

# FATHER FORGIVE ME

## Chapter One

When I was five my mother's sister Sophie would pull me up on her lap and tell me in her rich, deep baritone, "It's not easy being a woman, Sinda. You'll understand when you get older, believe me." Thirty-five years later I can still remember the scent of her Crepe de Chine, the way her woolen suit scratched against my bare legs, the faint smell of tobacco on her breath. I can hear her voice as if it were yesterday, "It's not easy being a woman."

Sophie would then slide me off her lap, place a fifty-cent piece in my hand and say, "The only advice I can give you darling is to save your pennies, be true to yourself and trust as few people as possible."

Aunt Sophie's fifty cent piece would go right into my rose-colored glass piggy bank, but her advice - to trust as few people as possible - was tucked away in the back of my mind. It's come in handy in my line of work. My name is Sydney Sloane, and I'm a private investigator.

Sophie's gone now, but every now and then her words come back to me in waves. Especially during the times when it's hard to be a woman, hard to be a person; times like this past winter. It's finally Spring, and, like everything else in sight, I am beginning to thaw after a long hard winter.

It all started on December ninth. It was a gray and cold Monday, and I was finishing up the paperwork for our last job; tracking down a fifteen year old runaway who had made it cross-country to San Francisco. I was pecking out on my computer the last depressing details of why she had bolted when my office door opened without warning.

Kerry Norman, our secretary whose career as an actress is beginning to take root, came and planted herself in front of my desk.

"What do you want?" I asked as I re-read the last of what I had written. *Debi Cullerson's father began sexual abusing her when she was three years old.* I pushed

away from the computer and peered over my glasses. My head was still in the Mission district with a frightened, angry, and pregnant fifteen-year-old.

"I know you didn't want to be disturbed, but there's someone here to see you."

"I'm not in today." I said without taking my eyes off the monitor. Kerry knew that a week earlier I had brought home the body of a child who ended her life because her life had been unbearable. I hadn't been able to make a difference. Hell, I couldn't even stop her from killing herself.

"What about Max?" I asked, motioning to my partner's office. "I really have to finish this." I turned back to the computer and pushed my glasses back up to the bridge of my nose. My glasses are a new addition in my life and my girlfriend, Leslie, has observed that I often use them as a signal to state, 'this conversation has come to a close.' As a whole I see them as one of life's signs that I am getting old. My eyes burned as I stared at the computer screen.

Kerry cleared her throat. "I don't think so. Mrs. *Cullerson's* out there and she wants to talk to you."

I took a deep breath and nodded. I then activated the screen saver to my computer so Joyce Cullerson wouldn't be able to read it and followed Kerry back out to the outer office.

When I saw her pacing the reception area, Joyce lowered her eyes and gave the impression that she wanted to be invisible.

Oddly enough, so did I.

However, wishing didn't make it so. I ushered her into my office and closed the door.

"I'm sorry to come by without calling." Joyce Cullerson was a plain woman with straight, light brown hair, flat, almost colorless eyes and a wide mouth. She stood in the center of the room looking as if she didn't know what to do next.

"Have a seat." I suggested as I moved behind my desk.

"Thank you." Instead of sitting though, she dropped her coat on the sofa, walked stiffly to the windows that face Broadway and looked out on to the street.

I waited for Joyce to tell me why she was there.

It was several seconds before she finally mumbled, "I came to warn you about Tom." When she said her husband's name, her shoulders seemed to rise. She turned to face me and I could see her pain as clearly as the navy blue sweater, white Oxford shirt and blue jeans that she was wearing.

I arched a brow but said nothing.

"Ever since you brought Debi back he's been in a rage. When he gets like this, there's no telling what he's likely to do." She winced as she sat carefully on the windowsill. It was clear that she needed to keep a distance between us.

"Are you all right?" I asked, more concerned about her than her message.

She let out a sarcastic laugh, like a sigh, and shook her head. "Oh, I'm great." She then buried her face in her hands and started crying.

Mrs. Cullerson had good reason to cry. When I finally found her daughter, Debi was living in the back of an abandoned building with two other runaways. I liked her right away. She knew her parents had hired me to find her, but I promised her I wouldn't bring her back if she didn't want to go. There were other options, I had assured her, other ways to make things right. After two days I'd convinced her to stay with me at the Fairmount. The day after she moved in, her father called, though we had all agreed that until Debi was ready, there would be no contact between she and her parents. I don't know what they said to one another, but by the time I realized what was happening, Debi had withdrawn into a thick silence. The only thing she would say was, "He'll never let go. Never." I had tried to get her to talk to me, to tell me what her father had said, but she was mute. Finally, she told me that she needed some air, needed to go for a walk. I wanted to follow her, but knew I had to respect her privacy because no one else ever had. The air she took was on the roof of the hotel. She left a simple note before she sailed off the edge of the building: "It's not your fault, Sydney."

It struck me, as I watched Joyce sniffing across the room, that I didn't like her very much. I didn't like her, and I was angry at both of us for the miserable way in which we had failed Debi. Joyce had to know that Tom had been sexually abusing Debi for years, yet she chose not to act against him; a decision that directly resulted in her daughter's death. As far as my own role in Debi's death? It is a blunder I will have to live with for the rest of my life.

"I'm sorry." She whispered.

I grabbed a few tissues from the box on my desk, crossed the room and held them out to her.

