



In God We Trust

By  
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# 1

The screams of the young girl echoed through the halls of the dimly lit orphanage. The damp, pungent smell of mildew reeks through the walls from years of neglect in the centuries old building. The sounds of children screaming are all too familiar with the longtime residents. The building, constructed in the mid 1800's, was once a proud symbol of Catholicism and stood as a beacon of hope to many in the surrounding area.

No one would ever believe the atrocities that have been inflicted upon numerous unsuspecting youths since the building was erected. It has since become the true definition of nightmares to many who escape its grasp. The dust on the cinderblock walls is thick from lack of attention, and the carcasses of dead rodents are scattered throughout. Insect remains seemingly hang in midair, suspended by thin strands of spider webs.

Candles line the window sills, flickering with every turbulent, pain induced shriek the child releases. The stress of childbirth was never meant to be endured by one so young and innocent, but tonight, she must be strong or suffer the dire consequences. She lies on an old wooden, hand crafted table. Its boards creak, having never been designed to bear the weight of a birthing mother. Through the flickering of the candle light, cobweb shadows dance to the sound of her voice, which increases in intensity with every excruciating contraction.

Tears stream down her face as she clenches her worn, stuffed teddy bear and she tearfully stares into the eyes of the midwife who looks on endearingly. The stench of uterine blood

saturates the room with a thick odor that permeates the walls and can be smelled through the empty hallways and corridors.

The midwife stares into the child's prepubescent eyes as she positions herself at the end of the table trying to calm the 11 year old little girl with her softly spoken words. She herself has seen better days. Her down trodden uniform is wrinkled and stained from years of slave like labor and countless situations similar to this one.

Her face is a permanent mask of sadness from having to watch another child's innocence being taken away at the hands of perverted men behind the orphanage walls she so willingly gave her life to serve so many years ago. Although still relatively young herself, the stress of having to endure many years of psychological trauma have made her look 20 years older than the 31 years she has served the halls of the catholic orphanage.

"You have to breathe child. It's almost over but you have to relax and breathe." The midwife speaks in a steady calm tone.

The young girl nods her head in agreement as she attempts to slow her breathing. The midwife languishes for a moment. She is all too aware that the pain is almost unbearable for a child so young. The midwife begins to breathe slowly and the young girl mimics her rate of breathing and calms herself.

"Good. Very good my child. Now push with all of your might."

She knows the strength of an 11 year old girl is laughable at best, but nonetheless, the child heeds her words and gathers all of the strength she can muster. The child takes a deep breath and begins to push with all of the strength that she has in her weakened body. She grips the teddy bear tightly as she lets out a scream in anguish. The arm of the teddy is partially torn off as the girl makes an effort to push the premature baby out of her young womb.

“That’s it. Just one more time and it’ll all be over child. PUSH!!!”

The screams of agony fill the room and her bellowing soon softens as her labored breathing becomes lighter. The room is soon filled with the soft whimpering cries of the premature newborn in the arms of the midwife. The midwife grabs a dingy blanket and wraps the tiny 4 pound baby boy tightly, before walking over to the exhausted little girl to show her the fruits of her laboriously painful undertaking. The baby is now the living embodiment of the young girls lost innocence. A symbol of what once was, and, what will become of the future.

She looks at her newborn son with tears in her eyes, too young to understand the emotion of having just given birth that most mothers feel. Her soul is void and empty while staring into the face of this creature she doesn’t know how to feel towards. She never reaches for the child, but still tightly clenches her teddy bear, the only thing that gave her solace through her now lost childhood and innocence. The midwife, attempting to alleviate the obvious tension, speaks softly.

“What will you call him?”

Her words seem to fall on deaf ears as the young girl stares blankly at the child with a weakened, yet determined gaze.

“Caleb.”

The word leaves her lips as she passes out from the exhaustion. Father Langley, who had been watching from a seated corner of the room silently praying, jumps from his chair and briskly rushes over to the table. His cassock is freshly pressed as if he just pulled the outfit from his closet. He permeates musky aftershave and cologne barely overshadowed by the acerbic aroma of blood covering the table. A handsome yet worn looking man in his late fifties, his tall, slender frame resembles that of a distance runner.

Strands of salt and pepper hair comprise his receding hairline, and his facial stubble has obvious hints of fading hair dye, showing his deep rooted vanity. With his tattered bible in one hand he places his free hand over the limp girl's forehead before placing it over her chest. He mimes a crucifix across his arms and the center of his torso, before removing his cassock and collar, placing it down next to the worn copy of the Old Testament.

“She’s not breathing!” He shouts at the midwife.

He begins to administer CPR as the midwife stands holding the newborn. She looks on with disdain knowing full well that he is the cause of the child’s current dilemma, offering nothing more than a begrudging gaze as he tries to revive the young girl.

“She is still not breathing! Lord, please! Help this poor girl!”

His frantic words grow louder yet seem to go unanswered as he attempts to breathe life back into the little girl. The midwife stands silently amidst the candles with the newborn child crying in her arms desperate for the first touch from his dying mother.

## 2

The fourth empty container hits the floor with a loud, metallic bang that bounces off of the desolate church walls. The sound slicing through the piercing stench of gasoline soaked wooden floorboards. The interior is dimly illuminated by the street lights reflecting through the stained glass windows, making the inside of the old church appears as regal as ever. The shadow of the crucifixion of Jesus appears to encompass the entire floor, magnified as if to intimidate those who doubt his presence in the great structure.

Caleb laughs at the faint sounds of police sirens in the distance, amused by the irony. His weary, wrinkled face shows the scars of a hard tumultuous 30 years of life. His steely gaze scours the room with contempt, balking at the thought of the numerous innocent souls who gave their trust to those who would easily prey on the naiveté, hiding behind the shroud of religious protection. With each step he takes towards the hand molded sculpture of Christ behind the center of the pulpit, gasoline seeps through the carpet to the rubber soled boots he wears giving the slightest squishing noise.

Standing at the base of the statue, he stares in disgust at all of the church's religious artifacts before dropping the explosives filled duffel bag next to him. He pauses before he places the bomb detonator carefully on top of the bag. Stepping even closer to the statue of Jesus, he unzips his pants urinating on the statue before spitting on its marble face.

“Even with all of the proof that you don’t exist people still believe in you. You’re nothing but a fucking plague on humanity.” The disdain in his voice is too clear to mask. “Like a virus the thought of you keeps spreading and infecting more people. But I know better.”

Zippering his pants, he picks up the detonator and duffel bag, slinging it over his shoulder. Pulling out a lighter engraved with the initials F.L., he backs away from the statue flicking the lighter open before using the lighter to ignite the gasoline saturated carpet at the pulpit steps.

“You need to be eradicated,” the words leave his lips with a snarl.

He remains motionless momentarily, long enough to watch the inside of the building go up in flames, basking in his destruction. The wooden floors immediately catch fire igniting in a fiery blaze. The carpet immediately follows suit and the curtains begin to join the raging inferno. The building now roars with the sounds of hungry flames, and Caleb arms the detonator as he walks past the explosive charges he set before entering.

The faint sirens heard earlier are now growing louder, signaling their impending arrival. Climbing into his vehicle, he takes one more look at the burning building, watching the cross centered on top of the roof slowly ignite before detonating the explosive charges. He observes unemotionally as the building explodes from the inside out. The windows explode, showering the parking lot with fragments of glass, and flames roar from the window remains. The once historic church is turned into a flaming pile of wood and brick. As the sirens approach within mere blocks, he shoots one last disdainful glance before driving into the night.

