

OFFERINGS



Christine Sunderland

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The Trilogy
by
Christine Sunderland

Pilgrimage

Offerings

Inheritance

Prologue

“Papa!” Jack Seymour whispered. The boy, nearly twelve, stood by the bed and stared at his father who lay too still, his face too pale and gray. His father’s eyes looked as though someone had rubbed coal under them. “Papa, wake up.”

His mother said Papa would get better. Why didn’t he? Papa took many pills, but he only grew thinner and grayer. He was thin when he came home from the war two years ago, but not this thin. Mama had fed him “back to his old self” and he was fine most of the time. Japan and Germany had surrendered and Papa was a hero! Mama had framed the Medal of Honor and hung it on the wall.

But now a lot of his hair had fallen out and he stayed in bed, except when they helped him to the bathroom.

“Papa, I have good news.”

The body stirred and the eyes opened. He groaned and with shaking fingers beckoned the boy closer.

Jack leaned forward in spite of the sour odor. Why didn’t Papa get up? Why didn’t they play ball or go to the park on Saturdays? His mother brought soup on a tray to the bedroom and spooned the liquid into his father’s dry mouth. A nurse visited from the hospital, her lips pinched, her body stiff. She frowned a lot, and most of the time she told Jack and his sister, Meg, to go away.

At night, as Jack lay in his bed in the attic room, he could hear the moaning below. He heard his mother crying, too, in the other room where she now slept. Little Meg, just seven, would climb the stairs when the sounds grew loud and crawl into her brother’s cot. Sometimes she would cry too, little whimpers and gasps of air, and Jack would stroke her hair until she fell asleep.

He often turned on his crystal set radio to cover up the terrible wailing below.

“Papa, wake up.” Jack knelt by the bed. He needed to tell his father the news. He had made the team—he made pitcher!

“Jack,” John Seymour gasped as he grabbed the boy’s hand with his own. “I love you, Jack. Don’t ever forget that.” His face was all twisted.

Where was his papa? The boy wanted his real papa back.

“I love you too.”

“I have to go away,” he breathed and Jack read his lips.

“Why?” The boy’s heart pounded. “Why don’t you get better? Like Mama says?”

“Look after Meg.”

“I will, Papa.”

“She’s too young to understand.”

“Understand what?”

“Jack, it’s time. I’m going home. Home to God.”

“No, you can’t. Mama says you’re better. She prays for you in church. You’re wrong! God will heal you!”

“Look after her too, son. I’m dying. Cancer always wins.” His speech was thick and hoarse, his breath foul, and he squirmed as though trying to escape a biting snake. “I’m sorry, Jack.”

“No!” Jack wrenched his hand from his father’s and beat upon the sick man’s chest. “You can’t die. I won’t let you. I need you, Papa! We all need you!”

“It’s better this way—too much pain.” His father’s eyes fixed on Jack. “Promise me you’ll look after them. Be strong now. You’re the man of the family.”

“I promise. But...Papa...”

His father closed his eyes and gulped air. His chest rattled and his body grew suddenly quiet.

The boy laid his head on his father’s chest. He sobbed. “I made the team, Papa. I’m pitcher.”

The body was still.

“Mama!” Jack screamed. “Come quickly, Mama!”

Chapter One

San Francisco

*This is my commandment,
that ye love one another as I have loved you.*
John 15:12

On the first Saturday in September, Madeleine Seymour sat in the second pew of Saint Thomas' Anglican Church. Soon her son Justin would enter from the sacristy, followed by her husband, Jack. With that thought, she caught her breath, suddenly filled with a curious joy, for her son had asked his stepfather to be his best man.

Madeleine touched her rings, a diamond solitaire and a simple gold band, and recalled the day she married Jack in this chapel—February 6, 1982, over seventeen years ago. Her boy, a strapping nine-year-old, stiff in his first tuxedo, had carried the pillow holding the rings. In that ceremony they formed a new family, and now, Justin had chosen Jack.

