

INHERITANCE



Christine Sunderland

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The Trilogy
by
Christine Sunderland

Pilgrimage

Offerings

Inheritance

Prologue

Her great aunt had asked to be buried on a Sunday afternoon, “on resurrection day amidst the grapes,” and now, in the July heat, Victoria Elizabeth Nguyen watched six pallbearers lower the silver-lined casket into the rich soil of the Napa Valley. The burnished mahogany lid gleamed, and Victoria thought how she too was in that coffin, at least part of her. Brushing a long strand of hair from her face, she squinted in the bright light, and her lip quivered. She had loved her Aunt Elizabeth, and her aunt had loved her. Why wasn’t she here, now, when Victoria needed her most? Her body still ached.

Victoria touched the birthmark running over her nose, mourning the death of her aunt who had loved her the way she was. Elizabeth often proclaimed that her niece’s almond eyes and burgundy-black hair were like an ancient image of the Virgin Mary. “There’s no two ways about it,” she would say, holding Victoria’s face in her parched palms. “And as for the birthmark,” she would add with a dry but joyous laugh, “that’s the mark of God, so don’t you complain to me about it, young lady. And I want to see that pretty smile of yours.”

Now, before the grave, Victoria couldn’t smile. Her father, Andrew, looked sad as well, a dark cloud settling over his face as he stood beside her in his Vietnamese calm, eyes closed as though praying, brows pinched. He held her hand firmly, with assurance, but her mother Candice, a tense presence on her other side, her platinum hair expertly coifed and her Scandinavian skin protected by a wide-brimmed hat, sent waves of anxiety through her.

“*Unto Almighty God,*” the young priest read from his missal, “*we commend the soul of our sister departed, and we commit her body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust...*”

Victoria followed her father to the open grave and released a handful of earth onto the coffin. She glanced back at her mother, who looked toward a TV news van coming up the drive, and returned to her place between her parents. The priest continued his smooth soothing words as others filed past the grave, dropping their soil onto the lid. The earth fell, tapping the wood, keeping time, but her aunt was beyond time

now. Where *was* her Aunt Elizabeth? Was she anywhere at all? Although Victoria had not shared her aunt's beliefs, she refused to think that her aunt was really *gone*. How could she possibly think such a thing?

A warm breeze fluttered the parchment pages of the missal resting in the priest's palm, as he read, "*In sure and certain hope of the Resurrection unto eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; at whose coming in glorious majesty...*"

Candice muttered under her breath, and Victoria hoped her mother wouldn't make a scene. She inched closer to her father, whose stocky form and placid face, even his double chin, gave her comfort. At seventeen, she *wanted* to be more self-confident, more grown-up, but in her mother's presence she felt like a child. She couldn't control it. Candice was *so* beautiful and *so* assured. Victoria slipped her arm through her father's.

"...to judge the world, the earth and the sea shall give up their dead; and the corruptible bodies of those who sleep in him shall be changed..."

Candice shook her head, as though amazed anyone could say those words in this year, 2001, and walked toward the news van. She never missed a chance, Victoria thought, and the press always liked interviewing Senator Crawford-Nguyen.

Victoria glanced at her father for a cue. He bowed his head, ignoring her mother. Victoria did the same.

"...and made like unto his own glorious body; according to the mighty working whereby he is able to subdue all things unto himself..."

The large funeral gathering slowly dispersed. Car doors clapped the silence, and a light chatter fractured the hot air. A reporter, having concluded his interview with the senator, approached the priest, who waved him away. The elderly Elizabeth Crawford made news in death as she had in life. Victoria had seen her great aunt on TV only last month, the oldest praying protester in front of the Berkeley Free Clinic. A magazine show had interviewed her, thinking her eccentric, and she had launched into a fervent speech about "angel babies."

Victoria's father squeezed her hand and led her toward their Mercedes, where her mother waited. She slipped into the back seat, anticipating the inevitable fight.

Candice turned the key in the ignition and shook her head in apparent relief. "She's finally gone, and at ninety-six. Simply because she was a Crawford from old San Francisco society, she thought she could do as she pleased. She was *such* an embarrassment."

