs. Her husband adored and loved her and always put her first.

As she poured another cup of tea, she looked out at their pool and watched the morning light dance off of the water that was gently stirred by a mild breeze. It was beautiful, idyllic. Perfect.

It was all a lie.

Karen could not pretend any longer, she was suddenly unable to continue going through the motions hoping that external acts would somehow change who she was inside.

Colin's death affected Karen Foster in many ways – grief, fear about the

consequences stemming from the exposure of their secret, sadness, regrets – but the most profound result of Colin's passing was that it opened the vault in which she had hidden her heart for so long.

Her passion was not for Joseph Hunt. For the first time she now knew, with absolute certainty, that her feelings would never change. Karen had been straight with Joe from the start about Colin, at least to some degree, but not honest with herself.

She picked up her cup of Earl Grey and walked out through the French doors and onto their patio. She had memories here, great memories.

The night she announced her candidacy for the Governorship, the night she won. Right beside her, as a faithful and devoted husband should be, was Joe – encouraging her, offering valuable advice, raising money for her campaign, taking time away from his Fortune 500 international construction firm to help her get elected.

They celebrated these triumphs as one, they had also struggled as a team. Over the last ten years, Karen and Joe had shared an abundant life together.

Karen loved Joe. She was also devoted to him as a friend, loyal. But Karen loved Joe Hunt like a sister loves a brother or as a mother loves a son, not as a wife loves a husband. She certainly had never told him that. She wanted to fall in love with Joseph. She tried, but Karen Foster discovered, or more accurately was taught, that sincere effort alone cannot create a marital bond between a man and a woman, or break another covenant that was not meant to be broken.

Joe always knew that he was competing with a potent memory, but he was convinced, mainly because he wanted to be, that he had won his own place in Karen's heart. She did not dispel this notion, but neither did she validate it. Colin Sullivan had always hung over their marriage like a guillotine, and his death sent the blade inexorably falling towards its victim.

Scotty, Karen thought. How did he know? But Scott Armour had always known about Colin and Karen; he was their spiritual sibling, connected to both of them in ways words alone could not describe. She wanted to seek comfort in Scotty's arms, not Joe's. This desire only made her feel guiltier, more convicted of her sin. Unlike Joseph, Scott's place in her life was permanent and appropriate. Scott Armour was her friend, not a lover or a soul mate. That's the way it is, Karen declared silently, I'm in love with Colin Sullivan and no one else. It was a fact, a constant, an immutable reality.

Karen walked back upstairs to change. Joe would be home any minute. She passed by their bed, the marriage bed they had shared for a decade.

She felt nothing, no emotion whatsoever, at the thought of never being intimate with Joseph again. Not that making love with him was unpleasant, Joe Hunt was attractive and sensitive, but she had never, not once, been emotionally or physically satisfied by him. It wasn't Joe's fault, she knew that, but she was tired of pretending. Their life as lovers was a veiled disaster, a complete failure

that she concealed out of love and respect for Joe. She felt empty, and she was tired of feeling empty.

Despite it all Karen would have stayed married to Joseph, continued to fake and endure whatever she had to fake and endure if she believed that was what was best for him. But Joe was only fifty-nine and in perfect health, likely with many years of life left ahead of him. How could she deny him the chance at experiencing true love, at finding someone capable of returning his devotion?

Divorce would hurt Joseph, devastate him, she knew. He would probably end up hating her. But she deserved his scorn. Karen had lied to Joseph in the worst possible way one human being can lie to another.

Forgiveness. Father Sullivan was always preaching about forgiveness. Karen wondered if Joe would ever forgive her, or even try. Why should he? She deserved nothing from him but contempt.

Lost in her thoughts, she roused when she heard a car pull up outside. Joe was home. It was time.

"Karen, my God. I've been so worried," Joseph said as he set down his bags and kissed his wife.

"I really don't know how I could have...Joe," Karen said, changing thoughts, "we have to talk."

"We sure do. My sister has been calling and calling, sending me e-mails, pestering our mother."

"Have you?"

"I haven't spoken to her or read one word."

"Honey," Karen said, taking Joe's hand in hers, "let's go into the den and sit down." She chose the den because it was the room Joe was most comfortable in, it was his territory.

Joseph sat behind his desk, which was cluttered with two weeks' worth of unopened mail. He switched off his office phone and his cell and opened the curtains. Karen sat across from him in a chair.

"I've lied to you, Joseph. There is no easy way to tell you about what happened, so I just will."

Joe didn't react, nor did Karen expect him to. Joseph Hunt was a deliberative person who always considered all aspects of any situation before expressing his views or drawing conclusions.

"In 1978, I was high on pot, downers and alcohol at a grad night party. Kyle Hart handed me a gun. I, and everyone else, thought it was unloaded. A coyote burst into our campsite. I was fooling around, pointing the gun at the coyote, when it went off. The bullet hit Kyle in the chest, killing him instantly."

"So Colin Sullivan..."

"Colin took the blame to protect me. He and Scotty and Tony pretty much made the decision, but it's not like I didn't go along with it. I did."

"Why are you telling me this now, honey? If you believe for one minute that I would stop loving you or think less of—"

"Aimee Bynum, that stupid bitch...oh shit. I've got to stop blaming her, Joe."

It's not her fault," Karen said as she stood and walked behind the office chairs.

"Aimee began seeing Martha a few weeks ago. She spilled her guts to your sister."

"No, God no."

"Martha convinced Aimee that the 'right thing to do' was to expose all of us publicly. She contacted Sy Green, the little cretin that produces that celebrity paparazzi show—."

"DirtyLaundry.com. I've seen it, once. Once was more than enough."

"Since Colin's death, Scotty has been working hard. He somehow persuaded Green to back off. Aimee recanted, in writing. It may be that it's over, at least for now."

"Martha. I don't know what to say, Karen. It's very hard for me not to hate her. That she would have the audacity—."

"Don't hate her, Joseph. She's your sister, blood. Also, she's not entirely wrong – vindictive and cruel, no doubt – but not wrong about everything."

"I don't understand."

"I need a drink," Karen said, as she moved to the seldom used bar in Joe's office. "Would you like one?"

"Seems appropriate. I'll take a scotch, neat." Karen poured Joe a scotch and herself a double shot of vodka. She swallowed the vodka in one quick gulp, poured herself another and brought her husband his whiskey.

"Do you remember our second date, Joseph?"

"How could I forget? It took me four months of begging to get the first one, so I figured that the second one should be memorable."

"You flew me in a Lear from Carson City to San Francisco, limos and flowers, that fantastic restaurant..."

"La Trattoria."

"Yes, La Trattoria. You made me feel like a princess, Joe. I was overwhelmed, I could see how determined you were to pursue me, your sincerity."

"I'll never forget that night, honey. That was the first time I kissed you."

Karen stopped. Should she go on? Break Joe's heart? What was worse, leaving him or pretending to be in love with him? Once more she had doubts, serious doubts.

"Joe, maybe we should do this later. I mean you just got back, you..."

"I love you, Karen. You're my life, my everything."

"Joe, I—."

"Why don't we continue this conversation in our bedroom?"

She wasn't quite sure what exactly triggered it, the vodka, the pressure of the moment, the cumulative effect of thirteen years' plus worth of fraudulent attention, but Karen was suddenly repulsed by the idea of having sex with her husband. Not disinterested, disgusted. Like it was wrong somehow, immoral.

Her doubts vanished. She could not live another day, another minute, pretending to be Joseph Hunt's wife.

"Back to the second date, Joe," Karen said, ignoring his advances.

"Okay." Joe got the stop signal.

"Do you remember what we talked about until three a.m.?"

"Father Colin Sullivan."

"You didn't find that odd or rude? It was both, I assure you."

"We weren't kids. We each had a past. Yours was pretty intense, I'll grant you that."

"Do you recall what I said about Colin?"

"You said a lot, as I remember."

"How I felt about him."

"You told me that you loved him and always would."

"What part of that statement didn't you understand?"

"I understood, Karen. I've always understood."

"Then why on earth did you marry me, Joseph?"

"Because Colin Sullivan was a Catholic priest, an exceptionally devout and dedicated priest. Because Colin and I talked about you, you and me and you and him at length and he not only didn't discourage me, he wanted me to marry you."

Karen was floored. She had no idea that Colin and Joe had ever met without her knowledge, much less discussed her future.

"When did this?"

"Six months after that night in San Francisco. A few days before I proposed."

"So you knew that—."

"Yes, I knew. Colin told me that you had recently come to see him, that you had asked him, not for the first time, to break his vows and marry you."

"Joseph, my Lord." Karen didn't know what to say.

"See, honey, you're not the only one who has secrets."

"I have to know, Joe."

"What Colin said to me? About you?"

"Yes."

"Father Sullivan told me, and I'll never forget this as long as I live, that you were the most beautiful, most perfect woman God ever made. That he should have never become a priest, that he should be married to you and have a large pack of kids running around a happy home."

"Then why didn't he?"

"Because of two things, Karen. Colin was a convicted felon. A priest yes, but still a former criminal. By that time you were already in the State Assembly, the party was grooming you for the vacant House seat—."

"Which I never ran for, as you know."

"Colin couldn't get past the idea that he would hold you back, keep you from fulfilling what he saw as your destiny as a political leader."

"The other was?"

"His vow. He swore an oath to God, Karen. A man like Father Sullivan

takes his promises seriously. There was no way for him to undo becoming a priest, and I'm totally convinced he loved being a priest."

"So you two sat down, had a beer and decided my fate? Why do men always do that to me? What right did you have, did Colin have—."

"Whoa, Karen. It wasn't like that at all. We both loved you. Colin could sense my devotion to you, my desire to be a good and faithful husband. He wasn't selfish or proud, he put aside his own—."

"I can't stay married to you, Joe. I never should have married you. To say that I'm sorry, that I regret the things I've done, the lies I've told you, seems so weak and lame. I'm not in love with you, Joseph. I never was, I never will be."

"I know that you don't love me like, or as much, as you loved Colin. I knew that when I asked you to marry me. He told me, hell you told me."

"Joe, honey, did you hear what I just said?"

"I know that you love me, Karen. You're distraught, in mourning, it's not as if I—."

"Every time we had sex – you made love, Joe, to me it was just sex – I tried my best to pretend that you were Colin. That's so dishonest and mean as hell. I'm not a good person, Joe. You deserve someone worthy of your love, not me."

"You're saying that you don't love me, that you never did? I don't believe that."

"Of course I love you, Joseph. I'm not in love with you, that's what I'm telling you."

"Semantics."

"Semantics? Joe, why..." Karen cut herself off. No matter what she said, Joe was only going to hear what he wanted to hear. His love for her was blind and unconditional, like her love was for Colin. She had to be harsh, perhaps brutal. A corner had been turned and there was no going back. For both of their sakes, she had to end their marriage and end it now.

"You're pathetic." Karen's words hung in the air like poison gas. She had never spoken offensively to Joseph before, only with respect and love. "I'm standing here in your house and telling you that when you put your cock inside me I'm so numb, so bored, that I have to fantasize about another man who I haven't slept with in over twenty years."

"Karen, you don't mean what—."

"For such a rich and successful guy, you're really a wimp. Maybe that's our problem, I think I'm into real men."

"You should mind your tongue, Karen."

"I should what? Mind my what? My tongue? Fuck you, Joe Hunt. No, let someone else fuck you. I'm through putting up with your limp noodle." Joe had recently experienced erectile dysfunction and was taking medication for the problem.

Joe just sat behind his desk – hurt, bewildered, stunned. His face was beet red, reflecting anger and embarrassment. He didn't say a word.

"Martha was right about me, Joe; I was destined to break your heart. And let's set the record straight about one more thing." Karen knew that this last verbal blast would wound Joseph the most. "I always wanted children, even up until a few years ago, but I didn't want your children."

That was enough. Joseph remained silent, tossed his unopened mail into an empty box, walked out of his office, grabbed his still packed suitcases and left, slamming the front door behind him as he did. Karen listened as his car drove off, less than twenty minutes after it had arrived.

To her surprise, while she was concerned for Joe's welfare and disgusted by her viciousness, the emotion she felt most was relief. When the time was right, she solemnly vowed to send Joseph a long letter telling him how sorry she was for the lies she had told him and offering a lifetime of friendship. But apologies had to wait. She would completely avoid Joe for a while and have her lawyer serve him with divorce papers immediately. If she was nice to him right now, treated him as he most certainly deserved to be treated, Karen knew that this would only encourage him to cling to the fantasy that their marriage was salvageable.

Karen Foster walked back to the kitchen, made a fresh cup of tea, and sat down at the table. She was remarkably calm, experiencing a kind of peace that she hadn't known for a very long time, if ever; the peace that comes from living a life free from deception. Karen wanted this new feeling, this settledness to last, but she feared that it was too late for such hopes. Pain and suffering, that's what I deserve, Karen thought. She had no idea what lay ahead for her now that Colin was gone, but she was determined not to repeat her mistakes and to build the rest of her life on truth.

"Maybe then," Karen said aloud as she realized that she was praying without knowing it, "God will stop hating me."

Chapter Nineteen

October 1978

"Sullivan! I won't tell you again! Grab your shit, walk the line 'til the guard stops you! Move your ass!"

Colin was still in a fog, not yet cognizant of his new environment. He was barely three weeks removed from his life in Las Vegas, from the arms of the woman he loved and the comfort of his friends. His sentencing had been perfunctory, the outcome predetermined. He was amazed by how sterile the process was, like a slaughterhouse; push the cows in, haul the carcasses out. Human beings entered courtrooms, but they left as something else. Once convicted, they became a lower form of life.

"In here, youngster," the guard commanded, pointing towards an open cell. "Home sweet home."

The Nevada State pen in Carson City was built in the late nineteenth century, and many of the original structures remained - crumbling, but still marginally functional. Colin was put in a block of less hardened felons - first-time thieves, con men, non-violent dope dealers. It was in a "newer" section of the institution so Colin would enjoy life with fewer rats and lice, drinking water that was less brown and toilets that flushed almost half the time.

"Take a seat, Sullivan," said the fiftyish fat man with a thick New York accent. "I'm your cellie. Anthony, Anthony Bolognese."

They shook hands. Colin immediately felt more at ease and allowed himself to relax a bit.

"Kid, let's be straight up front, okay?"

"Yes sir," Colin answered.

"Yea, fuck all that sir crap, boy. I'm not some wet behind the ears paper hanger. I'm in here for murder. Contract killing."

"I thought..."

"That you was goin' to the pussy wing of the palace? Relax kid, you made it. I'm in here by, hmm. Let's say by special invite."

"Whose special invitation?"

"Al Righetti's special invitation."

"I see."

"No, you don't, boy. Lesson one - you don't see shit, say shit or know shit unless I tell you that you do."

"Yes, sir."

"What did you just call me?"

"Yes, Tony?"

"Call me Little T."

"Okay."

"Al Righetti's daughter, you sweet on her or somethin'?"

"No. Jen is my friend. More like a sister."

"What are you, a faggot? That girl is one hot piece of ass."

"I've got a girl."

"Good. I'll do my job. Al is an important capo, but I won't live with no butt monkey. Your girl, got a picture?"

Colin had a picture of Karen, it was one of the few personal items that he was allowed to keep from jail.

"Wow! She's a looker, Red. She any good in the sack? Make you scream and shout?"

"I don't think that's any of your—."

"Yea, yea. Good for you. Just checkin'. Like to know who I'm dealin' wit."

"So how did you end up in here, with me?"

"Green as wet wood, ain't you, Red."

"If you mean that I—."

"Okay. Schools in session. This prison here has rules. Things are done a certain way. The hacks, every fuckin' one of 'em, can be bought. Almost anything you can think of you can get in here. What you got is the most important thing, protection. No one fucks with me, Red, so no one will fuck with you. There's a couple a others too who are lookin' out for you. We screw up, you get hurt, we pay. Comprendo?"

"I understand enough."

"Good answer. Now, in a couple a hours the bars slide open and we head to chow. Don't say nothin' to nobody, stay right by me. I'll introduce you 'round. Keep away from the niggers, they're nothin' but trouble. Spics too. Capish?"

"Capish."

"Big day for you tomorrow, Red."

"What happens tomorrow?"

"Fall ball starts."

"Baseball?"

"We don't play fuckin' cricket in here, boy."

"I'm not sure—."

"Well, I'll be sure for you, Red. These convicts don't know nothin'. We're makin' a ton of stamps on you. They'll never see you comin'. Can you hit, or just throw smoke?"

"I can hit."

"Hot damn."

"Hot damn."

With that, Little T stopped talking, stretched out on his bunk and closed his eyes. Colin was sitting on the edge of his dirty mattress next to three sets of prison issue overalls, his bed roll and a "new fish" kit of basic toiletries.

He stood and walked towards the window, which was decorated with half inch thick iron bars. A couple of hundred yards away Colin saw the baseball field; it was primitive, all dirt, but obviously well maintained and used year-round.

Someone on the block cranked up the radio. The Series was on – the

Dodgers were battling the Yankees again for the title, just like last year. Colin listened as Vin Scully called the play by play.

Only six months ago Colin Sullivan was on track to play for Los Angeles and if he had spent his summer in Albuquerque honing his fastball rather than in Vegas preparing to do time, it was very possible that he might be in New York now, sitting in the bullpen with the other pitchers cheering on the team, waiting for his chance to shine in the big show.

But that was not his fate. Never, not once, since Kyle's death had Colin regretted his decision. No matter how down he got, how frightened or lonely he became, all he had to do was look at Karen's picture, remember that she was free and going to college and that she still loved him and he stopped feeling cheated or blue.

The world wasn't going anywhere. All he had to do was stay alive and be patient.

"Hi, honey."

"Hi, Jen."

"Been sitting here long?"

"No, a few minutes."

"You look like hell, girl."

"Nice to see you too, Jennifer."

"Where's Amanda?"

"She couldn't come. On Tuesdays now she goes to that painting class, the one my mom turned her on to."

"How is Colin?"

"Alive. Thanks, Jen. You'll never know how much it means to me to know that Colin is safe."

"You're welcome, but it's not like I had to beg Dad. He was happy to help Colin."

"What's up with you? Planning another trip?"

"No, but I had a blast. That is when I wasn't worried sick about you guys, or having nightmares about Kyle."

"Why don't you go to school with me? You could start winter semester."

"Me? Yea, right. I'm hardly the college type. A friend of mine got me a job in Utah, at Park City. It's only for the winter, but I need to get the hell out of here for a while."

"I understand. Sounds cool."

"What about you? Are you digging UNLV?"

Karen couldn't answer because she started crying. It didn't happen as much now – a month ago she still cried all day long – but seeing Jen brought all of the emotions she fought to bury back to the surface.

"I miss Colin," Karen said, wiping her tears.

"I can't even imagine what you're going through, girl. Any way you—."

"Any way you look at it it's wrong, Jen. Colin should be playing baseball. I should be in prison."

"Come on, honey. I know it's tough, but you've got to stop thinking about it that way. We had a train wreck. We did the best we could."

"I don't know if..." Karen stopped, waiting until she was composed enough to speak. "I can't tell you now how hard it is not to see him every day. To talk with him, to touch him."

"Karen, I love you guys. I feel helpless."

"Me too," Karen agreed. "The only thing that keeps me going is that Colin made me promise to go to school. I'm doing it for him, for us I guess, but life right now is pretty bleak."

"Want some good news?"

"Love some."

"Mr. and Mrs. Mancuso are doing well in South Bend. The right tackle on the team, an All-American senior, blew out his knee so Tiny is starting as a freshman. They've got some hot shot quarterback named Montana so they could be good, go to a big bowl game. I talked with them last night. They send their love."

"I should have called them back. I'm sorry, I'll do it."

"Don't be sorry. Tiny and Angie understand."

"I'm glad somebody does. I wish they'd explain it to me."

"When are you going up to the prison?"

"End of the month."

"Want some company?"

"Scotty is taking me. He got time off."

"You'll make it, girl. Trust me, even if you don't trust yourself. You and Colin will both make it. Together."

"I love him so much, Jen. I wish we were married."

"Why didn't you guys do it before he left?"

"Colin refused. He said that it wasn't fair to me. I guess he's right, I don't know. In a way he is, but Colin Sullivan is my other half, not just a boyfriend."

"Maybe you should have gotten pregnant."

"I tried. I quit taking the pill, but it takes time for your body to reset, according to the doc."

"I was joking, Karen. My God! You actually tried to get pregnant?"

"Don't tell anyone, okay? Especially not Colin."

"I think we've proven to each other that we can keep secrets."

"Jennifer, I know I've got to get it together, but damn it ..."

"Tiny asked me to tell you something."

"Okay."

"He wanted me to tell you to pray, to ask God for help."

"Sounds like Scotty. Colin too. I'm not sure, Jen. I mean I would become a Catholic in a heartbeat, I will someday for Colin, but I'm not much of a believer."

"Me neither, to be honest with you."
"Our friends sure are."
"Yea, most of 'em."
"Did Kyle believe in God, Jen?"
"I never asked him."
"Do you think he has forgiven me? For shooting him?"
"You know Kyle, honey. He could be shallow, or act like it anyway, but he wasn't mean. He loved you, Karen. He's not mad at you."
"If you don't really believe in God, how do you know that Kyle has forgiven me?"

It was a fair question. Jennifer took a sip of her coffee, sat back in her chair and said, "You know what? I just do. I'm not saying it to be nice or to make you feel better, either. Kyle forgives you. Somehow, I know that it's true."

"I can only kiss you once, baby?" Karen asked.
"Once when you come, once when you leave. That's the rules," Colin answered.
They sat down at one of the small, round steel tables in the visiting room. There were twenty of them spread throughout a two thousand square foot space, and all but two were occupied. A thick cloud of tobacco smoke hung in the air and it was noisy.
"What a madhouse."
"You have no idea, Karen."
"Are you alright?"
"Yes. I have help."
"I know. I had dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Righetti right after you went in. He assured me that you would be protected."
"Little T."
"Little who?"
"My guardian angel. Little T, that's his name."
"Maybe Mr. Righetti should have found a "Big T" for you. How much can—"
"Scotty might have trouble taking Little T, Karen."
"Really? Wow, you're safe then."
"Thanks for understanding about yesterday."
"I know that you needed to spend some time alone with Scotty. I'm not mad, baby."
"Karen, I really don't know what to—."
"Oh, Colin," Karen moaned. She began to cry and reached over and grabbed Colin's hand. "I'm sorry, honey. I promised myself that I wouldn't..."
"Go ahead, baby. Cry. Let it out."
"Look at you," Karen said, as she wiped her eyes with a tissue, "trying to

make me feel better. You're the one in prison."

"So are you, baby. Don't think I don't know that."

"I thought this would be tough, Colin, but I had no idea. I mean...I can't ... I won't lie to you. I don't think I can make it."

"You'll make it."

"I'm not strong like you are, Colin."

"No, you're stronger."

"Saying it doesn't make it true, but I'll try, as hard as I can, I will try."

Colin and Karen looked over and saw that the guard was distracted, so they snuck in a long, deep kiss.

"Did your parents come to see you yet?"

"Last weekend. My dad, only my dad came."

"And?"

"Karen, we don't need to..."

"You wouldn't tell me on the phone, so tell me now."

"Dad said that he was disowning me, that I'm no longer his son."

Karen's mood instantly changed from sad to furious. "You're exaggerating."

"No, that's an exact quote."

"Colin, that's it. You having to live in here, with these filthy pigs," Karen said as she pointed to an old man who was ogling her from the next table, "that's one thing. But your mom and dad? I can't let them go on thinking that you shot Kyle. I have to tell them the truth."

"No. Absolutely not."

"Maybe I have to, baby."

"No. They would tell the cops, the whole thing...remember, all of us are involved, not just you and me."

"Your father loves you, Colin. He doted over you – I can't remember him ever missing one of your ballgames. He took you to Mass every Sunday."

"Yea, he sure did. I guess what I was was more important than who I was."

"I can't believe it. I'll never speak to him again as long as I live."

"Don't be that way, baby."

"No, sorry. That's incredibly cruel. How can you ask me to...wait. Don't tell me that you've forgiven him."

"I have. It felt good, believe it or not."

"I'm in love with a saint."

"A horny saint."

The guard was looking the other way again, this time he was flirting with a prisoner's sister or mother, probably working out a deal to smuggle contraband into the prison. Colin and Karen embraced, savoring every second they could touch each other. They separated only when the guard returned to his post.

"Reminds me of when we used to make out in the back of English class in the tenth grade," Karen said.

"That seems like yesterday, honey."

"Have you made any friends in here, besides Little T?"

"One."

"Tell me about him."

"He's a priest."

"A Catholic priest?"

"Yep."

"What's he in here for?"

"Breaking and entering."

"He's a thief?"

"No, but he is different, not like the priests I knew at St. Viator's."

"What do you mean?"

"Father Sam, Sam Alcaraz, that's his name. Father Sam has done time more than once for protesting against the Vietnam War, for organizing migrant farm workers in California and for other stuff."

"Did the Church kick him out? Is he still a priest?"

"He is still a priest, but I guess his Bishop got royally pissed this time. He broke into a doctor's office in Reno, destroyed a bunch of stuff and waited for the cops to come and arrest him."

"Why? What did the doctor do?"

"He's an abortionist."

"But abortion is legal now, right? Roe v. somebody, I remember from Mr. Clark's class."

"The Catholic Church teaches that abortion is murder."

"I didn't know that. How odd."

"Anyway, Father Sam is really cool. I can talk to him about anything, well almost anything. I would never tell anyone, Karen, you know."

"What does he say about me?"

"He really wants to meet you, when he gets out. Father Sam will be released next summer."

"I'm glad he's there for you, honey."

"Like you said, mom and dad took me to Mass, I went to catechism, but it didn't sink in. Father Sam, he makes Jesus real."

"Tiny told me that I should pray for God's help."

"Do you? Pray, I mean?"

"I tried, Colin. I don't know...I guess...When you get out I'll join the Church, I promise."

"I love you, Karen. I miss you so much. Being apart from you is like being ripped in half."

"It hurts so bad, I..." Karen started sobbing again, Colin held her hand.

They talked all afternoon, stealing kisses and touching when the coast was clear. Karen promised that she would stay in school; she was living at home and working part-time for her mom at the realty office, so money wasn't an issue. Colin swore to write often and call once a week and, most of all, to "go slow and

stay low", as Little T advised. Karen would return for visits at least once every three months. So would Scotty.

Colin and Karen believed that somehow they would survive their nightmare, that they would get married, that Colin would play ball again and that everything would turn out right.

Otherwise, the world made no sense. No sense at all.

Chapter Twenty

"I wish that I could have been there."

"Religious only, Karen. It was a private Mass."

"Who came?"

"Who didn't?" Scott replied. "I counted fifty or so priests, almost as many nuns, seven bishops and ten deacons, including me."

"St. Thomas is a beautiful church. I always feel at peace there, even when all hell is breaking loose around me."

"Colin, Father Sullivan, touched so many lives, Karen. I don't think either one of us really knew the true scope of his ministry."

"Bishop Antonelli told me things. I listened, but I didn't pry."

"Remember Father O'Brian? Terrance O'Brian?"

"Wow, that takes me back. The last time I saw him was in the late 80's, as I recall. He had something to do with Dysmus, didn't he?"

"He took Colin's blueprint and duplicated it on the east coast. By the way, it's Bishop O'Brian now."

"I take it that he came to Colin's Mass."

"Came and gave one of the eulogies. Did you know that there are over a hundred Dysmus Society chapters now in the U.S., Canada and Mexico?"

"Yes. In Nevada, and in a few other states, they get some government funding, mostly grant money. Peanuts, but at least it's something."

"Bishop O'Brian said that over thirty thousand prisoners, both men and women, have been helped by Dysmus since 1986. Transitional housing, jobs, counseling, starting over money—."

"I have a collection of some of those success stories in my office. They're precious to me."

"Think about it. Thirty thousand people helped directly, thousands more – mothers, wives, husbands, children – also received mercy. I never imagined it was that extensive."

"The Dysmus prisoner re-entry program is a model for other efforts as well," Karen explained. "Protestant groups, even the Buddhists, have copied it."

"Less than fifteen percent of those who complete the program commit new crimes?"

"More like less than ten percent. The recidivism figures are skewed by petty parole violations and other minor offenses."

"That's amazing. Do you think that—."

"What are you trying to tell me, Scotty?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I know all about Dysmus and the food banks and the clinics. What, I'm supposed to say 'God be praised' or something? Colin was miserable and so was I."

"Karen, I didn't mean to set you off, I was—."

"What? Reporting the news? Flash – Colin Sullivan was a great priest. Worked tirelessly every day of his life serving others. Saint Colin."

"Stop, Karen. Just stop it."

"When does it stop, Scotty? Tell me, for the love of Christ, somebody tell me."

"You can't acknowledge the good Colin did, that you've done, without cursing God? Where's the sense in that?"

"I do not want to die a bitter person, Scotty. Someone who could never get past the pain."

"Like Colin's father."

"He comes to mind."

"It's entirely up to you, Karen. I, we, can help you, but you have to let go of the weight if you don't want to drown."

"I don't know why, but Peter Sullivan has been on my mind all day."

"Angels."

"What?"

"Angels trying to get your attention."

"You really believe, Scotty, I know."

"Let's talk about Peter."

"Let's not and say we did," Karen pleaded.

"You went to see him just before he died, didn't you."

"How did you know?"

"One of the nurses at St. Mary's is in my parish. She told me."

"Did you tell Colin?"

"Never. None of my business."

"Secrets. We have too damn many of them, Scotty."

"Or not enough."

"Peter was within a few hours of death. Colin called me, told me that his father refused to see him."