And it was here at Saint Thomas' that she had first *met* Jack. As she and Justin walked toward the park on a Sunday in 1977 her boisterous son had pulled her into the white sanctuary, drawn by the organ music thundering into the street. She had never regretted it. As a struggling single parent, she welcomed Saint Thomas' friendly fellowship. And the beauty of the Sunday mass was a colorful contrast to her clerical job. The liturgy washed her with its sweet-smelling incense, flaming candles, and joyous song. She entered needy and tired; she left filled with new life, stronger.

Madeleine prayed that today's ceremony would go smoothly, that Jack would be okay. Only last week he had doubled over in pain. "A little heartburn," he said. But in the night he tossed and turned, and she worried. Now she watched and waited, as though her fierce attention could ensure a good result.

The church had once been an old Victorian, one of many on

Sacramento Street. Gone were the bay windows and neat front steps. Gone was the broken interior—walls, floors, and narrow halls—open now to vaulted space, high and holy, where incense swirled about the people, drawing them together, pulling them up. An arched entrance led to a small narthex and domed sanctuary. Skylights opened to the heavens, green tiles covered the earth, and twenty-four oak pews faced an antique tabernacle on a stone altar. Near the altar, a red candle burned. White roses in terra cotta vases sat on classical pedestals on either side, and tapers flamed beneath a wooden crucifix above. A sculpted Madonna stood in the left corner niche—the Gospel side. Blue votives flickered at her feet.

The nave was nearly full now, the pews packed with family and friends. Elena Coronati, their young houseguest from Rome, sat next to Madeleine, and Jack's three sons and their families took over the third and fourth pews.

Madeleine breathed in yesterday's incense mingled with today's roses. The air seemed also laced with anticipation and memory; her years with her son stretched back from this moment, years of grief and joy, of fear and trust, of love. The past formed a chapter, a unit of time framed by his birth and this ceremony, time marked off before it slipped away. She had taken part in the miracle of his creation, and now she would witness his re-creation in this sacrament of body and soul. *Marriage.*

She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear as the organ played the first notes of Pachelbel's *Canon in G*. Then her son, tall and serious, entered from the right—the Epistle side—his blue eyes trained down the aisle. Her husband, his flushed face mapped with a gentle satisfaction, entered next, followed by three groomsmen and the priest. Madeleine smiled, seeing her boy and his stepfather before the tabernacle. Jack had helped raise her Justin, pulling him through braces and baseball and report cards, through driving and dates and danger. He accepted the boy's initial distrust and jealousy, dishing out a bit himself, but the turmoil of those years and Jack's quiet support had woven strong threads of family. She swallowed hard as she stared at the two men who were her world, then studied her husband closely. He touched his chest and folded his hands. He seemed okay—for now.

Father Michaels looked pleased and purposeful; he cradled his prayer book and smoothed his wedding stole. She liked the young priest, although who could replace Father Rinaldi? With that thought, Madeleine looked beyond to the tabernacle, embedded with amber and

aquamarine, then to the red candle signifying the Blessed Sacrament—Christ himself—in the tabernacle.

“Lord, thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you for this place, thank you for your Presence.”

Turning, she watched the flower girls lead the bridesmaids toward the altar. Finally, as the organ shifted to Handel’s *Trumpet Voluntary*, Lisa Jane and her father paused in the doorway. The bride, a statuesque brunette flowing in cream satin and antique lace, stepped serenely, as though her hands held the world to give to her lover.

“*Dearly beloved,*” Father Michaels began, “*we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this company, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony...*”

Madeleine absorbed each sixteenth-century word that summoned the holy into their lives, enshrining their passage through time. As she watched Justin make his vows, the familiar voice, the voice of the child no longer, echoed in her ears.

The bride and groom exchanged rings and the priest wrapped his stole around their hands. “*Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder...I pronounce that they are Man and Wife, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*”

The ceremony over, Jack followed the wedding party down the aisle, and Madeleine joined him. As she glanced at the Madonna and Child, she thought how glad she was for Mary’s presence, the sacred feminine. She said a silent *Hail Mary* and slipped her arm through Jack’s, touching the fine wool of his jacket and noticing a tear stuck in a crevice in his cheek. She handed him her tissue.



