

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.