"The man was a stubborn fool, Karen. He claimed to be a good Catholic, but he refused to show any mercy to his own son. Unbelievably prideful and stupid."

"Colin broke his heart. It didn't matter what happened after that, the damage was irreparable."

"But you told him the truth."

"I did. He had the right to know."

"What did he say, when you told him?"

"I'm not sure that you'll believe me when I tell you."

Scott flashed Karen a look that said, "Are you kidding me?" The tension of the moment was broken by awkward laughter, an intimacy exchanged between two souls bound tightly together through deep, unconditional sibling love.

"Peter said, 'I knew. I've known for years'."

"How? Who told him?"

"He wouldn't say, but my guess is my mother."

"Gina knew?"

"Yes, since before Colin went to prison. She overheard us talking, well, she spied on us one day that summer."

"But she never..."

"Other than telling Peter, she kept the secret all her life. She only told me that she knew when I was considering marrying Joseph..." Karen stopped. She didn't want to go there, not yet.

"Well, I'll be damned. If Peter knew, why didn't he make amends with his son?"

"He told me that when he found out it only made him angrier with Colin."

"My head is spinning."

"He said, 'Colin chose you over me. He had no right to do that'."

Scotty looked stunned, but he was more perplexed than stunned, like a father who doesn't understand why his child refuses to stop touching a hot stove. He sat there dazed for a minute, then he got up from Karen's kitchen table, poured himself a double shot of Cuervo and slammed it down. He walked over to the window and said, "I believe you, Karen. Some people are beyond help."

"Like me."

"No, you are not beyond help, Karen."

"I'm not so sure."

Before Scott could respond, Karen's doorbell rang. Everyone was here.

"Phenomenal, Kendra. Your fettuccini is world class."

"Thanks, Karen."

"My wife, a beauty and a gourmet cook."

"You don't deserve her," Jennifer teased.

"Shh. You're supposed to be good at keeping secrets," Scott retorted.

"Speaking of secrets, is anyone going to tell me why Sy Dipshit isn't airing the story?" Karen asked, sipping her Chablis.

"We would," Jen said, "but you're a politician and everyone knows that politicians can't be trusted."

"Seriously, what—"

"Karen, count your blessings and leave it alone," Scott said, somewhat sternly.

"They won't tell me either, Karen. Don't feel picked on," Tony Mancuso added.

Karen didn't pursue the matter further. She had more than enough issues to deal with right now and, truth be told, she generally preferred to be kept in the dark regarding Scotty's tactics of persuasion. That her friends were obviously protecting her was comforting. Now, as always, she relied upon their shelter, their always full reservoir of support.

"Where's Joe?" Amanda asked. "Out playing with his dump trucks?"

"No, well, I'm not sure. He was here earlier today, but I assume that he went back to New York."

"You don't know where your husband is at all times? How un-Karen like," Jennifer cracked sarcastically.

"He's not my husband, Jen. He never was."

"Say what?" Kendra blurted, taken aback.

"It happened?" Scotty asked.

"Yes," Karen admitted. "Today, upstairs. Joe was a perfect gentleman, I was a nasty bitch."

"I'm sorry," Scott said, "truly sorry for you both."

"What are you guys talking about? Where is Joseph?" Amanda Simpson was very fond of Joseph Hunt. She lived in New York most of the year and she and Joe were frequent dinner and social companions when he was in Manhattan.

"Sweetie, Joe and I are getting a divorce. I'm sorry, I know that hurts you."

"Why? You guys are so perfect for each other, Joe loves you so much, I mean..."

"I guess we should discuss this, there is no getting around it," Karen said.

"Honey, you've been through enough. Colin's funeral isn't going to be easy on you."

"Jen, no. Bless you dear, but I think that I'd rather talk about it."

"I want you to talk about it. I want you to change your mind," Amanda pleaded in her pouting, almost little girl like manner.

"I lied to Joe. I had no right to do that to such a beautiful man. He deserves far better than me."

"You told Joe about grad night?" Tiny asked.

"Well, I kinda had to, don't you think? His sister was spreading the story far and wide."

"I can't believe that he wants a divorce because of that, Karen. Joe is a bigger person, a real -."

"No, Jennifer. He, as always, was only concerned about me, what the outing of our secret would do to me."

"Why then? What lie?" Amanda asked anxiously in the high pitched, ultra-feminine tone she always reverted to when she was upset.

"Sweetie, do you remember, I guess it was eleven years ago now when you and I had lunch in Dallas?"

"Of course. It was during my first big exhibit. You were in Texas for some political convention."

"We talked about..."

"I can tell them?"

"Why not? Colin is dead and so is my marriage."

"You told me that Joe had asked you to marry him."

"Go on."

"You're sure? Really sure?"

"Go ahead."

"You said that you had just flown in from San Francisco, from seeing Colin."

Amanda hesitated again. She was uncomfortable sharing something so private, even when prodded.

"Yes, and?"

"You said that you had begged Colin to quit the priesthood and marry you. You said that he was the only man you ever did, or could possibly, love."

"No way. Really?" Jennifer asked incredulously. "I thought my life had drama. Turns out I'm a bore."

"I'll be damned," Tiny Mancuso swore. "I thought that you two were history by then. I mean, on that kind of terms."

"I remember very well what you told me, Amanda. You said, 'Love can grow. Just because you love Colin doesn't mean that you can't love Joe too'."

"That's true."

"Maybe for some people, Sweetie, but not for me. I didn't know that back then, but I should have."

"You went to San Francisco and pleaded with Colin to marry you?" Kendra Armour asked.

"Even got down on one knee."

"Father Sull...Colin, he was a priest. I mean...I don't mean to judge either one of—."

"You got dealt into this game a little late, babe. It would make more sense to you if you'd known them since junior high," Scott explained.

"We must seem like the craziest bunch of whackos to you, Kendra. Only two of us have any sense and you married one of 'em," Jen remarked.

"And I married the other one," Angie bragged.

"I believed you, Amanda. I wanted to believe anyway, that's for sure. Unrequited love is...it fucking sucks, it's hell on earth, that's what it is."

"So you married Joseph hoping that you'd eventually come to love him?" Angie asked, fascinated as usual by the emotional complexities of her husband's dearest friends.

"I loved Joe, I still do, but I'm not in love with him, not now and not then."

"Whoa boy. The old 'I love you like a brother' or 'I just want to be friends' situation. If a man is truly in love with you, it's kinder just to shoot him and bury him than to tell him that," Jennifer stated from experience.

"I know. You should have seen the look on Joe's face today when I attacked him. I felt, I feel, like the vicious monster I am."

"You're not blameless, but it cuts both ways, Karen," Scott argued.

"How does it 'cut both ways'? Joe was a great husband to me; any woman with any sense would be thrilled to be married to such a fine man."

"He knew, Karen. You never hid your feelings for Colin from him."

"True enough, but—."

"Karen, since we're honest and open and all, I'd like to ask you something."

"Go ahead, Jen."

"It's rude."

"I think I know what you want to ask. Let's get it out in the open."

"Well?"

"The answer is lengthy."

"We have plenty of wine left," Jennifer observed.

"In 1988, Colin was completing his religious education at St. Paul's. By then I'd bounced around a bit, tried a few cases, decided that criminal law wasn't for me, and ended up on the Las Vegas City Council, appointed by Mayor Brown to fill the seat left vacant by Karl Schubert's death."

"I forgot, when did Oscar quit being mayor?" Amanda asked.

"1984. He ran for Governor, but met with, well, you tell them, Scotty."

"What? This is 'everybody spill their guts night'?"

"Seems like," Tiny offered.

"Scotty?"

"Mr. Hart was disgraced by an unfortunate set of circumstances. He dropped out of the race, out of politics altogether."

"What a shame," Karen said, mockingly.

"Yea, damn shame. Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy."

"What comes around, goes around," Tiny said.

"Now I remember," Amanda said. "I was living in New York by then. I read about this in the *Times*."

"Who would have suspected that Oscar Hart was a dope dealer. I, for one, was shocked and appalled. To think that one of our esteemed elected officials would do such a thing," Jennifer said, grinning from ear to ear.

"The still photos of him shackled and chained and doing the perp walk are priceless," Scotty said. "When I need to cheer myself up, I pull them out."

"You guys had something to do with..." Amanda was catching on.

"Us? What a thing to say, Sweetie. We would never stoop—."

"The fucker had it coming," Scott said, interrupting Jennifer's tongue in cheek denial, the humor now absent from his tone. "He crucified Colin to take the heat off of himself politically. Hell, I could have understood if he had lashed out for revenge over Kyle's death, but he knew damn well it was an accident. Colin wouldn't have gone to prison, the D.A. would have been much more lenient if Oscar Hart hadn't insisted on lynching him. He was a piece of shit."

"So you and..."

"Sweetie, do you really want details?" Scotty asked.

"How did you guys find out about Oscar, what he did?"

"I graduated from UNLV in '82 and went straight to law school at Pepperdine," Karen explained. "Dan Sheppard's daughter, Joyce, was a last year law student during my first year there. We quickly became good friends, we still are today. One night, during her final week at school, she told me what she knew. Scotty and I pieced together the rest from other sources."

"Why did she tell you?" Amanda asked.

"I think that she was trying to apologize for her dad, in a way. Dan was diagnosed with liver cancer in '80. He died less than a year later. I guess that he spilled his guts to Joyce, told her some of the things he'd regretted doing in his life."

"Did Colin know, that you got some—."

"No way, Sweetie," Jennifer said. "Colin was all about forgiveness. Revenge wasn't something he approved of in any form."

"Go back to 1988, Karen." Angie Mancuso loved musing on the intrigue that so often characterized her friend's lives. Hers was dominated by the daily grind of caring for a large house, six boys and a busy, high profile husband and while she in no way envied or wanted to be like Karen Foster or Scott Armour, she relished living vicariously through them.

"Colin was scheduled to be ordained in December, so that summer, 1988, he was still a deacon. So much had happened between us and to us since high school...let's just say by then, in my mind at least, it was time."

"Time?" Amanda asked.

"Time for him to stop all this foolishness about becoming a priest and marry me as he promised."

"Karen, that promise was made before he went to prison, a long..."

"A promise is still a promise, Scott."

"Let her tell the story, dear." Kendra Armour was the only person in the world who could effectively scold Scotty, whose orders to "cease and desist" he would obey.

"Colin and I spent a couple of weeks together in July 1988. His dad and mom were both still alive, so he told the rector, Father O'Connell, that he needed to take a two-week sabbatical to be with his folks, to repair familial damage. I kinda, no, I flat out tricked him into being with me."

"Schemer," Jennifer said, in a way that was much more praising than scolding.

"I told Colin that all of us were going to be there, at Sea Ranch, you know, that resort just south of Eureka."

"Had he been with..."

"No one but me, ten years earlier, Jen."

"He was still a deacon then, right? No vows yet?" Kendra asked.

"No vows. I knew it was my last chance. I thought that if I could get him alone, remind him of his passion for me, that I had a shot."

"Oh, I really want to hear this," Angie Mancuso said, wide-eyed and edgy like a teenage girl seeing her first racy movie or smoking her first cigarette.

"I confessed that first night that none of you were coming and that I'd only booked one room. I apologized for deceiving him, but by then it didn't matter."

"He politely turned you down and then you drove him back to the seminary," Kendra guessed.

"No, we tore off each other's clothes and didn't leave the hotel room for four days," Karen boldly disclosed.

"That's so hot," Jennifer said.

"I've never had sex like that, before or since. Never will again, I'm sure."

"Had you been with other men, during college and law school and your first few years of practice?" Jen asked, knowing that the question was indecent but unafraid to ask it given the circumstances and the setting.

"I wasn't a nun, Jen, but...oh come on. Men have always been after me, wanting sex, or a conquest or, worse, a wife. Right after Colin and I broke up, I was still a kid, I had a torrid fling with one of my professors, but it was really only, only..."

"Revenge sex," Jennifer broke in. "I've been the receiver of that more than a few times."

"Yeah, know what? I never thought about it that way, but you're absolutely right. I wanted to get back at Colin, make him suffer, but it was only me who suffered. And Mr. Rose, he suffered too."

"I'll bet that there was a Mrs. Rose in the mix as well," Jennifer surmised.

"What an embarrassing, shameful...Do I have to relive all that?"

"No, Karen. Sorry. You know me, little Miss Perv."

"Point being," Karen said, bringing the conversation back around to its main subject, "by then I was older; I'd been with a few men and I had a decent sense of myself, who I was, what I wanted. I believed, maybe I was afraid, that there was one man, and one man only, meant for me."

"You didn't know that then and you don't know it now. Who could know such a thing?"

"I realize how stupid it sounds to you, Jen. Doesn't mean that it's not true."

"I understand," Angie said.

"Me too," Kendra agreed.

"Angie, you were never—."

"Of course not, Karen. I was barely eighteen when Tony and me—."

"Honey, by eighteen I'd been with thirty or forty men," Jen bragged.

"Well, I'm not you, Jennifer. I'm very happy that I've only been with Tony and no one else. Sorry if, I mean, I don't..."

"It's okay, Angie. Truth be told, I, well, let's just say that I would gladly change a few things if I could."

"How about you, Kendra? Since it's—."

"Don't go there, Angie. Please," Scott demanded, almost rudely.

"Mr. Sensitive," Kendra said, laughing. "You know my history, I have nothing to hide. Hell, there's not that much to talk about."

"I don't like you to—."

"Okay, babe, okay. Relax," Kendra said, trying to calm her husband down.

"Hey, know what? You don't have to talk about anything, Kendra," Karen said. "Privacy is a right, no explanation needed. I'm only telling you guys about Colin and me because maybe if I talk about it, I won't hurt so much anymore."

"If you two got back together, you know, physically, what happened? Why didn't you drive to Vegas and get married?"

"God happened, Kendra."

"God happened?"

"After a week or so of living as husband and wife in a beautiful hotel suite, going for long walks on the beach, talking for hours, oh ... this is so hard." Karen was struggling, her anguish was surging again, like a relentless, all-powerful wave that threatened to swamp everything in its path.

"Honey, we've been drinking steadily for a couple of hours. Maybe now isn't the best time."

"No, I mean, I need to do this," Karen said, pulling herself together as best as she could. "Let me finish."

Karen's dining room was silent now, uncomfortably hushed. Scotty knew part of the story, as did Jennifer, but no one knew it all. Everyone had always wondered exactly what happened that summer because they knew that after 1988 everything changed.

"One morning I woke up and Colin was gone. He hadn't done that before, got out of bed before me, so I kinda panicked. He wasn't in the room or on the terrace, but when I looked outside I saw him sitting in the dunes, holding a rosary. He was praying. Colin came back inside in half an hour or so but things, we, were never the same after that."

"Was he feeling guilt over, you know, having relations with you so close to his ordination?"

"No, it was never like that, Kendra. Colin and I never believed that being intimate together was in any way immoral; it was beautiful, a gift from God. Now, this is before he became a priest, remember."

"What was it then? What changed?"

"Colin felt a strong calling to the ministry. He liked the idea of being a pastor, of giving his life in service to God and to others. It was a crucial influence in his life, a large part of who he was as a human being. I have always...out of selfishness I have always discounted this, tried to minimize it, rationalize it."

"So he told you that he couldn't marry you because he had promised himself to Christ?" Kendra asked.

"Not exactly, but, well...His focus was not on himself or on me, but on others."

"That fits. That was Colin," Scott agreed.

"He told me that he got up early because 'the Holy Spirit' prompted him to pray. Out there in the dunes, he had some sort of encounter with God. He was 'made aware', his exact words, that if he didn't take his vows and become a priest that 'thousands would suffer here and in eternity'."

"Holy Mother of God!" Tiny shouted, startling everyone. "I had a dream, the same dream!"

"He told me later that you did, years later."

"Colin never gave me any context, Karen. I never knew that the prophecy came to him when you and he..."

"It was true. You know that now, right? How could you have any doubts?"

"Scotty, knowing that it's true and accepting it, living with it, are two very different things. Back then I didn't know it was true, just the opposite as far as I was concerned."

"You wanted a life with him, children, happiness. That wasn't wrong, Karen. It's just that Colin was called by a Higher Power to—."

"To what, Scotty? Self-destruction? I know, better than you or anyone else could possibly know, how good of a man he was; Colin was unbelievably beautiful and kind and loving. He was a great priest, the best, but he was also terribly unhappy at times."

"But at other times, Karen, he was at peace, fulfilled. He felt tremendous joy when he served others, by no means was he sad or down all the time, or even most of the time."

"Yes, as long as he could tell himself, convince himself, that I was okay, that I was happy, loved and cared for, he could mask the pain and loneliness and prosper as a minister of God."

"Wait, Karen. You never finished the story. What happened after that morning Colin prayed in the dunes?" Angela was worried that Karen might skip over the details and she was dying to know exactly what happened.

"I wasn't very understanding. As I saw it, he was asking me to compete with God and the Church. Besides, he promised to marry me before he promised to become a priest. Colin—."

"Honey," Jennifer said, interrupting. "I've always wanted to know something. Why was it either or? Why not join another church where ministers could marry and he could be with you and serve God?"

"Colin would nev—." Scotty shut up because Kendra not so gently jabbed him in the ribs.

"You're right, Scotty. We had this argument on day two or three after his 'encounter'. Colin absolutely refused to entertain the idea of leaving the Church, 'abandoning the Holy Mother and all the saints', as he put it."

"Praise God," Scott said, regretting his words as soon as they left his mouth.

"Unbelievable. After all we've been through, Scotty. That was just mean."

"Karen, I'm sorry. I apologize for not considering your feelings. Forgive me."

"What is it with you Catholics? No one else is quite good enough, are they. Everyone else comes up short because the Blessed Pope is infallible, Apostolic succession, the Church was created by Christ - I've heard it all, over and over and over. I'm sick to death of it."

"Karen," Kendra said, as she reached out and gently touched her friend's hand. "No good can come from traveling down this road. We all know how you feel, what you believe."

"You're right. I'm sorry. Forgive me, Scotty."

"Nothing to forgive."

"We sort of drifted in and out of each other's arms after that; the intimate

closeness was gone, but our love was still as passionate, as permanent, as ever. Before he said it, on our last day at Sea Ranch, I knew, I could sense what was coming."

"This is so sad," Amanda said as she wept.

"Colin told me that he had no choice, God had to come first. No matter how much he loved me or wanted to run away with me forever, and I believe that's what he wanted more than anything else in this world, he could not do it. He was sure that I wouldn't understand and sorry for all the pain he'd caused me."

"What did you do?"

"I reacted like a spoiled child, Jen. I mean, when I think back on it now...ah, hell. Why sugarcoat it? I called him every name in the book, said horrible things that I didn't mean and stormed out. I left him all alone in that hotel room. I'm not sure how he made it back to St. Paul's."

"Me. I came and got him, hon."

"You know, I always thought that's what happened, but I wasn't sure. It's kinda late, but thanks, Jen."

"What did Colin say to you when you got there, about what happened, I mean," Angie asked.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing. I think that's why he called me, because I was the one person he was sure that would come and get him, take him home and not ask any questions."

"So that was the last..."

"Yes, that was the last time, Jennifer. Once Colin took his vows, we never, he wouldn't, no matter—."

"Sy Green was going to tell the world otherwise, Karen."

"Let me guess, Dr. Bergeson's handiwork, Scotty?"

"Yep."

"Okay, let's put it all on the table. Yes, I went to San Francisco on, I was going to say on occasion, but I think ten or fifteen times a year is more than occasional. I wanted to see him, to watch him – not spying exactly, but learning. Wait, not learning, either. I just needed to be near him, to share...it was the only way that I could be with him. I know how pathetic that sounds."

"There is nothing pathetic about it, hon. But, in a way, it would have been kinder to Joseph if you had just slept with Colin, rather than, you know..."

"You're right, Jen. A hundred percent right."

"I'm lost," Angie admitted.

"Me too," Kendra agreed.

"I was unfaithful to Joseph, no doubt. A husband deserves all of his wife's love and devotion, not just sexual chastity. I couldn't help myself though, the more I went up there, the more I—."

"What would you do when you went to San Francisco? You never approached Colin, did you?"

"No, Amanda. I don't think he ever knew."

"He knew."

"Scotty?"

"He knew that you were coming to the church once in a while."

"Now I'm lost. How?"

"He told me that one weekend, in the mid-90s as I recall, he came back early from a retreat. He was on his way to the Bishop's office, but he stopped outside when he heard your voice. He said that he knew he shouldn't have, but he stood there and listened to you two talk for half an hour."

"So he knew."

"Yes, Karen. He was aware that you were soliciting funds for his projects, finding doctors for the clinics, all that. Bishop Antonelli would never break his vow of confidentiality to you, but he and Colin, on some level at least, well they knew what was going on. Colin was very, very grateful that the Bishop was counseling you."

"Wow. I'm too numb right now to be stunned, Scotty. Another secret exposed."

"Helping a priest is nothing to be ashamed of, Karen. Colin was so pleased, blown away is a better description of his feelings, that you were supporting him."

"I loved, I love him, more than anything in this world." When Karen said this, she started to shake and cry.

"That's enough," Jennifer ordered, assuming control of the situation. "I'm taking Karen to bed while you guys clean up down here."

Karen did not argue. Despite her best efforts, she was unable to maintain a second longer. She let Jen escort her upstairs and help her get into bed, all the while wondering by what miracle she would get through the next two days.

Chapter Twenty One

June 1979

"The old fire engine roared out of the st..., stat..., parque de bomberos? How do you say that word, Colin?"

"Stationhouse."

"Oh yeah. Out of the stationhouse and into the city to fight the blaze."

"Cool. That's the end of chapter two, Miguel. We'll read chapter three tomorrow."

"Thanks, amigo."

"No problem."

"No, I mean it, ese. I must know how to read. Thanks for keepin' all this on the down low, bro."

"Hey, no big deal. What's this?" Colin asked as Miguel handed him a paper bag filled with something heavy.

"Burritos. Junior makes 'em good. Eat, my friend."

"Muchos gracias."

"You're welcome, sir," Miguel said, trying his best to pronounce the English words without revealing his thick, Mexican accent.

"Hey Red," someone yelled from across the prison yard. "The priest is looking for you."

Colin stood and stretched. He was sore and a bit tired, but in a good way. Forever an athlete, Colin Sullivan was accustomed to a rigorous workout schedule, but in prison he found that he had nothing but time, so he ran, lifted weights and did calisthenics seven days a week. He was determined to turn his body from toned muscle into hardened steel. Colin threw at least fifty pitches every day and while there wasn't enough real competition available to keep him razor sharp, he made sure that he didn't forget how to bend a curve or paint a fastball on the outside corner. The other prisoners enjoyed watching him pitch, and they would often bet not on who could get a hit off of Colin, but rather on a more realistic goal, who could get a piece of one of his pitches and foul it off.

If he wasn't playing ball or exercising, Colin put himself at the disposal of Father Sam. At first this upset Little T, but once he was convinced that Colin wouldn't do anything stupid and that he could still keep an eye on him, he grudgingly accepted the arrangement.

Father Alcaraz was determined to help as many people as he could during his brief stay at the Nevada State Penitentiary. He testified to Colin that "nothing happens by accident" and that "Christ expects me to serve Him always". Service to God, according to Father Sam, meant seeing to the needs of His children. The good Father said Mass every Sunday, taught catechism and prepared men for baptism and/or First Holy Communion, set up a "sharing box" which Colin oversaw, to which all of the Catholic inmates were persuaded to contribute

toiletries and food to so that no brother had to go without necessities. Father Sam established a small group of tutors and mentors, of which Colin was one, to teach men how to read and write in English and other fundamental life skills.

"Padre. Good morning."

"Buenos Dias, Roja."

"What's up?"

"How is Miguel doing?"

"Better. He's on his third book."

"Good, good. He is an excellent boy, like you. Have you begun with Sanchez yet?"

"Mañana."

"Si, bueno. Colin, I wish to talk with you for awhile. Are you free?"

"Sure, Father. Want to walk?"

"Si, we walk."

They headed past the weight pile, strolled through the basketball courts and made their way to the track.

"How is Karen?"

"Good, well as good as can be expected, you know."

"She is enjoying school?"

"Yes. I think she has decided to major in Political Science and then study law, at least that's what she told me last week when she visited."

"She is still, you know, with you, Colin?"

"Yes, yes...of course, Padre. I realize that you have no way of knowing...Karen and I will always be together."

"Everything in this world is temporary, Colin. Only Jesus Christ is the same always, but I understand your feelings, what you believe. Do you want to know what I believe?"

"Padre?"

"Colin Sullivan would make a good priest, no, a great priest."

"Wow! What a thing to say, Father. Thanks, I guess." Colin was startled by Father Sam's compliment. They had never discussed the subject before.

"I watch you carefully, Rojo. You have the gift of patience. There is also a gentleness about you. I see how much you care about others, how generously you give your time to them."

Colin was almost blushing now from embarrassment. He was only doing what came naturally to him, expressing his true nature. To be praised for simply being what he was made him uncomfortable.

"I admit," Colin began, "that for most of my life I was the center of attention. Baseball star, super jock, you know, Padre. But Karen, she taught me that..." Colin hesitated and then stopped. He desperately wanted to tell Father Sam the whole story, what actually happened on grad night, but he couldn't, he would not break his vow of silence even to a priest.

"She taught you what, Colin?"

"Karen taught me that there are things greater than myself. In here you,

the men too, have taught me that helping others makes me happy. I enjoy being of service, being needed."

"Like I said, you would make a great priest, Rojo."

"Priests cannot marry."

"No, this is true, they cannot."

"Then I would not make a good priest, Padre. I cannot imagine not marrying Karen."

"Yes, yes. I'm not trying to...it is hard to explain."

Now it was Father Sam's turn to take a moment and reflect before speaking again. "The same qualities that would make you a good priest would also serve you well as a husband and father. It's just...how can I say this? I feel compelled to tell you something."

"Compelled, Father?"

"The Spirit sometimes speaks to me, Rojo. When He does, I cannot turn away, be disobedient."

"God said something to you about me? Come on, Padre, I don't mean to sound disrespectful, but who the heck am I? I'm nobody."

"You are most certainly not a nobody, Colin. I knew this from the moment I met you. God has blessed you with many gifts, and to whom much is given, much is expected."

"Father, I'm sure that—."

"Let me finish, Rojo."

"Sorry, Padre."

"I had a dream last night about you. Sometimes the Lord talks to me in my dreams. Do you believe that this is possible?"

"Father, I don't know...What a question!"

"I saw you, many years from now, standing outside a church in San Francisco. St. Thomas' church. Do you know this church?"

"No, Padre. I've only been to San Francisco once when I was a little kid."

"It is an old, magnificent building, very holy. Anyway, you and I were talking in front of this church. Colin, you were a priest, a priest of this church."

"Father, the only way that I'm likely to be in a church in San Francisco is if my baseball team has a Sunday game there and I go to Mass while I'm in town. I'm a ball player, Padre. That's who I am."

"Yes, you are a great ballplayer. Best pitcher I've ever seen, and I've seen plenty." Father Sam's hometown near Mexico City was famous for producing top drawer major league talent. "But being an athlete is not your greatest gift, Colin. Not by far."

"Oh, I disagree, Father. What else...I mean, I've never been very good at—."

"Last April, Rojo. The fight on the yard, the really nasty one with the stabbings and the clubs. I watched you, what you did."

"What did I do, Padre?"

"You walked right into the middle of that mess and pulled Ram out of

there. If you hadn't done that, he would have bled to death."

"That was no big deal, Padre. You're making too much—."

"You don't see it, do you? Most don't, or so I've been told."

"Padre?"

"You have this ability, a presence. People stop, listen and pay attention when you speak. You are respected almost automatically. It's selflessness, leadership, but it's more, much more. The Saints all have it, this unique, impressive quality."

"I assure you, Padre, I'm no saint. Believe that."

"Maybe yes, maybe no, but still you have this quality. How many men – white, black, Chicano, Asian, it doesn't seem to matter – seek you out, tell you their problems, value your friendship and advice?"

"Okay," Colin reluctantly admitted, "I plead guilty to being a good listener. I've been told this before, but that does not mean—."

"I'm not saying these things to pump you up, Colin, or for any other reason than I must tell you. God did not whisper in my ear, 'Colin Sullivan is to be my priest', but all the signs are there. How could I not share my heart with you?"

"Padre," Colin said as they stopped walking and he put his hand on Father Sam's shoulder, "I've learned so much from you. Until we met, I didn't know who Christ was, what the Church was all about, or what it meant to be a good Catholic. My dad, well, I know now that he wasn't a good example. Perhaps in my enthusiasm you got the wrong idea, misunderstood..."

"You'll be a priest for a while, anyway."

"Father?"

"I get released next month, Rojo. Are you telling me that you would allow all of our efforts to be wasted, that as soon as I am gone everything we do here will just stop?"

"I'm nineteen, Padre. Just a kid. I'll do what I can, you know that I will, but—."

"You will do more than that, Colin. I will see that a priest comes once or twice a month for Mass, but when he is not here it is your job to conduct a communion service. I will instruct the new priest to leave enough consecrated host in the tabernacle for you to do this."

"Me? What, you want me to give the homily? Distribute the Eucharist? Are you joking?"

"No, and you'll start this week."

"Padre, I'm way too young. It wouldn't be right."

"Promise me, Colin. I'm leaving this flock in your care. Part of being a Catholic is learning to be obedient. I am your priest, Rojo, and I'm asking you to step up and take care of your church, to be Christ to these men."

Colin then experienced something for the first time in his life; he felt responsible to God. He became aware, on a level that he neither rationally understood nor could he explain, that Christ wanted him to minister to His Church.