The social hall in the back of the church opened onto a redwood deck, and, beyond the deck, a lawn bordered with rosebushes. Tables draped in blue linen were loaded with canapés and delicate sandwiches, fruit cornucopias, platters of stuffed tomatoes in beds of greens, and plates of fanning asparagus. Justin and Lisa Jane’s friends from school, their friends from work, and family from both sides mingled through overlapping worlds, as a band played Beatles tunes.

The receiving line dispersed, and Madeleine chatted with the guests, looking up from time to time to her husband, who stood behind a

table tilting in the uneven grass, pouring champagne from bottles stashed in a washtub of ice. He had packed their old Volvo with cases of Moët his supplier had discounted to Seymour Wines, and now, having neatly arranged his champagne flutes, he turned to the next guest, gallantly holding an empty glass against the light and filling it with sparkling bubbles.

A gray pallor had replaced his flush. He touched his forehead gently and ran his long fingers through his silver-streaked hair, as though to regain his balance. She crossed the lawn, concerned, and noticed he wasn't wearing his sun cap.

Madeleine loved her husband. She loved his blue eyes, which possessed a confidence born of time—time spent analyzing ways and means to achieve his dreams. His threadbare schooldays had fed those visions of financial security, and his acute perception of others and why they behaved the way they did—his street smarts, he called it—had realized them. She loved that about Jack, his coming from nothing and making something of himself, his moving from rags to riches, his building a business from the ground up.

She also loved his chin, chiseled and determined, but softened with a charming dimple. His nose was fine-boned, and he said it was too long, but she thought it rather genteel. His cheek still bore a small scar where a bit of cancerous tissue had been removed, but for the most part, the jagged white line had merged into his freckles.

But what Madeleine loved most about her husband of seventeen years was that he never gave up his simple ways once he became successful. He rode the bus when he could, helped with church coffee hours, took the Scouts to Giants games where he bought them popcorn and hot dogs, sunscreen and caps. He had been awarded Father of the Year for his work with children's charities. At home he stocked the pantry with canned tuna and peanut butter, never forgetting his childhood war rations and his hungry college days.

"You okay?" she asked, touching his arm. "You're a little pale."

"I'm fine. And this one's for you, my dear." He gave her a glass and sipped from his own. "It's going well, I think. The day's warming up. We may get our September heat early this year."

Madeleine frowned. "Jack..." She picked up his Giants cap from the table and handed it to him.

He smoothed his hair down with one hand and slipped the cap over his head with the other. "Just a little bubbly, Maddie. After all, I've given up the hard stuff. I'm still allowed some wine now and again."

“Doctor Lau said—”

“Doctor Lau said to cut back, and I *am* cutting back.”

Justin joined them, his face glowing with happiness. He hugged his mother, and she caught a whiff of spicy cologne.

She leaned back and touched his receding hairline, a genetic gift from her father. “Have I told you how proud you make me?”

“Once or twice.” His grin held many grins from many days past: playgrounds, soccer, Christmas.

Madeleine looked into his blue eyes, certain her son had matured years with this single ceremony, as though he had graduated, become a different person, a true adult. “I wish your grandfather were here.” Her pastor father had blessed many couples as they made their wedding vows, before he lost his faith, left the Church, and taught “values clarification” to grade school teachers. “Do you remember him? He died when you were nine, and your grandmother shortly after. He was a good man.” Madeleine spoke as though to herself; this was not news to Justin. She bit her lip. Why bring this up, today of all days?

“I remember him a little—he took me to the circus.”

“I remember that, too.” Her father had not been well even then. The early stages of Lou Gehrig’s disease were showing—slurred speech, twitching muscles. And, even so, he took her son to see Ringling Brothers’ circus.

Madeleine pointed to Lisa Jane, who was welcoming an elderly aunt into her circle. “But you’d better help your bride over there. That’s Aunt Edith she’s talking to.”

Jack hugged Justin and poured him a glass of champagne. As he watched Justin cross the lawn, he shook his head as though amazed at the miracle of time. “And now here comes our Elena.”

“I saw her dancing earlier,” Madeleine said. Elena and fifteen-year-old Bethany, Jack’s oldest granddaughter, had organized the younger ones in a circle dance.

Their young friend approached slowly, raising her long flowered skirt to keep from tripping.

Jack touched his chest. “One would never know she was born crippled.”