### 3

The bartender over pours the long island with enough liquor to imbibe a 400 pound man twice over, handing it to the lumpy drunk at the end of the bar. The place is a dive frequented by the local neighborhood riff raff and bikers alike. The sun glares through the front window reminding everyone inside that it's far too early to be there. Half past 11am is far too early for a drink that potent to cause anything but calamity, and by the looks of the patron, he has seen his fair share. He removes the straw and takes a gulp straight from the glass. His face frowns up and he winces at the taste with an expression that looks as if he bit into a lemon dipped in goat shit.

“Is it too strong?” The bartender appears disappointed at his own work.

He swallows, setting the glass down and takes a deep breath eyeing the bartender.

“Perfect.”

The bartender smiles and nods his head, happy that his handiwork has been appreciated. His gruff exterior and lack of a substantial amount of teeth suggest that he doesn't receive a lot of appreciation for anything else. He smells like old, stale cooking grease, and residual alcohol from endless late night duties at the bar. The numerous photos taped to the mirror behind the bar, showing various members of the community with the bartender, give the impression that he is well known and liked.

Although, the scars on his face and use of a leg brace, lend to the idea that he probably isn't well liked by everyone. Happiness in his eyes that is evident in the photos is no longer there, replaced by a seemingly sullen and blank void. Beard hair hangs down to his chest with

thinly dispersed strands of grey throughout. His balding, grey hair lingers down the back of his sleeveless biker jacket and is pulled into a ponytail revealing his neck tattoos.

Caleb sits at the other end of the bar casually sipping his beer and eating an order of over cooked, dry chicken wings when the news comes on. From behind the counter of the dilapidated bar, the bartender looks up at the TV as well. A news station is covering the investigation into the church explosion the previous evening, and a reporter is interviewing the pastor of the congregation. The reporter looks to be young and inexperienced, yet, eager to do a good job. Her blonde hair is flat, and hangs down to her shoulders with bangs in the front. Her skirt is a light yellow with a matching jacket and baby blue undershirt. And her red lipstick looks oddly out of place on her thin lips against her pale white skin and dark blue eyes.

“Police are still searching for clues in the bombing of a downtown church last night,” the young female reporter looks excited to be reporting on an exclusive story.

“According to investigators, the building was empty and no one was harmed,” the camera zooms out and captures the pastor in the frame standing next to the reporter.

“The pastor of the church says that even though the damage was extensive they will rebuild as soon as possible,” her bubbly enthusiasm still apparent.

The bartender shakes his head and turns around towards Caleb.

“You want another?”

Still staring at the T.V. screen Caleb nods his head in agreement. The bartender pulls out a chilled pint glass from the lower fridge and pours a beer from the tap. Frost appears on the glass, as he pours the ice cold beer while glaring back towards the T.V. at the news reporter continuing her coverage.

“This is the third church bombing this month and although some people are speculating this could be the work of the Godless Organization better known as GLO; investigators haven’t confirmed at this point whether or not that’s true,” her voice turns to investigative.

The bartender notices that he is spilling beer due to being distracted by the news. He stops the tap, setting the beer down in front of Caleb.

“Who in the hell would want to blow up a bunch of empty churches?” The bartender speaks out loud to himself.

He grabs a towel and wipes his hands and then begins to wipe down the bar while still transfixed on the news report. The reporter has begun interviewing the Pastor who shows his optimism even during the less than positive situation.

“Well, with the grace of God we will rebuild bigger and better, and we will be back to worship his name,” The pastor speaks with enthusiasm. “It’s a miracle that no one was hurt, but we believe it was Gods saving hand and we will honor thy heavenly fathers name by rebuilding as quickly as possible!”

“What a bunch of mindless goddamn idiots,” Caleb lets out a smug chuckle as he picks up his beer and takes a sip. “They’ll never fucking learn.”

The bartender and a few other patrons in the bar hear Caleb’s’ comments and look at each other in disbelief. He sets the towel down and glares at Caleb.

“Hey buddy, what do you got against the church? It’s a miracle that nobody got killed,” the bartenders voice is agitated.

“No, it isn’t,” Caleb sharply replies.

“What? Hey, you want to repeat that?”

“Yea, I said it’s not a fucking miracle,” Caleb’s dismissive words leave no room for confusion this time.

A few of the other patrons get up from their seats and begin slowly making their way towards Caleb. One of the patrons, named Scrubs, is a large, stocky white man. He looks as if he is the head of the local chapter of the Aryan brotherhood. For some reason he appears particularly insulted at Caleb’s insensitive comments. His shaved, tattoo covered head, blocks the sunlight beaming into the front window of the bar. His veins are bulging out from underneath his pasty white skin as if he had just bench pressed a small vehicle before entering the bar. .

“My mother goes to that church,” the bartender’s voice grows more agitated with every syllable.

“Really? Well now your mother will have to get brainwashed somewhere else,” Caleb answers dismissively.

A second patron named Fats, is slowly making his way towards Caleb. He glances over at Scrubs, waiting for him to make an aggressive move. His stomach, which isn’t covered adequately by his undersized, grease stained t-shirt, hangs over his belt. His short stature makes his head barely visible above the bar, and the ridiculously strong drink the bartender made him has obviously kicked in, indicative of his slow moving wobble and slurred speech.

“Wh-What did you just say?” the second patron moves into striking distance.

Caleb looks out the corner of his eye, paying close attention to the movements of the approaching men. He sizes them up and prepares to defend himself against an inevitable ambush attack. A third would be attacker named Randy, pulls a knife out of his back pocket, which doesn’t go unnoticed by Caleb. He whips his head to the side forcing his long greasy, dirty blonde locks out of his face. He looks like a throwback to an 80’s hair band, with the matching

sleeveless Metallica t-shirt complete with beer stains. His tall lanky frame seems frail enough to be blown away in the midst of a strong gust of wind, only anchored down by the heavy doc marten boots on his feet.

“Hey Scrubs, I don’t like this guy’s attitude,” Randy sound annoyed.

“Scrubs??” Caleb laughs insultingly, and looks directly towards the buff, pasty white Aryan. “You’re nicknamed after a nurse’s uniform?”

The bartender sees that things are about to get out of hand and tries to intervene before things get physical.

“I think it’s time for you to leave buddy,” the bartender tries to diffuse the situation before it gets bloody.

“What? Isn’t a man entitled to his own fucking opinion in a bar anymore?” The sarcasm in Caleb’s reply is apparent.

“Not my fucking bar. Not against the church either,” The bartender’s voice rises steadily. “Now get the fuck out!!”

“Fuck you,” Caleb’s defiant reply doesn’t go unanswered.

Scrubs tries to take a swing at Caleb but is caught in the face with Caleb’s elbow before he can draw his arm back. The elbow, delivered to his nose with pinpoint precision and force, shatters his nose. He starts gushing blood like a broken fire hydrant. Scrubs let out a shriek of agony before collapsing to the floor.

Caleb then picks up the beer mug and smashes it across the face of Fats, knocking him out cold and shattering the mug to pieces. In the same motion he swipes the remaining half of the broken mug across the neck of Randy, hitting a major artery. He drops to the floor just as Caleb turns to the bartender who is pointing a 12 gauge shotgun in his face.

“Get, the fuck out, NOW!!” The bartender yells.

He cocks the loaded weapon as a sign of intimidation, and Caleb slowly puts his hands up in the air. Caleb throws the bartender a disdainful look before pointing and acknowledging Randy bleeding on the floor with his neck sliced open.