"Yes, Father," Colin said, slowly and thoughtfully. "If that is what you require of me, I will do my best and try not to embarrass you."

"You could not possibly embarrass me, Colin."

"Don't be so sure."

August 1980

"She's comin' tomorrow?"

"Yes. Karen and Scotty drove up today. They should be at the motel by now."

"Won't be long now, huh, Red. Bet you can't wait to get that gal of yours in the sack."

"Little T, sometimes...Oh, who am I kidding! I'm dying to be with Karen."

"She still dyin' to be wit you?"

"Yes, for sure. You always ask me that, T. After all this time, I'd have thought you had it figured out."

"You ain't experienced at bein' an ex-con yet, Red. Life ain't gonna be the same, don't fool yourself."

"Karen and I are the same."

"Yea, so far so good, Red. Wait 'til she parades her felon boyfriend around some, then we'll see."

"Our friends could care less about—."

"Ain't talkin' 'bout your friends, Sonny Jim. Didn't you tell me that she's gotten a taste of politics? Workin' for Carter?"

"That's right. She's in charge of the Carter campaign's UNLV campus office. Karen is running for Student Body President this fall, too."

"Bet she'll be proud to put you right there up on stage with her, huh, Red. Vote for me and my murderin' boyfriend!"

"We've talked about that, I think you're—."

"Now you're gonna tell me how it is again, ain't you, Sullivan. I've seen mor' in I care to of this ugly world, so give me some credit. I'm tryin' to help you."

"Karen and I love each other. That will never change."

"So what? All that and a dime and you still can't buy a cup of joe, Red."

"I disagree."

"You disagree. What are you, twenty, Red?"

"I'll be twenty-one soon."

"Since I'm old enough to be your daddy and, now don't go getting' all weepy on me, Red, I'm kind of fond of you, you need to know the truth."

"The truth. Okay."

"No matter what you end up bein', and I don't argue you got the talent to make the bigs, you'll always be a felon, a con. Now, that don't matter much in some circles – hell, in mine it's a requirement – but in Karen's world it will matter

a lot."

"Karen doesn't care, trust me."

"Not now she don't boy because she's in love wit you and wants to be wit you. What happens when you two get hitched, maybe you're a ballplayer, maybe not, and she wants to get a job as a lawyer or go into politics? Then your past will be a real problem for her."

"It's not like that."

"Yeah? She tell the Carter people about you?"

"No, well...that's different. We're not married yet and—."

"What did she say to them? Beautiful young woman like that, men got to be trippin' over their dicks just to sniff her. What's her story?"

"She told them that her boyfriend goes to the University of Utah. She does not discuss her personal life with anyone on the campaign."

"You're cool with that lie?"

"What...Alright, it's a lie, but it's not hurting anyone. Big deal."

"She's gonna hafta tell more lies, Red."

"You're trying to tell me what, T? That I should break up with Karen because I'll always have a criminal record? If you only knew how wrong...how..." Colin stopped. He didn't want to give T a hint, not even the slightest clue, as to why he was really in prison.

"Red," Anthony Bolognese said, almost affectionately, "I'm not a good man. I gave up tryin' to be one a long time ago. But Red, you are a good man. I've done a lot of time, boy, and I'm here to tell you that you're one of a kind. Never met anyone quite like you. Everyone in this place respects you. Hell, you don't need protection or help from me, you never did. And you're just a youngster. I just don't want to see you get hurt, Red, you're too good of a man."

Colin leaned back against the wall and rested his legs on his foot locker. Well I'll be, he thought to himself, Little T Bolognese has a heart after all. He was both touched and impressed.

"T, God bless you, and thank you, too. I never could have made it in here without your help."

"Maybe it's the way you say that, Red."

"Say what?"

"God bless you. You know what? That's what it is, I shoulda put two and two together before. For some reason, whenever I think about you, Red, I picture you as a priest."

"What did you say?"

"I said a priest, Red. That offend you or somethin'?"

"No, no, T. Have you been talking to Father Brian about me?"

"Hell no. That Mick is a lousy preacher. Ever since Father Sam left, you've been the real priest around here. Nobody likes Father Brian and he don't care for us too much neither."

Colin didn't respond, not because he didn't agree with Anthony, because he did, but out of respect and deference to the office of pastor.

"I do like it, T."

"Like what?"

"Conducting communion service, distributing the sharing box, helping the men, talking with them, praying with them. I've thought, I know this sounds stupid, but I've thought..."

"That you might miss it, miss the job, when you're out?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Like I said, I kinda think of you as bein' a priest. Father Sullivan...Has a nice ring to it. Real Bing Crosby."

"Maybe I'll be a deacon."

"Maybe you'll marry that stone fox girl of yours and pop out eight little Catholics."

"T, thanks. I know that you're telling me these things because you care about me."

"Now don't go gettin' all mushy on me, Red. Ain't like we're gonna be sharin' a shower anytime soon."

"Yea, yea. Tough guy. I think you want me to become a priest because you know that I'll pray for your soul."

"Busted. That's it, kid. Gotta do somethin' to reduce my time in purgatory. Maybe you could see fit to knock off a couple centuries."

As was their pattern and custom, when Colin and Anthony were done talking, that was it. No need for good nights or polite chit chat, just flip off the lights and drift off to sleep.

Colin lay there in the dimly lit, semi-darkness and watched as the guard passed by their cell, rudely slamming his keys against the bars as he did. What a prick, Colin thought, and how sad. How sad it must be to take pleasure in disturbing other people's peace just because you can.

As far as prison personnel goes, Colin learned both from T and from experience that there were two general types – the ones who thought inmates were in prison for punishment and the ones who believed that prisoners were incarcerated as punishment. The "for punishment" variety were the guards and staff who were often the most brutal and corrupt, the ones who smuggled the vast majority of the booze and drugs into the facility and who would routinely throttle any inmate who tried to rat them out to the warden or other higher ups. They berated the prisoners constantly, cracking crude and derogatory jokes at their expense. To them, the inmates were not human beings, but rather objects to abuse at their discretion, sources of perverse pleasure and profit. Colin, at Father Sam's urging, tried hard not to despise them, but he could not yet bring himself to pray for them.

The "as punishment" types were much easier to deal with and generally benign. Their agenda was simple and without malice; they wanted to come to work, do their job, collect their pay and go home, preferably with a minimum of grief and in one piece. On some level, Colin believed, most of them knew that making a living by operating a human zoo was a noxious occupation by

definition, but for the most part it was also relatively easy money with virtual lifetime job security. While he couldn't say that he'd become friends with any of the staff, more than a few of them liked and respected Colin and looked out for him within the bounds of their duties.

As for his fellow inmates, Colin often wondered if there was anyone else in the pen like he was, completely innocent. He prayed for them, not knowing their names or how many there were, but sure that he was not alone in suffering through the particular agony of being punished for something he did not do.

In 1978 Colin was naive; by August of 1980 he was anything but raw. Two years in prison had aged him twenty, from a spiritual perspective. Before, his life had been focused, sheltered and moved carefully along a path toward one goal, becoming a major league pitcher. Colin had no way of knowing what real evil and hardship were all about before he went to prison.

Now Colin knew the hard truth - for many in this world life is not only unfair, but it's also cruel. If you were raised in a poor home by an abusive, drunk and often absent father and a beleaguered mother who had to work three jobs just to keep her family alive, and your neighborhood was a barrio or ghetto or some public housing slum, the odds were overwhelming that you would end up poor, addicted to drugs, in prison, or, which is more likely, all three.

For Colin, drug and alcohol use had been, until the tragedy with Kyle Hart, an amusing distraction, almost routine, something that he and his friends enjoyed without much fear and no real consequences. Now he saw substance abuse for what it really was, a pernicious evil, a destroyer of souls. He was determined, no matter what he ended up doing for the rest of his life, to warn others about this hazard, to encourage them to avoid the pain, the dehumanizing cycle of pathological drug abuse. But drugs weren't the real enemy – they were a symptom, not the disease.

The real enemy, everyone's enemy he now knew, was the absence of love. The men Colin met while he was in prison, the first time or the repeat offenders, those there for violent or non-violent crimes, those who were genuinely repentant and those who were not, those who wanted nothing more than to get out and go right back to doing what got them into prison and those who sincerely wanted to change, all of them had at least one thing in common – the absence of love. At some point in their lives, someone let them down, refused to care and abandoned them in one way or another. Their mistakes were their own, but they did not fail without assistance.

If a man feels loved, Colin learned through the process of his spiritual growth and by taking to heart what his mentor, Father Sam, taught him, he believes, to a greater or lesser degree, that he has value, that he isn't a "nigger" or a "spic" or a "convict" or a "thief" or a "junkie" or whatever other ugly, insulting label the world unmercifully branded him with like a steer.

Men who believe they have value will not naturally waste their lives on empty pursuits or harm others to satisfy their passions. Rather, they are inclined to goodness, to building rather than destroying, to edification not dissipation.

The source of all love, Colin now also knew, not believed but knew, was God. Christ's call to mercy resonated in Colin's heart and soul and infused in him an ideal, a profound and permanent yearning to serve the Lord, to help people realize that no matter what happens in this world, God will always love them and that He abandons no one who seeks His mercy.

Many times Colin prayed, prayer was now an hourly habit for him, that God would show the same mercy to others that He had shown to him. He realized how blessed he was to have a woman who loved him and friends that would do anything to help him. He realized that these blessings were the result of Christ's spirit reaching out to His creation, freely offering His hand of peace, His love, to all who had the wisdom to seek and accept it.

He was no longer a child. He was no longer just a ballplayer. Colin Sullivan had become a servant of Christ Jesus, with all of the honor and challenges that such an exalted status endows.

Chapter Twenty Two

October 1980

"How many times you gonna read that letter, Sonny Jim? Say anything different the tenth time through?"

"No...I'm trying to...I'm not sure what I'm trying to do."

"Father Sam thinks you're aces, Red. He alright, Father Sam. Best damn priest I've ever known, that's certain."

"I miss him, like I miss Scotty and Tiny."

"Friends are all we got in this fucked up world. Better'n gold, a good friend."

"I'll miss you too, T. Don't quit on me, man."

"One thing I don't do, Red, that's quit."

"You know what I mean. Don't quit on your soul, don't quit on God."

"The Big Man has every reason to drop me off in Hell and leave me there, Red. You don't know...keep it at that, you don't know."

"No one is beyond God's mercy."

"There you go again."

"T?"

"Actin' like a priest. It comes so naturally to you, like a duck to water."

"T, man. My life is set. I'm moving in with Karen and her mom. I can work out with UNLV's team over the winter and either go to school and play for them in the Spring, or try out for a pro club, try to catch a break."

"That's a good plan, Red. If it's so damn good, why do you keep readin' the Padre's letter?"

"Remember Nunez, the older guy from Guatemala? He was released a few months back."

"What'd he do? Oh yea, I remember. Killed a man in a bar fight. Manslaughter, like you kid."

"That's him. Let me tell you something. As long as Nunez stays away from the booze, he's cool. More than cool. Hard worker, loves his wife, adores his grandkids."

"Yea, yea. Another one of your famous sob stories." Anthony derisively called all of the people Colin tried to help his "sob stories", but his disdain was not genuine. Truth be told, Little T Bolognese loved hearing positive accounts about prisoners, how they had changed themselves and their lives for the better, but he feigned indifference to bolster his now mostly fanciful image of himself as a predatory gangster, as someone who inflicted suffering and eschewed mercy.

"Nunez is back home now – well not 'home' home, but in San Diego. Let me read you a bit of his letter. 'Colin, you were right! I do feel much better, much calmer, when I pray the rosary every day. You would be proud of me! I never

miss Sunday Mass, but I do miss your homilies. No drinking either! Not a drop! My wife has never met you, but she is sure that you walk on water. I am sure also. Who would have believed that Arturo Nunez could be a good man?

"You, Colin. You did. For someone so young, you are truly blessed. I thank you so much for encouraging me, for convincing me that I could be someone God could be proud of. I think of you like family, amigo. Your brother, Art."

"Add that one to the collection, Red. Like I been sayin', you should be a priest."

"I wonder if I'll ever have the chance to do this again, T."

"Do what? Rot in prison?"

"No, of course not. To help people, to make a difference."

"Choices, kid. Choices."

"I hear you."

"Do you? I spend fifteen, sixteen hours a day wit you and I see the wheels spinnin' up there. Let me ask you somethin', whys it gotta be either or?"

"T?"

"Whys it gotta be either or? Lots a churches have revs that are married. What, you 'fraid that Karen won't want you if you tell her that you want to be a sky pilot?"

"No, that's not it at all. I'm Catholic, T, all the way, through and through. I believe in Christ and His Church. They cannot, they should not, be separated."

"Yea, I get that. I'm a bad one, but I'm still a Catholic. So pick."

"T, it's not—."

"Either the girl or the collar. You ain't the first man who has had to choose between the two."

"I choose Karen. I love her so much, T. I know that you think I'm too young to really und—."

"You don't know what I think, Red, 'cause most of the time I ain't tellin' you. But, then good. Choice made. Be happy, go forth and multiply, like the Good Book says."

"I will."

"Good."

"I love Karen, she's my life."

"I hear you."

"What's wrong with me?"

"Ain't a damn thing wrong with you, Red."

"I should be thrilled, this nightmare is over tomorrow, and I am thrilled, I'm dying to see Karen, to be with her, to pick up where we left off."

"But?"

"Some things have changed. Not Karen and I, we're the same, but now I know what I didn't know before. It's like my eyes have been opened and, this is for damn sure, I don't always like what I see."

"I'm listenin'""

"I, we, have to do something. How can I go on living my life as I want to live it knowing how much He needs servants, soldiers to battle the evil one?"

"He bein'?"

"Christ."

"Thought so."

"You haven't read much about the saints, have you T?"

"Some, one in particular."

"Really? Which saint?"

"Saint George."

"The Syrian general. He was a Roman soldier who refused to deny the Lord and was martyred."

"Yea, that's him. Slew the dragon, too."

"Why Saint George?"

"In the mafia, Red," Anthony had never discussed any details of his organized crime life with Colin before, this was something new, "when you're made, become a full member of the group, you hafta go through this ritual. You swear never to betray anyone in the mob, you swear on your life and you burn a saint's card when you make your vow."

"You picked Saint George?"

"Yea."

"Why?"

"He was fearless, unlike me. I ain't fearless, Red, far from it. Scared shitless mosta the time."

"I've never seen you afraid and I don't know anyone around here with any sense that isn't intimidated by you."

"People don't scare me, Red. Always figured I'd come out on top in any fight."

"Then what are—."

"Same thing you are, Red. God. The Lord scares me to death because I know how much evil I've done."

"You can erase all of—."

"No, you can't, Red. Some shit can't be erased. No matter what it stays wit you, haunts you like a damned ghost."

"That's not...You shouldn't believe that, Anthony." Colin had never called Little T Anthony before, and he wasn't sure why he did so now, but somehow it was appropriate. "You are no better, no worse, than any other person. Forgiveness is available to all, to all who sincerely ask."

"I do know that Colin," Anthony called him Colin for the first time, "maybe it ain't forgiveness as much as it is forgettin'."

"I don't understand."

"There is no way to get past some shit. All the prayer in the world won't help you, you can't drown it in booze or smother it wit smack. Ain't no amount a doin' good gonna help neither. It's just there, forever, part of you 'til you die."

Colin didn't immediately respond to Anthony's comment; he considered it,

pondered over what his friend was trying to teach him. They were comfortable with silence when silence was called for, so Anthony got up, brushed his teeth and laid back down on his bunk without saying a word.

A few minutes later, Colin said, "T, I think I know what you're talking about."

"Yea?"

"Yes. Maybe we're not meant to forget some things, even though we are forgiven for our sins. It's painful, though, to be so attached to something—."

"To somethin' you can't do fuck all about, but it still eats at you, like cancer."

"I think you answered my question, Anthony, although I'm not sure I want to hear what you're telling me."

"You mean what's wrong wit you? Like I said, ain't a damn th—."

"I'm in love with two things – Karen Foster and the Church. I have to make a choice, but no matter which one I choose—."

"The other one won't go away. Never."

"That's terrible."

"Welcome to my Hell, Sonny Jim."

October 1980

At the Pleasant Rest Motel in Carson City, Nevada shortly after Colin's release from prison.

"They're here."

"Nervous, hon?"

"I don't know, Jen. Kinda. Is that bad?"

"No, Karen. I'd be nervous, too."

"Do I look alright?"

"Honey, you could stop traffic wearing a gunny sack. You're gorgeous."

"He looks the same," Amanda Simpson said, as she peeked out of the window. "I don't like his hair, though. It's too short."

"He looks better without the beard," Jennifer added.

"He looks better naked," Karen said as she got up and opened the door.

"Hi, baby."

"My God, Karen. You look so..." Colin couldn't finish his sentence because Karen's mouth was covering his.

"I'm going to cry," Amanda admitted as she watched Colin and Karen embrace and then separate.

"The prodigal son returns," Scott Armour said as he tossed Colin's duffel bag onto the floor.

"I missed you guys so much," Colin said as he and Karen sat down on the

edge of the bed, arms wrapped around each other.

"I worried every day about you, Colin."

"Thanks, Sweetie. I prayed for you every day, for all of you."

"Is it over?" Amanda asked.

"Yes. The State of Nevada says that I have sufficiently paid for my sins."

"For my sins."

"For our sins, Karen," Scott corrected.

"What do you want to do first, Colin?" Jennifer asked.

"Since Scotty already took me to St. Catherine's to give thanks," none of them, not even Karen, knew that they had made a stop before coming to the motel, "whatever you guys want to do. I'm just glad to be free, happy to be alive."

"Don't tell me, ever," Amanda pleaded.

"Tell you what, Sweetie?"

"The horrible things you saw in there, in that place."

"It wasn't all horrible, Amanda. It was hell to be away from Karen, from all of you but, believe it or not, there are diamonds in the coal."

"Colin became sort of the prison priest," Scotty pronounced, with a tone of pride.

"Really?" Amanda asked, incredulously.

"My brother exaggerates," Colin answered, shyly. "But I think that I helped some people."

"But now that's all over, honey. Now you can come home where you belong," Karen said as she leaned over and kissed Colin's cheek.

"Tiny and Angie send their love," Jennifer reported. "They want you to call them when you get a minute."

"I will, of course."

For the next few hours, they talked and laughed and celebrated Colin's freedom. Unlike two years earlier, their chemical indulgence was limited to a few beers and Colin, to everyone's surprise except Scott's, drank only soda.

As the afternoon became the early evening Colin asked, "Do any of you keep in touch with Aimee?"

"Why? Should we?" Jennifer asked, snidely.

"We lost a friend, but she lost a brother. I think that we owe it to Kyle to look after her."

"Boy, you really did become a priest in prison," Jennifer responded. "The girl is a bitch, Colin. Complete pain in the ass. I've tried, Scotty has tried, Karen has—."

"Not me, I haven't tried," Amanda confessed. "She said really nasty things to me about Karen and Colin. I don't need to hear all that garbage, it upsets me."

"I'll speak with her," Colin promised. "She needs to know that Kyle is okay and that no one hates her."

"Seven thirty. Some of us have dinner plans," Jennifer reminded as she nudged Scott.

"Yep, we're history. Come on, Jen. I'll buy you a steak."

"You don't make enough money playing ball in Colorado Springs to buy me a burger, so let me buy the steaks."

"Pushy broad."

"That's me, the pushy broad. Come on, Sweetie."

"I might cry again. It's so good to see you, Colin. I love you."

"I love you too, Sweetie."

As the rest of the group were exchanging hugs and saying goodnight, Colin motioned to Scott and they talked for a moment outside, alone.

"How many cars did you guys drive up from Vegas?"

"Two, Karen's and mine. She wants to drive back alone with you."

"If I...I...Scott, don't turn me away."

"Turn you away, bro?"

"Don't leave me hanging, Scotty. I may need you tomorrow."

"Whatever you ask, Colin, I'll do it. You should know that."

"Just promise that you'll be there for me, no matter what happens."

"Always."

"Maybe you'd rather have a steak," Karen teased as she emerged from the motel room with her hair down and blouse unbuttoned on top.

Colin and Karen went inside, closed the curtains and bolted the door.

"What time is it, baby?" Karen asked.

"One thirty."

"Can't sleep?"

"Too much on my mind, I guess."

"Maybe if we do it again, it'll wear you out."

Colin smiled and kissed Karen gently on the forehead. For the past few hours he had been totally lost in her, in the magnificence of their passion. He couldn't imagine being with another woman. Who could possibly compare? Karen was perfection for him, the best the world had to offer.

Since midnight as she slept he had gently caressed her, running his fingers lightly across her tan shoulders and breasts, playing with her blonde hair. He was trying not to wake her; in fact, he prayed that time would stand still, that they could just lay together in this bed forever and make love, then cuddle, then nap, over and over again.

"Honey?"

"Yes?"

"We need to talk about something. You know me, if it's on my mind, it's on my lips," Karen said.

"Let's talk."

"I want to go to law school at Pepperdine in Malibu."

"Then that's what we'll do."

"I've been checking into it, Colin. It's tough to get into Pepperdine."

Expensive as hell."

"Pray that I get a pro contract by then."

"I'm not really too worried about the money, hon. Scholarships, loans, we'll make it. Something else is a problem, though."

"What?"

"They're picky about who they admit, Colin. My GPA and my sex, women are being given a preference these days, help tremendously, but if I put down on the app that my husband is a, a, ...you know."

"Murderer?"

"Don't ever use that word around me again, Colin. Swear it. It's not funny and it pisses me off."

"Sorry. I'm sort of numb to it by now."

"You're not a criminal, Colin. Who knows that better than I do?"

"No one. What do you want me, us, to do?"

"Can we get married in Mexico or Canada, in a Catholic church, of course, and just not tell anyone other than friends and family that were married?"

"You mean lie?"

"We wouldn't be lying to each other or to God, just to Pepperdine and only until I start law school. Once I'm in we don't have to keep it a secret."

"Aren't you tired of lying, Karen? I know I am."

"Tired of...I'm tired of a lot of things, Colin. Most of all, I'm tired of living without you. If you don't want to keep it a secret – to lie – then I'll go to UNR or somewhere else."

"Why Pepperdine?"

"It's a top notch school, honey. The best. Maybe I'm aiming too high."

"No," Colin said as he tenderly kissed Karen and touched her cheek. "I don't ever want you to compromise. You should go for it, always. You deserve to study at Pepperdine."

"I shouldn't have sprung it on you like that, baby. It's just that I've been waiting for you...it seems like forever, Colin, waiting to start living when you got out."

"As long as we are getting everything out in the open, I need to know..."

"Are you kidding me? Colin, I can't believe that you—."

"What did you think that I was going to ask you?"

"If I was faithf..." Karen caught herself. "Oops. Sorry, baby. Totally my fault."

"I took that for granted."

"As you should, now and always."

"What I need to know is why you dropped out of the race for Student Body President."

"I told you, Colin, it was lame. A childish popularity contest."

"Amanda told me what happened. She thought that you and I had discussed it."

"I...it doesn't matter, hon. It was juvenile, meaningless. Yes, Ron Garvin,

the chump who won, found out that you and I were still together. It wasn't that...I wasn't...I would never, ever, be embarrassed to be with you, Colin. My God, just the opposite. I know that I'm not nearly good enough for you." Karen felt tears well up in her eyes. She was ashamed of herself for not telling Colin about the matter sooner.

"Shh. It's okay, I understand."

"No, it's not okay. You think I'm a total jerk, don't you."

"Not at all, just the opposite."

"Colin," Karen said, as she wiped the tears from her eyes with the sheet and sat up, "I'm glad that were getting all of this out, putting it past us. Okay, truth time. Why didn't I just tell Ron Golden Boy to kiss my ass and that I love you to death and could not be prouder to be your girl? Because I absolutely cannot fucking stand it when people put you down, when they say nasty things about you which I know aren't true. How do you think I felt when you went through all of your court stuff? I had to sit there and shut up, knowing that it was me who should be taking the whipping, not you. Now, anytime that anyone opens their big, fat mouth and says anything bad about you I go nuts. I just couldn't stand it...if Garvin had something nasty about you in public I'd have...or Scotty would have..."

"Thanks, baby."

"Thanks for what? Being a weak coward?"

"You're neither weak nor a coward. Trust me, I know those traits now when I see them, all too well, unfortunately. Thanks for loving me."

"I have always loved you, Colin. Since I was a little girl."

"You know that I feel the same about you."

"Oh, let's forget about all of this nonsense, baby. You're out, prison is over. We have so much to look forward to, mom is absolutely..."

They talked and planned and cuddled and kissed until four a.m. when, exhausted, Karen finally fell asleep. Colin didn't discuss his inner turmoil with Karen, but he wasn't being dishonest about his enthusiasm for her, or for the idea of going back to Vegas and starting over from where a cruel twist of fate had dropped them off.

What he felt that he couldn't share with Karen was his profound love for Christ and devotion to the Church. She sensed in him a change, a spiritual awakening, a firm commitment to his religion, but to her Colin was still Colin. In her eyes, all his animated faith had done was intensify the qualities she loved the most in him; his kindness, courage and honesty. Colin had not so much become a "new man", the "old man" was not in need of much reform, but rather a better version of himself.

He did not believe that Karen was capable of appreciating a competing call on his life. She would view any discussion of his entering the priesthood as a dire threat to her, which it clearly was. Colin was sad that he could not now, and perhaps would never, be able to share this most intimate part of himself with the woman he loved, the only woman he could possibly ever love.

He held her tight and kissed her again. She stirred and nuzzled closer, clearly sleeping peacefully, probably for the first time in over two years. He asked himself, what right did he have to hurt her, to disappoint her? Colin's love for Karen was real and permanent enough for him to go to prison to protect her, to sacrifice his very life for her welfare. How could he even consider a life without Karen?

Then he thought about Nunez, Garcia, Ramos, Peterson, Cervelli, Brigham, and dozens more, all the men whose lives had touched his over the past two years. Father Sam had told him that "once your soul is awakened, you cannot easily go back to sleep." Colin now knew what Father Sam was trying to tell him – for him it was impossible to turn away from suffering. He must not turn away. He must act. But there are many ways to serve the Lord and His Church, Colin also knew this, and being a good husband and father was every bit as vital a calling as was being a good priest. But was it so for him? He wondered if he was confused, or perhaps still too young to understand the quite real difference between emotion and devotion. Was he simply overwhelmed by the intensity of his prison ordeal into believing that God was urging him to become a priest?

What about baseball? Other than being with Karen, the thing that he loved doing most was pitching. He believed that he had the God-given ability to be one of the best, a top tier pro player. Was he willing to give all that up to, not only the pure joy of the sport but also the potential fame and money? He was aware that he wouldn't deny these blessings just to himself, but also to Karen.

The reality of being an ex-con was also sinking in, weighing heavily on his soul. Karen was apparently headed towards a professional career; she wanted to be a lawyer, of all things, which probably astounded Colin as much or more than his becoming a priest would Karen. There was no escaping it – the world does not easily forgive, much less forget, a checkered past. In some endeavors, the arts, sports, entrepreneurship, a nefarious history can be overlooked or conquered by the successes of a new life, but not in politics, or the law, or in any form of public service. He was afraid that, no matter what he did or how much he accomplished, his criminal record would forever be a millstone around Karen's neck.

Colin was now all too aware of how cruel the world was, of how quickly and thoroughly unmerciful evil destroys its victims. He had already sacrificed his life once to protect Karen, was he risking reversing that victory if he married her?

He watched her breathe, softly and smoothly, and felt her warm breath flow out across his chest. Oh how he loved her, everything about Karen Foster was flawless. Colin knew that any number of better men would do anything to be close to her, to win her heart. But with Colin and Karen their love wasn't a contest, it was a given.

As gently as he could, he slipped out of Karen's arms, rose out of bed and put on a pair of jeans Karen had brought him from home. Colin took a few steps over to the small table in front of the window, sat down and began to pray.

"Lord, help me. Tell me what to do." Although he whispered the prayer, in

his head it sounded like a roar.

He sat there motionless in the dull moonlight that bled in through the curtains for over thirty minutes. Then he put on his shoes and shirt and very quietly packed his bag. Karen was still sound asleep.

Colin sat back down at the table. It was nearly dawn now, and the pale, yellow light of the early morning provided just enough illumination for him to write a letter.

It said, Karen, I love you so much. When you read this, I'm sure that you will be angry and hurt, and probably confused. I'll do my best to explain, but I do not expect that anything I say will ease your pain.

I know that you don't like Father Sam, or so you told me, and that's cool. I love him, honey, because he showed me the truth and the truth is a man, Jesus Christ. I must follow where the Master leads me, Karen, and He is calling me to the priesthood.

I will miss you beyond words to describe. I know that we could never be friends like I am with Jen or Sweetie. For us, we will always be sweethearts, I cannot imagine relating to you in any other way.

Please don't think that you've done anything wrong. You haven't. Please don't think that you and a life with you isn't something that I desperately want because it is. You are the best woman in the world, the only woman I will ever love.

What you do not understand, but I pray that someday you will, is what it means to be called by God for a purpose. I cannot disobey Him, Karen, I must not disobey Him.

My hope is that, over time, you will find someone to take my place, someone that will love you like I do and make you happy. I will pray for that every day of my life, Karen, and beg God to always protect you. I know that you can't (shouldn't?) bargain with the Almighty, but I just did. I told Him a few minutes ago, as I sat here writing and crying and watching you sleep in the bed that we just shared, that if He wants me, He has to take care of you. I will hold Him to His word.

Father Sam told me that you and I and Scotty and all of our friends are 'Children of Babylon'. At first, I thought that he was telling me that we were cursed, but that's not what he meant.