Her father glanced at her mother. "Candice, please show some

respect.”

“Respect? Where was *her* respect?” She gunned the car onto the road. “Giving the estate to Victoria’s firstborn, even bypassing my parents. What kind of a will is that? She was clearly senile. Our attorneys will have a field day.”

“It was the abortion,” her father said through his teeth. “She was really upset about Vicky’s abortion.”

Victoria swallowed hard, her throat dry.

Candice grunted. “As though a fourteen-year-old should have a child. A baby having a baby. The father was a child too—fifteen, I believe. At least *he* never found out. Elizabeth was out of her mind. She’s always been one of those reactionary Christians. They have little compassion for the poor who can’t afford children.” She spoke as though Victoria wasn’t there.

“She believed that life is sacred,” her father whispered, “and we’re not poor.”

Her mother gripped the wheel. “Why do you always take the other side?”

Victoria stared out the window, thinking of Danny and his Ford Mustang and the overlook and his groping hands and her immense desire to please him. Then her mother and her fury and the hospital steel and the wrenching regret, the loss, the tears. What had she done? The act still weighed upon her, thrusting her deep into the earth.

And now, what would she do?

As they followed the highway through the dry hills, she gazed with a needy hope at her father’s profile and wished the tense air could swallow them both. Still trembling from the last few days, she tried to quell the fear she could almost taste, the confusion, the unanswered question. That evening by the lake, nearly two weeks ago, replayed in her mind, over and over.



Victoria had run the lakeshore trail, her shoes tap-tapping the familiar path, as the late evening sun dropped toward the horizon. A Red-tailed Hawk soared above gnarled oaks and crickets chirped in the manzanita. *Only another mile or so...plenty of time before dark.*

The warm peace of the summer’s evening soothed her, and the

rhythmic motion of her legs' muscle memory lifted and carried her, making her a creature of power and drive. Her mother's critical glances, the laughter beneath her words, and in the end, the sure conclusion that she, Victoria, was a grave disappointment—these parameters of her life—receded as she bounded along the trail.

She had tried to be like her mother, so beautiful, blond, competent. But she would never be beautiful, not with her birthmark and her slanted eyes peering out like an owl's in mottled plumage. She had even tried to be blond, but the dye job when she was twelve gave her a hard look, and she returned to her natural black soon enough. Hoping to absorb her mother's competence, Victoria stood by her side at party fundraisers. She distributed flyers for Candice's run for the Senate. She copied Candice's clothes and smile, her firm handshake and way of taking charge. But Victoria sensed she only appeared ludicrous, like a dark mouse peeping out of its hole and finding a room full of cats.

Her father consoled her when he was sober and when he wasn't watching his own back. Victoria hated what her mother did to him, twisting his words into insults so that *he* became the cause of the argument, and once again Candice became the victim.

The trail looped back toward the lake, the home stretch. As she ran, her thoughts turned to her great aunt Elizabeth who, in spite of her age, had been her real mother, opening her heart and her home to her niece. Soon Victoria would once again visit the ranch in the vineyards, with its cherry-paneled library and dusty volumes of Dickens, Austen, and Eliot. There, in Augusts past, sitting in the window seat, turning the pages of C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, she followed Lucy through the wardrobe of furs and into Narnia, a world of witches and talking animals, a frozen land of eternal winter without Christmas. In the window alcove, with the sun slanting through the shutters, the fountain raining a dance on her ears and the deer lapping from the pond, she had fallen into Tolkien's *Hobbit* and traveled with Gandalf and Bilbo through an ordered universe, where good was good, evil was evil, and, in the end, good won. Victoria's summers in her great aunt's rambling old house had shaped her into a creature so different from her mother. She wondered if, someday, she could find her true self in that house, could learn who she really was.

As she ran the lakeside trail, she dreamed. Suddenly she heard a rustle in the bushes and sensed a large man behind her. She had no time to scream as he covered her mouth with a strong-smelling cloth and pulled her down. Her leg scraped the pavement, and she struggled for

the whistle in her pocket. The last thing she remembered was a powerful blow to the side of her head and her right ear ringing into darkness.