“God works in amazing ways.” In her mind Madeleine saw the Rome chapel where they had met Elena—the teenage girl in her wheelchair, playing a refitted organ, her golden retriever peeking from her side. Fifteen years earlier, the nuns had found her, a baby, on the convent doorstep, swaddled in rags, sleeping in a vegetable crate. They

gave her the name Elena Coronati—Elena after Saint Helen, for it was Helen’s feast day, and Coronati after their convent. They raised her as their own in spite of her spinal defect.

“It was so beautiful,” Elena said, her thick ponytail swinging. “They are so in love!”

“Miss Elena,” Jack asked, holding up two bottles, “would you care for champagne or sparkling apple juice?”

“Juice, please.” Elena raised dark brows. “The legal drinking age here is twenty-one, isn’t it? I’m only nineteen *and* on a student visa. I don’t want to do anything that might make me lose it.” She looked at the bottles in the bin. “But thanks.”

“You are wise,” Madeleine said. “I know there’s no age limit in Italy.”

Jack handed the glass to Elena. “Very wise. Although this champagne is a special one—my former brokers gave me a bargain price when they heard it was for Justin’s wedding.”

“Are you still involved with the new owners?” Elena asked.

Madeleine watched his reaction. When Mandalay Foods bought their import business, she and Jack retired to a comfortable life, enjoying a slower day. But soon she returned to teaching history at the university and researching her book. She was fascinated by accounts of miracles, those amazing moments when the supernatural intersected the natural.

At first, Jack didn’t seem to miss work. He played more golf and his handicap decreased. He did some fundraising for Coronati Foundation, the trust that supported Elena’s orphanage. Lately, however, Madeleine sensed an increased restlessness in her husband.

“I do a little consulting,” he said with obvious satisfaction, “and who am I to turn them down? Anyway, I own their stock—I have a vested interest.”

“He keeps busy,” Madeleine added.

Elena’s face grew thoughtful. “It’s important to use your talents.”

“It is. I’m grateful Justin’s found his niche in the building trade.” She turned to Jack. “Can you believe it?”

“Believe what?” Jack asked.

“That Justin’s married. My—our—little boy is married.”

He kissed her on the forehead. “The years have slipped away, haven’t they? But you look just the same, just a little gray here and over there.” He touched her hairline, teasing. “One would think you were thirty-something.”

“Thanks, but I’m afraid I’m not quite as trim as thirty-something.”

Madeleine smoothed her skirt over her hips. How had fifty-two come so suddenly? How had she grown from size six to ten?

“Who *is*?” Jack asked, as though there were safety in numbers.

“But *you’re* older. You have a better excuse.”

“Only by twelve years. I married a child.” He winked at Elena and she grinned, her wide smile white against her olive skin.

“And you jog.” Madeleine patted his hard tummy. “You’re in good shape, Jack, mostly. Maybe I should go to the gym with you.”

“After you finish the book?” Jack squinted as though he knew the answer.

“*After* I finish the book. With this semester off, I might make some progress. Say, I decided on a title, at least a working title. Elena helped.”

“Good girl, Maddie.”

“Which one did you choose?” Elena asked.

“*Holy Manifestations: God’s Presence in Our World.*”

Elena grinned. “That was my first choice.”

Jack rubbed his chest. “Sounds good. I knew it would have religion in there somewhere.”

Elena turned toward the buffet. “Let me get a plate of sandwiches for us.”

“Thanks, Elena.” Jack gazed at the bride and groom. “I’m so proud of him.”

“Me too.”

“He means the world to me, Maddie. I’ve grown to love that boy like he was my own.”

“I know you have, honey.”

Jack rubbed his chest and shook his head. “Do you think I was too demanding?”

“You set high standards—you wanted him to have the best, be the best.”

“True.”

“You set those standards for yourself as well.”

“As did my mother for herself—caring for the neighborhood kids and organizing the local PTA.”

“And your father?” Madeleine had never met Jack’s father, who died shortly after the war. Jack didn’t often speak of him.

Jack paused and stared at the grass, then at his black shoes.

“Sorry,” Madeleine said, sensing she had trespassed.

