

Chapter 1

On a late September Wednesday night, at 11:30 p.m., a black-and-white patrol car slid up to the curb in front of a dilapidated brick house on Hudson Street and idled. The neighborhood, once the pride of Chicago's southwest suburbs, had fallen into disuse and disrepair, like an old refrigerator stored out back without a security lock. The houses, mostly faded brick, had long ago been converted into apartments. The iron bars that covered the first-floor windows were a more recent addition.

A tall, slim man dressed in black with a dark-blue windbreaker exited the back seat of the car, and after a brief exchange of words through the front window with the vehicle's driver and passenger, he climbed the six cement steps to the front door, noticeably favoring his right leg.

The security light reflected off short, brown hair turning silver and a serious face with a slim, straight nose, a wide mouth, and hazel eyes more green than brown. When he reached the top step, keys in hand, the car pulled away and, after pausing for the stop sign, turned left. As the taillights disappeared around the corner, a thin, high cry caused the man to pause in the act of unlocking his door. Another cry came, this time a distinct call for help.

Father Gerald "Mac" McAllister took the stairs

AN UNHEALTHY ATTACHMENT

in two jumps, stumbling on the pavement below as his right leg took his weight. Then he broke into a run. Halfway down the block, he kicked up gravel as he entered an alleyway.

An elderly woman pressed her body back against the side wall of a pawn shop, her wool hat crumpled on the ground next to her exposing matted, gray hair. She clung with both hands to the plastic handle of a cheap, pink purse as a young man in baggy jeans and a Chicago Bulls jacket, a dark, knit cap pulled low on his forehead, twisted and tugged at the purse. He looked up in surprise as the priest rounded the corner, and at the sight, he let go of his prize and sprinted down the alley with his pursuer close behind.

It wasn't a stylish tackle, but McAllister hit his target at the knees, and they both landed hard on the filthy ground. He pulled back the young man's shoulder and rolled him onto his back.

"What's the matter with you?" he said. He was breathing hard from his run and the pain in his leg, but his baritone voice carried authority. He leaned back on his heels while he caught his breath, and his white Roman collar shone in the glow of security lights over the back doors of the surrounding shops.

The young man let loose a whoop. "Father forgive me—"

"I was a witness."

"I tried to rob an old lady. I confess! Now you can't say nothin'!"

"Doesn't count. I saw it happen." He got to his

AN UNHEALTHY ATTACHMENT

feet, grabbed hold of the thug's jacket and hauled him to standing. "And it doesn't sound as if you're sorry anyway."

The thug glared back. "Hey, man. Just tryin' to make a living. What's *your* problem? And why ain't you in church?" Thin, freckled lips spread into a twisted smile. "Altar boy cancel your date?"

McAllister's head jerked back in shock and disgust, and before he could push aside the emotional response, a burning heat flooded his chest and his hands tightened their hold on the thief's jacket. He took several steadying breaths to counter the sensation, but it was too late. The Voice made its move, and the darkness closed in.

He has a point, don't you think?

McAllister closed his eyes, his lips moving in silent prayer as he tried to drown out the mocking, cajoling litany that only he could hear.

Misinterpreting his reaction, the young man laughed. "Hit a nerve?"

A few bad apples and the rest of you must eat dirt for the rest of your lives. It makes us wonder. Why doesn't He stand up for you?

The Voice oozed with sympathy, on McAllister's side and urging him to acknowledge the indignity. He prayed the words of the Hail Mary. Tried to feel her love for priests. Tried to feel God's presence. Yearned to experience something new instead of the emptiness that had dogged him these past weeks. The aching chest. Exhaustion. Hopelessness.

AN UNHEALTHY ATTACHMENT

What about those lives destroyed by false allegations? You have seen it happen, so you know we speak the truth. Why would He allow that if He loves you so much? His precious, precious sacerdots.

“His will be done.”

Do you really mean that? But what is His will? Hard to tell when he is so silent. Or have you heard from Him lately?

“Our Father, who art in Heaven—”

The thug sneered. “I don’t need your prayers.”

A car turned into the far end of the alley and crept forward. The young man sent a nervous glance in that direction.

“I’m outta here.”

The car sped up and the thug made a move to leave, but McAllister grabbed his jacket and held tight. After a brief warning tweet from the siren, police lights peppered the alley with flashes of red and white.

“Looks like you’re not going anywhere,” McAllister said.

Neither are you. You know what is coming. It has already started. You have felt it. You have seen it in all its dark glory, and all you can do is stand by and watch. Poor, poor sacerdos.

As he struggled to hang on to the purse snatcher, recent memories assaulted McAllister. He fought to keep his expression neutral, but he blinked.

Yes. We are glad you know it. Shame about Cherry Valley. We do not think Mr. Henderson will ever be the same. And send our regards to Senora Vargas.

AN UNHEALTHY ATTACHMENT

A slight shudder ran through him.

“What’s the matter with you?” the thug said, still trying to break free of his grasp. “You havin’ some kind of fit?”

You have our sympathy. We are both the victims of His cruel punishment.

“You made a choice,” McAllister hissed.

The thug reversed his tactics and leaned into the priest. “I didn’t choose to have no money.”

The Voice chuckled, a raspy sound like nails scraping metal.

Did you have a choice, McAllister? Nifty gift He has given you...or is it a curse?

The priest’s brow wrinkled with uncertainty. The description had hit too close to home, and the Voice pounced.

You are outnumbered, and your fellow creatures are on our side. Nasty, little experiments; abominations, really, and distasteful to the extreme, but they have their uses. It is so easy to make them hate. Abortion is their right. G-ddammit. See how the curse rolls off the tongue? The Eucharist is a symbol. Who needs the Mass? Dead prayers, ridiculous music, and the mutterings of a vested virgin. Not like the old days, is it, Jerry? When pitiful creatures felt the thrill of the sacred and bowed and scraped in proper fear of their God? Now it is just corpses in the pews sitting there. Bored, bored, bored. Unless they have a cell phone. Thoughts wander, with our help, of course, but really, we do not have to work hard. Fantasize about a dying man torn and battered on the cross for your

sins? Too dreadful. A downer. Let us imagine fornicating with the cantor in the thigh-high skirt instead.

The Voice shouted with laughter, and when he didn't respond, it altered course again, poking and prodding, looking for the nerve that would make him react.

He called you a pedophile. Said you like boys.

"Stop it," he said through clenched teeth.

The thug shoved again. "You don't like it, huh?"

You are His instrument. His weapon. Strike out.

McAllister met the young man's gaze and noted the mockery in his eyes. The belligerence.

This is a predator, hunting the frail and helpless at night. An enemy.

A ray of light broke into his thoughts, and for a moment, he saw the situation clearly. This was a wounded human being made in the image of God.

We wonder what we could do with this one. Oh! We have just had a delicious idea. Tell us if you approve. It is just a thought, but how would you like to be the next priest to stand accused?

The darkness closed in again. "Shut up!"

McAllister's adrenaline spiked, and he squeezed his eyes closed.

The young man shoved his face close. "You gettin' off on handling me? Are ya going to feel me up now?" He laughed but stopped abruptly and drew in a breath.

McAllister's eyes snapped open. His irises were dark with anger. He pulled back a fist and felt the

AN UNHEALTHY ATTACHMENT

satisfying pain as knuckles connected with bone. A hand clamped down on his shoulder before he could deliver a second punch.

“Steady, Mac,” a familiar voice said.

A second uniformed officer snapped handcuffs shut over the young man’s wrists and said:

“Looked like self-defense to me. What do you say, Mac?”

McAllister put his hands over his face and rubbed his eyes. “God help me.” It was a prayer.