Victoria gazed out the window as the sedan took her farther and farther from her aunt's grave. She would know this week if a child had been conceived on that lakeside trail. She would face that then. "No use borrowing trouble," her aunt would have said. Victoria had not told her mother, who was in Washington. As usual, her father had mothered her through the days of pain and shock, filling out the sheriff's report and seeing to her doctor.

Her father would know what to do. When the time came, he would know.

Chapter One

San Francisco

*In Rama was there a voice heard,
lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted,
because they are not.*
Matthew 2:18

On a cold Sunday in San Francisco, Madeleine Seymour stood with her husband, Jack, as the organ sounded the recessional at Saint Thomas' Anglican Church. Father Michaels, robed in Advent purple, genuflected before the altar, turned, and followed the crucifer, acolytes, and deacon down the aisle to the double doors. As the December storm battered the skylights, Madeleine and Jack sang with the others, "O come, O come, Emmanuel...."

Once again, beneath the white Romanesque vaults, the Mass had been offered, the Body and Blood of Christ had nourished their own bodies, and Madeleine was thankful for this moment, when time became eternity, when her middle-aged flesh could fly with the angels. The last chorus of the hymn ending, she dropped to the soft leather kneeler for a final prayer as an acolyte returned to snuff the altar candles. She looked up to the comforting Madonna and Child and said a Hail Mary, then to the burning sanctuary lamp that continued to flame, signifying the Real Presence of Christ reserved in the stone tabernacle. This one light would not be put out, would be kept burning, as a sign.

Madeleine and Jack joined the line filing down the aisle toward Father Michaels who pumped hands, kissed cheeks, and hugged with his hefty arms.

Jack held Madeleine's raincoat open as she slipped her arms inside, then put on his own, glancing at the skylights. "Rain stopped. Don't need the umbrella."

He was a careful man, Madeleine thought, especially since his successful surgery two years earlier. He noticed weather, people, the things around him. Now he turned to the elderly woman in front of them, as though he sensed she was about to speak.

Mrs. Sanderson spun on her heel. "Love your short hairdo, Madeleine."

Madeleine touched the nape of her neck where her auburn hair feathered lightly. The layering and trim had added fullness, but the new style would take some getting used to. She raised the collar on her coat and smiled. "Thanks. I wasn't sure about it."

"It's so lovely. Now, will you be helping with the Christmas pageant this year?" Her lined face was full of hope. "You did such a fine job costuming the little ones last year."

"Sure," Madeleine said, grinning. "I'd love to." The triplets, age four, had made a spectacular heavenly host. She had even cut tag board wings glittered with gold.

"Do I get to be a king?" Jack asked, raising his brows with mock expectation.

"Of course, Jack," Mrs. Sanderson replied. "Which one? The one with the line?"

Madeleine loved that the pageant included all ages, although the children had first choice of roles. Her husband, at sixty-six, made a venerable and graying king, with his emerald green cape and foil crown.

Jack's blue eyes squinted with concentration. "That's the one. *Where is he who is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him.* How's that?"

"Excellent. I'll sign you up." She pulled out a notepad and pencil.

A small face peered around Mrs. Sanderson's skirt. "Mrs. Seymour, I'm going to be the Starholder this year!" Madeleine recognized Cynthia, nearly five now. "When are you going to be my teacher again?"

Madeleine bent down to the child's eye level. "One of these days. But for now, we'll make that Starholder costume perfect for you." She had retired from teaching Sunday school to finish writing her book; at fifty-four, time passed too swiftly, and she needed to be published. Had she made the right choice? She had prayed about it, but she wasn't sure. Was *Holy Manifestations: God's Presence in Our World* to God's glory, or was teaching children to God's glory? She gave Cynthia a hug. "I sure miss you guys."

A deep voice came from behind. "Morning, Madeleine and Jack." It was elderly Joe McGinty, dapper in his three-piece suit, his thick silver

hair neatly combed to the side. He was in good shape for his age, Madeleine thought, although he walked with a cane.

"Hello, Joe, good to see you." Jack touched his own tie as he shook Joe's hand.