“It’s okay.” Jack’s lower lip twitched. “This seems a day for reminiscing. My father worked hard at the post office, but he played

hard too. We tossed a ball on Saturdays—mostly baseball but in the fall a little football too. He was pitcher in the local league. I worshiped him.”

“Then it was your mother who insisted on the violin lessons?”

Jack seemed relieved at the change of subject. “She was the one. Did you know I played a violin solo in the youth orchestra at the Paramount when I was fourteen?”

“You excelled at everything, I think.”

“I tried. I wanted a better life. We were *so* poor. Always scrimping and saving.” Jack poured a glass for a guest then turned to refill Madeleine’s.

“You got your better life, I’d say.”

“I did—I bought my mother and Meg new Sunday dresses with my first summer job. And our first TV. My first car at seventeen.”

Madeleine fingered the gold cross Jack had given her at Easter. It was a Greek cross, the arms of equal length. “And you rescued Justin and me.”

Jack chuckled and rubbed his chest. “That was a pleasure indeed. You two made it all worthwhile, although I have to admit Justin was a challenge at times. And here comes Elena, loaded with food.”

“I wish she wasn’t leaving. It’s like having a daughter in the house.”

“She had to return to Rome sooner or later, now that school is over.”

Elena set a plate of sandwiches in front of Jack.

“Why, thanks, Elena, don’t mind if I do.” He popped a ham-on-wheat triangle into his mouth. “We saw you dancing earlier. You looked great out there.”

“It’s a miracle for sure. My legs don’t recall ever being in a wheelchair.”

“You had good doctors,” Jack said.

“It *was* a miracle, Elena,” Madeleine said, her tone too serious.

Jack raised a napkin to his lips and looked at Elena as though sharing secret knowledge. “And I recall one doctor who was very fond of you. An American helping out at the Rome convent?”

Madeleine frowned, fearing Elena’s embarrassment. It had been two years since Garvey McGinty asked Elena to marry him and she turned him down. Elena blushed and looked away.

“Jack, she was barely seventeen. Elena, let’s find a place to sit and eat and people-watch. We can leave the romantic skeptic to pour champagne.”

Jack smiled and turned to serve another guest. The women found a

bench next to a newly planted maple tree, its young trunk bound to a stake.

Elena reached for a sandwich. “I don’t mind Jack’s teasing, Madeleine. I shall always be grateful to both of you. I’ll *never* be able to thank you enough.”

“Your being here is thanks enough. We’ve loved having you for the summer. And you’ll be a tremendous help at the orphanage with the accounting certificate.” Madeleine sipped her champagne. Tingles gathered and skipped down her throat.

“I’ll be happy to help, but I meant your fundraising for Coronati House. You were so generous—you saved us.”

“Jack enjoyed the challenge.” The project had helped her too. “And we were both so thankful for my healing.” The deep anguish Madeleine had known since her baby drowned would always be with her. *Had it really been twenty-four years since that summer of ’75? Since she left Mollie in the wading pool?* Some days it seemed like yesterday—she would never forget. But on that pilgrimage she had accepted God’s love.

“Are your nightmares truly gone?” Elena asked.

“Mostly. The journey through Italy worked miracles. But helping the orphanage has...how can I say it? Helping *continues* the healing.”

“I’m glad.”

“The convent does wonderful work in Rome, with all the babies and new mothers.”

Elena looked into the distance. “Perhaps I shall take vows, become a nun one day.”

Madeleine gazed at the young woman, so untouched by the world. Elena seemed unaware of her own beauty—her dark eyes, strong nose, full lips, and smooth skin. “You have time to work that out.” Could she give up marriage, motherhood, family?

Elena tilted her head, unconvinced.

Jack joined them and took a seat beside Madeleine. “I was getting a bit tired, so George is relieving me.” His face was white as he pulled out his blood pressure monitor and wrapped it around his wrist.

Madeleine waited for his reaction to the numbers. Medication had kept things under control, but he checked his heart rate regularly. He nodded an okay.

A young boy ran toward Jack, proudly waving a badge, his slacks grass-stained at the knees. “Mr. Seymour, Mr. Seymour! I got it. I got it. Thank you for helping me!” He lisped, his front teeth missing.