In the book of Revelations it says, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great. She has become a haunt for demons. She is a cage for every unclean spirit, a cage for every unclean bird and disgusting beast. Depart from her, my people, so as to not take part in her sins and receive a share in her plagues, for her sins are piled up to the sky, and God remembers her crimes.'

This world is full of injustice and suffering, honey. I must fight against this enemy with every ounce of my energy. In a sense we are all exiles, 'Children of Babylon', as Father Sam said, not just people (like us) who grew up too fast in a city whose basic purpose is to prey upon human weaknesses. I intend to fight Babylon, the evil in this world, until the Lord calls me home.

*Karen, baby, I know now that there is something greater than our love,
greater than anything in this world, and that is Jesus Christ. I am His servant.
May you someday find it in your heart to forgive me.*

*I will love you forever,
Colin*

After neatly folding the letter, Colin placed it on the nightstand, picked up his bag and left without making a sound. He knocked on Scotty's motel room door. It took a bit for Armour to stumble out of bed and respond.

"Colin, what the—."

"Please, don't ask me any questions. Grab your gear. I need a ride to San Francisco."

"My God, Colin, what the hell is—."

"Scotty," Colin said, tears now streaming down his face, "please. I'm begging you."

Nothing else was said between them as they climbed into Scott's old Ford and drove away.

Chapter Twenty Three

"I was quite surprised that you wanted to see me, Señora. Humbled and honored as well."

"Thirty plus years of animosity is..." Karen hesitated. "Colin wanted us to talk, to try to forgive."

"You are not in need of my forgiveness, Madame Governor."

"Karen."

"Que?"

"My name is Karen, Father."

"Si, Karen. As you wish."

"But you are definitely in need of mine."

"We share a history, a troubled past."

"Is that what you'd call it? A 'troubled past'? You are my nightmare, Father Alcaraz. I have asked God for your death, Padre, a slow and painful death."

"You wish to see me suffer, as you have suffered."

"I don't believe that's possible, Father. Do you realize what you've done, not only to me, but also to Colin? Your prodigal priest is dead Padre, as is my best friend, the man that should have been my husband, the father of my children."

"You hold me responsible for your loss. I believe that your feelings are sincere, but is it really me that you blame, or is it God?"

"Both of you and your Church, too. But it wasn't Christ or the Church who stood outside St. Paul's thirty years ago and refused mercy to a desperate twenty-year-old girl, Father. You did that."

"Yes, I did. I have thought about that night many times since, especially over the last few days. I did what I believed was best at the time, Madame Gov...Karen. God will judge me as He will judge us all."

"I was desperate, Padre. You took my world, my everything, from one prison to another, to a prison from which he would never be released. I pleaded with you, begged just to be able to talk with him for a few minutes, but you refused. Why, Father? What were you so afraid of? If Colin was truly meant to be a priest, how could I, how could anything that I might have said to him changed that outcome?"

"Looking back, Karen, perhaps I should have handled things differently. Certainly I should have been kinder to you, not so abrupt."

"Perhaps? Maybe? We are burying him tomorrow! Colin was still a young man with the best part of his life ahead of him. You stole it all from him, Father, without pity or even the slightest remorse."

"Do you not know that I am also full of sadness? I loved Father...Colin Sullivan as if he were my own son. You must understand that this is true, Karen."

"What I 'understand' is that Colin's fathers, both the natural and the spiritual, let him down when he needed them most, betrayed him."

"Karen, I do not claim perfection. I have made many mistakes, but I never, would never, betray Colin Sullivan."

"You might as well have pulled the trigger yourself."

"Oh, Dios! It is impossible for me to go back three decades and let you in the seminary, Karen. How can anyone undo what has been done? And, I'm sorry if this offends you or fuels your rage, I am not convinced that what I did was wrong."

"You were a prideful and stubborn young man and now you are a stupid old coot. This was a mistake, Father. Perhaps you should—."

"Colin was a remarkable priest. He did a tremendous amount of good, served others and the Lord in ways that—."

"He never told you, did he."

"Told me what?"

"That I shot Kyle Hart. It was a tragic accident, of course, but Colin went to prison to save me, to protect the woman he loved."

Father Sam Alcaraz leaned back in Karen's overstuffed chair, his once smooth, light brown complexion now marred with deep wrinkles and red splotches. He was seventy-five, an old and enfeebled seventy-five, his never-all-that-robust body worn down by too many eighteen-hour work days, regular, ascetic fasting and the burdens of shepherding a flock of the least of God's creation for more than four decades.

"Karen, is this true? You would not say this only to—."

"On Colin's soul, I swear that it's true."

"Then he knew all about carrying his cross before he met me. Such courage, such devotion, such a—."

"What the hell, Padre? Are you even listening to me?"

"Of course, I am listening to you, Karen. What is it that—."

"He was innocent! Colin should never have gone to prison, it should have been me. You should never have met him. You were a mistake, a detour, a wrong turn. You and your Church."

"Jesus Christ is not a 'wrong turn', Karen. He is the Savior of the world, our only hope, your only hope."

"He didn't save Colin."

"Oh, but He did. Of that I am sure."

"Colin committed suicide. Even I know that is a mortal sin. It's unforgivable."

"Who told you that suicide is always unforgivable? The Church does not teach this."

"Please don't lie to me, Padre. Everyone knows that suicide is a one-way ticket to Hell."

"Utter nonsense. Colin never said this to you. I know because I taught him correctly."

"I'm...what about..."

"That's it then. I see, Señora."

"You see what?"

"You feel guilty, responsible for Colin's death, for what you mistakenly believe is his unavoidable damnation. You are listening to the devil and he is telling you these lies. Do not believe him."

Karen was suddenly too angry to speak. She imagined herself reaching across her desk, grabbing the decrepit priest by the throat and snapping his leathery skinned neck. She dug her nails into the arms of her chair and took a deep breath and tried with all her will to maintain.

"The Church teaches that the circumstances of the suicide must be taken into account when judging the act. Yes, taking an innocent life, especially one's own, is a grave sin, but God does not withhold His mercy, especially not from pious men who sin out of desperation."

Karen said nothing, but she was listening carefully and had her emotions sufficiently in check to avoid committing homicide, at least for the moment.

"Didn't you wonder why Bishop Antonelli allowed a funeral Mass to be said for Father Sullivan in San Francisco as well as one tomorrow here in Las Vegas?"

Actually, Karen was curious about that. Scotty and Tiny had told her that it was going to happen, but not why. She assumed because Colin was a priest that he merited a funeral Mass regardless of the circumstances of his passing.

"Yes, I do want to know."

"Bishop Antonelli was Colin's confessor. He was in the best position to know Colin's faith and his doubts and his struggles. He shared his heart with the Archbishop, who then agreed that a funeral Mass was appropriate."

"So, the Church is saying..."

"The Church is saying that Colin is by no means certainly condemned, that we can pray for his soul with both faith and confidence that Christ will be merciful to our beloved brother."

While still incensed, Karen did experience a certain amount of relief upon hearing Father Sam's words.

"Colin told me...he said in a letter that he wrote to me before he killed himself that I may be the only person who could get him into Heaven. How...why...what does that mean, Padre?"

"He believed that he had greatly wronged you, Karen. He wanted you to forgive him, to accept him for what and who he was and to stop cursing God. He loved you so much – so much that he lost control of himself at times in his passion for you."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Pray for him, forgive him. Reconcile yourself to God. See the beauty in his life and in your own and let go of the pain. Leave all of your anger, your fear and your hatred where we must all leave such things, at the foot of the cross."

"I have no idea how to do that, Padre. It's impossible for me."

"You are not responsible for Colin's death, Karen."

"Don't go there, Father. I'm not ready to—."

"Father Sullivan told me what happened, a few years back, when you came to see him for the last time."

"I told you that I don't want to discuss—."

"Go ahead. You wish to hurt me, to hit me?" Father Alcaraz said as Karen stood and walked around her desk to confront the priest.

"You are a strong woman, do what you will. I am ready to die."

To her surprise, Karen seriously thought about, just for a second, picking up the nearest heavy object and smashing in the priest's skull. She hated Father Alcaraz; he was the embodiment of all that was wrong with her life, of all that she had been denied. To Karen, he was the very face of evil.

But she did not hit him. Something stopped her, not fear of punishment or moral persuasion, but something else. She sat back down and listened.

"I will not lie to you, Karen. Father Sullivan was never the same after this incident with you. He continued in his work, he never stopped fighting for Christ, but his soul was shattered."

"How much do you know?"

"Colin told me that you came unannounced to the church to see him, that you were greatly distressed, that when he refused your advances, your demand that he quit the priesthood and marry you, that you exploded in rage and said terrible things to him."

Karen closed her eyes and rested her head in her hands as she leaned over the desk. For over three years now she had deliberately avoided remembering anything about that wretched day. She wanted to erase it from her consciousness, cut it out like a cancerous tumor from her mind.

"Father, I don't know if ..." Karen wasn't crying, she was too agitated to weep, but she was shaking almost uncontrollably.

Reflexively, Father Alcaraz reached out over the desk to touch Karen, to offer comfort.

"Don't touch me. Don't you ever touch me," Karen barked as she removed her head from her hands. Father Alcaraz sat back in his chair and sighed.

"Alright, priest. You win. I'm good at controlling my tongue, I'm a politician for hell's sake, but when I lose it, I really lose it. Is that what you want to see, you want to watch me rave like a lunatic?"

"No, Karen. I wish only to—."

"I told Colin that he had ruined my life, that everything he had done for the Church, for your precious Christ, was a waste. I said that he had thrown his life away for nothing, for some phony ideal."

"Karen, perhaps now is not the best time to—."

"I said to him, 'All of the good that you've done has been blotted out by my misery.' I called him vile names, swore at him, lashed out. I had never done that before. Regardless of how mad I was, or how hurt, even when we broke up in '88, I'd never gone that far."

"I could tell that I had gravely wounded him and, here is the confession you priest's love so much, I was happy about it. For the first time in my life, I took

pleasure in causing someone pain. I wanted Colin to suffer, is that what you want to hear? I'm selfish, obsessed, psycho, all of that."

"You are in agony, wounded, but you are not evil, Karen."

"We never spoke again after that day. The last words I said to Colin were, 'I hate you'."

"Do you know why Colin took his life, Karen?"

"Would you like to read the note? It could not be clearer."

"I do not need to read it, I know what it says, but that is not why Colin committed suicide."

"I'm sure that I don't want to hear this, but we've come this far. Go ahead."

"Colin Sullivan was a warrior, a soldier for Christ. I sensed this the moment that I met him in prison; he was strong, noble, very determined. God opened his eyes, showed him the truth, the real nature of things. He could not turn away from the fight, Karen, not even for you. Colin was a casualty of war. I warned him, others warned him, especially Bishop Antonelli, that Satan would attack him relentlessly and without mercy because Father Sullivan was a mighty force for God and the Church."

"The Devil. Satan. The Prince of Darkness murdered Colin."

"Yes, most certainly, yes! I am not the only one who knows this, Karen. If the Archbishop did not believe this there would be no Mass for Colin, no honor."

"Get out. Get the fuck out of my office right now."

"Karen, I need to tell y—."

"Priest, I have armed men just outside my door. Must I call them in?"

"As you wish, Karen."

"I also wish to never see you again. I mean it. Never. Do not come to the funeral Mass tomorrow. If you do, I'll have you arrested on the spot."

"I will be dead soon anyway, Karen. The doctors say that I have very little time left."

"What? You're looking for sympathy from me? Asshole. Get out!"

Father Alcaraz left and went directly to the nearest Catholic Church, Our Lady of Las Vegas, and earnestly prayed. He petitioned the Lord to show mercy on both Colin Sullivan and Karen Foster. He begged forgiveness for the wrongs he had done to them.

He could feel the presence of the evil one lurking in the shadows, hoping to consume more souls, to cause more human misery, but he also felt the Holy Spirit draw near to him and shield him.

"Christ," Father Alcaraz prayed, as he blessed himself with holy water as he exited the sanctuary, "do not let the enemy tempt us beyond our ability to resist. Have mercy on us when we fail to trust in You, when this rebel world gets the best of us."

Chapter Twenty Four

"Your conference call is prepared, Governor. Everyone you requested is on the line."

"Thank you, Nancy. Whenever you're ready."

Nancy pushed the proper buttons on her phone and then told her boss, "You are connected, ma'am."

"Phil?"

"Good morning, Governor."

"Hello, Karen."

"Thomas, good morning."

"Governor, Lacey McGuire here."

"Thank you, Ms. McGuire. Busy day at the White House?"

"Every day here is a busy day, Governor."

"I can imagine."

"What's going on, Karen? Your staff implied that you were wrestling with some serious problem. How can we help?" Thomas Reed, National Chairman of their political party, was Karen Foster's most enthusiastic supporter. They were classmates at Pepperdine. Reed's wife, Marie, was Karen's roommate at law school.

"There is no use dancing around the subject, so let me be blunt. Effective at the end of this month, I'm resigning as Governor of the State of Nevada. I'm withdrawing from public life permanently so I will not seek any other elected office, or accept any political appointments. My decision is final."

"Whoa! Slow down, Karen. What in the hell is going on? You haven't announced this to the world yet, have you?"

"Not yet, Thomas. I have called for a press conference at two p.m. I'll announce it then. I felt that I owed it to the party, and to the President, to tell you folks first."

"Would you like me to see if the President is free, Governor? I'm fairly certain that he would appreciate the opportunity to speak with you before you make your decision."

"That will not be necessary, Lacey. Of course, I'll talk to the President when I can. As I said, though, my decision is made and it is final."

"What in the world is happening, Governor? I mean you just dump this on us, completely out of left field? What are we looking at here, some scandal?" Phil Baker was Nevada's longest serving elected official and the Majority Leader of the United States Senate. His relationship with Karen Foster had always been tenuous, at best. Party affiliation was just about the only thing that they had in common politically and they personally disliked each other intensely. When required, they worked well together and they always refrained from making negative comments about each other to the press.

"Senator, I'm going to answer that question the only way I can. I don't think

so, no. I'm confident that there will not be a public scandal, but not a hundred percent certain. Believe it not, the threat of the disclosure of any possible personal problems I have is not the reason I'm resigning. I've had enough, plain and simple. My heart isn't in it anymore. Sam will be an excellent Governor. I'm leaving the State in excellent hands."

"Karen, my God, why? Whatever it is that's bothering you, this vague but obviously serious problem that you're dealing with, let us help you. I mean you're throwing away a brilliant—."

"Thomas. Have I told you enough how grateful I am to you? What a great friend that you've been to me over all these years? Thank you, thank you so much."

"Are you ill, Governor? Is that what's wrong?" Phil Baker asked.

"No, Senator. As far as I know, I'm in perfect health."

"Joseph, is he okay? Is he in trouble or something?"

"Joe is fine, Thomas. Well, I better disclose this too. I'm filing for divorce today. In fact, I'll bet those papers have already been filed."

"Karen, talk to us," Lacey McGuire said. "We can help. I'm confident in saying that the President would welcome the opportunity to support you. We need you, Governor. The party needs you. Our nation needs you."

"You want to help me?"

All three answered yes at roughly the same time.

"Then let me go. I need to move on with my life. I have to make some changes, some serious changes, before it's too late."

"Karen, I have known you longer than Phil or Lacey or the President. We go way back. Do you want to speak with me privately, friend to friend?"

"I always like talking with you, Thomas. We'll do that, but later. This is a business call, a courtesy that I owe to my party and to my supporters."

"What's the fallout for us if this issue of yours becomes public?"

"Minimal, Senator. It's ancient history, not current events."

"So why all the—."

"You don't believe me, do you, Thomas."

"Of course, I believe—."

"Then take me at my word. I'm not resigning out of fear, I'm leaving because I have to go. I have nothing left to offer the people."

"I'm going to see if the President is free, Governor. You two have developed a good relationship over the past few months, he will want to weigh in on this."

"I will not take the President's call until after my press conference, Lacey."

"That's it then? You're resigning, you won't tell us why and you won't give us a heads up about anything that could be headed our direction?"

"Senator, like it or not that's the way this has to come down. Relax, Phil. None of my mud will soil your trousers."

"I'm hanging up now, Governor. Be aware that I'm informing the President about this immediately."

"I understand that you have a job to do, Ms. McGuire. As a courtesy, please tell the President that I will not be available to speak with him until after my press conference."

"I'll pass on the message, ma'am."

"Karen, when can I call you? I'm worried as hell about all of this, as Marie will be when I tell her."

"I promise to call you guys in a couple of days, Thomas. Give Marie my love."

"Nancy," Governor Foster said after she pushed the intercom button on her phone. "Please terminate the conference call."

Chapter Twenty Five

"Christ give me strength," Scott Armour prayed as he sat in his car in front of the Bynum's house. Tom's sedan was parked in the driveway, which meant that he had probably made it back from Carson City. Scott was hopeful that Tom had returned because he did not want to face Aimee alone.

He opened his small, pocket sized photo case. Usually he kept it in his home office, occasionally he would take it to work with him, but he rarely left it in his car or in his briefcase. Its contents were too valuable to risk being lost. Scott had a bad habit of misplacing small objects like his wallet, sunglasses or keys, so he was extra careful with his special pictures.

"My brother," Scott said as he smiled and looked at a snapshot of he and Colin on Father Sullivan's ordination day. Scott closed his eyes and brought the memory back to life in his mind. The morning was clear, no fog, which is rare for November in San Francisco. Outside, a sea breeze kept the air fresh. Inside St. Thomas church, the aroma of incense and the glow of candlelight helped set the mood. Everyone was happy, but not giddy. The occasion was a celebration, but a solemn one which called for joyful respect and reverence. Colin was dedicating his life to the service of God, and Scott Armour was never prouder to be his brother than he was on that day.

Everyone was there, except for possibly the two people Colin most wanted to be present other than Scotty; Karen and his father. Scott has always understood why Karen stayed away, Colin was marrying the Church instead of her, but for Peter Sullivan not to attend his own son's ordination was unforgivable in Scotty's eyes.

"What else could I have done, Colin?" Scott asked himself aloud. "Maybe I should have said no and not driven you to Frisco. Maybe I..." Scott abruptly stopped talking to himself. Bemoaning the past was pointless, self-indulgent, a weak person's bad habit. He would not allow himself to be sucked into a whirlpool of pity and regret which could only weaken him and lessen his resolve.

When Scott reminisced, he chose to focus on special times, those critical moments in his life that helped him to move forward, to press on towards the prize. His own ordination as a deacon, his wedding day, a few, outstanding professional baseball games, his friends and their triumphs. Dwelling on sorrow, on what might or should have been, was not only a waste of time but also dangerous to his soul, an enemy to his peace of mind.

How often had he tried to teach Colin this fundamental truth, to let go of what cannot be changed, to not be drawn into senseless despair over the adverse outcomes of past decisions. But he and Colin were different men, different men who loved and respected each other, but still very different men. They shared a devotion to Christ and His Church, but they served the Master with their own unique gifts.

They were both charitable, but Scott did not have the temperament to

immerse himself in stranger's problems, to indulge their "whining", to listen to boorish recitals of who did what to whom. Colin's empathy was limitless, or so Scotty believed. He marveled at how long Father Sullivan could hear confessions, hours upon hours of trite jabbering about human weakness and suffering. Scott knew that after a few minutes of listening to that drivel he would almost certainly force open the confessional door, reach in and pound the crap out of the penitent just to shut him up.

Colin, however, had no desire to administrate, to build and run the organization that was essential if charity was to be properly distributed to the needy. That was Scott's strength. For fifteen years Scott had worked tirelessly to build and perfect his "giving machine" – his term for one of the largest local Catholic Charities in America. He ran the enterprise as he conducted all of his affairs, with integrity, forethought and discipline. Scott Armour was a thorough person, detail-oriented and not slow to make a decision. The charity reflected the attributes of its leader, and thousands of Southern Nevadans, both Catholic and not, received mercy in the form of food, shelter and medical care through Scott's efforts and those of his staff and volunteers.

But there was another side to Scotty. Few knew about it and those that did kept silent either out of fear or respect or, in most cases, both.

In exceptional circumstances, which were rare, but not nearly infrequent enough to please Kendra, Scott Armour stepped into difficult situations and simply did what needed to be done. He did not view himself as some sort of hero. Scott never bragged about his exploits, just the opposite; he did not discuss them outside of his small, trusted inner circle of friends and those directly involved, but if a wrong needed to be addressed, a bill paid, an innocent protected, at times Scott would step in and "handle it".

Always Scott took the problem to the Lord first. Many times, much more often than not in fact, Scott would refuse to become involved in a predicament because he did not feel that it was "righteous" for him to do so. He considered this self-proclaimed state of "righteousness" to be his shield, a defense against both man's and God's judgment.

Usually Scott's intercession meant the use of violence to accomplish his objective. Whenever possible he employed intimidation before force. When he had to lay his hands on someone, he tried his best to inflict only as much punishment as was required to accomplish his goal.

For as long as he could remember, Scott had always been not just a tough guy, but the toughest guy. Never once had he been a bully or taken pleasure in hurting someone for the sake of inflicting pain alone, but he had always believed that God had given him this power, a knack for coming out on top in a fight, a sense of fearlessness, the ability to think and act swiftly under pressure, for a purpose.

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord." Scott believed this, but not in a way that would garner the approval of any respectable Catholic theologian. While he had no delusions of grandeur, Scott had always been convinced that one of the

reasons God put him on earth was to exact His wrath when He called for an avenging angel.

Father Sullivan never totally acknowledged this premise, the notion that Scotty was God's "enforcer", but over the years he came to accept both Scotty's sincerity of purpose and the effectiveness of his interventions. With a clear conscience, Father Sullivan gave Scott Armour absolution for sins despite knowing that his penitent wasn't in the least bit sorry for committing them and that he would repeat the offenses without remorse.

Just about the only thing Scott hadn't done yet was murder someone, although he had come close to doing so more than once.

Now, however, Scott was listening to a new Voice, or rather to the same Voice giving him different instructions. Attuned to the Spirit moving in him, Scott had been pulled towards Aimee Bynum's home for the past couple of days, but his mission with her was not to inflict corporal punishment, but rather to humble himself and show mercy. He felt utterly unsuited to the task, but he was obedient always, and if the Lord wanted him to show mercy to Aimee then he would suck it up and do so, period.

"Tom."

"Scott."

"May I come in?"

"Okay, yeah. We should talk, but I'm not sure that Aimee will see you."

"Fair enough."

They walked through the Bynum's house and made their way to the back patio. Scott kept silently repeating the Jesus prayer, "Lord have mercy on me a sinner", to try and focus his mind on his duty rather than on himself, on God's judgments and not on his own, because his judgment of the Bynums was that they were both pathetic, each in their own equally aggravating way.

"I'm sorry about Father Sullivan. I didn't know him well, but I've heard nothing but good things about the man. My condolences."

"Thank you, Tom."

"As for Aimee...Scott, I know that you and she go way back, but who gave you the right to slap my wife?"

"No one. Did she tell you the whole story?"

"Aimee? Are you kidding? Karen told me. Still, Scott, I want you to know that if it were up to me, I'd press charges for assault. Aimee won't do that, of course."

And if it were up to me I'd round up every scumbag lawyer and publically flog them all, Scott thought but did not say. He re-focused on his task, increased his self-discipline.

"So then you know about Sy Green, the DirtyLaundry.com fiasco."

"That man is a cur, a parasite. You should have slapped him, not Aimee."

"I beat up his lunch."

"What?"

"Never mind. I came here for a purpose today, Tom."

"Yes?"

"It would be my honor to escort you and Aimee to Colin's funeral."

"I got the impression from Karen that Aimee wasn't welcome."

"She is not only welcome, I need to take her with me. I'll beg if I have to, Tom. You don't want to see that, it isn't pretty."

"There is more happening than you know."

"Go on."

"Aimee is headed to rehab in a few days. A live-in facility in Vermont for a minimum of four months. The place is top notch, costs a small fortune."

"I'm glad to hear it. She needs to get well, Tom. God knows we've all tried to help her over the years. Perhaps this time she will make the most of her opportunity."

"The doctors wanted to take her away yesterday, for her own protection, but I said no. I'm watching her like a hawk. One scotch every three hours and that's it, just enough to stave off the DTs. I'm keeping her calm and mildly sedated. The last thing she needs is a big scene with all you guys."

"She needs to heal, Tom."

"I thought that's what I just said."

"Yes, she needs to learn to live without chemicals, but she also needs to heal spiritually."

"I'm...we're Jewish. The rehab facility is Jewish. They don't ignore the spiritual needs of their patients."

Jewish my ass, Scotty thought, but kept to himself. He knew that Tom never went to Temple and that Aimee was ambivalent about God and definitely not a Jew.

"That's not what I meant. She needs to know that her friends don't hate her and, most importantly, that no one blames her for Colin's death."

"Are you the same man who stormed in here a few days ago and called Aimee every foul name in the book?"

"One in the same. I was angry, I'm still pissed, but yesterday is gone. We need to deal with today. Aimee's recovery will benefit by getting some closure with Colin and support from her friends."

"I don't agree, Scott. I've listened to you, I appreciate your respectful tone and manner, but it's time you should leave. Please let us know where we can send flowers, or make a contri—."

"No."

"Aimee, you should be lying down."

"Tom, for God's sake. Calm down. Just because I'm half sober doesn't mean that you have to treat me like a child."

"Aimee. You look...better. I mean it, girl." Aimee did look much more robust than when Scott last saw her. She was clean, neatly dressed and the color had returned to her skin, some brightness to her eyes.

"The doctor said—."

"Screw the doctor, Tom. I need to talk with Scott. You're welcome to stay."

"I'm not supposed to let you out of my sight."

"Fine. Let's go in the kitchen and sit. Maybe someone could make me a damned cup of coffee. For once I think I actually want one."

Tom Bynum was wary. Despite the nightmare Aimee created for both of them by her choice to chronically poison herself with alcohol, Tom loved his wife. He was desperate to see her get straight, frightened of the consequences for their relationship because he had never known a sober Aimee, but even more panicked that if she did not deal with her problem now she might not be around long enough to take advantage of another chance.

"You know what the worst part of not drinking is?"

"Tell me."

"Realizing what an idiot you are when you're drunk."

"You know what, Aimee," Scott said, surprising himself. "I think you mean that."

"I think I do, too."

"Let me, let us, help you."

"Why? Why would you want to help me?"

"Truth?"

"Truth."

"Two reasons. Colin would want us to and Christ commands us to."

"Thanks."

"For?"

"For not trying to bullshit me about how much you love me, how close of friends we've been over the years, all that crap. I know that you despise me, Scott."

"Aimee, none of us hates you. But, still keep it real?"

"No more fucking lies."

"You've been tough to like, much less love, for a very long time."

"Yeah, I can't argue with you. If it's any consolation, I hate myself more than you could possibly hate me."

"Jesus loves you, Aimee. He always has."

"Whoa now, Scott. I know that you mean well, but we're Jewish. I don't think it's appropriate for you to—."

"I'm not Jewish, Tom. Quit saying that. I'm a Catholic, my family is Catholic."

"But I thought we decided—."

"Tom, let it go. I love you. I know that I don't tell you that enough, honey. God knows that you're a saint for not tossing me out into the street, but please don't call me a Jew. Not ever."

Tom's face turned bright red. He said nothing as he busied himself with pouring coffee for the three of them.

"Scotty, I know that you're sincere. You believe. I want to start believing again, but I don't know how."

"Please, come to Colin's funeral Mass. You and Tom can sit with Kendra

and I. That's where you start, Aimee."

"But Colin wouldn't be dead if I hadn't run my mouth to Sy Green."

"Are we still speaking plainly?"

"Yes, and stop asking me. From now on assume it, always."

Scott Armour then experienced something he had never before considered possible. Aimee was earning his respect; only a small measure at first, but it was real.

"Yes, Colin would probably not have killed himself when he did if the whole Sy Green thing never happened. But Aimee, he shot himself, you didn't kill him. Sooner or later it might have happened anyway because Colin was in so much pain. You did not cause his suffering, Aimee. You sinned, you messed up big time, but that does not mean that you're responsible for Colin's death. He was, no one but him."

"You want me to apologize to Colin, to everyone, don't you."

"If you want to seek His grace, you must do what He says, pick up your cross and follow Him."

"My cross is pretty heavy."

"Don't feel alone, Aimee. Mine is larger than yours."

"I'll do it."

"I'm glad, Aimee. I truly am."

"Tell me about my father."

"What? What about your father?"

"You, you and Karen set him up, didn't you? Planted that coke in his office. The dirty money, too."

"Aimee, I'm not sure if—."

"It was more than twenty-five years ago, Scott. You can't be prosecuted. Tell me."

"Alright. Yes, yes we set him up. Do you know why?"

"Hell yes, I know why! The rat bastard had it coming, if not from you from a lot of other people."

"You're not angry?"

"No. Dad had no conscience. He could be decent when it benefited him, but he ran over anyone who refused to get out of his way. He never saw you coming though, Scott. No one over does."

"Why is that, do you think?"

"I always thought that you could tell me."

"Nope. I just do what I do."

"I would love to hear your confession."

"Take a number."

"Could you arrange for a priest to hear mine?"

"I'll drive you right now if—."

"Slow down, Scott," Tom said.

"Tomorrow, Scotty. That's soon enough," Aimee replied.

"Aimee, I'm... I'm sorry. I mean it. You know that I don't give apologies

well, or very often."

"You have done nothing to be sorry for, Scott."

"Yes, I have. Please forgive my outburst, my attack. I was hurt, angry, in a state of shock, really."