Madeleine kissed Joe's cheek in greeting. "How are you? Any news from your brother in London?" She recalled that Joe McGinty had been keenly interested in establishing a children's home in London, along the lines of their Coronati House in Rome. As chairman of the board of the Coronati Foundation, he had been their chief financial backer. He had helped Jack organize fundraisers in San Francisco. Jack knew folks, as Joe liked to say, from his days in the wine importing business.

"I've been meaning to call you," Joe said, as the line moved slowly forward. "How would you two like to go to London, all expenses paid? Fine hotels, fine dining." He looked encouraged as he saw Jack's face light up. "My brother's made some contacts and says the political climate is ripe for our children's home project. Might help a good number of women with their choices. What do you think?" He slapped Jack on the back.

"Sounds good to me." Jack looked doubtfully at Madeleine. "But Madeleine's beginning a short sabbatical. She has a book deadline."

It would be her first published work. But even so, she could see Jack was thrilled with the prospect of a trip to London. Since he retired, he had been bitten by the travel bug but didn't have the means: champagne taste on a beer budget. Their income, even with her part-time teaching, hadn't stretched as far as they'd hoped. But London *now*? Her editor at University Press had given her a June deadline, and she was far behind. Maybe Jack could go to London on his own. "Could we get back to you?" she asked Joe.

"Sure, but could you let me know soon? I'd like to ask the Wilsons if you can't do it. But Jack, I'd prefer you handle a property search like this. You have the legal background in contracts, as well as experience with British solicitors."

Jack rubbed his chin. "What did you have in mind, exactly?"

"Something like our Rome orphanage with the clinic and adoption agency. But I was thinking of adding some of the services that Sandy Taylor offers here in the city—unplanned pregnancy counseling with ultrasound technologies, prenatal *and* postnatal support. Have you seen Sandy's clinic?"

Madeleine had been meaning to visit. Sandy Taylor was a member of the parish, and had invited them to the opening of their San Francisco

clinic, but Madeleine's teaching schedule was full that day. Still, Sandy had mentioned it often, and Madeleine had felt guilty about never making the time. "We haven't, but we've always wanted to."

Jack nodded. "Their fundraiser last year was terrific. I've been meaning to ask her about it—the giant video screens, the live music, the testimonies of the children and mothers. Wow! We could learn a few things for our own events."

They turned toward Father Michaels in the doorway. He was a man who clearly enjoyed his food and wine. His wide face was flushed, and he stood as though planted on the porch, a fixture of permanence and satisfaction. Madeleine liked him. His sermons held wisdom beyond his thirty-five years: he understood the reverence required in worship, for he was a true believer, believing they worshiped a living God present among them. He wasn't Father Rinaldi, God rest his soul, but who could be? For a moment, Madeleine winced with loss. Grief hit her like that, sudden and unexpected, and right here on the porch stoop of their pretty chapel, just as the rain was drying up and the sun was coming out.

Father Rinaldi had been their priest and friend, a good pastor. He had taught her about the faith, had helped her raise Justin. (Could her son really be twenty-nine with a family of his own?) He had blessed her marriage to Jack nearly twenty years ago. His heart failure had been a shock to them all, but he had lived a good life, sacrificial and joyful, and Madeleine was sure that he stepped right into heaven. One day she would see her old priest and friend, on the other side.

Madeleine beamed into Father Michaels' face, so open and unguarded. "Great sermon. Thanks for letting me take notes."

"I'm flattered you do. But don't forget next Saturday. We're decorating the church for Christmas."

"We'll be there," Jack said. "Shall I bring some festive libations to accompany lunch?"

"That would be excellent. Do you still have connections in the wine business? But it's Advent, a penitential season. Oh, well, a little won't hurt. So close to Christmas."

Madeleine laughed. Father Michaels had a way of working in festive libations. "We have a pageant rehearsal, don't forget, in the morning."

"Now how could I forget that?" Father Michaels glanced at Mrs. Sanderson waving from the bottom of the steps, several children in tow, heading for the parish hall in back. "We're all looking forward to the pageant. Christmas wouldn't be the same without it!" He turned to Joe McGinty and grasped his thin hand in his thick one.