“He has about four minutes before he bleeds out. You may want to call an ambulance,” Caleb informs him unmoved.

With blood covering his face and hands, Scrubs stands up and observes a standoff between unarmed Caleb and the bartender.

“What the fuck are you doing? He broke my fucking nose, shoot this bastard!!!” Scrubs barks.

“I’m not shooting an unarmed man!!” The bartender reluctantly barks back.

Caleb makes his way to the door, and pushes it open. He slowly backs out, his hands still in the air. The bartender puts the gun down and grabs the phone as he makes his way around the bar dialing 911 in the process.

“Hello? I need an ambulance fast!!”

Caleb walks blindly towards his van parked across the street. Walking right into traffic without looking, he causes vehicles to swerve and slam on their brakes. A motorist swerves narrowly missing him and Caleb doesn’t even flinch still making his way to his vehicle. The driver hops out his vehicle and begins a profanity laced rant.

“You fucking dick head what the fuck is – “

He stops short in his tracks once Caleb gives him a blank devil eyed glare and begins walking in his direction. The motorist sees the evil in his eyes and immediately runs and jumps

back in his vehicle speeding away. Caleb turns around and makes it to his van, looking at his watch realizing he has a previous engagement that he has to keep.

“Right on time.”

## 4

On this particular Sunday afternoon the church is more packed than usual. Jacob Osmond, world renowned preacher and televangelist, is giving his sermon to a packed crowd of about 20,000 devout Christians. His church is an old stadium that was previously used as an athletic arena for the local professional sports teams, but has since been renovated. The building is now home to his large congregation which is also broadcast every Sunday to millions around the world.

Jacob is more charismatic than most preachers you see. He is a tall, dark haired, handsome man, who possesses a certain attraction that women are drawn to, like a moth to an irresistible flame. His voice is deep and commands attention but calming at the same time. Like James Earl Jones or Lou Rawls, mixed with hints of Frank Sinatra. In his early 40's, he is the type of man with a charming appeal that any woman would be proud to bring home to their family for dinner. Dressed impeccably, his \$3,000 wingtip shoes always matched his \$7,000 custom Armani suits that fit so perfectly it looked as if he were poured into them. He is always perfectly groomed, with every strand of hair perfectly cut and in place, and every fingernail manicured. His cologne was so effervescent that it could still linger in areas he had left hours before.

The acoustics inside the arena carried his voice to the top seats so that every believer would hear his voice as if God himself were sitting next to them. Today he was more boisterous than ever. The 80 inch television monitors scattered throughout the building gave a crisp view of everything happening on stage, and the camera crew on staff ensured that he was always in

perfect focus. The dance between him and the audience was somewhat poetic in nature. They always knew when to cheer, applaud, or be silent. The symmetry was more parasitic though, and he knew that without his followers as host, his preaching would mean nothing. Every word he spoken was as if it were scripted and planned out for months, he made it seem as if he spoke directly to their souls, and of course their pocketbooks.

“Now I want to tell you something. God didn’t put us here to be perfect. He didn’t put us here to be without sin,” Jacob’s words are soothing.

“He knows we are all sinners. But he wants you to be a better person and he knows that you can achieve that if you make sure that you are closer to him,” He flashes his pearly white teeth. “

“But you have to accept Jesus Christ into your heart every day. When you think you can’t survive whatever he is putting you through, know that he is right there with you every step of the way,” His slick tongue leaves the audience enamored.

The crowd erupts with applause at his powerful message as if it were the first time their ears had heard something so prophetic.

“God doesn’t want you to suffer. He wants you to bask in his glory and have all of your dreams come true. But that first step means accepting Jesus Christ into your hearts,” Jacob puts the icing on the cake.

“The collection plate is being passed around now. Open your hearts to Christ and Christ will open doors in return. I want you all to pray with me right now so that – “ His words are suddenly cut short.

Feedback pulses through the speaker system causing the audience members to cover their ears in irritation. The loud pitched whining is followed by the TV screens going blank. The

audience is bewildered by the sudden diversion before the TV screens suddenly come back to life. Although this time, a strange shadowy figure is laughing on the screens with the letters GLO in the background. Jacob looks around, puzzled by what's going on.

“What the hell is this?” Jacob looks to the cameraman who is obviously rattled. “What’s happening?”

“I don’t know it looks like they hacked the feed,” The cameraman answers obviously frustrated.

Jacob becomes enraged losing his temper at the mishap. “Well get it back! NOW DAMIT!!” He yells at the cameraman.

“I’m trying!”

The crowd looks around in despair. Frantic and bewildered they panic, trying to figure out if a practical joke is being played on them. The voice that comes through the speakers is ominous and terrifying.

“You people are pathetic. You still believe that God is real. You still believe that some mysterious invisible man is the answer to all of your fucking problems,” The words come across as condescending.

“ I’m here to tell you once and for all you’re wrong. YOU are the PROBLEM!” The voice grows more agitated.

Audience members begin to realize that the situation has gotten out of control as panic begins to set in. Jacob is still confused as to the severity of the situation, and he tries to calm everyone down to no avail.

“My brother, I can hear you are hurting. Come down here so we can talk. Whatever is bothering you, Jesus can help. Just accept him into – “Jacobs words are once again cut short.

“Shut the fuck up!!” The congregation gasps in unison, as the fear begins to show on their faces.

“You are a manipulative liar who takes advantage of the weak minded. You spread conjecture to those who are too weak to think for themselves. You are a cancer. You and all of the people who listen to you need to be eradicated from existence.” The voice grows more agitated with every word.

Screams emanate from the crowd drowning out most of his words. People are scrambling from their chairs trying to make their way to the doors in an effort to escape the building. Jacob is still trying to reason with the frantic audience in the middle of the mayhem.

“No my brother. I have seen the face of Jesus and he is real. He can –“

“Before you all die I want you to ask yourselves a question,” Jacob is abruptly interrupted again. “I want you to ask yourselves if you were God what you would do to help mankind. I want you to think of all of the things you would do to make the world a better place. Then, I want you to realize that your God has done NONE OF THOSE THINGS!!! Your god allows starvation, death, disease, bigotry, sodomy, incest, hatred. Your God allows priests to rape innocent children in his name in churches and does NOTHING!!! The truth is, there is no GOD. Religion is a disease that needs to be destroyed. You are the cancer and I am the cure.” His words stun everyone leaving them temporarily speechless.

Laughter resonates throughout the buildings speaker system as the screens go blank and the main lights go out completely. Backup generators are triggered powering the dim emergency lighting system. Members of the congregation are now screaming, violently shoving each other in the shadows, stepping on one another trying to escape the building. An elderly woman walking through the aisle holding her grandchild is knocked to the ground and the child is

thrown from her arms. The child, no more than 3 years old, screams in pain, as she is trampled to death in front of her grandmothers' eyes. The elderly woman helplessly watches as the child who is reaching with her arm outstretched towards her, is crushed under the weight of grown men carelessly scrambling to make their exit.

A wave of people rush the church doors and the weight of the crowd crushes the individuals who made it to the door first. The doors have been blocked off with chains during the sermon, ensuring that everyone will face the same fate. Timers connected to explosives within the building count off their last seconds before detonating simultaneously. The bombs detonate, sending shockwaves and flames through the halls, collapsing the entire structure on top of itself. The roof is disintegrated and falls down on top of the doomed crowd violently crushing everyone. Sitting in his van outside in a vacant parking lot two hundred yards away, Caleb removes his headphones and watches the building crumble in a blinding inferno of fire and smoke. The chaos brings no joy to Caleb's face as he stoically sits, staring at the destruction he has just caused.