“And what did you get, Max?” Jack examined the cloth emblem. “It

looks mighty like a fish, it does.”

“It *is* a fish, Mr. Seymour. It’s my fishing badge.”

Madeleine grinned. She recalled the weekend Jack helped with the Russian River trip. He had come home aching and itching and sunburned and complaining he was too old for this.

“Congratulations, Max. We worked hard for that one, didn’t we?”

“Yeah.”

“And we’ll work hard on the next one, won’t we?” He handed the badge to the boy and tousled his hair.

“Yeah,” Max said and ran back to his mother.

Jack smiled weakly and touched his forehead. “Cute kid.”

“You okay?” Madeleine reached for his shoulder.

He leaned forward, swaying slightly. His glass slipped from his hand and onto the lawn. The clear liquid poured into the green grass.

“Sorry, not feeling too good.” His speech was hoarse, raspy.

“Perhaps we’d better go home.”

“My chest hurts...don’t want to alarm you...all the same, a bit dizzy. Let me rest a minute.”

“I’ll get Father Michaels.” Elena hurried away.

“Is it like last time?” Madeleine leaned over him, her arm around his shoulders, seeing the Emergency Room and feeling the fear. Doctor Lau had diagnosed acute gastritis and bathed his gastro-intestinal tract with an intravenous antacid.

“Yes and no...oh...” He doubled over, his hand on his chest. “I think I need to lie down. Don’t let Justin see me—don’t want to spoil things.”

The young vicar approached. He studied Jack’s face and felt his pulse. “Let’s take him to the rectory.” He motioned toward the house next door and helped Jack to his feet.

Chapter Two

San Francisco Medical

*We find suffering and love
twined so closely together,
that we cannot wrench them apart: and if we try...
the love is maimed in the process.*

Evelyn Underhill

Tuesday morning the rain fell in gusts, freak swirls of moisture carried over the sea by high winds. The red brick buildings of San Francisco Medical stood against the cold sky, solid and staid, suggesting permanence where there were no guarantees, only hopes, prayers, and goodly efforts.

Jack had survived his fainting spell, but tests were ordered. His EKG was normal. Even so, Conrad Lau ordered an endoscopy; the doctor would insert a minute camera through Jack's esophagus and stomach.

Madeleine followed Jack to the hospital entrance, through a crowded lobby, and into an elevator as the doors began to close. Their collapsed umbrellas dripped, water pooling at their feet. A woman in a wheelchair stared at the floor, creating an open space surrounded by tall, tense bodies. For thirty seconds they were a closed society of eight, travelers in a steel cage.

A bell rang, the door opened, and a disembodied voice announced the third floor. Jack and Madeleine squeezed out and walked down the wide, empty corridor to the end of the hall. Through swinging double doors, they entered the Diagnostic Center and took seats in a small waiting room crammed with empty plastic chairs.

Madeleine looked about the room. A sign on the wall read *Patients Rights and Responsibilities* in English, Chinese, and Spanish, the linguistic colors of San Francisco. A tattered *Good Housekeeping* magazine sat in a

plastic wall rack, *Hispanic* in the slot below. A disconnected lamp stood in the corner, décor without light. Air whirred through ceiling vents in the windowless room as they waited in the silence under long florescent tubes.

“I’m glad Justin didn’t see me faint,” Jack said, “and we were able to send him off on his honeymoon.” He focused on the opposite wall as though it held his future.

“We’ll have to let him know at some point.” Madeleine studied Jack’s strong profile, his jaw set, determined. “And your sons as well, for that matter.”

He rubbed his hands. “Not yet, not Justin and Lisa Jane, at least not until they get back. Doctor Lau insists it’s not my heart, but the pain sure feels like it.”

“I’m thankful it’s *not* your heart.”

“It could be worse.”

“Nothing’s worse than heart disease. Well, cancer, maybe, but Barrett’s Esophagitis isn’t cancer.” She tried to keep the tension out of her tone, the pleading.

He rubbed his chest. “Close enough—pre-cancer.”

“The doctor thinks you can help control the reflux with diet and stress reduction. Maybe you worry too much, honey.”