Monday morning was overcast with a cold wind as Madeleine and Jack emerged from the downtown parking garage. They soon found the vintage medical building.

She studied the elevator listings and stepped into the old-fashioned cubicle. “Sandy wanted easy access, but parking would be a problem here, or, at least, expensive.”

“She also wanted to be close to other doctor’s offices,” Jack added. “And there’s always public transit.”

They found the clinic on the third floor. A scripted sign on the door read *Sandy’s Prenatal Services*.

They entered a small waiting room, much like any other medical office. Pamphlets filled a wall rack, Christmas carols played through a sound system, and a fir tree decorated with blinking lights rotated in a corner.

A frosted glass panel slid open. “May I help you?” a receptionist asked.

They introduced themselves, and moments later Sandy Taylor appeared in the doorway. “So glad you folks could visit. Come on in.”

They followed her down a narrow hallway. Sandy’s honey-colored hair fell straight to her shoulders. Of medium height, she carried herself with a competent air as though she always knew exactly what she needed to do and did it. For a moment Madeleine envied the younger woman’s energy, vision, and assurance, as she recalled her own race with time, her struggle with her book, her manuscript divvied into piles with thick clips and color-coded Post-It Notes covering her desk at home. Writing was such a fragmented business, with all the bits and pieces dangling in various cranial corners, with phrases jotted on notepads and odd scraps of paper captured under paperweights. How did one pull it all together? How did one impose order on chaos, make sense of life?

Sandy led them into a tiny parlor. A burgundy loveseat faced two teal armchairs, and white daisies in a clay vase sat on a low coffee table. “I’ve been wanting to show you our new facility here in the City,” she said, speaking quickly. “Do you have a few minutes?”

“We do.” Madeleine nodded, recalling Sandy had three other locations in the Bay Area.

“All the time you need,” Jack said, “as long as you tell me your

fundraising secrets.”

“Good, and I’ll do that, Jack.” She gestured to the couch. “Please, have a seat. This is our counseling room, where we hold our first interviews. Many women hear about us from our website, and this is where we all get acquainted. I wanted the room to have a homey feel.”

“Good idea.” Madeleine thought the space inviting, comfortable, like a family den.

Sandy sat in an armchair and leaned forward. “I understand Joe McGinty wants to do something like this in London?”

“That’s right,” Jack said.

“The London project sounds great. And Joe has the backing and the connections. What’s your Rome orphanage like? I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

Madeleine adjusted her glasses. “It’s a small orphanage for the children we aren’t able to place in homes, twenty beds, run by an order of nuns. The sisters teach the children and staff a free clinic. We’ve recently added a women’s shelter.” Father Rinaldi had founded the convent and later the orphanage at the Church of the Four Crowned Saints, *Santi dei Quattro Coronati*, and she and Jack had visited the church on their pilgrimage to Italy over four years ago. Had it really been four years? It seemed like yesterday.

The pilgrimage had changed her, healed her of haunting nightmares, and in thanksgiving, they had set up a foundation to continue the work Father Rinaldi had begun. Coronati House was thriving, and Jack soon discovered that volunteering his time enriched his retirement. Madeleine had also been blessed by her work with Coronati House—writing articles, brochures, sending care packages and toys at Christmas—for her healing had continued.

Sandy nodded. “We emphasize prenatal counseling for women who have unintended pregnancies, including married women with families.”

Madeleine grew thoughtful. “Are there many women with that problem?” Madeleine had wanted more children but hadn’t been able to conceive. Even so, she was grateful for her son, Justin, and then there were Jack’s boys too. *And* seven grandchildren.

A shadow passed over Sandy’s face. “Indeed there are. I’ve been surprised how many women who are frightened by unplanned pregnancies have husbands and children. They’re worried about another mouth to feed. Once again they have to put off their careers, their plans.”

“It makes sense,” Madeleine said. “I can see that.” She thought of her own job.

Sandy turned to Jack. "So Joe says you'd like to offer these services?"

"Exactly." Jack nodded.

Madeleine glanced at her husband, happy in his satisfaction. She could see he was mentally planning the trip. He saw himself as a transplanted Brit, with his aristocratic nose, fine bones, and freckled skin. She hoped, with her looming book deadline, she wouldn't disappoint him.