"Fucking Cancer," Caleb slowly mutters watching the scene.

# 5

Caleb pulls his van into the dusty warehouse and presses the button on the remote control, closing the garage door behind him. Chains on the garage doors creak loudly, the sounds resembling a medieval drawbridge. The garage door shuts with a loud thud, echoing throughout the damp warehouse as the van emits puffs of smoke from the tail pipe, indicative of the need for an oil change. Paint is peeling back on the aging vehicle revealing faded spots of primer from years of neglectful treatment. Looking worse for wear, Caleb exits the vehicle wearily and pulls his duffel bag from the back of the vehicle. He walks over to a dingy table carelessly throwing the gun filled bag on top of a stack of more guns and explosives.

The warehouse is sparsely lit in some areas highlighting the dilapidated environment in which he lives. The smell of sulfur permeates the air from the surrounding chemical plants. A makeshift workout area sits in one corner of the building, complete with punching bag, free weights, barbells, dumbbells and a full bench. A spider slowly inching along a damp towel draped across the dusty bench, hints at workouts that have been far and few between lately. Multiple computer screens line one of the walls connected to security systems with infrared, night vision cameras that provide surveillance for the perimeter of the building.

Loud music blares through the old speakers as Caleb spots the shadow of a body out of the corner of his eye. Grabbing a gun from the table, he slowly moves towards the back room, cocking his semi-automatic pistol in the process. Reaching for the door he points the gun out in front of him making sure the first thing the intruder will see is the barrel looking back at them.

He slowly turns the door knob thrusting the door open just as a woman jumps from behind the door opening, jumping up and wrapping her legs around his waist happily.

“Hey you’re back –.” Candice jokingly smiles at Caleb before noticing the loaded gun in his hand. “What the fuck is that for?”

Her jovial demeanor changes to bewilderment. Candice looks younger than her age of 43 years, but the trauma of a hard life is still apparent. A beautiful woman in her younger days, the signs of age are beginning to catch up to her at an inescapable pace. Her long, dark, curly hair is thick, but out of place, and slightly matted from not being washed regularly. Her hands are calloused and her face is showing wrinkles and laugh lines through the heavy lipstick and thick coat of foundation. The cut off t-shirt she wears hides her sagging breasts, and the thong panties highlight the barely visible stretchmark’s on her ass and the back of her thighs. Healed puncture wounds on her forearms from years of repeated use of hypodermic needles reveal an addiction to heroine from days that have long since passed. Clean and off of drugs, Candice is still attractive enough to live the life of a call girl, but unable to maintain a 9 to 5 occupation.

“What are you still doing here?” Caleb pushes her away from him forcibly, obviously irritated by her presence. “You said you would be gone before I got back.”

Undeterred, she engages in playful banter with an unemotional Caleb.

“Yea, well, I didn’t have anything else to do and nobody called me so I just kind of stayed here and waited for you,” She responds coyly.

“Waited on me for what?”

Caleb begins getting undressed as Candice walks up behind him rubbing his back. She turns him around runs her hands along the jagged ridges on his scarred chest.

“Because I figured we could hang out.”

“Why?” his tone is dry.

“Well you know you didn’t exactly finish last night so I figured I could make up for it.”

Her playful response causes Caleb to raise an eyebrow.

“You don’t have to do that,” he sternly states.

“I know, but I want to,” She is still undeterred by his indifferent attitude. “You’re one of my best customers and I want to make sure you’re satisfied.”

“Look, you shouldn’t have even stayed here last night and I’m not about to pay you again.” Caleb’s reluctance is transparent to Candice, as she continues her attempts at seduction. Her hands make their way from his chest down to his jeans and she slowly unzips them wrapping her hands around his already erect penis.

“That’s ok. This one’s on the house.”

Candice strokes his throbbing hard erection and begins making her way to her knees. Caleb doesn’t resist any more and tilts his head back, moaning in pleasure as she puts her warm lips around the head of his penis and strokes him. Small drops of pre ejaculate ooze onto her tongue as she slowly massages his balls, causing him to moan even louder with every stroke. Listening to his sounds of pleasure excites her more, and she responds by opening her mouth wider, pushing all of him down her throat until her tongue can feel every inch of him pulsing ready to explode.

Caleb, now unable to control himself, grabs the back of her head and begins thrusting in her mouth. Candice obliges by putting both hands around his ass pulling him deeper and deeper with every thrust, her saliva dripping out the sides of her mouth and down her chin onto her exposed nipples. Caleb, unable to take it anymore, grabs Candice up and throws her on the bed nearby and pounces on top of her. He rips her panties off and forcibly enters her much to her

delight. The sounds of rough sex fill the warehouse and Caleb and Candice both forget the tattered remnants of their faded lives once again. For another night nothing else matters except the right here and right now.

## 6

Candice sits across from Caleb staring into his face like a smitten, adolescent school girl. She hasn't felt a connection with a man in so long that it felt refreshing, even if it was purely physical with him. She knows he doesn't feel the same way but none of that mattered. Her life of a low level prostitute, drug addict, and call girl haven't given her much along the way of a true love life, but she seemed to be drawn to him like no one else. He is harsh, dismissive and unemotional, but, even though he was a paying customer, he treated her with a certain level of respect that most other johns didn't offer.

'Bad to the bone' plays through the speakers in the seedy diner, while Caleb and Candice indulge in a late night meal. The faint smell of sewage and old cooking grease permeates from the unsanitary kitchen. It's obvious a health inspector hasn't visited this establishment in quite some time, and the employees all appear to have just returned from a halfway house after a long and arduous prison stint. A squeaky ceiling fan rotates slowly above them while a news reporter is on the local news covering the investigation of the most recent church bombing. It is the same reporter that reported on the first church bombing that involved Caleb.

"The police are making little headway in the latest church bombing, which killed over 19,000 people, including well known pastor Jacob Osmond and his wife."

Caleb stops eating and stares up at the screen as the reporter continues her coverage.

"People are afraid to go to church due to the lack of progress in the case. Police have offered a \$50,000 reward for any information that leads to an arrest."

Candice looks at the screen blankly then back down at her food morbidly. “That’s so sad.”

Caleb is unmoved by the report. “What? Oh. Is it?”

“Of course it is how could you say something like that?” Candice is taken aback by his nonchalant lack of compassion.

“Why do you give a shit? You’re a whore. What has God ever done for you?” Caleb looks at her scornfully.

“Excuse me??” Candice is surprised by his demeanor.

“What did God do for those people in that church?” Caleb stares into Candice’s eyes.

“Fuck you! I may not be a saint but I damn sure don’t want to see a church full of innocent people die on a fucking Sunday!” Candice retorts defiantly. “All those people wanted to do was praise God.”

Caleb is still unmoved. “Yea, well you see what all that praising God got them don’t you?”

“How can you be so fucking heartless? There were children in that building!! Mothers and fathers!!” Candice is almost brought to tears she is so upset.

“Everybody except GOD apparently!!” Caleb yells back quickly.

Caleb slams his hand down on the table causing the employees to look over at their table. The cook peeks from behind the kitchen wall at the commotion in the dining area and Candice stares back at Caleb surprised at his heartless demeanor. She grabs her jacket and stands up from the table.

“You know what? You’re an asshole. I’m out of here.” Candice replies as she stands up from the table.