"I wish to hell you would have slapped me years ago, maybe I would have woken up sooner, avoided all this agony."

"Where have you been, girl? I like this Aimee. You know who you're reminding me of right now? Kyle. The brashness, the half-cocky tone of voice, that was your brother."

"I still miss him. Lord, how he could infuriate me! I loved him and he loved me, warts and all."

"Colin prayed for Kyle's soul regularly, not once or twice a year, but at least once a week for thirty years."

"I believe that."

"You should, I know it's true."

"Tom, what time is it?"

"Thirty minutes more, Aimee."

"God, I want a drink."

"How about a prayer instead?" Scott offered.

"The Twenty-Third Psalm. In Latin. Like we used to do at St. Anne's grade school."

"You remember that Psalm? After all these years?"

"Would it shock you to know that I've said it a few times since?"

"A few minutes ago, yes. Now, no."

"You start, Scotty."

"*Canticum David Dominus pascit me nihil mihi deerit. In pascuis herbarum adclinavit me super aquas refectiois enutrivit me.*" They recited together, Aimee stumbled over a few words, but clearly she knew the verses.

"I need to find those green pastures," Aimee said.

"Let Christ lead. He'll take you there."

"*Animam meam refecit duxit me per semitas justitiae propter nomen suum. Sed et si ambulavero in valle mortis non timebo malum quoniam tu mecum es virga tua et baculus tuus consolabuntur me.*"

"We all must walk through the valley of evil, Aimee. Have courage."

"I'll try, I really will."

"*Pones eorum me mensam ex adverso hostium meorum inpinguasti oleo caput meum calix meus inebrians. Sed et benignitas et misericordie subsequetur me omnibus diebus vitae meae et habitabo in domo Domini in longitudine dierum.*"

"Amen."

"Amen."

"Thanks, Scotty. That was nice. I do feel a little better, but I'd still kill for a fifth of cheap whiskey."

"Fight your demons, Aimee. I'll show you how Christ can help you. I'd like

to be your..."

"Friend?"

"Yes."

"Offer accepted."

"Tomorrow then. Kendra and I will pick you and Tom up around ten."

"Will you go with me, honey?" Aimee asked.

"Yes, of course," Tom answered, still reluctant but now accepting the inevitable.

"Tom, please take me back to bed. My head feels like someone's driving nails into it."

"Take this with you," Scott said, unclasping his necklace and handing it to Aimee.

"A rosary, and a..."

"Scapula, an icon of the Holy Mother, a sign of devotion to her."

"But they're yours, Scott. From the looks of it you've had them for a long time."

"I've worn that sacramental for more than twenty years, night and day."

"I can't possibly acc—."

"It's yours now, Aimee. You might own the only rosary in Vegas that's been blessed by two Popes, John Paul II and Francis."

"That's quite the gift," Tom Bynum said, obviously uncomfortable with Scott's dramatic demonstration of affection towards Aimee, unsure how he should respond to such a bold overture of goodwill.

"It's too much."

"Aimee, I want you to have it. When you struggle through some of the dark days ahead, draw strength from this symbol, pray, use it to increase your faith."

"This is what friends do for each other, isn't it?"

"You're in my prayers from now on, girl. That is definitely what friends do for each other."

Aimee Bynum and Scott Armour had forty years of experiences in common. They had traveled down many of the same roads, with the same people, but always separately. In all that time they had never shared an honest hug and kiss of peace and sincerely wished each other well.

They both believed that Father Sullivan was watching them as they did so now, and they knew that Colin was pleased and proud of them both for stepping forward together in faith.

Chapter Twenty Six

The meeting room at the Governor's Las Vegas office was too small to accommodate a large media event, so Karen's staff chose to hold her press conference a few blocks down the street at the Federal Building where they had an auditorium that seated over fifty.

Karen began, "Effective at the end of this month, I am resigning my position as Governor. I'm leaving public life forever. I know politicians make these bold retreats on occasion and then somehow their name appears on a ballot as a candidate for some other office sooner rather than later. That will not happen with me. You'll see in time.

"My other news is personal, but since nothing a Governor does ever seems to qualify as a private matter, I want to get ahead of the rumor mill and set the record straight from the start. I have filed papers seeking a divorce from my husband, Joseph Hunt. Neither of us has been unfaithful. To the best of my knowledge, Joe's company is in good shape and he is not in any trouble, legal or otherwise. Joe can speak for himself about his feelings towards me. Joe Hunt is a wonderful man, a person of the highest character. I love Joe and I will always do anything in my power to support and help him.

"My reasons for seeking a divorce are my own and I absolutely will not discuss them with the press. Since very shortly I will no longer be Nevada's Governor, there is no longer any legitimate public interest in my personal life.

"I will miss being your Governor and public service in general. It has been an honor, a distinct privilege, to represent the people of our great State in one elected office or another for the past twenty years.

"The time has come in my life when I must move in a new direction, re-define myself personally and professionally and focus my talents and energy on areas other than government. I will take with me the best of memories, a wealth of experience and friendships as I move on.

"I'll answer a few questions."

Karen couldn't focus for a moment because the room full of reporters were all shouting at the same time.

"Maggie," Karen finally said, hoping that if one of them asked a question the others would stop yelling long enough to listen.

"Governor," Maggie Porter, a well-known local TV reporter asked, "You can't expect us not to want to know more about your decision. Why quit now? Your term is up in less than two years, why not wait until then to exit politics and finish the job the people elected you to do?"

"The good people of this state elected me to serve them to the best of my ability. I can no longer serve them to the best of my ability. The only explanation I will give is that my heart is no longer in the job. Nevadans deserve a Governor who can and will give the position a hundred and ten percent twenty-four seven. Sam Phillips will do that. I have every confidence that he will be a tremendous

asset to this state as Governor."

Maggie followed up. "Why can you no longer serve to the best of your ability, Governor?"

"I will not answer that question other than to repeat myself – I must find a new direction for my life."

"We have a right to know more, Ms. Foster," Bart Henry shouted before being acknowledged by the Governor.

Karen kept her cool but responded sharply. She knew how much "Bart the Bastard", a crusty, thirty-year veteran newspaper reporter from Reno, despised her. "Is that so. Please cite for me the State or Federal statute that requires me to bare my soul to the world, Mr. Henry, or compels me to do anything more than properly deliver my letter of resignation to the Secretary of State."

"I'm just doing my job, Governor."

"Do your job, then."

"You lost a close friend a few days ago, Father Colin Sullivan, a Catholic priest who lived in San Francisco. What part did his death play in your decision to resign?"

"I've known Father Su...Colin Sullivan for nearly all of my life. His suicide was tragic, devastating to all of his friends, not just to me.

"Let me repeat myself, I seem to be doing that a lot today, I will not discuss my reasons for resigning further."

"Were you having an affair with Father Sullivan, Governor? It's a matter of public record that you and he were high school sweethearts. I'm being told by a credible source that you and the good Fa—."

"Let me stop you right there, Mr. Henry, before you make a fool of yourself. I've never been unfaithful to my husband and anyone who says otherwise is a liar."

"The information I've received, corroborated by documents and witnesses, is that you visited Father Sullivan's church frequently, physically disguised and using a phony name."

"That's true, yes."

"So you admit—."

"I admit that Father Sullivan's Bishop, Bishop Antonelli, has been my spiritual advisor and confessor for many years. I'm not Catholic, my relationship with God is not something that I've ever discussed openly and I did not want Father Sullivan to know that I saw the Bishop for what amounted to personal spiritual counseling."

"So you didn't use your visits to San Francisco to—."

"She didn't give you photos of Father Sullivan and me together, Mr. Henry, because such photos do not exist."

"She?"

"I know who is feeding you this trash and why she is doing it, Mr. Henry. Why don't you tell everyone her name, put her on Front Street? Don't you 'owe' that to the public?"

"I will not divulge my source, Governor."

"Fine. I understand. I'm not dignifying this tripe by addressing any more of your unfounded allegations. Sarah."

"What about your programs and initiatives, Governor? Are you going to stay involved with school funding, economic development, drug abuse treatment and ethics in government issues? Make your voice heard?"

"I care passionately about our children and that won't stop when I leave office. As all of you know, I've been an outspoken advocate for non-incarceration, education and treatment-based drug abuse intervention programs. As for ethics in state government, I inherited a dirty house and swept it clean. I believe in what I've done, but exactly how I will act on those beliefs in the future, beyond speaking out, I don't know. Carter."

"Ma'am, a couple of days ago a source in Los Angeles called me and said that you would shortly be the subject of some sort of expose, a nationally broadcast story very damaging to your character. Today that same source told me that the story was killed. Care to comment?"

"On what?"

"On the rumor."

"Why?"

"Governor, being cute won't help you, if—."

"Thanks, Carter. I think you're a peach too."

Once the laughter died down, Karen said, "I'm not trying to be 'cute', Carter. We have a free press in this country, thank God. Whoever 'they' are can air whatever 'they' chose to air. I have no control over anyone's programming decisions."

"That doesn't sound like a denial."

"There is nothing to confirm or deny. People say all sorts of things. I will not confirm or deny hot air. Sandy."

"Have you spoken with the President? Informed him of your decision to resign?"

"Indirectly. I briefed one of his top aides. I expect that the President and I will talk shortly."

"So you will not accept the Vice Presidential slot on the ticket in four years if it's offered?"

"Thanks for the compliment Sandy, but not only is that idea completely unfounded, flattering, but unfounded, I would not accept any offer to be on any national political ticket."

"It's hardly 'unfounded', Governor. The pundits agree that you are one of the top candidates on a short list."

"There are more important things in life than politics, Sandy."

After a noticeable pause, Sandy Towers asked, "What is more important to you than your political career, Governor?"

"My soul."

"Your soul? What does that—."

“Thank you all for coming. As the transition to Sam Phillips' administration progresses, we'll keep you informed.”

With that, Karen Foster stepped down from the podium and calmly walked away from her former life, keenly aware that she had ripped apart in a few minutes what had taken her a lifetime of hard work and sacrifice to build. It did not matter to her in the least that the reporters were still barking questions at her as she left, that they were both stunned and indignant by her short and unsatisfying answers to the few questions she allowed them to ask. For the first time in her life, Karen wasn't concerned with what other people thought about her. She felt no need to prop up her image or protect her reputation. Appearances and posturing, the daily grind of being in the public eye, seemed a trivial pursuit now, unworthy of her attention.

Karen was focused on only one matter, an unwelcome epiphany that had dominated her thoughts since Colin's death – a profound realization that she could not go on living lying to herself.

She was learning to yield to the painful truth that the only permanent thing in her life was her soul and that its condition should always have been her foremost concern.

Chapter Twenty Seven

July 1985

"Are you sure this is cool, Scotty?"

"A hundred percent. After all, you'll be a Padre in a couple of years."

On the back of Colin's San Diego Padres jersey was the number eight and his name, Sullivan. Colin had spent the entire week with the team as Scotty's guest; he participated in off-day workouts, threw bullpen sessions with the pitchers, shared his opinions with the Padres' pitching coach, hung around the clubhouse with the players and sat in the dugout during games.

The players all liked Colin. Even the non-Catholic guys were calling him "Rev C" by the end of the week. Deacon Colin Sullivan was hired by the organization as an "unpaid consultant", a sort of temporary team chaplain, but that was merely a convenient pretense. Scott Armour wanted to spend some time with his brother, and since Colin had been loosely associated with the Padres since he was called up in '83, they invented his position so he could "officially" hang out and be one of the guys during the home stand.

"So this is what it feels like. Thanks, man. It's an honor."

"It's baseball, Colin. No different than Chapman field back home, just a few more people in the stands."

"Only a few, a few thousand."

"Oh, remember. No heat, keep it dialed down in the mid-80s. And for heaven's sakes don't throw any curve balls, especially to Garvey and Kennedy. To them BP is a show. If you make them whiff, I'll never hear the end of it."

"Got you."

"I'll go last. When it's my turn, we get fifteen pitches. After the crew removes the screen, go to the mound and throw a few to Bevacqua. I don't want to hear you whining that you weren't ready when I pound one of your fastballs into the left field seats."

"Scotty, I don't know how I could ever thank—."

"You're not gonna start cryin' now are you, Koufax? Suck it up, it's time to play ball."

"I apologize in advance for making you look foolish in front of your teammates."

"That's my boy. Let's go."

Jack Murphy Stadium was about a third full when the Padres emerged from their dugout to take batting practice. The Dodgers were finishing their session, collecting their gear and exiting the field.

Colin watched as the Los Angeles club went about their business; talking, laughing, horsing around as ballplayers do pre-game. They were a loose bunch, the '85 Dodgers, incredibly talented and favored to win the division going away. Anchored by Fernando, Hershiser and Welch, their starting pitching was second

to none in the National League. Pedro Guerrero, Mike Marshall and Bill Madlock provided them with a fair amount of offensive firepower.

As Colin played catch with Scotty to warm up before throwing BP, he couldn't help but consider the very real possibility that he could have been a member of the elite Los Angeles pitching staff had events taken a different course.

But Colin Sullivan wasn't in the least bit regretful about foregoing a baseball career to serve Jesus Christ as His priest. As much as he loved the game, and he did love it – the training and the competition, friendships, belonging to a team, pushing himself to the limit physically, even the little things like the smell of a freshly oiled mitt, the feel of digging his spikes into the pitcher's mound, rubbing up a baseball until it had that "certain feel" – serving the Lord brought him more joy and satisfaction than playing baseball ever could, even if he had become a star in the big leagues.

He found it impossible not to think about Karen when he was playing ball. The two things went hand in hand, one didn't seem right, even possible, without the other. Despite knowing how absurd it was, he caught himself looking into the stands, hoping that she might be there watching him feed the Padre hitters meatballs that they methodically slugged around the park.

Since Bob Welch was pitching for the Dodgers today, the Skipper thought it would be helpful if Colin did his best to mimic Welch's posture and arm action. It wasn't tough, Colin had no problem aping Welch's style while putting pitch after pitch exactly where the hitters wanted them at medium velocity.

After forty-five minutes, the last Padre to hit before Armour, their starting pitcher, Dave Dravecky, finished his abbreviated session. Colin stepped back onto the mound, scraped some dirt away from in front of the rubber, dusted his hands with the rosin bag and signaled to Bevacqua that he was ready.

"The Rev doesn't want any warm-up tosses from the hill, Armour. I think he's taking this seriously," Bevacqua said.

"Still cocky. I love it," Scott replied. As he stepped into the batter's box, Scott took off his helmet and waved it, apparently signaling to someone.

Before Colin could throw, the PA announcer belted out, "Now pitching for the Padres, number eight, Colin Sullivan."

The crowd wasn't paying close attention yet, the game was still half an hour or so away from starting. Most people thought the announcement was a test or something, so they ignored it. But Colin knew exactly what was happening. He was brought to tears by Scott's gesture. Before he threw his first pitch, he walked toward the plate. Scott met him halfway.

"I love you, my brother."

"I told you, there is no crying allowed on the field, Koufax."

"What's that running down your cheek, tough guy? Got an onion in your pocket?"

"I'm sending your best pitch into the seats, Colin. Sister Mary throws harder than you."

"Your friends are going to ride your ass without mercy when I make you look like a bench-warming little leaguer."

"Bring it."

"Oh, it's comin'."

Colin felt so blessed. He was a wealthy man, rich beyond measure. Christ had given him such a wonderful friend. He felt unworthy, humbled, but most of all he felt pure childlike happiness.

A few players in both dugouts had caught on that BP had become something more interesting and were now paying closer attention.

Colin wound and threw his first pitch, a ninety-five mile per hour four-seam heater that moved six inches as it crossed the plate. Scott let it go by, deliberately. The "pop" sound from Bevacqua's glove was loud and heavy, the exact same noise produced by a major league pitcher throwing in a real game.

"Strike one," Bevacqua pronounced. "Your boy can wing it, Armour. How old is he?"

"Same age as me, twenty-five."

"Tell me again why he's not in the majors?"

"He got a better offer."

From experience, Scott knew what Colin would likely throw next, a curveball. He was ready, sitting on the pitch.

Colin obliged and threw the bender. Scott could see the spin, he knew the angles, after all he had caught thousands of Colin's pitches, so he swung to hit the spot where he was certain the ball would end up, not where it appeared to be headed. But he was a bit too anxious.

Scotty sent Colin's curveball three hundred and fifty feet away in a hurry toward the left field stands, but at the last second it veered foul by twenty feet.

"Just a loud strike," Colin yelled from the mound.

"I'll straighten out the next one."

"There won't be a next one, cub scout. No more lollipops for you."

Lord how Colin loved this moment! He was pitching in the big leagues against top notch competition. Like it was yesterday, all of the old emotions came roaring back, the singular thrill of being out there on the hill, one on one, battling a hitter.

"Strike his sorry ass out, Sullivan," someone hollered from the Padres dugout.

"Yea, Rev, I wanna see that," another San Diego player yelled.

The next pitch was a heater, probably pushing a hundred miles per hour because Colin was so amped up. Scotty tried his best, but he swung hard and missed, losing his balance as he finished his swing.

"Who is that guy out there?" Tommy Lasorda asked a Padre's staffer who was walking by the Dodgers' dugout.

"Some friend of Scott Armour's," the young man replied.

"He's got a helluva'n arm," Lasorda complimented as he watched Colin wind and deliver his next pitch.

It was another fastball, but this time Scott was ready for it. He smashed a hard line shot right over the third base bag, at least a double unless the infielders were positioned to protect the lines.

"Nice," Colin complimented loud enough for Scott to hear.

"It'll be nice when I park one," Scott replied.

"Not gonna happen," Colin retorted.

The next pitch was high and tight. Colin threw it there because he knew that Scotty liked to crowd the plate on a pitcher to try and dominate the outer half. Sullivan considered himself to be the sole owner of home plate and he did not tolerate trespassers. The ball would have clipped Armour on the arm or shoulder if he hadn't fallen backward at the last second to avoid getting hit.

"Whoa! Nice one, preach!" shouted a player from the San Diego squad. Laughter could be heard from both dugouts. Scott Armour had been brushed back, intimidated by a soon to be priest with one very live fastball.

"Go ahead, dust yourself off. I'll never tell," Bevacqua teased.

"Wanna switch, Curt? Go grab a bat, I'll put on the gear."

"No thanks. You're doin' just fine, Armour. No sense in both of us lookin' like rookies."

Scott was so proud. Colin still had it – not only his physical skills, which were obviously undiminished, but also his dominant attitude, the predatory style that defined Colin Sullivan as an athlete. While Scott would do his best to crush a pitch or two, he was like a father who was thrilled to be struck out by his son, delighted that Colin remained a beast on the pitcher's mound.

Although Armour knew damn well that the next pitch, be it a fastball, curve or a change-up, would be away, probably painted on the black, it made no difference. Colin put a curve right on the outside corner, exactly where he wanted it. Scott swung and missed badly.

"Hey, you guys signed this fellow yet?" Lasorda asked the Padres pitching coach who was standing behind the cage.

"Nah, you did. Seven years ago, but you cut him before he showed at camp."

"That's impossible, I would rem...wait a minute. Sullivan. Colin Sullivan. The kid from Vegas who went to prison. That's him?"

"Yep."

"Why do you fellas call him Rev?"

"He's studying at St. Paul's Seminary up in the Bay Area. Went straight from the prison to the pew. God signed him to a long-term deal."

"Have you even tried? I mean, that fastball is a thing of beauty and his curve moves three feet."

"Don't waste your breath, Tommy. Hell yes, we made him an offer, two years ago when he first showed up at spring training to see Scott. The GM watched him pitch a simulated game and got out his checkbook on the spot. The man said, thanks, but no thanks. He wants to be a priest and that's all there is to it."

"I think that's wonderful."

"Me too, but still..."

"Yea, damn shame, huh." Tommy said. "He'd rather save souls than play ball. Some people really need to get their priorities straight."

"Three pitches left, Armour. You're one for twelve. You haven't even hit one fair since that weak ass pop up five pitches ago."

"He's good, isn't he, Curt," Scott stated more than asked.

"Damn good. Wouldn't take much to get him ready. Hell, he could probably give us five good innings today."

"More like a complete game. Colin almost always finished what he started."

Another heater barreled toward the plate, but this one dropped on approach. A sinker.

"That's a new pitch," Scott said.

"Does the Rev work out regularly?" Bevacqua asked.

"Yea. He's sort of the de facto pitching coach at Stanford. Colin works with their kids year round."

"Two more, Koufax," Scott shouted.

Colin winked and said, "Remember Machi."

It would have been difficult for anyone but a professional player to notice, Colin's delivery and arm speed remained the same, but by moving the ball more in his palm than in his fingertips, Sullivan's potent fastball became a well disguised slow, straight toss. He might as well have put it on a tee for Scotty.

Understanding what was happening, Armour obliged and deposited the baseball in the left field seats.

"One more," Scott yelled. Colin threw the same easy to hit pitch on the outer half, belt high. Scotty went with the pitch and hit a blistering shot that cleared the right field fence only a by a few inches.

"Damn nice of you, Koufax," Scott said as he approached the mound.

"Charity is a virtue, or so the priests keep telling me."

"You impressed everyone. Especially me."

"That's Tommy Lasorda."

"In the flesh."

"I can now die a happy man, brother."

"Mr. Armour," a young woman wearing a Padre T-shirt yelled, "remember the kids? The kindergarten class is here."

"Oh yeah," Scott recalled. "Slipped my mind. Where are they?"

Behind the third base line. The usher is waiting for you to take them onto the field."

"Come with me, Colin. The team invites groups of youngsters to the park once in a while. We sign autographs, play catch with 'em, take pictures. You'll get a kick out of it."

In a few seconds, Scott Armour would forget about Colin, the game, or anything else. He was about to be overcome by a force so powerful it would

change his life forever.

"Mr. Armour? My name is Kendra, Kendra James." The gorgeous young teacher was small in stature, but obviously an athlete. Her arms and legs were toned, but not masculine. She had dishwater blonde hair, lightly tanned skin, bright green eyes and warm smile.

"Mr. Armour?" Kendra asked again because Scott just stood there staring at her, unable to speak.

"Colin Sullivan," Colin said, extending his hand. "You'll have to forgive my brother, he gets nervous sometimes."

"Do I make you nervous, Mr. Armour?" Kendra asked.

"Sc..Sc..Scott. Please call me Scott."

"Okay," Kendra said, laughing. "Scott, if I promise not to bite, will you spend some time with my kids?"

"Absolutely. I'm so sorry. I'll go grab a box of balls to sign." Armour turned and walked back towards the dugout to retrieve the balls.

"What position do you play, Colin?" Kendra asked.

"Oh, no, I'm not on the team. I'm just here to spend some time with Scotty. They let me pitch BP because they think I bring them luck."

"How's that?"

"I'm a deacon, studying to be a priest."

"Really? That's cool. My brother is a priest, a Jesuit. John James, he teaches history at USF. You don't happen to—."

"I know Father James quite well. He and I volunteer together at the Bay Area Regional Food Bank."

"Small world. God bless you, Fa...Deacon Sullivan. I hope we meet again."

"You're Catholic then? Sorry if I'm getting too personal."

"No, no. Of course, yes, I'm Catholic."

"So is my friend, the one walking this way with the red face and the baseballs. You made quite an impression on him."

"All I said was hello."

"Sometimes that's all it takes."

The children gathered around Scotty, who patiently talked with each child, posed for pictures and played a little catch with some of the boys. The whole process only took fifteen minutes. When they were finished, Scotty asked, "Miss James, would you have dinner with me?"

"Scott, yes, I would love to. Let me give you my number, you can call me—."

"No, I mean, I want your number, but I'm asking you to dinner tonight, after the game."

"I would, but I have a prior commitment."

"Oh, I understand. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—."

"Mass. I go to Wednesday night Mass at St. Catherine's. Would you like to go with me? We could eat afterwards."

"Would I like to go with you? Are you kidding? He..ah..heck yes, I'd love to

go."

"Let's meet at the church, around seven. Does that work for you?"

"If I'm not there, the Lord has returned or I'm dead."

"Such a serious man! Does he ever lighten up, Colin?" Kendra teased.

"For sure. He'll calm down in a bit. Give him a chance, you won't regret it."

"Alright then, see you tonight, Scott. The kids and I should get off the field so you guys can play your game."

"Where are you sitting?"

"First base side, twenty rows back."

"I'm starting tonight. I'll look for you."

"Come on, tough guy. We've got to get your gear on," Colin said.

"Bye," Kendra said as she smiled, waved and walked with the children back into the stands.

"Colin, my God! That woman, Kendra, she's perfect! I was too jumpy. Why am I such a klutz? She probably thinks I'm a stupid fool."

"I doubt it. Something tells me..."

"What? Tells you what?"

"That it's time for you to go to work. Dravecky needs to warm up," Colin said as he pointed to the bullpen where Dave Dravecky was nervously pawing at the dirt with his cleats, wondering where in the hell his catcher was hiding.

"Now batting for the Padres, number thirteen, Scott Armour." The crowd reacted to the announcement with a smattering of applause.

"I hope he gets a hit," Amanda said.

"A homer," Jen added. "He promised."

"Scott promised to hit you a home run? Kinda bold," Tiny said.

"He can do it. Welch hasn't been pitching that well over his last few starts. If he hangs a curve, Scott will murder it."

"All this baseball mumbo-jumbo. What does 'hang a curve' mean, Colin?"

"If you throw a curve, or try to anyway, and it doesn't break, it just sits there spinning but not moving, like a cement mixer, that's called 'hanging a curve'. At this level, hitters crush those mistakes."

"But what does the curve hang on?"

"Amanda."

"Sorry, Tiny. I'll be quiet."

"You do better with football."

"When I go to your games it's easier to follow. Run or throw the ball until the other guys stop you. Make it all the way down the field, you get six points. Kick it through the big fork looking thing-a-ma-jig and you get three points. Simple."

"When does camp start, Tiny?" Colin asked.

"In a couple of weeks."

"You don't sound thrilled."

"I hate training camp. You know that. I miss Angie and the boys too much, and all that work, two a days in the heat. I'm getting too old for that crap."

"So quit," Jen offered. "Do something else."

"What does that mean, Colin? The count is 'two and one'?" Amanda interrupted.

"Two balls and one strike on Scotty, Sweetie."

"Three balls and he goes to first base and four strikes and he's out right?"

"Amanda."

"Sorry, Tiny."

"Two more years, Jen," Tiny continued. "That's the plan. I want to coach, but we need a couple years more of player money to reach our financial goals."

"I guess you'll just have to suck it up then, big fella. What, you can't leave poor Angie alone for a month? She might like the break."

"You don't understand, Jen. You're not married."

"Thank God."

"It's three and two now, Colin. How come the count is full? Full of what?"

"I give up," Tiny said, exasperated. "She'll never get it."

"The count is full because one more strike and Scott's out, one more ball and he walks, gets a free pass to first base."

"I understand. I'm not entirely stupid. Tiny just has no patience for me anymore."

Scott then fouled off a Bob Welch slider, sending the ball directly over their heads and back into the seats.

"Isn't Scott out? Tiny told me that foul balls are strikes."

"They can't be the third strike. The batter has to miss the ball completely or the catcher has to catch the foul tip on the third strike."

"That's just silly. Who thought up these ru—."

"Amanda."

"You don't love me anymore, Tiny."

"I adore you, Sweetie. Quit being a pain."

"I'm not a—."

Amanda's response was cut off in mid-sentence by the crack of Scotty's bat. He sent a Bob Welch "cement mixer" four hundred feet away to dead centerfield. The crowd cheered and music blared as Scott trotted around the bases. Since there were two runners on, the Padres went ahead three to nothing.

"I get the bat," Jennifer bragged.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yep. Scott promised me. If he hit a homer, I get to keep the bat."

"I think you might have some competition now, Jen," Colin said.

"Scott is seeing someone? Why didn't he tell me? We had dinner together last night, but he never mentioned a girlfriend."

"He hadn't met her yet," Colin clarified. "See, he's waving to her now. The girl in the white top and blue shorts. She standing with all the little kids."

Scott had emerged from the dugout for a curtain call and was indeed waving to Kendra.

"What do you know about her?" Jennifer asked.

"She's cute, bright, loves kids and she's Catholic. Scotty is taking her to Mass tonight."

"Church? On a Wednesday?"

"Many parishes offer Mass seven days a week."

"First date in a church, huh. Scotty's in trouble."

"I'll bet he's in trouble big time. I got a really nice vibe from Kendra. Very wholesome, positive."

"A 'vibe'? Priests get 'vibes'?"

"I'm not a priest yet, Jen."

"Soon enough."

"I just think she might be the one."

"You got all that from a brief introduction?"

"My vibes are almost always right. I can usually tell when two people are meant for each other."

"Hey, if Mr. Right comes strolling in my direction, give me a heads up so I can run like hell the other way."

"No worries. I've got your back."

"And I still want the damn bat."

A few innings later....

"Karen asks about you constantly," Jen said, as she slowly munched on some popcorn.

"So I'm told."

"It's been years now, Colin. You guys need to get over it and move on. Be friends."

"I love Karen, she loves me. That's never going to change. Think of it this way. What if your dad told you one day that he didn't want to be your father anymore, just a friend. Could you do that, be his friend and not his daughter?"

"That's not the same, Colin."

"It isn't? Why not?"

"Because boyfriends and girlfriends come and go, fathers and mothers are forever."

"For you, either because you choose to live that way, or you haven't met the right man yet. But for me, and for Karen too I know, that's the way it is."

"How sad."

"Yes and no."

"What part of your ordeal with Karen Foster isn't sad?"

"Not everyone is graced by true love, Jen. Even if you only get to share

that with someone for a moment it's a blessing, not a curse."

"Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all?"

"Yes."

"Bullshit. Pure, one hundred percent bullshit."

"I'm sorry that you feel that way."

"Don't be. Do you realize what life is like for Karen?"

"I only know what you guys tell me. I pray for Karen every day."

"Men are always pursuing her. She works hard at avoiding them, Colin."

"I know how desirable Karen is, Jen. My hope is that eventually someone will come along who is worthy of her and will live to make her happy, treat her like the queen she is, give her a family, children and a full life."

"You mean that, don't you."

"Of course. You don't believe that I want Karen to be happy?"

"No...well, yes. Colin, you are so unlike other men I know."

"I don't doubt that, hon. I don't under...Let's not go there, Jennifer. You know what I think."

"That I should stop being a whore?"

"Hey! I never said that. You're not a whore."

"Don't be so sure."

"For the sake of your soul, I hope that you're exaggerating."

"Probably, maybe. But Colin, don't you know? About Karen, I mean?"

"What?"

"She won't let anyone get close to her. Nice men, good and decent guys, get nowhere with her. A few of them have come to me, wanting to know what they have to do to impress her, to win her heart."

"You tell them?"

"Change your name to Colin Sullivan, go back in time ten years and you've got a shot. Otherwise, you're just wasting your time."

"What do you want me to say? Karen lives her life the way she chooses to...I don't...I don't want or try to control her."

"I'm not buying that, Colin. Not completely, anyway. Oh, I do believe that you want her to be happy, but I think that you kinda get off on the fact that she carries a torch for you."

"Please. Come on, girl."

"Have you told her, to her face, that there is no hope for you two?"

"I'm in the Seminary, Jennifer. Hello. Karen isn't stupid."

"When it comes to you, honey, she's as dumb as a post."

"Yeah, right."

"Have you? Have you told her?"

"Have I told her what? That I'm going to be a priest, that my life is His and not my own? Yes, many times."

"Tell her that you don't love her, Colin. Better still, tell her that you never did really love her, that what you and her had was just a teenage love affair, not the real deal."

"That's a lie, Jen."

"Of course it's a lie! Sometimes you have to lie to protect those you love."

"I don't live my life that way, Jen. I'm a man of God."

"Oh yeah? Then why did you go to prison, 'man of God'? You told a lie to protect her then, tell her another one now and save her from the misery of a lifetime of failed relationships with men."

"It's not that simple."

"Oh, hell yes it's just that simple. Until you take your vows, even after I'd bet, Karen will pursue you, in one way or another, as long as she believes that you're still in love with her."

"I am still in love with her and I always will be."

"For God's sakes show some compassion, Colin! Cut her loose!"

"We don't even talk anymore, Jen. It always leads back to the same issue, the same—."

"When was the last time you spoke with her?"

"Christmas. We had a pleasant conversation for more than an hour before the inevitable happened. She ended the call by slamming the phone down."

"I knew it."

"Knew what?"

"This guy, a big shot exec from Marriott, Howard...I forget his last name. This poor schmuck, he was smitten. Head over heels in love. I think Karen was impressed by him too. The guy was handsome, loaded, not too—."

"I don't need details."

"Sorry. Anyway, he was going to ask Karen to marry him. I know this because he called me seeking Karen Foster wisdom. I kept my mouth shut about you, thought I'd sit back and see what happened."

"And?"

"Evidently, Karen talked with you and that was it. On New Year's Eve she told Howard to hit the road. Poor guy was devastated."

"She never mentioned Howard to me."

"No shit! Don't play dumb, Colin. It's beneath you."

"I love Karen Foster. I tell her that on the rare occasions that we speak, but I would never ask her to not marry a good man. I hope she does when the man and time are right."

"She called you for reassurance that her hope wasn't in vain, that there was still a possibility that you and she could be together. Congratulations. You didn't disappoint her."

"I never told Karen th—."

"Forget it, Colin. What the hell do I know, anyway? I'm the last person who should be giving anyone relationship advice."

"Jen, it's not like that, honey. You're a dear friend to both of us, we both love you."

"Well, be glad that it's Karen who is in love with you and not me. I'd have shot you and buried your sorry ass in the desert years ago."

"Why don't I doubt that."

"What inning is it, Colin?" Amanda asked as she and Tony Mancuso sat down with the beer and hot dogs they went to retrieve.

"Bottom of the eighth, Sweetie."

"Three innings more then, right?"

"Two more innings. One and a half, to be precise."

"No, no. The last game I went to they played ten innings. I remember."

"Was the score tied after nine, Sweetie?"

"That I don't remember."

"They only play more than nine innings if the score is tied after nine."

"Oh. Tiny didn't tell me that."

"Buy her a rule book or somethin', will you?" Colin joked.

"Angie isn't here, that's the problem," Tiny answered.

"So, now I'm a problem?"

"No, Amanda. I love you. I'm sorry."

"Me too," Colin added. "No more teasing."

"You guys made her cry," Jennifer said as she grinned and put her arm around Amanda. "Bullies."

"Oh boy."

"Yep, you stepped in it now, Tiny."

"Mr. Mancuso?" a man sitting in the row behind them asked. "Could I get your autograph, please?"

"Sure, what do you want me to—."

"How 'bout my hat? It's not a Rams lid, but it says LA."

"Sure." Tiny smiled and signed the man's Dodgers cap.

"You guys gonna be good this year?"

"We're looking better all the time."

"Dickerson healthy?"

"Think so."

"I have season's tickets. Just off the thirty-yard line, east end of the Coliseum."

"Always happy to meet a fan. My best to you, sir." Tiny shook the man's hand and turned back around.

"How often does that happen?" Jennifer asked.

"Not much. Not too many people recognize or care about linemen. He probably overheard us talking, figured out who I was."

"Scotty is up again," Amanda said, sniffing.

"Let's see if he can break the tie," Tiny said.

"Stoddard sure is tall. What is that guy, six eight?"

"You know him, Jen?" Colin asked.

"Let's just say we've met."

"I'll bet that Scotty is sitting on a first-pitch fastball on the inner half."

"How do you know that, Colin?" Tiny asked.

"That's the scouting report. Stoddard comes in on right-handers on the first

pitch with heat. He thinks it helps him set up his out pitch, a backdoor slider."

"I'm not even going to ask," Amanda said, pouting.

At the crack of the bat Jennifer shouted, "Wow! He did it again!"

"It's got the distance! Stay fair, you son of a bitch!" Colin pleaded.

Armour's second home run of the day soared out of the yard, missing the left field foul pole by five feet. This time, the crowd erupted because Scott had just put the Padres ahead very late in the game.

"Does Scott hit a lot of home runs, if you don't mind me asking?" Amanda said, tentatively.

"He only plays every fourth game or so, but he pinch hits pretty much every other day. He's hit twelve home runs so far this year, counting the two today."

"Is that good?"

"Sweetie, every player you see on the field is superb. Making the majors is like...hmm. It's like being a good enough artist to have your paintings hanging in the Met."

"No way."

"Yes way."

The rest of the Padre half of the eighth was uneventful. After two strikeouts and a weak pop fly to right, it was time for Gossage to come in and try and shut down the Dodgers and earn another save.

Between innings, Jennifer whispered to Colin, "I'm sorry, honey. Sometimes I run my mouth when I shouldn't. Try and not take me too seriously."

"You're a good friend, Jen. Don't ever apologize to me for being honest. I wish...I...if...I'll consider everything you said."

"I just feel so bad for Karen. You have your brother priests, the Church, the comfort of your religious life. She has nothing but an empty bed and a broken heart."

Chapter Twenty Eight

It was familiar ground, but a few things had changed. When they were kids, the houses in the neighborhood around Chapman High were new and mostly white people lived in them. Now the area was a Hispanic enclave. The baseball field looked the same. The school had expanded the viewing stands, but otherwise everything else was circa 1978 from the faded out local business ad signs in the outfield, to the huge grey metal light poles, to the weathered wooden players' benches in the dugouts.

"Cold?" Tiny asked.

"No, but I'm glad that I brought my sweatshirt," Amanda answered.

"Are you still a night owl?"

"Yea, still. I can't remember the last time I saw the sunrise. It's beautiful. I should do it more often."

"Angie wakes me up at dawn when she...you know."

"Must be nice, to have someone wake you up at dawn to...you know."

"Angie is my princess. She and the boys are everything to me."

"You're blessed."

"Here, Sweetie. Light these and set them over there, by the dugout."

"Okay." Amanda lit two candles and set them down by the fence. The flames flickered in the gentle breeze.

"Why candles, Tiny?"

"To remind us why we are here, to help us pray for our departed friends."

"Colin and?"

"Kyle."

"Sure. That makes sense."

"I love you, Amanda. So do Angie and the boys. You know that, don't you? It's important to me that you always know that we love you, Sweetie."

"Tony, you guys are my family. I know that you love me."

"Be sure of our love, Amanda. Scott and Karen love you, too. Whenever you fell like giving in, like it's all too—."

"I'm past that, Tony. You don't have to worry about me anymore."

"I believe you, but I never want to have to—."

"Colin, it was...isn't that something? Father Sullivan was the person who brought me back from the edge, gave me hope, and now he's gone."

"It's alright, Sweetie. Cry. We're going to be doing a lot of that today."

Tony Mancuso kissed Amanda Simpson on the forehead as he tenderly held her close in his massive arms. He removed the blanket that he was sitting on, wrapped it around Amanda and kissed her again.

"I can still see him out there, plain as day, playing baseball."

"Me too," Amanda said. "When I close my eyes, I can see him, too."

"What did we do wrong, Sweetie? Didn't he know how much we loved him? This is so hard."

Now they both cried. There was no one else around, Chapman Field was deserted. The sky was transforming from black to dull orange as the sun slowly crept over Sunrise Mountain.

"You didn't do anything wrong, Tiny. You and Scott were good friends to Colin. The best."

"Not good enough, obviously."

"Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"The whole Catholic guilt trip thing. You're not Karen, so don't try and own her stuff. Besides, people do what people do, all we can do is forgive them, love them and keep on going."

"My Colin is just...I've never seen him this upset. He's so sad, Sweetie. I feel helpless. What do I tell him? How can I comfort him?"

"He and Father Sullivan were very close, I know, Tony. Your son's heart must be broken."

"Colin wants to be a priest. Just like his uncle."

"Do you think now he?"

"I don't know. These are the times when it is the toughest to trust God, to really believe that He loves us and has a plan for our lives."

"When my mom died, Colin was right there for me. He came all the way to Manhattan, picked me up and we flew back together to Vegas."

"I remember."

"He went with me to see Dad. I would never have been able to forgive him without Colin."

"He was a great priest. Not a good priest, a great priest."

"Sometimes, like with George, Colin had this ability. It didn't matter if he knew you or not, if you were a Catholic or a Buddhist or a whatever, he could just look at some people and—."

"Melt their hearts."

"Yes. I was going to say reach them, make them aware that God loved them, but that's a better way to put it. Colin melted cold hearts."

"George. When did your dad pass on?"

"Four years ago this Easter."

"I have another candle. Would you like to..."

Amanda took the candle from Tony, lit it and set it by the other two.

"That's for both of them, my parents," Amanda declared.

"Sydney was a lovely woman, Sweetie. Very gentle, too."

"I loved mom, but she should have stood up to George. She allowed him to abuse her. I think she even got off on it sometimes."

"Amanda."

"What? It's true. They did this weird dance, those two. It was kinda sick."

"You see things differently now. You're older, wiser."

"I think that's why I'm gay, Tiny. Because of them."

"Amanda, I might not be the best person for you to talk to about this

subject."

"Quit it. I've told you more than anyone else since the seventh grade."

"So you have."

"You guys always just accepted me for who I was. Do you have any idea what that meant to me as a kid? It was everything. To be loved by all of you even though I was different taught me that there are good people in the world."

"Hey, I'm the big fat slob, sister. Believe me, I understand."

"Yea, I guess you do."

"Colin, Karen, Jen and Kyle. They were the popular ones, the people everyone envied."

"And look at them now."

"Yea, two of them are dead, Karen is a wreck but Jen, she's just Jen. Like you, she never changes."

"You know, Jennifer and I, we tried a few years back to be...umm...more than friends," Amanda revealed.

"No way."

"Yea, we kept it quiet, but it happened. That's why I moved to LA for a while."

"I had no idea that Jen was a..., I mean that she..."

"Switch hit?"

"Yea," Tiny said, laughing. "That's one way to put it."

"I think she wanted to try it, as a lifestyle, being gay, but she's not gay. Jennifer is tired of being alone and since she couldn't seem to make a relationship work with a man, she thought why not try it with a woman."

"Amazing. I could never, you know..."

"It's kinda different with the ladies."

"I guess so!"

"Anyway, the sex was fantastic, by far the best I've ever had," Amanda bragged as she nudged Tiny.

"Amanda, I..." Tiny's face was beet red from embarrassment, but it was still too dark for Amanda to notice.

"But it didn't work, her and I. Jen is a wild thing, I think she's tried everything once, but she's not gay. We knew pretty quick that we were wasting our time and risking our friendship, so we broke up and went back to being friends."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Why are you telling me this now, Sweetie? I mean, would Jen be mad if I knew?"

"Maybe, but then again I really don't know. It's just something that happened, another experience. Not that big of a deal."

"Did you tell Colin?"

"Yes. I told him everything, sooner or later."

"What did he say?"

"The same thing he always said, that until I chose to stop doing things my way and started doing things God's way, I'd suffer."

"Wise advice."

"What is God's way, Tiny?"

"Men are meant for women, women are meant for men. That is God's will."

"If that's true, why am I gay? I don't necessarily want to be gay. Some people do, though, they want to be gay. What, God cursed all gay people, set us up to be sinners?"

"We all have predispositions, appetites, that aren't healthy. We have to control our flesh, or it ends up controlling us."

"I've tried, you know. More than once."

"Tried?"

"Being straight, being with a man."

"I thought that you had never known a man."

"The first one was Kyle."

"No freaking way."

"Yes freaking way."

"I've gotta hear this story."

"Junior year. We were partying at Jughead's house. Remember him? Tall guy, played basketball?"

"Yea, I remember."

"Kyle and I got really toasted and I said to him, 'I want you right now, right here.'"

"Why didn't these things ever happen to me?"

"We did it in the spare room at Jughead's place. Two or three times, as I recall."

"Why Kyle?"

"Better him than someone I didn't know. I wanted to see what it was like."

"You hated it?"

"No, because I loved Kyle. But his equipment, his, you know..."

"Penis?"

"Yea. Now I'm sure that it was fine, Kyle was a healthy, good looking boy but, well, it made me sick."

"You wanted to puke?"

"Pretty much. And his skin was so rough, all those muscles. And he had chest hair. Yuk."

"So you knew for sure, after Kyle I mean, that you were gay?"

"I knew before but hey, until you try something once you never really know for sure."

"Trust me. That's something I never have to try. Being with a man, that's disgusting."

"That's how I feel. From a sexual point of view, I find men disgusting."

"But you tried again?"

"Yes. I think I even fell in love with a man once, but I just couldn't get past

the, his, ..."

"Penis."

"Yea."

"You never found a woman to settle down with, a permanent relationship?"

"I've tried that, too."

"Debbie broke your heart, didn't she."

"She crushed it into little pieces."

"You never really told me what happened with you two, Sweetie."

"We were together for almost five years, then one day she came home and said, 'I want children'."

"She was younger than you, right?"

"Fifteen years younger."

"You didn't want kids?"

"I've always wanted children."

"Then what was the problem, you and Debbie could have gone to a doctor, gotten pregnant."

"She wanted to have a traditional family, a husband and father for her children."

"Debbie wasn't really gay?"

"She sure was, is, more than me. Debbie had no interest in men at all, not even to experiment."

"I'm lost."

"Debbie Butcher made a hard choice; she gave up the person she loved, me, and married Rick, whom she also loves, I'm sure, but not like he thinks she does, to have a family. Emily was born last month. Absolutely beautiful baby girl."

"People do the strangest things."

"It must seem so to you, Tiny. You are the stable one, the rock of our group. Scotty is too, I suppose, but he has his dark side. I wish that I was more like you."

"I wish that I was more like Christ. That's the secret, Sweetie, more of Him and less of us."

"I believe in God, Tony. I always have, you know that."

"Belief alone is not enough."

"Not now, Tony."

"Why not now? You started this conversation."

"Look, Colin tried to turn me into a good Catholic. I even lived in a religious community for six months. I never told anyone about that, not even you."

"Wow. Which one?"

"Carmelite sisters in Marin County."

"Did you have a good experience?"

"Yes, but I'm not like them or like you. God to me is more of an energy, an ultimate goodness. I can't conceive of God as a person."

"Like Jesus."

"It doesn't work for me, Tiny."

"But you still go to Mass once in a while?"

"Yes, I like it very much. The praying, the singing, the reverence."

"I'll miss going to Father Sullivan's Mass."

"Me too. I loved watching him do everything in his robes, his..."

"Vestments."

"Sorry," Amanda said, chuckling. "I know that all of the accoutrements have names. I didn't mean to be disrespectful."

"Everyone loved his homilies, but I was moved most by his prayers and chanting. Colin believed, passionately, in the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist."

"Another thing I never understood, but it is beautiful. I love the concept."

"We only do what Jesus commanded us to do, Amanda. He said that we must eat His body and drink His blood if we are to have eternal life with Him."

"I think that we have many lives, Tony."

"Still on the New Age kick, I see," Tony said in a condescending tone.

"Hey! I'm respectful of your beliefs, please don't—."

"You're right, Sweetie. I shouldn't do that. Please forgive me."

"You want to know what I believe? I believe that Colin and Karen have done this before, been together, and that they may need to do it again and again until they get it right, learn what they need to learn."

"I..." Tony hesitated. He chose his words carefully so as not to offend Amanda. "I hope that you're wrong, Sweetie."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to come back here, to this miserable Earth. When I die, I want to go somewhere better. To Heaven."

"You will."

"Oh, you're sure of that, are you?"

"Yes."

Tony kissed Amanda on the cheek and they held hands in silence for a few minutes. The sun was halfway over the mountain now. The ballfield was bathed in the pastel light of a new day.

"Colin called me a lot, over the past six months or so, I mean," Amanda said, breaking the stillness with her words.

"Yes?"

"He wanted to make sure that I wouldn't try to hurt myself again, that I was working through the pain of losing Debbie."

"He cared so much about all of us."

"Our talks became more and more about him, though."

"Please share with me what he said, if I'm not asking you to break a confidence."

"No, no...I think I should. Colin was sad, I mean really blue. He was fighting the same battle I fight – part of him thought that he was a failure, a bad person. No matter what, he could not get past Karen, her needs and suffering."

"It's beyond me, Sweetie. I think he got tired of talking with Scott and I about it because we always told him the same thing – let it go. He could advise others not to be defeated by their pain, their sin, to accept Christ's mercy, but he couldn't, wouldn't, take his own good counsel."

"Men. You're so...one dimensional."

"That's a new one," Tiny said, as he smiled. "One dimensional?"

"Black or white, right or wrong, correct or incorrect. People are deeper than that, Tony. Especially people like Colin. His emotional and spiritual life was like a web, a maze, not a switch he could turn off and on. That's what made him such a good listener; he could almost crawl into someone else's skin, a little bit anyway."

"Empathy."

"Yes, plus love. Colin tapped into God's love and spread it around, he shared God's grace with everyone he met."

"But Karen..."

"She should have been a man."

"What? How can you say—."

"Karen Foster thinks just like a guy. Acts like one, too."

"This is fascinating. I should be recording this or something."

"Oh, come on. Like you haven't noticed."

"I've 'noticed' Karen Foster all my life. The very last thing I'd call her is masculine."

"Just because she's gorgeous and feminine in appearance doesn't mean that she has a woman's soul."

"Sweetie."

"Karen...when she latches on to something, watch out. Talk about one dimensional! A plus B equals C. Achieve goal one by completing steps one through ten. Anything that gets in her way, hinders her plan, muddles her logic, is an obstacle to be avoided or destroyed."

"She's always been ambitious, I'll grant you that."

"Colin was her ultimate prize. Everything she did was either an attempt to capture him or a way of trying to forget him, a diversion. Her biggest problem was she didn't know when to quit because quitting is not in her DNA."

"You saw the news, yes? She quit her position as Governor."

"Colin is gone. She has to face that now. Her ambitions, her motivation, died with him. Honesty is rearing its ugly head. Karen has never been this lost, this vulnerable."

"Did you study art or psychology, Amanda?" Tony Mancuso was impressed. This was a side of Amanda Simpson he'd never seen before.

"Please. Like no one else can see what I see. Jennifer understands."

"Who understands Jen?"

"Very good question."

"For another day, Dr. Simpson."

"Colin, he allowed Karen, maybe allowed is the wrong word. She touched

him deeper than anyone else could. They really, genuinely, loved each other, Tiny."

"Yet they brought each other only misery."

"They both abused their gift, that's why I'm telling you that they will need to come back and do it again, get it right before they can move on."

"If you believe that, then why did you say that I'm going to Heaven?"

"Because you've got it right, Tony. You and Angie, your boys, your players; who doesn't love you? I don't think that you need to come back."

"And you?"

"Whoa. Huge mess. I'll probably have to start over as an insect or something."

Tiny couldn't help himself, so he laughed. Amanda did, too. They both appreciated the break from the gloom.

"Ready?" Tiny asked, as he stood and stretched.

"No. I want to stay here. You go and tell me all about it. I despise funerals, and I especially hate this one."

"My Lord. This will be rough."

"Then I better come, Tony. You might need me."

"There is no 'might' about it, Sweetie. You've got to help me get through today. Angie, she'll be there, but she was never really...never..."

"One of us?"

"She's my dear, sweet wife, but not my..."

"Friend?"

"Not like you."

"I understand."

"Yes, yes you do, Sweetie."

"Back in '78, right before Colin went to prison, I asked you a question. We were in the airport. I picked you up when you came back from football camp. Do you remember?"

"Amazing. Maybe there is something to that psychic stuff you believe. I swear to you that I've been thinking about your question ever since Colin died."

"Well?"

"Yes and no."

"Huh?"

"Yes, someone can take your cross, your trial, away from you for a while and suffer in your place. But also no, ultimately all of us have to pick up our own cross. I think it's a matter of timing – timing and mercy. We all need help from other people but, in the end, we will rise or fall on our own merits. No one can duck and dodge God forever."

"Sooner or later we have to balance the scales, pay the price."

"Yes, I believe that's true, Amanda."

"Should Colin have done it? Gone to prison for Karen?"

"Only the Lord can judge, certainly not me, but what is so frustrating is that they both did so much good, helped so many people, along their separate paths."

Why couldn't they see that? Why wasn't that enough?"

"Linear thinking. One dimensional. Colin and Karen did great things, they were the best at their professions, so how is it possible that they were unhappy, empty inside, most of the time? Because two plus two does not always equal four, Tony."

"I'm not sure which one of them, maybe both of them, should have come to their senses, but for damn sure they should have thrown in the towel and ended their frustration long ago."

"Maybe that's meant for their next life, Tony."

"What if I'm right?"

"I don't follow."

"If the Church is right, then we have only this life and then we are judged. Where does that leave Colin and Karen?"

"Or me?"

"Any one of us."

"You're safe, Tony."

"I pray for Colin's soul today; may he find the peace in the next life that he never found in this one."

"I pray that God remembers all the love Colin shared with others and forgets how he ended his life."

"That's very Catholic of you, Amanda."

"Hey, the sisters taught me a few things. I paid attention."

"For such a smart woman you can still be awfully cute when you play dumb."

"My act is wearing a little thin, don't you think? I get senior discounts at stores now."

"You never 'wear thin' with me, Amanda."

"Let's go, Tiny. Before I change my mind."

They left Chapman Field as they found it; vacant, waiting for the kids to bring it back to life once again in the spring. But for Tony and Amanda, Chapman Field would always be animated and cherished in their memories, filled with the sights and sounds of a more innocent time when a baseball game was the most important thing in the world and their friends were young, happy and whole, undamaged by the trials of life.

Chapter Twenty Nine

"I haven't been in this church for... damn, how long has it been? Over thirty years. It hasn't changed much, Bishop," Karen said.

"My Godson, Anthony Carmelo, was a priest here. I used to come down and visit him once or twice a year."

"Father Tony? Stood about five foot five, weighed a buck and a quarter, a little black goatee? That Father Tony?"

"I was certain that you'd met him. He was Colin's priest when he was a boy."

"Father Tony was a good man. Very pious, a gentle soul. Where is he now?"

"With the Lord. Pancreatic cancer took him a few years ago."

"The grim reaper comes for us all eventually."

"Do you fear death, Karen?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

"No."

"Do you?"

"No."

"I believe you, Bishop."

"You fear life far more than you fear death though, don't you Karen."

"Yes, far more."

Bishop Antonelli reached out and took Karen's hand. As he held it, he softly spoke a short prayer in Latin and gave Karen a blessing.

"The brothers at St. Thomas were, uh, a bit puzzled by your choice of a burial plot for Colin."

"It wasn't my choice, it was Scott's, but I agree with it. He'll be looking out at nothing but pleasant memories."

"If I may, forgive me for being so bold, but Meadows Hill is, well, quite run down. I understood that it was full, too. How did you manage to secure a plot?"

"I'm still the Governor for a few more days. As you know, I'm also a woman of substantial means."

"You bought the cemetery?"

"Lock, stock and caskets."

"The priests here were telling me that the cemetery's neighbors have petitioned the county to have the graves moved to a new location."

"Pardon the pun, but that issue is dead and buried."

"It was that important to you, and to your friends, to lay Father Sullivan to rest there? Why?"

"So he can watch the kids play ball at Sunset Park. From where he will be interred he has a perfect view of all of the fields. I'll make sure that the property is upgraded and well maintained."

"As you wish."

"The brothers in San Francisco are mad because we didn't lay him to rest in that horrid bone yard behind the rectory? That place is dismal."

"Colin would have the company of his fellow religious at St. Thomas."

"Nope. Not this time, your Eminence. You can't have him anymore."

"Simple as that?"

"Simple as that."

"I was awakened early this morning by a disturbing phone call, Karen."

"From?"

"Father Sam Alcaraz."

"Here comes my chastisement. Go ahead Bishop, tell me again how wrong I am to despise that man."

"I have never judged you or your feelings. It is my duty to bring Christ to you, to counsel you in the ways of His love."

"Bishop, I am—."

"Let me assuage your concerns. You will never see Father Sam again. Not today, not ever."

"Thank you, Jesus."

"He is returning to Mexico to die with his family."

"Adios."

"Karen, you are not a cold hearted person. I know you, well, quite intimately. All I ask is that you pray to the Lord – Please God, take away my hatred for this man. Then be pati—."

"Please God," Karen began, "bring great pain, suffering and humiliation upon Father Sam Alcaraz. Make his death slow and painful and may he burn in Hell forever. Amen."

"My daughter, that is the plea of a woman in great spiritual distress. I pray that you find peace, Karen."

"May both our prayers come true, Bishop. But you don't need to worry, God never listens to me anyway."

"He hears everyone, especially people in distress."

"Then why didn't He hear me thirty years ago? I, we, needed Him most then."

"Must His answer be yes to your prayers for you to believe that He hears you?"

"I'd like to ask you a question and receive a blunt, straight answer from you."

"Why am I suddenly afraid."

"Well? Will you?"

"I'll try my best."

"You should have been a politician."

"Being a Bishop means being a politician, of a sort."

"Was Colin wrong for lying about Kyle's death? Was I wrong for letting him do it?"

"That's two questions."

Karen Foster said nothing, but she stared intently at Antonelli. She made it clear through her silence that she expected a meaningful response.

"Alright. Is lying always wrong? No. The Lord tells us, "mercy triumph's over judgement." Colin, if he was anything, was a merciful man. I've never—."

"Except on himself."

"Yes, except on himself. I, no one, in my view, could honestly look you in the eye and say with certainty that what Colin did was right or wrong. Clearly it was merciful, of that I'm sure. But sometimes mercy is...how to put this..."

"Sometimes when we show mercy to a person, carry their burdens, suffer for them, it may not be the best thing for them. Sometimes people need to face their problems head on to learn what God wants them to learn."

"I should give you the vestments and the collar, Karen. Your statement is a perfect expression of my beliefs."

"Address the second question, Bishop. Please."

"Only you can answer that question, my daughter."

"You're punting? I'm struggling, drowning. Help me."

"Since we are discussing this, sharing our hearts, I want to tell you two things. First, Colin was destined to be a priest. I have no doubt that God called him to the vocation. How could anyone, even you, question that? I have been privileged to know hundreds of priests over the course of my life and Colin is, by far, the best parish priest that I've ever known."

"Parish priest?"

"Father Sullivan was at his best when he immersed himself in the lives of his parishioners. He could spend his entire day seeing to their needs, physical and spiritual, and never shortchange a soul. He made time for everyone and never turned anyone away. As we say, Colin had the patience of Job."

"What's the second thing?"

"That, years ago, regardless of his calling, he should have quit the priesthood, been satisfied with being a deacon, and married you."

"Bishop! Lord in heaven! You told him this!"

"I begged him, my daughter. Yes, I pleaded with the best priest I knew to renounce his holy orders and marry you."

"Why haven't you ever told me this before? I mean, it could have made all the diff—."

"Do you imagine that I would even consider breaking the sanctity of the sacrament of reconciliation?"

"Then why are you telling me now?"

"Because Colin is dead, but you are alive. My first duty is to minister to the living. I can pray for the dead, but nothing more."

"Then why? If you..."

"Perhaps your mother can speak to your heart best about all of this, my daughter."

"You know that my mother has been dead for years."