"Then let me show you where we do our prenatal exams."

They crossed the hall to a room where a nurse was setting up electronic equipment.

"Our sonogram unit." Sandy's brown eyes twinkled. "And this is Amanda, our very capable RN. She just joined us from school. She wanted to work with a nonprofit for a few years before moving on to a hospital."

Madeleine and Jack exchanged greetings with the young woman.

Amanda eyed them earnestly and smoothed her white smock. "It's so amazing when the women see their baby move on the screen. And hear the heartbeat." She turned to Sandy. "All set to go," she said and excused herself.

Sandy turned to Madeleine and Jack. "We don't argue for or against abortion. We simply provide information. The sonogram is part of that information. Some women choose to have their child, and we help them do that. We helped sixty-seven children come into this world last year."

As Madeleine listened to Sandy, memories of her own Mollie flooded her. The room shifted precariously, and she reached to steady herself. Her daughter had been less than eight months old when she drowned. *And it was my fault.* The old demons stabbed her again as she reached for Jack's arm and slid into a chair. "I'm sorry," she said to Sandy, "just felt a little faint. Okay now."

"You sure?" Sandy looked worried.

"It's a long story," Jack explained.

Sandy gazed at Madeleine, then gently touched her shoulder. "I have a story too." Sandy's face, so open and upbeat, clouded, and she grew quiet. "It's the reason I got into all of this." She sat on a stool.

Madeleine sensed a sister, one who had also suffered.

"You see, Madeleine, I had three young children, and when I found myself pregnant with my fourth I truly didn't want the baby. Being a Christian, abortion wasn't an option, but nevertheless I pretended the baby didn't exist." Sandy looked into the distance, and her eyes grew

moist. "I can't believe that now, but it's true. When my daughter was born prematurely, she only lived a few hours. It was awful. It was as though I had caused her death by willing it."

Madeleine could feel the depth of Sandy's grief, the remorse, the guilt. Mollie flashed before her again, her large eyes entreating, as she had in so many nightmares.

"But God pulled good from the tragedy. He gave me a vision." She opened her palms. "And here it is."

"God does that," Madeleine said. "He takes our wrong turns and makes them right." She inhaled slowly. "My story goes back to 1975. Really, even earlier, as most stories do. In 1967 at the age of twenty I married Charlie, a high school sweetheart. We were pacifists then, romantic idealists. We immigrated to Canada and tried to make a life there. Justin and Mollie were born in Vancouver." She paused.

"You don't have to tell me," Sandy said quietly.

"No, it's okay. That summer of 1975 I left Mollie alone in a wading pool. She was less than eight months. She drowned. I was responsible. It's been over twenty-six years, and it still hits me." Her words sounded stilted, far away, as though she had re-entered a distant country.

"How terrible," Sandy said.

"I returned to San Francisco, my marriage dying, haunted by nightmares. When I married Jack they receded, but then they returned a few years ago. Father Rinaldi sent us to Italy on a pilgrimage of healing. One of the places we visited was the Quattro Coronati Convent in Rome, and you know the rest."

"I see the connection now. I wish I had known Father Rinaldi during my own tragedy."

"But God has used your suffering," Madeleine said.

Sandy leaned forward, hands clasped. "He has. And I understand these women. I remember what it was like to fear such a pregnancy, so unplanned, not part of my future, not the way I saw my future. I no longer had control. And I understand why some women choose abortion. They are under a lot of pressure from parents, boyfriends, our cultural assumptions. They have to give up all those plans they had, or at least postpone them. Then there's the financial impact."

Jack's brow pulled together. "I bet they have tremendous pressure."

"It must be so hard for those who make that choice," Madeleine said, some clarity of mind finally returning. *And through their own act, their own free will.*

"As a matter of fact, we do a good deal of post-abortion counseling.

Grief counseling, actually.” She stood, and led them to the waiting room.

“What other services do you provide?” Jack asked, glancing at the brochure on the rack, as though wanting to shift the conversation to another level.