“See ya.” Caleb doesn’t even look up as he replies and continues to eat his food.

Candice stares back at him in disbelief. She expected him to show at least an ounce of emotion but it just wasn’t there. She shoots him the bird and walks out of the diner as he continues to finish his meal. When he turns his head to look back towards the T.V. the waitress is standing in the way blocking his view and holding a pot of coffee. Her uniform is stained from endless hours of wear and weeks of not being washed. The faded name tag on her shirt reads Beatrice. Her shoes are scuffed from nonstop 12 hour shifts and her matted dark hair barely fits underneath her dingy fraying hairnet.

“Well that went well,” she sarcastically proclaims.

Caleb smirks. “Yea.”

“More coffee?” she moves the pot towards his cup.

“No, I’m ok just let me get the check.”

“Here you go.” She pulls the bill out of her pocket and slams it down on the table. Caleb looks taken aback as he watches her walk away.

Caleb glances at the bill and sets it down. He retrieves a wad of cash out of his pocket and digs a wrinkled \$20 bill from the wadded mess. He sticks the money under the plate with the check and stands up. Reaching for his keys he spots an old man sitting at the far end of the diner at a table by himself. He grabs his keys from the table and heads towards the door noticing the old man is not eating and there are no plates or cups on his table in front of him. No one has acknowledged him, and they are behaving as if they do not even see him sitting there.

His hand carved cane is sitting on the table top with both hands wrapped around it. Dark glasses that adorn his face would indicate some sort of vision impairment and he looks to be at

least 80 years old with a lot more salt than pepper strands in his hair. Caleb assumes that because he is African American they are ignoring him and allowing him to sit there.

“Hey,” Caleb gets the attention of the waitress and she turns around and looks at Caleb, obviously caught off guard.

“Somebody gonna help this guy?”

The waitress looks to the table where Caleb is pointing and doesn't see anyone sitting in the section he is referring to.

She glares back at Caleb. “There's no one sitting there.”

Caleb raises an eyebrow and looks at the table again looking at the man obviously still sitting there motionless. He looks back at the waitress and then back at the table.

“Whatever.”

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Caleb's dirty, old, brown cargo van creeps down the desolate highway filling the atmosphere with puffs of smoke from the tailpipes with every press of the gas pedal. The sparsely placed street lights along the highway provide minimal assistance down the dark roads. And his crooked headlights prove to be equally ineffective, barely allowing him to see 10 feet in front of the vehicle. He turns on the radio, and searches for a cd in the passenger seat. Fumbling through the cases he spots an N.W.A. CD and puts it in the deck. He fast forwards to his favorite song, 'Fuck the Police' and blasts the volume to the maximum.

As he sits back in the seat, he makes his way around a hairpin curve in the road and a figure seemingly appears from nowhere right as he comes around the corner. The old man from the diner is standing directly in front of his vehicle causing Caleb to swerve.

“Holy FUCK!”

He screams while turning the steering wheel sharply to avoid hitting the old man. The van veers off the road into the woods and shoots down a hill. Caleb slams on the brakes, but the muddy ground provides little traction as he slides towards an oncoming tree. As the vehicle slides closer to the four foot wide oak tree at the bottom of the hill, Caleb throws his hands up and the van slows to a halt right before colliding with the tree. Startled and puzzled, he jumps out of the van running back up the hill to the road. Caleb looks around for the old man, but only sees darkness and the tire tracks from where he swerved and ran off the road into the woods. Shaking his head, he walks back down the hill to his vehicle which is still sitting idle in front of the tree.

“I must be losing my fucking mind,” He mutters to himself.

Caleb hops back in the driver seat closing the door and puts the van in reverse. Looking out the driver side window, he slowly presses the gas pedal and backs away from the tree. He turns his head to glance out the passenger window and is caught off guard by the old man who is now sitting in the passenger seat.

“What in the fuck?!?!?”

Caleb quickly looks to his waist and reaches for his semi-automatic pistol, pointing it towards the passenger side of the vehicle, only to realize that the old man has vanished, and he is aiming his gun at the door.

“Ok what the fuck is going on?” His deep breathing is panicked as he tries to calm himself down.

He places the vehicle in park and looks around inside the back of the van only to see that it is empty. Caleb takes a deep breath and lowers his head setting it down on the steering wheel. After a few moments he lifts his head and drives the van back up to the road and pauses for a few seconds mumbling to himself.

“Get it together man. You’re fucking falling apart here.”

Rewinding the song ‘Fuck the police’ on the CD player, he drives the van, now covered in dirt and leaves, back onto the highway and drives off into the night.

# 7

Fresh blood drips from a portion of a brick wall down into a large red puddle on the ground, attracting a swarm of flies to hover around the stench. A broken arm hangs lifeless amidst the piles of concrete cinder remnants. Bones protrude the split flesh as muscle tissue sits exposed, rotting in the sun, making for a tantalizing meal for the buzzards soaring above.

Tears of red flow from the eyes of a dead woman, as her liquefied brain matter oozes from her shattered skull onto the pavement. Her bulging belly once filled with new life waiting to be born, now crushed under more than 100 tons of bricks and concrete. The baby girl she carried never having the chance to take her first breath. The mountain of blood stained rubble covers thousands of bodies, hiding the graphic reality of a gruesome atrocity. Faint, ghostly like screams are heard, growing more frequent and louder with each passing second, before finally becoming an orchestra of voices simultaneously bellowing in agony. Then, all at once, the voices seemingly stop and begin playing in reverse like a grateful dead album spun backwards. It's as if someone pressed a pause button and then began to rewind a faces of death video.

The bloody tears flow in the opposite direction and the split flesh begins to heal itself. The broken bones are put back in place and the crushed bodies begin to heal all at once. Brain matter, which once flowed outward from bashed in skulls, now flows inward as the wounds close themselves. The acres of rubble and brick begin to lift off of the broken bodies and starts flying around putting themselves back in place. People stand up unharmed and take backwards steps while the fire lessens. Explosions are pushed back inside of the bombs from which they erupted.

The old black man emerges and walks unaffected through the middle of the backwards scene, his eyes seem to glow crimson red from the reversing flames.

Caleb wakes from his sleep gasping for air. Sweat dripping from his face and body leaves a pool in the bed that has soaked through the sheets. He slows his labored breathing and sits on the edge of the bed holding his head, his stomach sick from the repeated nightmares of the carnage he caused. He stands up from the bed and heads into the kitchen for a glass of water. While drinking from his glass he is overcome with a sense of guilt and begins to contemplate informing law enforcement of his actions. Glancing over at the phone he replays the nightmarish visions in his head that have been haunting him since the church explosion. He slowly picks up the phone and dials 911.

“911 please state your emergency.” The voice on the end of the phone is hurried as he holds the phone speechless.

“Hello? 911 please state your emergency.”

Caleb glances over towards a mirror into his reflection. His mouth opens to speak, but he freezes, unable to utter a word as a torrential wave of anger comes over him and he slams the phone down. Inhaling deeply he takes another drink of water before walking towards the bathroom. Turning on the light, he sets the glass of water down on the sink and reaches for the soap. He turns on the faucet, picking up the soap to wash his weathered face. The dust covered light bulb flickers for a moment making a crisp popping sound and Caleb looks at it briefly before it stops. After rinsing the soap from his face he reaches for a towel and pats his face dry. Pausing for a moment he runs his hands across his facial stubble and lets out a depressing moan.