"Yes, of course, but what you don't know is that she and Father Sullivan

were close friends. They talked to each other at least once a month all of their lives after Colin got out of prison. He visited her too, frequently towards the end."

"Mother loved Colin, I know. I knew that they talked once in a while, but I was not aware that th—."

"Read this," Antonelli instructed, handing Karen an envelope.

"And 'this' is?"

"A letter from Gina to Father Sullivan, written on her death bed."

"Where did you get this letter?"

"Colin left it for me. He slipped it under my office door with a note on the day he died."

"What did the note say?"

"No. That is private. But please, read the letter. He wanted you to read it."

Karen opened the envelope and immediately recognized her mother's handwriting. It was sloppy, words were misspelled and crossed out rather than erased, very unlike Gina Foster's usual perfect penmanship. As the end grew closer, Gina's ability to use her muscles deteriorated rapidly.

"Should I read it..."

"Aloud, yes. There is no one else in here with us."

"October 10, 2003," Karen began. *"Father Sullivan, you have just left. I can still smell your cologne and feel the warmth of your hand on mine. I'll miss you when I go and I trust in your word that we will meet again someday. You truly are my son. I love you just as if you were my own child which you really are in every way that matters."*

"*You are a...*" Karen stopped. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. She reached out and held the Bishop's hand and looked at him with the saddest of eyes.

"I know that this is hard for you, my daughter, but you did ask me for 'blunt' answers to your questions. This is your answer."

"She wrote this less than two days before she died," Karen said as she used Antonelli's handkerchief to wipe her eyes and face. "Colin must have snuck in to see her while I was detained in New York with Joe."

"He loved your mother very much. He spoke of her often with the greatest respect and kindness."

"*You are a,*" Karen said as she began reading the letter again, *"Saint, Colin. How can I say thank you for saving my precious Karen? I am so proud of you, of the man you have become. When you call me your friend it humbles me because I have done nothing in my life to merit having such a wonderful friend."*

"Someday I hope that Karen will realize that men like you, blessed men full of God's grace, belong to the Lord, not to any one person. But I don't blame Karen for wanting to possess you. For her, every day without you is a kind of torture. I know that you love her more than anyone else in this world."

"I also know that in her own way Karen loves Joseph and God knows that he is a good man, but what little they have together was not meant to and will not endure. I would never say that to Karen, but I'm also sure that I'm not telling you"

something that you didn't already know.

"Have patience with my Karen, son, forgive her and look after her always. She is an angel and the only person in the world who loves her as much as you do is me. As I have always known, because you promised me, you'd die before letting any harm come to her.

"When I see your father on the other side I'll tell him all about his son the priest and reassure him that you have forgiven him.

"I love you, Colin. Take care of our girl.

"Your friend for all eternity, Gina."

Karen slowly set the letter down on the coffee table, hesitated, then stood, took two faltering steps and collapsed into Bishop Antonelli's embrace. He comforted her as best as he could, but he knew that this difficult day would have to run its course. For Karen, that meant suffering through intense pain. All of her fears, regrets, resentments and distress would be driven through the funnel created by Colin's funeral and amplified onto her soul.

What Bishop Antonelli silently prayed for was that this terrible trial would be the crucible that forced Karen Foster into facing and dealing with issues critical to her salvation.

This time, Colin would not be able to pick up her cross.

"How many people are you expecting?" Jennifer asked.

"I wouldn't dare to hazard a guess, but they have been receiving a lot of calls here and at St. Thomas' over the past few days. The church seats five hundred, but I can't imagine a crowd that large coming," Scott answered.

"Oh, the place will be packed. Trust me," Kendra asserted confidently.

"Honey, you don't know that, no one knows," Scott said.

"You'll see," Kendra said.

"Haven't you learned yet not to argue with your wife?" Amanda teased.

"He's hardheaded," Jen said.

"I agree with Kendra," Angie Mancuso offered, "because Colin was so loved. I'll bet a couple of thousand would show if they could get here."

"Or more," Kendra added.

"Is everything set at Meadows Hill, Scotty?" Jen asked.

"Yes. Karen had a landscape crew come in and spruce the place up yesterday. It looks much better."

"Where is Karen?" Angie asked.

"In the office, talking with the Bishop. They've been in there for over an hour."

"Who came with you and Kendra, Scott? I saw two other people in the car with you when you pulled in," Jennifer asked.

"They're in the sanctuary. I'll go get them in a minute."

"Wait," Jennifer said as she suddenly realized what Scott had done. "You

didn't. Tell me that you didn't bring that vile woman to the funeral."

"She's not vile and yes, Aimee and Tom are both here. I invited them. I insisted that they come."

"You had no right to do that, Scott."

"Wait a minute Jen, hold on now, don't fly off the hand—."

"Oh, you know what? Kendra you, above all people, should know better. Don't defend Scotty just because he's your husband. Aimee Bynum has no business being here, no bus—."

"I think I know why you did it, bro," Tony Mancuso said, breaking in, "but I'm with Jen on this one. We have the right to say goodbye to Colin in peace. Aimee is a distraction."

"Not a distraction, a fucking backstabbing bitch," Amanda cursed.

"Sweetie!" Scott said forcefully. "You're in God's house. Watch your language."

"Shit, by all means, watch your language, Amanda. Scott, I am totally out of it this morning; I'm down, beyond sad, all of us are, and now you just made a horrible day a whole lot worse. Thank you very fucking much, you arrogant asshole."

"Don't you call my husband an asshole, Jen. Apologize, right now," Kendra demanded.

"I was calling him an asshole, when he deserved it, long before he knew your name. Don't lecture me, woman."

"Hey, everybody calm down," Tony pleaded.

"You calm down, Tiny. Jen is right. This is bullshit. Aimee should get the hell out of here before someone knocks her sorry drunk ass to the floor."

"Amanda!"

"Shut up, Tony."

"Please, everyone, we are here for Colin, not to—."

"Scott, you should have thought of that before you took it upon yourself to ruin my one chance to say goodbye to Colin. You want her here? Fine. Then you don't want me. I'm gone," Jen said as she turned to look for her purse.

"I'm leaving with Jen," Amanda declared as she stood. "I'm sorry, Tony. I love you, but I won't sit in the same room with a—."

"Wait a second, please," Aimee Bynum said as she walked in the door.

"Please, I'll leave. Don't fight. Let me say something first to all of you, then I'll go."

"Sorry...it's too late to say you're sorry, Aimee," Jen said.

"Way too fucking late," Amanda added.

"You're right, Jen. Way too late. What I did was unforgivable. I would not insult all of you by saying that I'm sorry."

There was something about Aimee's tone and the way she was presenting herself that put everyone back on their heels. Even Jennifer sat down.

"I've spent most of my life living out of a bottle or a pill box, trying to—."

"That's no excuse," Jen said, interrupting. "Not even close to one."

"You're right, absolutely right."

"So don't think that you can march in he—."

"Jen, sweetheart, let her say her peace," Scott said as he laid his hand gently on his friend's shoulder.

"I've been trying to hide, all of my life I've been hiding. Always unhappy, bitching and moaning, polluting myself with chemicals. The best word to describe who I've been is pathetic."

"You think that any of us disagree with you? You are pathetic. You're a coward, just like my mom," Amanda said, her voice quivering with rage.

"I understand that now. I'm here to tell all of you that I don't want to be a pathetic coward anymore. I'm going to face my demons head on and, with God's help, beat them. I'm done hiding. I'm either good enough as I am or I'm not, but no more lying, drinking or drugging. I'm putting the old Aimee where she belongs, buried with Colin and Kyle.

"I just wanted all of you to know that at least some good came from Colin's death. This whole mess, this damn bloody disaster, was all my fault. For Tom's sake, I hope that I don't get what I deserve.

"You guys are the best. I can appreciate a little better now why Kyle loved you all so much. Please, don't argue. Not today. Give Colin the send-off he deserves and don't say anything hurtful to each other that you'll regret.

"Thanks, Scott. You were so right. I did need to do this." When Aimee stopped talking, she turned to leave.

"Hold on," Karen said. She and Bishop Antonelli had entered the room from the back just when Aimee started speaking.

"This catastrophe is in no way your fault, Aimee. It's Colin's and mine. No one else's. That's one burden you do not have to carry."

"Karen, I'm so sorry for your loss. I know how much you loved Colin. If I had only been stronger, not listened to your stupid sister-in-law, sobered up for just a ..." Aimee couldn't talk anymore, she was crying too hard.

Both Scott and Karen moved quickly to Aimee Bynum and held her as she wept. Tom, who had been watching all this from a safe distance, now felt brave enough to come in.

"I'm sorry, Scotty," Jennifer whispered as she put her hand over his. "You're still an asshole but hey, I've got no room to talk."

"Bitch," Scott cracked, as he bent over and kissed Jen on the cheek.

"Yea, but you love me all the same."

"Sure do."

Whispering, Jen said in Scott's ear, "Keep Aimee the hell away from me today, Scott. I'm not ready to deal with her shit. Promise me that you'll do that."

"Done."

"Where's Sweetie?" Jen asked.

"She's sitting out in the pews, talking to herself," Tom answered, as he peeked through a crack in the door at the sanctuary.

"Give her some space," Jennifer suggested.

"Bishop, I believe that you have a customer," Karen announced as she

took Aimee by the hand and led her over to Antonelli.

"How long has it been, my dear?" the Bishop asked.

"The last time I went to confession was...let's see. Jimmy Carter was President."

"This may take a while, Karen. If Father Currie is looking for me, please tell him ..."

"I'll tell him that you're showing mercy to my friend," Karen said.

"Thanks," Aimee said. "Save me a seat, Scott?"

"Right next to me, Aimee."

After Aimee and the Bishop left, Jennifer said, "Any more surprises? Anyone? Speak up now, for God's sakes don't leave us in suspense."

"No more from me, but I couldn't help but notice the pack of jackals camped outside," Scott said.

"The reporters are following me around," Karen said. "The Monsignor corralled them into a small area in the parking lot and told them to stay put or he'd have them escorted from the property."

"Still nothing from our friend Mr. Green? Silence is golden?" Jen asked.

"Whatever you guys did seems to be working. Rumors are flying, but they have nowhere to land. They asked me a few uncomfortable questions yesterday, but I danced around them."

Amanda reentered the room and said, "Joseph called me this morning. The man is a wreck, completely beside himself. You served him with divorce papers, Karen? You couldn't wait a few days, give him a chance to catch his breath?"

"Where is he?"

"Montreal."

"Good for him. Joe loves Quebec. If he can find some peace anywhere, it'll be there."

"How could you, Karen? Joe is the nicest man I've ever met and you just shit on him, threw him out like yesterday's trash."

"Amanda, it's not your place to judge other people's marriages," Tony Mancuso said sternly.

"Don't tell her that," Kendra said. "Amanda can say whatever she wants to, Tony. You're not her father."

"Kendra. Now is not the time," Scott chided.

"Oh yeah? I should just shut up and be the dutiful wife? Okay, honey, let me know when I have your permission to speak."

"You love Joseph, I know you do," Karen stated.

"Yes, very much," Amanda concurred.

"Then why don't you marry him? Me, I'm done pretending. Either you're in love with someone or you're not, Sweetie. And just so you know, I'm being merciful to Joe, as kind as I can possibly be to him, because I love him like a brother."

"Since when is it kind to be cruel?"

"I don't have to explain my actions to you, Amanda."

"Or to anyone else, or so it seems."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"When do you answer, Karen? When do you step up? My God! Two of the best men, the best people, I've ever known, you destroyed! Aren't you sorry at all about that!"

"Sweetie, I...what do you—."

"That's enough, Amanda. You need to back off."

"Give me a break, Jen. You treat men horribly, too. All a guy is to you is an ATM machine with a dick."

"What do you know about dick, carpet muncher?"

"Whoa, ladies. Come on now," Scott begged. "We're here to—."

"Stop it," Karen said softly, but she was heard. "Let's not do this, chew on each other like rats. There isn't a person in this room I don't love with all my heart."

"Love? What's that got to do wi—."

"Colin can see us, you know," Angie Mancuso said. "We're embarrassing him."

"We're all broken, hurting. Let me say what we're all thinking but don't want to admit; we feel betrayed. I absolutely feel betrayed. I don't understand how Colin could do this to us. I love him just as much as I always did, but I'm mad as hell at him."

"You know what, Tiny? You're right. I think I've been scared to say it, like I shouldn't say it or something, but I feel like Colin just left me here all alone. How could he do that? What am I supposed to do now when I need him? Who will be there for me?"

"Amanda, Tony and I will always be there for you, honey," Angie said.

"I know, but it's...you're not Colin."

"No one can be," Jennifer agreed. "He was irreplaceable. You guys don't know how many times I woke him up in the middle of the night balling my eyes out like a little kid. He never once told me to call him back at a decent hour. He listened, he loved me, and to love me with all my faults...Amanda's right, I'm lost without him, too."

"What a blessing he was," Kendra said. "All of us were lucky to have known him."

"Why, Karen? Couldn't you have done something?" Amanda begged with tears in her eyes. "He loved you. Why couldn't you stop him?"

"I should have, Amanda. The hard, ugly truth of it is that I let him down. God forgive me."

"You guys all know how much I love my brother," Scott said. "So you know where my heart is when I say that we need to stop treating Colin like he was a Saint. So many people laid that weight on Colin, myself included. It was unfair to do that to him. The truth is he was a man, a man with strengths and weaknesses, like all of us. We have a right to be angry with him, he did let everyone in this

room down when he killed himself, but we shouldn't love him any less because we are all weak, struggling sinners.

"So stop it, Karen. Stop blaming yourself for his death. I told Aimee the same thing. No one killed Colin except Colin."

"Don't forget who actually killed him, honey," Kendra added.

"I don't follow, baby."

"Sure you do, you're just not thinking it through. The evil one got the best of Father Sullivan like he's been getting the best of us for the last few minutes. We can't let the bastard beat us, we just can't."

Karen looked upward, whispered to herself and said, "Okay. I'm listening now."

"Do you know what we've never done, all of us together, I mean?" Tony asked.

"What?" Amanda replied.

"Prayed. We've never prayed as a group, as one. Let's do it now."

"We're not all Catholic, Tony," Jen pointed out.

"You don't have to be Catholic to pray, Jen. Tony's right, what we need to do is pray together and stop all this petty bickering," Angie agreed.

"Scott, I'm not sure that I s—."

"Tom, you're in. We could use a Jew. You'll balance things out a little."

"Me too? You want me to pray?" Amanda asked.

"Why not? Are you afraid to pray with us? Embarrassed?"

"No, Tony. I...I like the idea."

"I'm in," Karen said.

"Someone should pray out loud, for all of us, I mean," Kendra offered.

"Tony."

"Yes, Tony should be the one."

"Why me?" Tony asked.

"Because you're the best person out of all of us, Tony. God listens to you," Amanda said.

"She's right," Scott agreed.

"You're the deacon," Tony pointed out.

"Pray, Tony. No more talking. Pray for us, please," Scott asked.

They joined hands and bowed their heads. As they did, each of them felt a little calmer, a bit less angry and more gracious.

"Lord," Tony Mancuso began, "we are together today to say goodbye to our brother Colin, Your good servant. Everyone here loves Father Sullivan and we will miss him. His death has left a void in our hearts that only You can fill, God, an emptiness that tempts us each to be bitter, to forget our love for each other. Help us Lord not to give into our fears and anger, but to rise above our flesh and our pain and see the miracle that is our lives through Your eyes and to trust in Your love always. Be with us Jesus on this stressful day and help us to honor our friend. Amen."

After Tony had finished his prayer, no one moved for a minute. Everyone

seemed to need a brief period of silence for reflection, for a touch of healing before they moved on to face their ordeal.

Eventually Karen said, "Tony that was truly beautiful. If you don't mind, would you write that prayer down for me? I'd like to keep it forever, to read it when I need help."

"Please?" Amanda asked. "I'd like to have it too, Tiny. It's an amazing prayer."

"I'm sorry," Tony said, as he looked at his friends. "I don't think that I can do that."

"Why not?" Jen asked. "It's not that long. I remember most of it."

"I only remember saying, 'Amen'"

"Come on, Tony. Quit kidding around."

"Jen, I wouldn't joke about a prayer, especially not that one."

"It's okay, Tony. I think you're just too keyed up right now. You'll remember later. No worries, hon," Jen said.

"Colin," Karen said.

"What about Colin?" Scott asked.

"It was him. He's here."

"Sure he is, honey. We all know that he—."

"No, Jen. I mean he is really here with us. Present right now. He whispered that prayer in Tony's ear."

"Karen, don't go too far, it's easy to—."

"Why have I been so blind?" Karen murmured to herself as she dropped, more than sat, on a sofa. She was doing her best to hold it together, but she was losing the battle. Any second now Karen was certain that she would start crying and never stop.

Chapter Thirty

"Freaked yet?"

"Getting there."

"Where did...who are all these people? I mean, Colin hasn't lived in Vegas for thirty years."

Jennifer and Amanda were acting as unofficial gatekeepers for Colin's funeral Mass. They stood outside the main entrance greeting those they knew and directed traffic. An hour before the service was scheduled to begin, St. Viator's church was already filled beyond capacity, but the only people turned away were those with a video camera and a bad attitude.

"Well I'll be," Jennifer whispered to Amanda as she gestured to a man waiting his turn in line to come in, "I kinda had a crush on that guy. I haven't seen Roy Lewis since 1980."

"Roy," Jen said, with enthusiasm. "Roy Lewis. You look great."

"Jennifer Righetti...is it still Righetti?"

"Never took the plunge."

"Not for lack of offers, I'm sure. I'm sorry that we have to see each other again under such trying circumstances."

"I know but, hey, give me the highlight film, the Roy Lewis story."

"Okay, well...it's Dr. Roy Lewis for starters."

"Doctor of?"

"Dentistry."

"No kidding. Wife, children, dog, mortgage, I assume?"

"No, well, that used to be my life."

"Sorry to hear that, Roy. How long have you been divorced?"

"Oh no, I'm not divorced. Debra and my sons were killed in a car accident six years ago."

"Roy, my God. Forgive me, I had no idea."

"It's alright. I'm long past the shock phase."

"You kept in touch with Colin over the years?"

"No, but when I lost my family he found me."

"How?"

"Scotty. Can you believe it? Armour keeps a current list of phone numbers and addresses for everyone on our high school baseball team. Who does that after four decades?"

"Scott is one of a kind."

"Colin made a special effort to come and see me in San Diego. He went to the funeral. I didn't even know that he was a priest before he called and told me. I'm not Catholic either. I've never been a particularly religious person."

"He did things like that."

"So I'm told. Anyway, Colin brought me real comfort, peace, during the worst days of my life. I just can't believe that he killed himself. Did you stay in

contact with Colin?"

"We've always been close."

"I just wanted to come and pay my respects. Colin was a very kind man. Best baseball pitcher I've ever seen, too."

"Let's talk later."

"Love to, Jennifer. Hello, Amanda."

"Hi, Roy. You're looking well."

"You too."

"Okay, now I'm getting a little freaked," Jen admitted softly to Amanda.

"Everyone here seems to have a story to tell, something Colin did for them or someone close to them."

"My funeral will be a little bit different. Not too many people want a lap dance from a corpse."

"If I'm alive, I'll be there. So will a lot of other people, Jen."

"Sweetie, I'm sorry for calling you that nasty name. Thanks for putting up with my foul mouth, hon. You know how much I love you."

"Hey, I've been called worse things than a carpet muncher."

"Ugh. I said that, didn't I?"

"I still have feelings for you, Jennifer."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Girlfriend, if I were so inclined I'd be the luckiest woman in the world. You're the best, Sweetie."

"Carol Lathuris?" Amanda called out. "Carol, my heavens you look so..."

"You weren't joking."

"No. You thought that I was?"

"Wasn't sure. You know that it will wag folks' tongues, fuel the rumor mill."

"I don't care, Scott," Karen said.

"Obviously."

"Does it bother you?"

"Not at all. Colin was your true husband. I know that better than anyone else. I have to ask, what's that on your left ring finger?"

"It's not Joe's."

"No kidding. I know what your wedding ring looks like, Karen."

"Before Colin went to prison he bought me this little diamond chip. It was my engagement ring, his promise that he would come back to me. See it, in the middle?" Karen said as she pointed to her ring.

"Barely. The large rocks around it are obstructing my view."

"Years ago, before I met Joesph, I had this ring made. Wow. It's been twenty years," Karen mused. "I used to put it on and wear it around the house when I imagined what it would be like to be married to Colin."

"The black dress, the wedding ring. You're a widow, that's what you're telling the world."

"I will not be denied my right to grieve for Colin as I chose. If someone objects, too bad."

"Is the ring going back in the box after the funeral?"

"It's never leaving my hand again. I'll be buried with it."

"Karen, honey, have you considered that maybe you're not in the best frame of mind to be making major decisions about your life?"

"Have you ever known me to be irrational, Scott?"

"No, never. Except when it pertains to Colin, then I'd say that you've always been completely nuts."

"If I were to tell you that God is trying to get my attention, that He is using Colin's death as a means to wake up my soul, would you believe me?"

"Perhaps. No, that's not what I meant. Karen, all of us, especially when we go through times of high stress and trial, are more inclined to listen to the Spirit. When we are weak, He is strong and all that. But prudence is a virtue for a reason, hon. Charging blindly ahead, groping in the dark for a way out when we're upset, can be dangerous. Reflecting on our inspiration and then acting slowly and wisely is usually best."

"You're worried about me."

"Damn straight I am."

"God, I'm so lucky to have you in my life, brother."

"Karen, I could—."

"I just can't live another day as a liar, Scotty. I just can't."

"Your life isn't a lie, Karen. How could you believe such a thing?"

"It isn't?"

"No, it isn't."

"Would I be the Governor today if I'd told the truth back in '78?"

"Wait a min—. "

"Was Colin meant for me, weren't we meant to be together?"

"Go on, finish."

"Didn't I lie to a great man, told him that I was in love with him, promised to be his wife until death do us part, knowing damn well that I could never truly be his wife?"

"That it?"

"Let's see, my career is a lie, my marriage is a lie, everything I've done is a lie."

"Can I say something now?"

"What is there left to say?"

"You are not a lie, Karen Foster. You are a caring, intelligent, beautiful woman who has spent her life serving others. In this world, an honest politician is a rare treasure, and I know that you have always worked hard to do the best you can for people, to help, to lead."

"As for Joe, hon, it's a fact that he was beyond well informed about you

and Colin. He took a chance, because he adores you, that he could erase Colin from your heart. As it turns out, that's impossible. So be it. We risk what we risk when chose to give ourselves to someone else – we may end up broken and alone. But you did not deceive him nearly as much as you think you did.

"I don't know what to tell you about Colin. Over the years I've gone back and forth on this; what he should do, what you should do, what's the right thing to do.

"I keep returning to the truth though Karen, to reality. Father Sullivan was a priest, a servant of Christ. Like you, he was at his best when he was helping other people. Have you looked out there? Inside the church?"

"No. I've been avoiding it, hoping that if I don't look maybe this nightmare isn't real."

"Look now. Go on, take a peek through the door."

Karen did and said, "Holy Mother of God."

"Yea, I'd say. We've still got thirty minutes to go before Mass and the pews are packed, aren't they."

"Every seat."

"What does that tell you?"

"So many people loved Colin. He was a blessing to everyone he knew."

"I think, Karen, that perhaps people like Colin aren't meant to belong to one person, that God wants to share them with everyone."

"Funny, someone else just told me that."

"Who?"

"My mother."

"Let Colin go today, Karen. You've got half your life left to live, don't waste it wallowing in regret and bitterness over what might or what should have been."

"You're right, Scott. In part."

"This is new. I'm encouraged."

"I can't afford to waste even one more minute of my life. Colin always said that we don't own our lives, that our very breath is a gift from God."

"We're renters, stewards, of our lives, not owners."

"Because God made us, we did not create ourselves."

"You sound quite Catholic, Karen Foster."

"That surprises you?"

"It pleases me."

"You're wrong though about me needing to let go of Colin. I need to get closer to him, not farther away."

"He's dead, honey. A dead man can't keep your feet warm at night, or hold your hand, or show you love."

"I'm through with romance, Scotty. Done. It's pointless. God doesn't make better men than Joe Hunt. If I can't fall in love with him, be a good and faithful wife to him, then I should learn my lesson and move on."

"Celibacy?"

"I've thought about that option, but I'm not a nun. I cannot even imagine

being intimate with a man again but hey, who knows? As long as he doesn't fall in love or try and marry me...I'm not dead inside Scott, but I will not pursue a relationship with a man, casual or otherwise."

"You've never needed to, that's for sure. Men are after you twenty-four seven."

"Maybe less so now, honey. I'm fast becoming an old maid."

"Old maid," Scott lovingly mocked. "A smoking hot old maid."

"I have this sense, Scotty, a growing awareness that God wants me to do something, something for Him. Does that sound nuts?"

"No, not at all. I get that big time. What is it that He wants you to do?"

"I haven't a clue, but I think that I might know soon."

"Now that's a prudent attitude. Wait on God, then follow His lead."

"But getting a divorce, leaving the statehouse, grieving as Colin's widow, disposing of the things in my life created and sustained by lies, these are things that must be done now, not later."

"You're sure?"

"Completely."

"Then I fully support you and what you're doing. But I still worry about you."

"That's your job, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I need you today, Scott. Like I've never needed you before."

"I'm there for you, honey. Always."

"Tell Kendra that I'm borrowing you for a while."

"She knows. It only took thirty years, but she finally gets it. You scare the hell out of women. They're convinced that you're out to steal their men until they get to know you."

"Women are shallow, insecure creatures, Scotty. The only thing that saves us is our anatomy. You fellas can't get enough T&A."

"So true. Sad, but true."

"Keep telling me jokes, Scott. Anything to distr—."

"Oh, forgive me for interrupting," Father Currie said as he walked up from behind Scott and Karen. "It's time. We should take our places."

"I'm not sure that I can do this, Scotty. Tell me that I'll make it, that I won't die from grief."

"I'm with you, Karen. We're all with you. With God's help, that will be enough."

"What happens now?" Jennifer asked.

"They start the Mass from the front of the church, at the entrance," Angie explained. "It's called a procession."

"What do we do?"

"Oh shoot, I forgot to give you a program. Sorry."

"Will you show me what to do? I've been to Mass before, but I don't know when to kneel and when to stand and all that."

"No problem. Don't worry."

"I can't believe that he's gone."

"I know. Look at Colin. He's torn up, Jen. It breaks my heart."

"You have a beautiful boy, honey. Inside and out."

"Talk with him, will you please? He listens to you, values your opinion."

"Of course I will but, I mean, so many other people would be better suited to—."

"He has always looked up to you. Gorgeous Aunt Jennifer, superwoman. You've helped us raise him, you know that, don't you?"

"What a nice thing to say. Thanks, Angie."

"It may be nice, but it's also true. You have always been there to back us up, to help us teach him right from wrong. Important life lessons, coming from you, have an impact."

"I love all of your boys."

"We know, but Colin is special."

"Yes, he is. There is something about him that's unique, always has been. Amanda says that he has a powerful, bright aura, whatever that means."

"He's an emotional young man. Wears his heart on his sleeve."

"Yea, we've had a few talks on that subject. He needs to be careful who he opens up to because a lot of lions look like lambs. Trust God, your family and a few close friends. Be wary of flattering strangers, I tell him."

"See? That's what I'm talking about. Advice like that coming from you is priceless. You have a unique type of credibility."

"I'm a gristled veteran of the school of hard knocks."

"You're a smart lady with a bigger heart than you give yourself credit for and our dear friend."

"Hey, if I lose it today, please help me. Pick me up off of the floor and remind me that in some other universe all of this makes sense."

"I've got your—."

Angela Mancuso was cut short by the deacon shouting, "Please stand."

Then Father Currie said, "Lord, you raised Lazarus from the dead, forgive our brother and give him a resting-place in peace."

"Okay, Jen, we say this now," Angela instructed.

The assembled all said, "Give him eternal rest, O Lord, and may Your light shine upon him forever, forgive our brother and give him a resting-place in peace."

As the organist played a hymn, Father Currie led the procession towards the altar and Colin's coffin. A deacon, one of three serving the Mass, carried the paschal candle, the symbol of the risen Christ. Another held an ornate gold crucifix borrowed from St. Thomas' church.

When the procession reached the altar, Father Currie and the deacons

stopped, turned and faced the congregation. The Bishop then joined them and stood by the priest.

Father Currie said, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

The people responded, "And with your spirit."

Father continued, "I bless the body of Father Colin Sullivan with holy water that recalls his baptism of which St. Paul writes; All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death. By baptism into His death we were buried together with Him, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might have new life. For if we have been united with Him by likeness to His death, so shall we be united with Him by likeness to His resurrection."

The deacons then placed the gold cross on Colin's coffin and also a white pall, in remembrance of the baptismal garment. Bishop Antonelli then said, "On the day of his baptism, Colin Sullivan put on Christ. In the day of Christ's coming, may he be clothed with glory."

"If I choke up, forgive me," Kendra Armour whispered to her husband as she rose to walk to the amble.

"I love you, baby. Do your best," Scott whispered back.

Kendra opened the large Bible on the amble which was marked by a ribbon to the book of Daniel, twelfth chapter. She began to read, "At that time there shall arise Michael, the great prince, guardian of your people; It shall be a time unsurpassed in distress since nations began until that time. At that time your people shall escape, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; Some shall live forever, others shall be an everlasting horror and disgrace. But the wise shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament, and those who lead the many to justice shall be like the stars forever."

"Karen, look around you," Scott whispered. "What do you see?"