Sandy pulled out some pamphlets. “Whatever is needed. And for whoever needs our services. Nobody likes abortion, and everyone wants to make it rare. We can all agree on that. So we’re trying to make that happen.”

“Well said.” Madeleine was at a loss for words, her own tears near. Ever since she read the words, *A child dies every twenty minutes from abortion*, she had heard the clock ticking, the silent screams of the unborn.

Sandy turned to Jack. “We offer help mostly, help with the choice that must be made, help with the pregnancy, help with the birth, help with the doctors. During the last months and after the birth we enroll the new family in our Godparents Program, where a local church adopts them. The church gives the mother-to-be a baby shower, finds housing if needed, daycare, that sort of thing. Follow up services. Community support.” She spoke quickly and glanced at her watch. “I’m really sorry, but I have an appointment. Could I have our Marketing Manager call you, Jack?”

“Sure, that’d be fine.”

“And check out our website. You might get some ideas there.”

Madeleine cleared her throat. “Thanks so much, Sandy. We really appreciate it.”

Sandy grinned, her good humor returning. “Good luck with London. Keep me posted, and contact me if you have any questions, okay?” She opened the door and they stepped into the hall. “So glad you folks could come by.”

As they headed for the elevator, Jack turned to Madeleine. “What do you think?”

“Wow. I can see why Joe is so excited. This is a whole new approach.” They had learned much of this at Sandy’s fundraiser, but seeing the clinic made it real. “I love the ultrasound.”

“Should I call for flight reservations?”

“Give me another day, Jack.” There were the stacks of papers on her desk. The footnotes. The research that hadn’t been worked in. And there were three calls from Lois Beecham, her editor, that she hadn’t returned. “I’ll call Lois this afternoon.”

Chapter Two

Sea Cliff

*The World is trying...
to form a civilized but non-Christian mentality.
The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient...
meanwhile redeeming the time:
so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us;
to renew and rebuild civilization and save the World from suicide.*

T.S. Eliot

Madeleine climbed to her attic study. The walls of the stairwell were covered with icons and photos: saints gazed from gilded wood, family posed behind framed glass. They were a host of witnesses and they comforted her.

She entered her precious work space, where so many words had been placed on so many pages, giving life to her thoughts. Dormer windows on two sides allowed filtered light, and low shelves ran under the pitched roof, crammed with books on theology and philosophy, history and literature, poetry and memoir. There was T.S. Eliot, Evelyn Underhill, Russell Kirk, Raymond Raynes, Dom Gregory Dix, Dorothy Sayers, C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton. Numerous Bible translations shared a shelf with the 1928 Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, the 1940 Hymnal, and the Anglican Missal. There were the apocalyptic novels of Michael D. O'Brien, the great Canadian novelist. There were dictionaries, thesauri, word menus, a hefty concordance alongside Butler's *Lives of the Saints*. Gertrude Himmelfarb, Paul Johnson, Barbara Tuchman, Walter McDougall, the journal of Alexander Schmemman, a biography of Charles de Foucauld, the saintly hermit of the Sahara. On her old oak desk two framed pictures kept her company: one of her wedding day with Jack, standing before Saint Thomas' altar, Madeleine in her cream dress, Jack in his dark suit; the other of Justin and Lisa Jane with little Luke on her

lap. Madeleine's grandson must have been about one, the picture taken the previous August. Her son's smile held justified pride, and Madeleine ran her finger over his face. Lisa Jane grinned ingenuously into the camera, her natural beauty shining through. *Aspens in the background, the Rockies*, Madeleine thought.

A foghorn sounded and Madeleine crossed to a window. She unlatched it and looked out to the Golden Gate, breathing in the moist air. The afternoon fogbank, propelled by sea winds, was moving in rapidly, sliding over the bridge, heading for the East Bay.

Madeleine and Jack had bought their Sea Cliff house in 1982 when Madeleine proposed. Justin was nine, and she told Jack that she didn't have time to date anyone who wasn't interested in a serious relationship. She wanted a husband and Justin needed a father. So what, exactly, were his intentions? Time pressed upon her.

