

# *Absolution*

## Chapter One

Radko Slopovich did not have the kind of name most people associated with being a Catholic priest. Maybe in Eastern Europe, but here in the United States most Catholics thought of it as a slightly sinister name, more suggestive of a gang member or even a war criminal than a kindly man who might teach second graders their prayers. Nonetheless, Radko took pride in his name and his heritage, more so since he was part of the Roman Church, not the Orthodox Church of most of his countrymen. He thought that the name set him apart from others, something that appealed to his pride. He also thought it gave him some room to maneuver. So when he started his assignment in Chicago, he told people if they asked that he had tired of the East Coast and wanted to seek out humbler, more Midwestern roots. The truth was that he loved the East Coast with its cosmopolitan ways, rich cultural heritage, and even its hubris. He always agreed with the attitude he perceived in most residents of the original colonies: that they were the real United States, and that the states added after the Revolution were more like outlying provinces. Radko always felt lucky that his parents left the Balkans when he was an infant and settled in Maryland, where they raised him and his sister like good American children. Though his looks would have tagged him as a foreigner, his accentless English put everyone at ease that he was one of them, a true American. Radko had no memory of the Balkans, and his parents never returned with him to visit. So despite his appearance and the obvious foreign-born impression his parents made, Radko felt himself to be an American. He was granted citizenship when he was twelve.

He left Baltimore five years ago not because he didn't like it but because his life had taken a turn that surprised him, delighted him, and gave him constant cause for worry. He thought Chicago, where he didn't know anyone and where he could easily find work in the sprawling Church structure, better suited his purposes.

That was five years ago. During these years, Radko has been executing his priestly duties, as these were required by his influential if humdrum job in the Chancery office, and pursued what he came to think of as his real life without exposure. There were times when he got anxious about this, of course; but more often he was pleased that he had grown so skilled at living parallel lives, deceiving almost everyone he knew, and walking a tightrope so thin at times that he was sure it was only the grace of God that allowed him to do it.

Not that Radko put much stock in the grace of God. He had come to see himself as an intelligent but simple and honest man, not given to self aggrandizement so common among clergy, especially office-bound politicians who dreamed of dying in possession of a mitred or even a red hat. No, Radko believed he had few illusions about himself, even as he pursued a career in an institution in which his faith had dwindled. He was enormously fond of the Church he served and felt bound to it. It defined the context and texture of his life and was his road map for traveling through time. He loved its history, its liturgy, even its efforts to do good

in the world. In fact, he could hardly imagine not being a part of such an enormous worldwide organization with such power, such breadth, such reach across the globe. And not just in the West, but in the emerging countries: in Africa and even Asia; in Polynesia. It made his head spin just to think about it. But he saw himself as a modern man, perhaps even an intellectual, who had little use for the myths and folklore of Christianity. Despite his education and his pious upbringing, he could no longer make sense of arcane concepts like the Virgin Birth. Or transubstantiation. Or the Trinity, for that matter. Even the concept of God, something that Radko could allow, did not include a person with whom one was in daily conversation. Especially not on the receiving end. He missed these beliefs, but he was a realist.

On the other hand, Radko saw the world through religious eyes. Wherever he looked, he was awed both by its intricate beauty and by its sheer immensity. Everywhere he looked he saw mystery and knew from his reading and studies that even modern science limited itself to probabilities and not certainties. He also knew in his heart that, if you strip away the mythology of religion, its basic values—of reverence, of mystery, of love—best described the core experiences of self-aware humans on the planet. And his Church always seemed like the biggest tent: the place where the rich diversity of life was reflected in a tolerant and accepting way. The details didn't really matter to him.

So his “doubts”—he didn't really think of them as doubts; just as the way things were—began vaguely in his formation for the priesthood and never completely abated. They didn't even change. He did not have an alternative explanation for how the world was or who made him or why whoever made him made him. He didn't think these matters were really knowable or even important and wondered at those Christians who seemed so sure of the view of reality they foisted onto others so insistently. The term “born again” made him wince; fanatical “defenses” of marriage made him nauseous; damnation of the different made him faint. Fortunately, in his work, he did not have to deal with those types of pastoral concerns. The way Radko saw it, he was just a guy doing his job as best he could. For himself, for his wife, and for his family.

Because of all the ecclesiastical artifices that Radko had trouble digesting, the hardest was celibacy, that quaint if perverse stipulation that the Church had required of its priests for the past nine hundred years. One of the first things to go in the upheaval of the Reformation and one of the most staunchly defended institutions of the remnant Old Church, it remained a hallmark of the Roman Church, which exulted in its celibate priesthood even through the many sex scandals that revealed the extent of its sheer unworkability. Because Radko did not see himself as militant, and because he was a man not without ambition, he elected not to protest publicly this lunatic requirement. And because he loved the Church despite itself, he could not bring himself to abandon the priesthood. Nor could he ignore his desire—no, not only his desire, but his need—to be feverishly close to a woman, to love her in no way chastely, and to celebrate the children this fever spawned. To Radko, this was not so much a conflict as it was a matter of just living his life, juggling

his needs in the most efficient manner possible, much as a single mother must work and still be a mom. Tough at times, but no question about the need to do it. No question at all.

Of course, were his unorthodox lifestyle to be exposed, he would have to face music he did not want to hear. But being simple and honest did not include being stupid, and Radko did everything he could to make sure that such exposure would never happen. Not to him; not to his wife; not to his family. It was for this reason that he came to Chicago, a big, tolerant city where it was easy to be anonymous.