"What for?" I asked.

"Coming here like this." She waved her hand in a helpless gesture. "Crying."

"Crying is probably the healthiest thing you can do at this point."

"I didn't think I had so many tears." She blew her nose gently and cleared her throat.

"There's a lot of ugliness in your life, Joyce. How come you never stopped it?" I surprised myself with how abrasively harsh the question sounded, but is there a delicate way to ask something like that? I turned and went back to my desk.

She looked frightened. "Stopped what?" She asked in a small voice.

"Tom. What he was doing to Debi."

Her eyes flashed with the hesitation that reads loud and clear: DENY. DENY. DENY. But there was no denial when Joyce shook her head and asked, "Aside from killing him, how do you fight a man like Tom?"

"There are ways. She was your daughter." I said, well aware of the futile attempts people take daily to protect themselves from bullies and paranoid paramours.

"Do you think for one minute I don't feel as if I personally pushed her off that building?" Her voice cracked.

"I don't know what you feel." I answered honestly. "But you didn't come here for my opinions or my approval, did you?"

"No. I came here to warn you. Tom is convinced that you're the reason Debi killed herself. He wants revenge." Her eyes seemed to sparkle before she looked away and added, "I don't hold you responsible, Sydney. You have to know that. I blame Tom and myself, and that's it."

I wished I could share her take on it, but I didn't. I said nothing.

"Anyway, ever since last Wednesday, Tom's been swearing that he's going to even the score with you."

"And you think I should be worried about that?" I asked.

She gently pushed off from the window sill and carefully walked to the desk where she slowly alit on the visitors chair. "Oh yes. When Tom gets started on something

he just won't let go of it. His mother was Sicilian. I always thought people were just being prejudiced when they said if a Sicilian's mad they won't let go and it can make them crazy, but it's true. Believe me, Tom can be vindictive and mean." She crossed her right leg over her left with great difficulty.

"Did Tom do that to you?" I asked, feeling certain she was sporting some ugly bruises under her Banana Republic attire.

"He has a bad temper."

"I can give you the name of a place where they can help you."

She shook her head and looked remarkably peaceful. "I tried that before Debi was born. There's really nothing anyone can do. Except . . ." She raised her eyes to meet mine and seemed to be trying to tell me something telepathically.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing." She sighed.

Being the youngest of three I long ago learned how not to play the *Have-I-got-something-to-tell-you-oh-never-mind* game that older siblings use to torment kid sisters and brothers. I shrugged as if to say, "Okey-dokey", which naturally brought her to the point.

"There's only one way to stop Tom."

"And that is . . ." I prompted her.

"To kill him."

I returned her gaze, never once taking my eyes off her. Neither of us spoke for what seemed to be an eternity.

"Why are you telling me this?" I finally asked.

"Tom plans to hurt you." She twisted the tissue in her hands.

"And do you know *how* he plans to hurt me?"

"No. But I honestly think the only way to stop him is to stop him." It was clear that Joyce Cullerson was serious and way out of her league.

"Are you telling me, Joyce, that you want me to kill your husband?" There. It was on the table.

She looked like a mouse caught in a maze surrounded with the scent of cheese. "I thought maybe if you knew someone . . ."

"To kill your husband." I enunciated clearly.

"Well, yes." She shifted her gaze to her lap where her fingers were furiously shredding the tissue into bits.

I took a deep breath. "Do you realize that you could go to jail just for trying to hire someone to do that?"

"I can't live like this anymore." The color had long since faded from her face and her features all seemed to blend into one another but at that moment I was struck with how much she looked like her daughter. And I was reminded of a conversation identical to this in an abandoned house in San Francisco where a mattress on the floor had served as the total sum of home furnishings and a fifteen year old had insisted there was no future for her as long as her father was sharing the same planet.

"Murder is never a solution." I said feeling a little like Jack Webb on Dragnet.

"I think maybe sometimes it's the only solution." She whispered. "Tom and I have been married for seventeen years. For sixteen and a half years I have been afraid. Do you have any idea what that's like?"

"No. But I'm a private investigator, not a gun for hire. If you thought by being sympathetic to your situation that I would agree to kill Tom, you were wrong."

I was suddenly exhausted. I was also angry that she had thought I would agree to murder anyone. I considered asking her to leave the office, but I couldn't.

"Here." I scribbled down the name of an organization that helps women in her position. "These people can help you. Things are different now than they were fifteen years ago. Tom doesn't have to know where you are. You don't have to spend the rest of your life in jail because you couldn't think of another solution."

She balled the tattered tissue into her fist and nodded. "Yes, of course, you're right." She spoke to her lap. "This is my problem. I don't know why I brought it to you. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just don't throw your life away because you're afraid of him."

She raised her thin eyebrows. "Well, at least now you know to watch out for him."  
She grabbed the arms of the chair and steadied herself as she rose painfully.

I stood and handed her the name and number of the women's crisis center.  
"Please call them. If you like, I can take you over there right now."

She looked at the paper, shoved it in into her jeans pocket and shook her head.

"You need help, Joyce. But you have to understand, I can't do what you ask."

"Maybe I'll go to this place later. I just need time to think." She held out her hand.  
"Thanks for taking the time. I appreciate it."

"Don't do anything foolish." I opened the office door.

She nodded. "Be careful. You don't know him. He really is crazy."