"I see many whom Colin has led to justice."

"Then don't worry about him, honey. I know that Colin rests in peace with the Lord."

"That's my hope, but I can't live anymore just on hope. I have to act, Scott. I must atone for my sins."

Now it was Angela's turn to read from the Book. Speaking from the amble she said, "From the book of Romans, chapter fourteen. 'None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For this is why Christ died and came to life, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living'."

"Colin always belonged to God, Scott. I was selfish to try and keep him for myself. He's dead because of my selfishness," Karen whispered to Scott.

"He's dead because, like all of us, he wasn't immune to temptation."

"You know who I am? Jezebel, Bathsheba, Delilah. A destroyer of men, a

succubus."

"You're no such thing, Karen. Don't let the devil or the world tell you who you are, that honor is Christ's alone."

Tony Mancuso gave the final liturgical reading. "From the second book of Timothy, second chapter. 'Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David: such is my gospel, for which I am suffering, even to the point of chains, like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. Therefore, I bear with everything for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, together with eternal glory. This saying is trustworthy: If we have died with Him, we shall also live with Him; If we persevere we shall also reign with Him; But if we deny Him, He will deny us; If we are unfaithful, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself'."

"Live with Him, Karen. Persevere. Be faithful to His call for your life."

"I will be faithful, Scott. I'm not Colin, or you, I don't have a whole lot of religious zeal, but I'm not senseless. I believe that God will make a way for me now, a path to follow."

"He will do that, honey. I know He will."

"I love you, Scotty. Thanks for being my brother."

"It's an honor, Karen."

"I've been fortunate to know and work with many priests over the years," Father Currie said, beginning his brief homily. "While I count them all like brothers, only a few do I consider to be my friends; men with whom I enjoy both praying and sharing a beer with, men who can make me laugh, men who challenge me to be a better person, a more faithful Catholic, a stronger and more efficient priest."

"Father Sullivan was my best friend. Unlike most of you, I don't have many friends. Losing Colin is terrible for me, I'm in lots of pain."

"But I am reminded of what St. Peter said, that our lives are like a vapor, a wave tossed in the sea. We exist here in this rebel world trapped in these fragile bodies, hopefully doing our best to serve God as He gives us the strength and wisdom to do. Often we fail, come up short, in our eyes and in God's."

"I testify to you today, my brothers and sisters, that Jesus Christ lives, that He has conquered death for us all. My hope in the resurrection and eternal life is certain."

"Colin, rest in peace, my friend. Your life is a beautiful legacy, an example for us all of what a priest should be; Jesus Christ to his flock. May the Lord forgive and forget how you left us and always remember your devotion to His Holy Church and to others, freely given in a lifetime of service to God's people."

"Please God, I'll see you in Heaven."

"Scotty, I'm not going to...I don't know if I..." Tears were streaming down Karen's face now, puddling in her lap. The color was completely gone from her skin. She looked and felt fragile and helpless, like someone enduring torture."

"Hold my hand, honey," Scott said.

Sitting on the other side of Karen, Tony Mancuso said, "Mine too. Lean on

us."

"Oh God, help me. This is too hard. I can't do it."

"Yes, you can. We are with you," Tony said.

"Colin is with you too now, Karen. No one can take him away from you ever again," Scott reassured.

"Your son?" Karen asked.

"Yes. That's okay, isn't it?" Tony asked.

"Of course, honey. Don't let go of me, either of you."

Colin Mancuso was barely nineteen years old, a recent graduate of Bishop Gorman High School in Las Vegas. Physically he resembled his father, except for the weight. Colin stood six foot three and weighed a very trim two hundred and ten pounds. Like his father he was an outstanding athlete, but not a football player; Colin was a tennis star. He was taking some time after graduation, working for his Uncle Scott at Catholic Charities, deciding between a future of training for the priesthood at a seminary or a full ride athletic scholarship to UCLA.

Colin and Father Sullivan had a special relationship. In many ways, young Colin had two dads – both dedicated to his welfare, both fully committed to helping him become a good Catholic man.

"I am Colin Mancuso. I was named after Father Sullivan, whom we are saying goodbye to today. I'm nervous and very upset, so please forgive me if I stumble a bit.

"I've thought a lot about Father since his death. I asked my dad if it was okay to say this, he said that it was and I need to so I will; I'm mad, angry as hell at Father for killing himself. But I don't want to stay mad at Father because I love him so much. I miss him in the worst way. It sucks, it's horrible, that I can never talk with him or see him again. I'm trying to make some sense out of all this, but I can't, I don't know how.

"For as long as I can remember, Father has been both my priest and my uncle. When I was little, he used to come to Vegas and spend the weekend with us once every few months. Father was a great listener. We would sit and talk for hours, long after mom and pop and my brothers had gone to bed. He taught me about God, about His Holy Church, about what it meant to be a good man.

"I could tell my uncle anything, share all of my secrets with him without fear. Always he would gently lead me back to the "right path", as he called it, toward the 'Christian life'. Uncle Colin had this way of being able to teach you a lesson without judging or condemning you.

"When I was ten I stole a six pack of soda from the market. It was stupid, I did it because my friends dared me to and I didn't want to be called a 'chicken'. The store manager knew my dad because he'd just become the head football coach at UNLV.

"Pop was Pop, he's always been the best father in the world. He said all the right things to me, took me to confession, made sure that I did my penance, which was cleaning out the trash bins in the back of the store every night for two

weeks. I learned my lesson. But Father Sullivan used this incident to teach me much more.

"Later Pop told me that they were planning to do it anyway, not just for me but for all my younger brothers when we reached ten or twelve or so, but at the time I was told only that after school ended in June I was going to San Francisco to 'spend some time with Father Sullivan'. I thought that it was some kind of punishment, but it was a great blessing, not a punishment.

"My first night in San Francisco, Father took me to a Giants game; we talked, ate cookies until two a.m., had a blast. The next morning Father brought me to the St. Francis Mission. Now, I'm ten, almost eleven. Just a little kid. I'd never seen a large group of homeless people before, much less spent any time with them. He told me that it was my job to sweep and mop the kitchen floors, take out the trash and clean the restrooms at the mission.

"I was upset, mad and scared. The people at the shelter frightened me – they smelled bad, looked rough, used foul language. There were children at the shelter too, and they scared me even more than the adults did.

"With tears in my eyes, I grabbed Father and begged him to take me away from this nasty place. I swore that I would never steal anything again as long as I lived, that I'd learned my lesson.

"I'll never..." Colin had to stop for a second, wipe his eyes and catch his breath, "I'll never, ever forget what he said to me next. Father said, 'You're not being punished, son. You're dad and I decided that it was time you met Jesus Christ'. I told him that I'd already done First Holy Communion, that I went to catechism every week, that I knew all about the Lord.

"Then Father said, 'No, Colin. To actually meet Christ you have to do more than go to Mass and take the sacraments. He expects you to seek Him in the eyes of the poor, for that is where He lives, with the desperate'.

"It was rough at first, but after a week or so at the mission, I was being guarded every second by a deacon, but I thought that he was a homeless guy, not a deacon, I started to see, to understand, what Father was trying to teach me. Despite the filth, the horrible smell, the cursing, they were beautiful people. I found that I enjoyed helping them, being their servant. I thanked God every night for my parents and appreciated in a very profound way how lucky I was to have them, to be loved and cared for by two terrific people.

"Father and I talked for hours most nights. I bunked with him and slept on a cot in his small apartment. I think those were the happiest days of my life. While I wanted to go home after a month or so because I missed my mom and pop and my brothers so much, I knew that I would also miss Father and 'Christ's children', as Father often called the people who came to the mission.

"I went back to St. Francis and served there every summer for seven years. I loved the experience. Not all of my brothers did, for sure, but they did learn something. The most important lesson we all learned was the one St. Francis is most famous for teaching, 'Preach the gospel always. Use words when absolutely necessary'.

"That is the Father Sullivan I knew; the firm yet gentle person with a huge heart for the less fortunate. I never met the Father Sullivan who was troubled enough to take his own life. Or did I? He must have been there all along, too embarrassed or afraid to show his face to me.

"Father," Colin said, as he removed his gaze from the congregation and put it on Colin's casket, "I forgive you. I'm sorry that I couldn't...that you wouldn't...that you didn't...Sorry, give me a second please." Colin stopped and wiped his eyes with his sleeve and drank a sip of water.

"I want you to know, Father, that I've made my decision. I want to be a priest. Pop's influence was significant, but I want to be a priest mostly because of you. God needs His servants, as you told me many times. I'm ready to serve, Father.

"Please God, take your son, Father Sullivan, and cradle him in Your loving arms for all eternity."

After Colin had finished his eulogy, the church went completely silent except for the sounds of weeping and sniffing. Colin slowly walked away from the amble and into his mother's arms, then into his father's embrace. Then he moved to Karen, took her hand and whispered, "Please don't be mad at Uncle Colin. He's sorry that he hurt you, Aunt Karen. More than anything, he wants you to forgive him."

"Oh, Colin. Son, I'm so proud of you," Karen managed to eke out between her tears. "I forgive him, I truly do. Pray that he forgives me."

"He did, Aunt Karen. Long ago."

"Be a good priest, Colin. Draw strength from your uncle."

"I will. I love you, Aunt Karen."

"I love you too, son."

While Colin was hugging his parents and Karen, Tina Ferro made her way to the amble. She wore a conservatively styled, loose fitting purple dress and plain, flat shoes. Her long, brunette hair was wrapped tightly in a bun. Despite her best efforts, there was no hiding her perfect body and striking 'Playboy Bunny' appearance. She looked like a movie star who was trying to blend in with the crowd and not having much success.

"Ten years ago I was lost. I was a zombie walking the earth completely ruled by my disordered flesh. I weighed barely a hundred pounds because I refused to eat or take care of myself. To feed my coke habit, I'd do anything; sell myself to men or women, deal drugs, steal.

"I had a friend who danced at Ms. Righetti's place, The Panther Club in LA. Billie, my friend, she wasn't like me. She looked at dancing as a job, not a lifestyle. She was raising three kids on her own, so she didn't do drugs or mess around.

"Billie said that I should ask Ms. Righetti for a job, but she told me up front that Ms. Righetti didn't tolerate b.s. like drugs or prostitution in her club. If I wanted to work for her, I had to play it straight.

"So I marched into Ms. Righetti's office, half sober and all cleaned up,

prepared to give her some song and dance, say whatever I had to say to get the job. Girls, back then, could make a grand a night or better dancing in her club. Even though I was too thin, I knew that I was pretty enough to work there.

"We hadn't talked for more than five minutes when Ms. Righetti said, 'You're in trouble, Tina. I'm not stupid, so please quit lying to me'. For a moment, and only for a moment, I tried to play dumb, act insulted, but before Ms. Righetti could throw me out, I broke down. I lost it, folded my hand right then and there in her office. I told Ms. Righetti the truth about my desperate condition, all the ugliness and pain, although at the time I wasn't really sure why I did.

"She didn't give me a job, of course, but she gave me five hundred bucks and a plane ticket to San Francisco. She said, 'You need to go see Father Sullivan. I'll tell him to expect you tomorrow'. Ms. Righetti also said, 'If you don't go to him, you might as well just drive yourself to the cemetery, fall in a grave and let someone bury you'.

"I spent the five hundred bucks on nose candy and stayed up all night on a runner. One last binge, as it turns out. I woke up in some strange man's apartment at seven a.m. I had no intention of going to San Francisco; rather, I was looking for the guy's wallet to steal from him and buy some more coke, find another party.

"But something stopped me. In my jeans, I found the plane ticket Ms. Righetti had printed out for me. I looked at, said something to myself like, 'What the hell', left the apartment and took a cab to the airport.

"I remember feeling something tugging at me as I walked into St. Thomas' church. I felt, in some bizarre way, like I was home. Safe. For the first time in weeks, I felt hungry. It was the beginning of my miracle.

"Now, anyone, any woman, will tell you that Father Sullivan was a very handsome man. The first time that I saw him, that day in the church, I remember thinking, 'Wow. He's a priest? I wonder if he fools around?' I was so blind back then, so entrapped in my sin. I thought all men were like the ones I knew, selfish, shallow cretins that only wanted use me for their pleasure.

"He took me by the hand and led me to the Holy Water. He sprinkled some on me and blessed me. We prayed together. He did not withhold his affection, but it wasn't sexual. When Father hugged me or patted me on the shoulder it was comforting, not threatening or enticing.

"Father took me to get something to eat, then we went to see Judy Wallace. Ms. Wallace was Father's connection to the world of shattered and abused women. He told me that I was going to stay with her, work for her while he ministered to me. Ms. Wallace's shelter was only a few blocks away from St. Thomas' church.

"I thought, okay, I'll stay for a few days. Father had this way about him – it was hard to disobey him. His love was credible. I knew from the moment that I met him that I could trust him. Ms. Wallace too.

"Every day Father would come and see me. Lord knows how he managed to find the time; I've never met anyone busier than Father Sullivan. We talked,

went for food, hung out. He didn't even mention God for a couple of weeks or preach to me in any way. Father said to me later, 'I've learned with troubled women that first I have to prove to them that I'm their friend before I can minister to them'.

"When the time was right I was hungry for the Word. Father shared the Gospel with me and, gradually, I opened my heart to the Lord.

"A year later I was a baptized and confirmed Roman Catholic, a brand new person, free from my sins. I stayed in San Francisco and studied to be a court reporter. That's where I met Randy, my husband, who is a San Francisco policeman. We have a beautiful daughter, Jessica, who turns five later this month. Father Sullivan baptized her.

"It wasn't long before I realized that Ms. Righetti and Father had this 'arrangement'. From time to time Ms. Righetti sent him women who were in desperate, terrible shape as I was. Now, not every girl was smart enough to open her heart to Father, to let him help her but, surprisingly, many did. Dozens of women over the years were saved from an early grave, or at least from a life of degradation, because Father, and Ms. Righetti, cared. Now I can pull my own weight. I have become the rescuer. I preach Christ to my sisters in need.

"I love and respect my husband, Randy Ferro. He is my knight in shining armor, but I told Randy when we got serious about each other that my first true love was Father Sullivan. I liked Father, too. He was funny, charming, always upbeat. Father was very easy to be around because he was so sincere, so committed to his work, so humble. He taught me that it was okay, it was safe to love. He taught me about boundaries, morals, why living like a godless pagan was the worst form of human slavery. He gave me a new faith in men, that it was possible to trust them if they were sincere Christians.

"To tell you all the truth, I expected one day to see Father walk across the bay to Oakland or turn tap water into Chardonnay.

"But I was wrong. Many of us were wrong. Not about Father's qualities, he was a rare and beautiful person, but we were wrong to assume that he didn't hurt inside, too. He needed to be loved; the giver also needed to receive. How did I miss that? Over the past few days I've asked myself, how could I possibly have been so blind, so selfish, as to miss that?

"I should have reached out to him more, asked him how he was feeling, how his day was going, rather than always drone on to Father about my troubles, my struggle. While he hid it from us, the truth was that Father was a human being, not an angel.

"Forgive me, Father, forgive me for not insisting that you share with us what we shared with you, our weaknesses. I assumed, because I chose to, that you were above all that, a super human. That was wrong, terribly wrong.

"I owe you everything. Because you cared, I have Randy and Jessie. My life is filled with joy, hope and love thanks to you.

"We love you. Rest in peace.

"Please God, if You can look past my many sins, allow me to see

Father Sullivan someday in Heaven.”

Now everyone in St. Viator's was weeping without shame. The church echoed with the sounds of mourning.

“It's my turn, honey.”

Karen didn't answer Scott, she couldn't. All she could do was gently squeeze his hand as he rose to speak.

“I love Colin Sullivan as much as it is possible for one man to love another. We've been best friends since the sixth grade, but more than friends, much more. He is my brother, my family. It is impossible for me to imagine life without him. His death is a tragedy, a loss for everyone except, please God, for him.

“I've never met a more honest or a more empathic human being. Colin was capable of giving extraordinary amounts of himself as an athlete, as a man, as a priest. C.S. Lewis calls Christianity the 'good infection', and I suppose that's what Father Sullivan was more than anything else, a carrier of that 'good infection', a conduit through which God's grace flowed freely.

“When we were thirteen, still playing Little League ball, there was this kid, Miguel. Miguel Guerrero. His family crawled onto a raft one day, all ten of them, and paddled all the way from Cuba to South Florida searching for a better life. Eventually, they ended up in Vegas because that's where the jobs were in the early 70s. Back then no one asked too many questions about Latin illegals: the casinos put them to work and they just blended in with the community. When I met him, Miguel was about four feet nothin' and weighed a hundred pounds after a big meal. He spoke almost no English. But he loved baseball. Colin was already a playground legend and taller and stronger than most kids. Miguel started following Colin around like a puppy at the park, begging him constantly to teach him how to play ball, especially how to pitch.

“Being smart ass little kids, we naturally rode the crap out of poor Miguel, made fun of his accent, picked on him a bit because he was so small and different. Around us, his pals, Colin didn't say much about it – he never teased Miguel, but he didn't tell us to stop either.

“One day I couldn't find Colin. It was mid-week, a Tuesday as I recall, and I wanted to ride bikes or shot BB guns or something, but Colin was AWOL. That was odd because we always did everything together. I was kinda steamed, so I decided to ride my bike to Sunset Park, which was a fair distance from my house, at least five miles. There, at least I could find some fun solo.

“When I got there I noticed two kids playing ball on the back practice diamond. We had a tire set up there to throw baseballs through, a makeshift batting cage, bags of shag balls, that sort of stuff. It was Colin, he was teaching Miguel how to pitch.

“Now, at first, I was hot. My best friend ditched me for a little pissant like Miguel? I peddled as fast as I could, I was going to let Colin have it alright, tell him off but good.

“He saw me ride up and throw my bike down in anger. Before I could say anything Colin said, ‘Hey, Scotty. I was just coming to find you. Miguel needs a

hitting coach. That's your department'. Miguel looked over at me and, I swear I'll never forget this, he had a smile a mile wide. His little face was all lit up like it was Christmas morning.

"That winter on every Tuesday afternoon, most Thursdays too, Colin and I coached Miguel. We didn't tell a soul, it was our secret. The little guy got better fast, much better. Turned out to be a real good second baseman, so good in fact that five years later he got a scholarship to play ball at Arizona State. Now he's, well, Miguel, why don't you stand up and say hello to everyone."

In the back of the church, a Hispanic man stood and waved to Scott.

"How many children do you have, Miguel?"

"Seven, Mr. Scott."

"Tell all of us what you do for a living, Miguel."

"I coach baseball at St. Michael's High School in Phoenix."

"God bless you, Miguel."

"God bless you too, Mr. Scott."

"We were thirteen, seventh graders. Colin and I went to catechism, we were altar boys, but by no means were we 'church kids' back then, just average Joes. We didn't even go to a Catholic high school because, in those days, Bishop Gorman didn't have a strong athletics program.

"But Colin was never 'average' as a boy, or as a man. He always had a heart for others and a desire to serve. I know now what it was, he opened himself to Christ. Doing that was as natural to him as breathing is to the rest of us. I am in awe of his gifts and abilities, I always have been.

"In 1986, after a year of trying, Kendra and I went to the doctor to see why she wasn't getting pregnant. She was all right, but the doc told me that I was sterile, that I could never be a father. No news, until last week when I was told of Colin's suicide, ever hit me so hard. My whole life all I ever wanted was a large family. Kendra too. I felt like I had cheated my wife out of the life I promised her. I felt like a failure, a loser, cursed by God for my sins.

"As it turns out, no coincidence, of course, thank you Jesus, it was September when I got the news, the very day that we left San Diego for a three-game series against the Giants in San Francisco.

"I cried like a little girl, something none of you will ever see me do. From that day until last week I never cried again. For a couple of days, Colin didn't offer answers or solutions, only solace. His sense of timing, emotional and spiritual timing, was precise, as usual.

"Then he said to me, 'God does not promise us good health, success in life, a happy marriage, children, or anything other than trials and salvation. It is up to Him to decide which challenges we must face to become what He wants us to be. We think we know what we need, what we want, but He is in charge, not us. Our struggle for control is an illusion, a trap. The only solution is to increase our faith, know that a loving God rules our lives, and accept His will'.

"I needed to hear that message, at that very moment, exactly how he expressed it. When Colin told me that God loved me, I believed him, mostly

because I knew that Colin loved me.

"Many of us here today were directly touched by Father Sullivan's passion for his fellow man. He changed more lives for the better, brought more people to Christ, than anyone else I've ever known.

"But Colin's suicide should be an alarm bell for us all, a jolt to our souls. Great goodness does not shield us from evil, in fact just the opposite – the enemy comes in force against his strongest adversaries. We are at war, brothers and sisters. The destroyer of men lurks like a lion, seeking souls to devour, as St. Peter warned us.

"Father Sullivan could forgive everyone but himself. He should have, he was commanded by our God to do so. As far as I know, this is the only command from God that Colin did not heed. It was his undoing. Satan stole our brother from us long before his time by using Colin's one weakness against him.

"Don't let the devil do that to you, brothers and sisters. Know our enemy. If he can tempt Colin, then you can be tempted, too.

"All I ever wanted for you, my brother, was peace. With complete surety, I know that you have it, that you are Christ's treasure and that you have returned to Him who created you.

"I will miss you every minute of every day until I too am called home. Pray for me, Colin, I desperately need your help. I don't have your talents, your skills, your always willing heart. Please help me to guard and cherish the blessings God has given me, especially my wife, Kendra. Help me to serve and protect our friends who we both love so much.

"I wish that you would have stopped and realized the plain, simple truth that you were a success, Colin. So much of the seed you spread fell on good ground. You failed no one except perhaps yourself. Your children in Christ are here with me today, Father Sullivan, to say goodbye and to celebrate your life.

"Please God, see to it that Colin rests in peace with the saints and the angels until that glorious day when all who believe in Christ shall rise and live forever with Him in the New Jerusalem. Amen."

A hush fell over the church. The cumulative effect of four heartfelt, impassioned eulogies drew everyone into a few moments of calm reflection.

"You okay, hon?" Scott whispered to Karen as he sat back down.

"No."

"What can I do?"

"Just don't let go," Karen said as she took hold of Scott's hand.

"Never, Karen. I'll never let go."

Bishop Antonelli and Father Currie then began the process of consecrating the host, preparing the Body and Blood of Christ for consumption by the faithful. Their prayers and chants provided a much needed short emotional respite from the eulogies and reminded the assembled that while they were at a funeral it was also a Mass. Christ was fully present.

"Honey, Tony and I are going to take communion. We'll only be gone for a few seconds."

"Okay."

"Would you like to come forward and receive a blessing, Karen?" Tony asked.

"Bishop Antonelli already took care of that, Tony. Thanks. I'll be alright."

As Scott and Tony rose to receive the Eucharist, Karen began to silently pray. Her petitions were made without conscious construction, as if someone else was praying with her, praying for her.

"God, please protect and bless Joseph. He's a great man. Send him a woman who will love and appreciate him, a true wife. Help me to be a good friend to him, if he'll let me, if that is Your will.

"Christ, I ask you not to hold Colin's suicide against him. If it is possible, I beg you to let his sin fall on me. Let me pay the price for his mistake, as Colin once paid the price in this life for mine. It's long past the time that I should carry my cross, Father. I know that I could have prevented Colin's death if I had not been so selfish. Help me to atone for my sins, to be a better person, to listen to You and follow Your lead.

"Thank you Lord for my friends. Without them I would be lost, hopeless. I love each of them very much. Watch over them Father, bless them always, bring them happiness and peace.

"Bless the people of Nevada. Please help them to forgive me for quitting on them. You know that I had nothing left to give. Bless Sam, help him to be a good Governor, help him to continue to be an honest man."

"We're back, Karen," Scott said as he sat down and took her hand in his.

"Now comes the hardest part."

"I know. We're here. Hold on."

Bishop Antonelli, Father Currie and the three deacons approached the coffin. The deacons incensed the coffin and Father Currie sprinkled it with Holy Water.

The Bishop turned, faced the people and said, "Before we part, let us take leave of our brother. May this last farewell express the depth of our love for him, ease our sadness and strengthen our hope. We know that one day we shall greet him with joy where the love of Christ, which overcomes all things, will destroy even death itself."

Father Currie chanted, "Saints of God, come to his aid!"

The assembled responded, "Receive his soul and present him to God the Most High."

Father Currie chanted, "May Christ, who called you, take you to Himself; may the angels lead you to Abraham's side."

The assembled responded, "Receive his soul and present him to God the Most High."

Father Currie chanted, "Give him eternal rest, O Lord, and may Your light shine on him forever."

The assembled responded, "Receive his soul and present him to God the Most High."

A few feet to the right of the coffin and the clergy, a chair and microphone had been set up. Sarah Towers came forward with her acoustic guitar, sat in the chair and said, "Years ago, on a very tragic day, much like this one, I stumbled into St. Thomas' church searching for answers. Completely spent, I collapsed in a pew. A few moments later I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I looked up and saw Father Sullivan's beautiful face. He held me there, tenderly, like he'd known me for years, for an hour while I wept.

"Then we talked, or rather I talked, he listened. I needed some hope because at that moment I was hopeless. The words he said to me aren't as important as the love he shared. He was Christ to me when I needed Him most.

"Today I have a full life. People tell me how talented I am, how pretty, how special. I have two Grammys, platinum albums, more money than I could ever spend.

"But if Father Sullivan hadn't been there for me on that one horrible day, the day that my parents and brothers were murdered, I wouldn't have made it. I would not be sitting here now with all of you.

"I'm not Catholic. I believe in God, but I don't go to church much. Most of the time the world baffles me.

"But I do understand, I know deep down, that Father Sullivan was a good man, a holy man, a friend of God. He was the real deal in a world of fakes. I'll miss him very much, as I know that all of you will, too.

"A couple of years ago, Father was singing this song when I came to visit him. While he could do many things well, Father couldn't 'carry a tune in a bucket', as grandpa used to say. We laughed about his tone deaf ear, and then I asked him what he liked about the song. He said, 'I hope that people will think these things about me when I'm gone'.

The song is '*Remember Me*' and was written by my friend Mark Schultz. This is for you, Father."

"Scotty, God help me, I'm..." Karen fell into Scotty's arms, shaking and sobbing, inconsolable.

Sarah sang, "*Remember me. In a Bible cracked and faded by the years. Remember me. In a sanctuary filled with silent prayer.*"

Jennifer silently prayed, "Goodbye, Colin. I love you. Please tell Kyle that I love him, and that I never forgot him."

Aimee silently prayed, "Forgive me, Colin. I'm so sorry. Help me to get sober, to be a good wife to Tom. I want to be a Catholic again, Father. Hug Kyle for me."

Tony Mancuso silently prayed, "Christ be with you, Father. Please help me when I ask you to pray for my family. Keep your love and protection on my Colin, help him to become a good priest."

Sarah sang the chorus, "*And age to age and heart to heart. Bound by grace and peace. Child of wonder, child of God. I've remembered you. Remember me.*"

Amanda silently prayed, "I pray to God that the universe gives you peace.

I love you so much, Colin, so much it hurts. You're the brother I never had and I'm lost without you."

Sarah sang, *"Remember me. When the color of the sunset fills the sky. Remember me when you pray and tears of joy fall from your eyes.*

"And age to age and heart to heart. Bound by grace and peace. Child of wonder, child of God. I've remembered you. Remember me."

As Sarah continued to sing, Karen whispered to Scott, "Please take me to the coffin."

"That's really not allowed, Karen. A funeral Mass has its—."

"Please, brother," Karen begged with her eyes more than her words.

"Yes, yes. I'll explain to...come on."

Scotty helped Karen to her feet, but he carried her more than she walked the few steps to the coffin. One of the deacons rose to stop Scott and Karen, but the Bishop intervened and gestured instructing the deacon to remain seated.

"...their Sunday school with smiles. Remember me. When there old enough to teach. Old enough to preach. Old enough to leave..."

"Baby," Karen whispered as she knelt before Colin's coffin, "I love you. I'm sorry that I failed you, but I just don't know how to let you go. I'm done trying to do that, baby. I'll never let go of you again.

"You told me when I married Joe that marriage meant that each partner in the sacrament vowed to do whatever they had to do to get the other into Heaven. You knew, I see that now, that I could not truly make that commitment to Joe because I had already committed my soul to you.

"I know now that I am responsible for getting you into Heaven. The Bishop, Scott, everyone believes that you're already there. I pray, with all my soul, with all my love, that they're right, but I promise you that I will live the rest of my life as if they are wrong as if your salvation depends on what I do.

"Help me, baby, help me to believe like you do, to love like you loved. Give me the strength to finish this life without you. Save a place for me by your side."

"I love you Karen, now and forever."

"Thanks, Scotty. I love you too. I'm done, please take me back to the pew."

Sarah had finished her song. The Bishop had paused the funeral rite to give Karen all the time she needed to pray beside Colin's coffin.

"Feel any better?" Scott asked as they sat down and Father Currie began the closing prayer.

"You know...I do, Scott. What you said to me was just what I needed to hear."

"What I said?"

"At the coffin, before we stood and came back to our seats."

"I didn't say anything to you, Karen. Not one word."

"I love you Karen, now and forever?"

"That's true, but I..."

"Colin."

Father Currie prayed, "With faith in Jesus Christ, we reverently bring the body of our brother to be buried in its human imperfection. Let us pray with confidence to God, who gives life to all things, that he will raise up this mortal body to the perfection and the company of the saints. May God give Father Sullivan a merciful judgement and forgive all of his sins. May Christ, the Good Shepherd, lead him Safely home to be at peace with God our Father. May he be happy forever with all the saints in the presence of the eternal King."