

EXCERPT from *Freeze Before Burning: A Sam Tate Mystery*
By Nikki Stern ©2021

Ed Rizzo slid his ample body into the ornate confessional, crossed himself, and pushed a strand of thinning hair off his forehead. “Forgive me, Father,” he intoned, “for I have sinned, although I’m pretty sure God will cut me some slack even if my wife won’t, if you take my meaning.”

At ten in the morning, the sanctuary was deserted. Good. He didn’t need anyone listening to his confession, which he unloaded to the figure who sat beside him in the confessional over the next ten minutes.

Even as he talked, he considered who might be on the other side of the grate. Rizzo couldn’t make out the features of the man. He wondered if he’d landed the new priest. Maybe a younger person would make light of his transgressions, which mostly related to his perfectly legitimate reaction to his obnoxious neighbor, Frank Pagonis.

Rizzo had his justifications lined up. He hadn’t survived more than a year of enforced quarantine with three kids and a demanding wife, never mind the missing paycheck for a while, only to put up with the stolen newspapers, a lawn mower returned with a bent blade, and a television loud enough to wake the dead.

“But when his dog, which, by the way, he refuses to leash and that’s against the law, went and dug up my tomato plants, yeah, I sprayed some stuff on whatever the mutt left. Not enough to kill the animal, you understand. He can’t help it if he has a jerk for an owner. I would have sprayed his owner’s food if I could have. The point I’m making is, the dog got sick, but it didn’t die, okay?”

Rizzo cocked his head, thinking he might have heard a faint sigh.

“Now he’s coming around with a pile of vet bills and talking about suing me. I told him to take his threats and shove them. I tell you, Padre, I am this close to beating that smug face or maybe twisting that scrawny neck of his. My wife claims that kind of thinking is sinful. I don’t think it’s as bad as doing the deed. I haven’t told her about poisoning the dog, but sparing her the details isn’t the same as lying, is it?”

Nothing. The guy had probably fallen asleep. The confessional was stuffy, and Rizzo experienced a touch of claustrophobia. Time to move things along.

“If you can just suggest a penance to perform, I’ll get it covered. Then I can be on my way.”

He stopped talking, suddenly aware of the silence, how absolute and enveloping it was. The noises of the city street outside had receded. He could hear himself breathing.

“Hey, Father? You all right in there?” Rizzo scratched the grill dividing the two sides of the confessional. His head was pounding now, and he felt vaguely dizzy.

“I know I’ve been yakking a lot. How about we wrap this up, okay?” Again, no response. It occurred to Rizzo that the other man hadn’t said a word the entire time. What if the good father had suffered a heart attack?

He hoisted his bulk off the narrow bench and pushed himself out of the tiny space. The other side of the confessional had its own entrance. He rapped on the door, then tried the handle, more out of instinct than anything else. It turned in his hand, and he pulled.

The black-garbed figure sat with head bowed, hands folded in his lap as if in prayer or contemplation. Or asleep. Rizzo put a tentative hand on the man's shoulder. With a sigh like a punctured balloon, the black-robed figure tipped sideways off the bench, fell to the floor, and rolled like a blow-up toy.

Startled, Rizzo jumped back. *Stay cool*, he told himself.

He bent over with an *umph* and put two fingers to the priest's throat to search for a pulse. He expected to feel cold, not the scalding heat that burned his skin.

"Jesus Christ!" he yelled, forgetting for a moment where he was. He waved his blistered hand in the air and hopped around until a wave of nausea stopped.

With his foot, he nudged the body so that it rolled onto its back. He stared, speechless for once, at the face of the priest. Then he stepped farther back, pulled out his cell phone, punched in 9-1-1, and gave his report to the dispatcher in a calm, measured tone.

He agreed to wait for the police and medical authorities just outside the church. He even accepted the suggestion that he might dissuade others from entering until help arrived.

Without looking again at the body of the priest, Ed Rizzo crossed himself. He walked slowly to the front door, stepped into the fresh air, and threw up.