Caleb opens the medicine cabinet and retrieves his razor and shaving cream setting them on the counter. When he closes the medicine cabinet the reflection of the old man is glaring back

at him. The reflection places the old man standing directly behind him. Startled, Caleb quickly reaches for a gun he keeps conveniently stashed under the sink with duct tape, knocking the glass of water to the floor, shattering it in the process. Just as quickly as the glass hits the ground he spins around pointing the gun at the empty space.

“WHO ARE YOU????” Caleb screams “WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT FROM ME???”

His bellowing voice bounces off the walls as he stares into an abyss of obscurity in the empty hall. He walks towards the door and sticks his head around the corner to find nothing waiting for him. Lowering his pistol he sets it down on the sink next to his razor, and looks down at the shattered glass on the floor, shaking his head. Turning his head back to the mirror he is taken aback at a message that is seemingly sprawled across it in red letters.

**‘12903 Holly Hills Lane – THEY ALL MUST DIE!!’**

Caleb stares at the message curiously. “What the fuck?”

Caleb walks over to his computer which is sitting in the warehouse on the table in the living area. He grabs it and walks over to the couch and sits down, typing in the address that is written on his bathroom mirror. The search engine pulls up a large Catholic Church and private school on the outskirts of the city. Scrolling through the church webpage he finds the name of the Headmaster and performs a new search on him.

Upon further investigation into the Headmaster of the church, Father Riley, Caleb finds out that he was prosecuted on child molestation charges 8 years prior in another state. Apparently when he was deacon at a different church he repeatedly molested numerous young boys over a

three year period before being caught. Only one accuser would take the stand in court, and although he was indicted and prosecuted for the crime, he was set free when the trial ended in a hung jury. Before the District Attorney's office could prosecute him again he was relocated by the Catholic Church and given a promotion to Headmaster at his current location, St. Agnes Catholic School.

“Son of a bitch,” Caleb mutters to himself before getting dressed.

## 8

Candice's red stiletto heels make a distinctive clicking sound on the pavement as she makes her way up the steps to her rundown apartment. She lives in a slum and frequently has to step over drug addicts on the steps just to enter the front door of her apartment building. Tonight though seems different. The night is quiet and the streets are eerily desolate. A slight fog hovers in the air as she looks around cautiously. The last time she came home this late she was assaulted on her front steps, and sometimes there are intruders waiting for residents to open the door to follow them inside the building. But tonight there is no one waiting outside. No stray animals in the street and no drug addicts lying on the front steps. She pulls her keys out of her purse and unlocks the door and quickly enters slamming the door behind her. She exhales deeply, trying not to let her paranoia get the best of her.

She walks through the hallway to the elevator and presses the button. She can hear faint voices on the opposite side of the walls, residents carrying about with their everyday lives. As she stands waiting for the elevator she hears footsteps behind her. Reaching into her purse she grabs a vial of pepper spray, something she picked up after the last heroin addict tried to assault her on the steps. The footsteps stop as she turns around quickly pulling the pepper spray out and pointing it at the empty hallway in front of her. Her eyes scan the surroundings slowly as she comes to the realization that her fear is controlling her mind. She puts the pepper spray back in her purse just as the elevator bell rings and the doors open. Never loosening her grip on the

pepper spray she enters the elevator and turns around glaring at the empty hallway. The doors close just as a shadowy figure in a brimmed hat steps around the corner just out of her eye sight.

Candice makes her way to her apartment and closes the door behind her locking a multitude of deadbolts before turning the light on and throwing her purse on the kitchen table. The apartment is a one bedroom studio, best described as overpriced and under furnished. A single couch sits in the living area with a small throw rug in front of it. The kitchen table is wooden and looks as if it came from a thrift store or a yard sale. A single double bed sits in the corner next to a makeshift night stand made from milk crates. A loud train rumbles by her window, shaking the entire building in the process. Candice ignores it as if she has heard the sound on countless occasions, so much that she doesn't even notice it any longer. She walks to the bathroom and turns the light on staring into the mirror. She hums an indiscernible melody to herself while she removes her earrings, placing them on the bathroom sink. Turning on the water she grabs a small piece of soap sitting on the sink and begins washing her face removing all of the makeup.

She grabs a towel and starts patting her face as she leaves the bathroom heading into the living area again. As she is patting her face she drops the towel and screams, startled by the same old man Caleb has been seeing sitting on her couch motionless.

“What the fuck are you doing in my apartment?” She yells.

“Candice, don't be scared.”

“It's a little late for that,” she snaps. “What the hell do you want?”

“I need you to do something for me.”

Candice walks over to the kitchen area to the refrigerator. She opens the fridge and looks around. The only thing inside is a six pack of beer, a few bottles of water and some other various condiments. She grabs a beer and closes the fridge.

“Something like what?” She asks.

“You aren’t going to offer me one?” he asks politely.

Candice sighs, obviously annoyed.

“Would you like a beer?” she asks slowly.

“No thank you.” He replies smiling.

“That’s why I didn’t offer you one asshole.” She snaps back.

“Yes. But, its good manners to offer.”

“Look old man. You’re the last person who should be trying to talk to me about manners.” Candice replies, her attitude growing more impatient.

“Ok, fair enough.” He answers quickly.

“Do you think its good manners to show up in someone’s house unannounced?” She states matter-of-factly.

He stands there speechless as she continues her ranting. She walks over to the kitchen table and pulls out a chair sitting down.

“As a matter of fact, you show up here almost a year ago out of the fucking blue. Then you tell me some bullshit story about my past and I am just supposed to believe it?”

“I understand your anger Candice, but you’re going to have to set aside your animosity towards me for now. What I need you to do is bigger than you and I.” The old man states steadily.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Candice asks curiously.

“I need you to take a trip. Pack a few things. You won’t need much.”

“Where am I going?”

“I’ll tell you on the way.” He replies.

Candice gets up and makes her way to the bathroom to grab her personal items mumbling along the way.

“I’m really tired of this bullshit dad.”

# 9

The van crawls to a stop at the address that was written on the mirror in Caleb's warehouse. He sticks his head out of the window and glances at the sign on the front of the building. Several lights from the garden illuminate the sign just enough to make out the words. St. Agnes Catholic School. Sculptures of gargoyles sit atop the main entrance of the church. The grey brick walls look old but sturdy and well maintained. Lights adorn the grounds enough to show certain parts of the building, but are just dim enough to make an easy target for someone looking to cause mayhem.

Caleb glances at the old brick building with disdain and smirks at the fact that he is about to turn the entire structure to dust. His concern for human life is basically null at this point. Anyone whom he sees is able to turn a blind eye to such egregious abuse of a child is susceptible to the collateral damage he is about to cause, now, and forever. He drives a few blocks away and parks the vehicle, grabbing his duffel bag full of explosives and guns. He quietly navigates the grounds, making his way towards the school under the cover of shadows.

Most of the lights inside the building are off or dim from candlelight as Caleb crouches underneath the window of a dark room. He opens his duffel bag and quietly begins setting his explosives around the building. As he makes his way to the rear of the main building he encounters a mass of rose bushes and slices his hand in a few places.

"Shit." Caleb whispers as he feels the sting on his left hand.

He glances at his hand and realizes its bleeding in a few places and he needs to clean it up quickly to avoid infection. He stops his mission for a brief moment and digs in his duffle bag retrieving a bottle of alcohol and a rag. Hastily pouring some alcohol on the rag he places it on his injured hand grunting in discomfort. He places the bloody rags and alcohol back in his bag and searches for his gloves to cover the wound.