When she left Vancouver and came home to San Francisco with her young son she knew her marriage with Charlie was over. The divorce was a sad affair, an ashen thing, a gray death in itself, all those hopes and dreams, embers dying. She and Charlie had been so young, green with longings and desires, so sure of life, so full of passion. What went wrong? Was it Charlie's inability to hold a job? Was he too lazy or too proud? Did he really think he would be the next great American novelist, the Vietnam War expat living in Canada? Or was it her exhaustion, working full-time and keeping house so that he could write? Then came Justin, her great joy. And Mollie, her great sorrow. She often thought it was Mollie's death that separated her from Charlie as nothing else could, as though a rushing river rose up between them and left them standing on opposite shores. Charlie withdrew even more into his books. Abandoned, Madeleine fell into a deep depression, far from reality, as though she watched herself move about, another person. Finally, she and Justin flew home to San Francisco, with two deaths—her child and her marriage—weighing upon her soul.

She found a clerical job, and not long after that, she found Saint Thomas' Church on Sacramento Street. The white chapel with its booming organ invited them in and they stayed. A lapsed Presbyterian, she now learned a new way to believe, one of ritual and song, flames and incense, pageantry and purpose. She learned to dance the rhythms of the Church Year, from Christmas to Easter to Trinity and back to Christmas again. She learned about the sacramental life, how God worked through matter, that he was present in the Eucharist. At Saint Thomas' she made close friends. She helped with Sunday school. It was there, in the parish

family, that Justin grew up, and it was there, before Saint Thomas' altar, that Madeleine married Jack.

Their Sea Cliff house was not large. A small living room, a smaller den, and an even smaller kitchen and dining area occupied the ground floor. Stairs descended to a cellar where Jack stored his wine finds, good years at great buys he had collected over the years. They had converted part of the cellar to a guest suite with its own street entrance. A grander set of stairs ascended from the main floor to two bedrooms, and further up, a narrower staircase rose to the attic.

Madeleine soon turned the attic into her reading room. She placed a wing chair and a lamp in an alcove and retreated there when Jack and Justin, and later Jack's golfing buddies, watched sports downstairs. She had never understood football and, after trying to understand, decided she never would. After earning her doctorate and beginning to teach history, she prepared lessons at her antique desk, and when she bought her first laptop, came here to jot down her musings that would metamorphose, she hoped, into *Holy Manifestations*. The musings were the offspring of her reading, her meditations on Sunday sermons, conversations with Father Rinaldi, and the travel journals she kept as she and Jack visited Italy, France, and England on wine buying trips for their stores. The musings had come too from her doctoral thesis, *Miracles: Fact or Fiction*, and from the ongoing research involved for her classes.

Indeed, teaching undergraduates was profoundly satisfying, for she taught the lessons of time, history's thrust upon our present, particularly in the Western world where culture shifted so precipitously. She enjoyed her students and their questions, the evolving discussions, the counterpoint of young minds making connections. But she was only part-time, and her job was never secure, for the university was cutting back and Madeleine was no longer young. They favored a more modern approach, what Madeleine saw as history revised to suit current tastes. But if she published, that would make a difference. She didn't want to lose her job. Not yet. It had become an important part of her.

A children's home in London. How could she not be involved in such an undertaking—especially when it landed in her lap like this?...

For more of the story, read on...

INHERITANCE

Christine Sunderland

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About the Author



CHRISTINE SUNDERLAND, also the author of *Pilgrimage* and *Offerings* (the first two books in the trilogy), has been interested in matters of belief since she was sixteen and her father, a Protestant minister, lost his faith.

Today she is Church Schools Director for the Anglican Province of Christ the King and Vice-President of the American Church Union (Anglicanpck.org). She has edited *The American Church Union Church School Series*, *The Anglican Confirmation Manual*, and *Summer Lessons*. She has authored *Teaching the Church's Children* and seven children's novellas, the Jeanette series, published by the American Church Union.

"In order to write *Inheritance*," Christine says, "I traveled extensively in England to Christian historical sites. It was a fascinating quest."

Christine holds a B.A. in English Literature and is an alumnus of the Squaw Valley Writers Workshop and the Maui Writers Retreat.

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