A wave of anger—or simply panic—crossed his face. “I have a lot to worry about. The market’s going crazy. Those stocks and bonds are our retirement, Maddie, at least what’s left of them.” He handed Madeleine his wallet, ring, and watch. “Be sure and talk to the doctor afterwards. He dopes me up and I don’t remember what he tells me.”

“I will.”

He covered his face with his palms. “I just retired and now all this keeps happening. I worked so hard, Maddie.”

“I know.” She shivered.

“It’s all so unfair. We finally can do things we never had time for or could afford. I wanted to travel a bit.”

“Jack, maybe you should try praying.” Madeleine reached for his hand. He withdrew it.

“Not now, Maddie, not now.” If it was panic before, now it was anger.

“Please, Jack.”

“This could be the real thing, Maddie.” He turned, his eyes imploring her to understand.

She touched his shoulder. “I know.”

The door opened and a nurse looked in. “Jack Seymour?” And to Madeleine, “He’ll be about two hours. The cafeteria’s on the second floor.”

Madeleine watched Jack disappear down the hall.

She pulled from her bag a slim paperback Father Rinaldi had given her—Evelyn Underhill’s *The School of Charity*. Today, she thought, it would be called *The School of Love*, for this earlier meaning of “charity” had faded with disuse. Perhaps she would find answers in these words to questions of life and death, why life *was* death, why man’s dying began the day he was born.

Where was Father Rinaldi now? She missed him, his comfort, his wise words. She saw in her mind the day he died, as he consecrated the bread and wine. Such a moment to die—in the midst of the great sacrifice of the mass. His heart gave out—he was, after all, quite elderly—and God allowed him this peaceful passing. Even so, his leaving them left a hole in their lives, an empty space that could never be filled. She would see him again, she often told herself.

The book lay open in her palms. She pulled out a pencil and notepad and soon was folding page corners, fearing she would forget the words, wanting to hold the visions of this Anglican mystic close and real and available.

Suddenly Madeleine put the book down, clasped her hands together, and closed her eyes.

She prayed for Jack’s peace, his comfort, the dulling of his pain. She saw the tube go down his throat and into his erupting stomach, where uncontrolled worry-explosions searched for a target and, finding none, destroyed the walls of his insides. The camera at the end of the tube would diagnose the present and predict the future. *Dear God, help us.*

Madeleine noticed other patients take seats and wait tensely, carrying their own revelations of mortality hidden, skeletons in a dark closet. Here, in this sterile space lit by cold rays, their bodies confronted their souls, thrusting them into the half-light, the physical facing the spiritual, as though meeting unexpectedly for the first time.

Time loomed precious as the sand fell faster through the hourglass, like rocks in an avalanche....

For more of the story, read on...

OFFERINGS

Christine Sunderland

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Don't Miss

PILGRIMAGE



Christine Sunderland

It was a day
when nothing should have gone wrong..
but everything did.

Madeleine Seymour will never forget what happened twenty-two years ago in her own backyard. She's still riddled with guilt. Hoping to banish the nightmares that haunt her and steal her peace, she travels to Italy with her husband, Jack, on a pilgrimage. As a history professor, Madeleine is fascinated by the churches they visit...and what they live about the lives of the martyrs. But can anything bring her the peace that her soul longs for?

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Coming Soon...

INHERITANCE



Christine Sunderland

She risked everything to save a life...
But who would save hers?

Vietnamese-American Victoria Nguyen, seventeen, flees to England with a powerful secret.

Madeleine Seymour, a history professor, and her husband Jack, a retired wine broker, travel from San Francisco to London to found a children's home.

Brother Cristoforo, a black Franciscan from the Seymours' Quattro Coronati orphanage in Rome, disobeys his superior, and must face his penance.

Woven through the mists of Lent to new life on Easter Day, *Inheritance* draws the lives of these four characters together to a stunning, unforgettable conclusion.

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About the Author



CHRISTINE SUNDERLAND, also the author of *Pilgrimage* (the first book of the trilogy and the story of Madeleine's journey through the grief of losing her young daughter, Mollie), 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 *Offerings*," Christine says, "I traveled extensively in France 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.

Inheritance, the third book of the trilogy, will be set in England.

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