While digging for the gloves in his bag he hears voices coming through one of the windows. He finds the gloves and while putting them on his hands he listens intently trying to hear exactly what's going on. Believing it's nothing, Caleb ignores the voices he hears at first and goes about his business and continues to set explosive charges. But the voices grow louder, and as Caleb slowly makes his way to the other side of the building, the voices quickly turn into painful screams of agony from the window just above his head. Startled and confused he cautiously pokes his head up to peer into the window with trepidation. His eyes grow wide with disgust momentarily before his jaw drops. He is overcome with fury in a split second as he is taken aback by the gruesome scene he is witnessing.

Inside of the church office, which is dimly lit by candles, four church parishioners are surrounding the Headmaster of the school. The parishioners all stand naked; stroking their half flaccid penises. The dim lighting illuminates the wrinkles on their pasty white skin, and the candle flames dance in the void created by the shadows where their sunken eyes should be. They all breathe heavily, waiting for their turn to participate, salivating like dogs. As they watch with anticipation at what is taking place, the Headmaster is reciting bible verses in front of a young boy. The boy, no older than thirteen years old, is forcibly bent over a desk being mercilessly sodomized by the Headmaster. With each thrust the Headmaster speaks another verse of the

scripture while the boy wails in pain. The boy is trying to keep quiet to the best of his ability but the trauma is too much to bear and each stroke becomes more painful than the last.

“Oh my child, you are truly a gift from the heavens. While they also by prayer on your behalf, yearn for you because of the surpassing grace of god in you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” The Headmaster joyously recites.

“PLEASE STOP!!” The young boys pleas go unanswered as the Headmaster thrusts into him again.

“But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift! Therefore it says when he ascended on HIGH, he led CAPTIVE a HOST of CAPTIVES, and he gave gifts to the MEN!” The Headmaster continues his ranting.

He thrusts deeper into the boy causing him to scream out in pain at the top of his lungs. Caleb bursts into the room just as the boy empties his lungs into the air, pulling his guns out. With the precision of a trained marksman he shoots four single shots at each of the four half naked men. The bullets strike each one directly between the eyes making an exit hole the size of a grapefruit in the back of their heads. Their bodies collapse on the floor as the startled Headmaster reaches for his clothes and Caleb puts a bullet in his back, crippling him. The right side of his chest explodes spraying the wall with his blood. He crumbles to the ground gasping for air and writhing in pain.

His thin frame is frail and old which is more visibly apparent as he lay in the ground struggling to survive. The receding hairline has erased more than half of his hair, and his comb over did nothing to hide the lack of follicles on his head. The blood that leaks from his gaping wound spills onto the carpet. If it weren’t for the carpets dark red color, one would shudder at the sight of so much blood and carnage. Fortunately the blood is barely visible against the backdrop

of crimson carpet and dim lighting. Life is rapidly escaping his body while he is trying to crawl away as Caleb walks up behind him slowly.

“Turn around you fucking piece of shit,” Caleb growls

The Headmaster, on the brink of death and coughing up blood slowly turns over and looks Caleb in the eye.

“MURDERER! You are the spawn of SATAN and you will BURN in HELL for all ETERNITY for this ATROCITY in the house of the LORD!!” He screams at Caleb.

“I wish.”

Caleb’s dry response is deafened by the sound of bullets leaving the barrel of his pistols. The smell of gunpowder fills the room as he empties the remaining bullets into the Headmaster spitting on his bloody corpse. He grabs two more clips from his waist and reloads his guns walking over to the young boy who is now on the floor. He sits motionless in a pool of blood from the violent sodomy, looking up at Caleb with eyes full of tears.

“Do you still believe in God?” Caleb asks facetiously.

The boy nods his head slowly causing a frustrated Caleb to give him a bewildered look as he kneels down to look into his eyes. He lowers his voice almost to a whisper in order to be less intimidating.

“Why??” Caleb yells confused.

The boy clears his throat and wipes his eyes. “Because everything is part of Gods plan. None of us are able to neither question his plan nor judge our fellow man.”

Frustrated, Caleb looks down at the ground and shakes his head in anger. The response, which sounds scripted, only aggravates him further. His demeanor changes as he stands up and points one of his guns in the boy’s face.

“God didn’t save you then. God isn’t going to save you now,” Caleb scowls back.

He stands there with the barrel of the gun pointed in the boy’s face struggling to pull the trigger.

“I’m ruined. Do it. Please. God sent you here to save me. End my suffering. Please.” The boy pleads with Caleb.

Confused Caleb lowers his gun and looks at the child in angst. He takes a deep breath and turns away momentarily. He becomes enraged at the child’s words and exploded in a fit of anger raising his guns again.

“THERE IS NO FUCKING GOD!” Caleb screams.

Caleb opens fire on the boy emptying both clips into his body and dropping his guns on the floor. He walks out of the room grabbing his duffel bag as an alarm goes off in another part of the building. Making his way out of the church, Caleb detonates the explosives he set around the building as screams fill the night air before being drowned out by the roar of the explosions.

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“Fucking cancer!!! All of them are just FUCKING CANCER!!!!” Caleb angrily screams to himself as he speeds down the dark highway.

Caleb bangs his fist on the dashboard of his van making a small crack on the surface. Obviously distraught from the scene he just encountered, he keeps continually replaying the events in his head over and over again. He digs his hand down inside of his jacket pocket and pulls out a crumpled pack of cigarettes. Yanking one from the pack and placing it in his mouth he throws the pack in the passenger seat of the van. From the same pocket in which he pulled the

cigarettes, he retrieves an old zippo lighter and tries to light the cigarette hanging from his mouth. His hands are shaking uncontrollably as if he has tremors, causing him problems while trying to get the lighter to catch so that he can light the cigarette in his mouth. The lighter finally catches fire, but, he accidentally drops it in the van while it is still lit.

“Fuck.”

A piece of paper catches fire while he is reaching down to pick up the lighter. Losing control of the van he careens off the road onto the shoulder. Caleb tries to correct the vehicles trajectory, but over compensates and turns the wheel too hard to the left. The mistake causes the van to cut too hard and flip over in the middle of the road multiple times. Continuing to flip out of control down an embankment, Caleb is tossed inside the cab of the van like a rag doll violently, before finally coming to rest at the bottom of a hill. Caleb curses at himself, angry at his own carelessness. Excruciating pain shoots through his entire body as he tries to move and he looks down at the damage that has been done.

Caleb lies in the van badly wounded with multiple compound fractures in his legs and arm looking around at the interior of the flaming vehicle. He looks down at one of his crumpled legs and moans in pain at the sight. The flesh is split open and a portion of the bone is visible through his skin and pants. He struggles to exit the van but he is making little progress due to his injuries. His destroyed vehicle bursts into flames, just as the struggling Caleb is able to pull his broken body halfway out of the vans shattered windshield. His lower half catches fire as he makes it fully out of the windshield and is screaming in agony, unable to douse the flames that are now beginning to consume the rest of his body. Managing to grab onto a nearby tree, he attempts to pull himself to his feet, but the flames have fully consumed him and he drops back to the ground burning to death his legs collapsing under him.

Caleb immediately realizes his injuries are fatal and this will be where he will take his last breath. As he lays there in becoming further engulfed by the ravaging flames his thoughts turn to the son he lost. The thought of being able to see his son again somehow in the afterlife gives him a sense of solace and he resigns himself to the outcome of his mistake before passing out from shock. Darkness consumes his thought as he lay there lifeless and in flames.

Seemingly out of nowhere the old man appears in front of Caleb dropping his cane to the ground. He removes his gloves and kneels down in front of him and waves his hand in front of his smoldering body. The flames that are burning his flesh to cinders slowly begin to disappear, and Caleb's charred skin begins to heal. As his body is repaired he regains consciousness and stares at amazement at his hands and body no longer in flames and fully restored. He looks up at the old man just as he vanishes. Caleb stands up, his burned clothing hanging off his body, still reeling from the shock of what just occurred. He strikes a confused glance at the carnage in his wake before running off through the woods, his crumpled van still smoldering behind him.

# 10

An old, beat up truck pulls in front of the warehouse. Weary, and half dressed in burned rags, Caleb is sitting in the passenger seat being glared at by the driver of the vehicle. The driver has a beat up Jack Daniel's trucker hat on with a dusty flannel shirt. He spits into a cup from the wad of dip on the side of his mouth and the vehicle is filled with empty beer cans. The passenger door opens slowly as Caleb cautiously gets out of the vehicle. The vehicle smells like stale beer and cigarette smoke and apparently hasn't been cleaned in ages.

"Man you would've been walking for a long time if I hadn't seen you. Are you sure you're ok? Looks like you've been through hell." The cab driver states, looking Caleb up and down.

"Thanks for the ride," Caleb is groggy

"Ok no problem. Take it easy man.," the driver answers cordially.

The driver speeds away as Caleb makes his way into his warehouse. Stumbling over his couch he flops down face first, laying there for a few moments before rolling over on his back. He digs in his pants pocket and retrieves his cigarettes putting one in his mouth. Still tired and barely holding on he pulls his lighter with the initials F.L. engraved on the side out of his pocket. He stares at the lighter incredulously, his eyes are barely able to remain open. He never gets to light the cigarette in his mouth before passing out from exhaustion.

He falls into a deep sleep as his eyes fall shut and blackness engulfs his mind. He flashes back to the gruesome scene he encountered at the St. Agnes Catholic School before setting it

ablaze. The sight is as fresh in his mind as it was in real life, as he watches unable to help as the boy is raped repeatedly. The boy screams at the top of his lungs as the Headmaster sodomizes him mercilessly with a devilish grin on his face. His eyes hold a darkness Caleb has only seen once before, when he was a child.

The Headmaster recites bible scripture in an indiscernible tongue as he laughs over and over again, the rape scene replaying on a somewhat continuous loop. Caleb watches as the young boys face is transformed and the Headmaster slowly begins to resemble Father Langley. Caleb quickly realizes the young boys face has been replaced with his own younger, adolescent face. He is now watching his own rape by Father Langley, when he was just 12 years old.

His screaming stops and a look of anger consumes his face, as the Headmaster has now assumed the face of Father Langley. The young boy spots a letter opener sitting on the desk he is hunched over and grabs it, concealing it in the palm of his left hand. Caleb looks at his younger self and watches as the young Caleb spins around swiftly planting the letter opener deeply into the neck of Father Langley. Blood spews from the wound as the Headmaster lets out a ghastly scream like a banshee on fire. He falls backwards onto the floor writhing in pain as young Caleb pounces on him removing the letter opener from his neck and rapidly plunging it into his skull over and over. Blood gushes from the wounds and is splattered on the walls by the violent stabbing and before long young Caleb is only stabbing a life less mound of mush.

He drops the letter opener and slows his labored breathing before digging into the pockets of the corpse. He retrieves his wallet first which he digs through recovering a few loose bills totaling about \$150 dollars and tosses the empty wallet to the side. He digs in the other pockets and finds a cigarette lighter. The lighter is a classic silver zippo with gold overlays and the letter F.L. engraved on the side in old calligraphy style text. Young Caleb stands, up pulling his pants

up in the process. He puts the money in his pocket and stares at the fancy lighter. He lights it and admires the flames seemingly entranced by the light of the fire. Caleb jumps from his sleep violently gasping for air before calming himself down groggy and still sore from walking, he shakes his head and sits up on the couch pondering the nightmarish dream he just experienced and the other strange events that occurred during the evening.

“What the fuck is happening to me?” he mutters to himself.

With the events from his fiery near death experience fresh on his mind, he chuckles when he sees his van undamaged and parked in its usual spot. Upon seeing the van he believes that everything that happened last night was nothing more than a bad dream. Shaking his head as he walks to the bathroom, he turns the hot water on in the shower and the room quickly fills with steam.

# 11

After a relaxing hot shower Caleb is getting dressed when the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. The fact that there is another presence in the room is unmistakable as Caleb feels his heart rate increase. He could feel the mood in the air change causing his adrenaline to rush through his body. He grabs a gun off of the dresser, spinning around with lightning speed and pulling the trigger all in one motion, letting a flurry of bullets fly towards the old man. Unfazed, the old man doesn't flinch while Caleb is reacting to the surprise of his ominous presence in the room. With a raise of his hand the bullets racing towards his frail frame are stopped in midair just inches shy of striking the old man in the face and chest. The bullets are suspended until the old man slowly lowers his hand causing them to follow suit until finally dropping to the ground altogether. Realizing the gun he is holding is useless at this point; Caleb lowers it, dropping it on the floor and raises his fists, circling the old man.

“Who are you?” Caleb angrily asks. “And what the fuck is going on?”

“If the bullets were no good against me what effect do you think your fists will have?”

The old man smirks with hubris.

“You didn't answer my fucking question.” Caleb defiantly stands his ground.

“If I wanted you dead I would have let you die last night Caleb.” The old man states matter-of-factly.

“Ok smart ass,” Feeling like an idiot, Caleb looks at his hands and lowers them to his side.

“Now answer my question. Who are you, and what the hell is going on? Why do you keep following me, and how do you know my FUCKING name?” Caleb’s grows more agitated.

“All very good questions.”

“Yea well, are you going to answer them?” Caleb answers impatiently.

“Have a seat Caleb.”

“No, I think I’ll stand.” Caleb’s responses are still defiant.

“You need to take a seat.”

“Listen old man, I don’t know who the fuck – “

Caleb’s words are cut short as his feet lift off the ground when the old man raises his hand. His eyes grow wide with surprise as he is flung violently across the room into the couch. He throws an evil stare at the old man as he regains his composure.

“Ok asshole, maybe I will sit down.”

“Thank you.”

Waving his fingers the old man moves a chair across the room to a place directly in front of where Caleb is sitting on the couch. He then vanishes and reappears, sitting down in the chair startling Caleb. He sets his cane in his lap and removes his glasses.

“Now to answer your first question, I am the beginning, and the end. I am the Alpha and Omega of all existence.”

“What?” Caleb is confused.

“I have always been and will always be. I am who your race so egregiously refers to as God.”

“Bullshit.”

“Indeed,” God is matter of fact in his answer.

“You can’t be god,” Caleb is almost dismissive but intrigued.

“Why not?”

“Because there is no God,” Caleb answers sternly, staring directly in his eyes.

“Yet here I am.”

Caleb stares at the old man curiously and then lets out a small laugh.

“This is fucking crazy,” Caleb is still laughing. “I must still be sleeping and having a bad dream or something.” Caleb’s dismissive attitude annoys the old man.

“Just because you don’t believe something exists doesn’t make it true.” The Old man shoots back.

Staring at the old man intently, Caleb’s reply is short and smug. “You want me to believe you’re God? Ok prove it.”

“How do you explain what just happened then? The gun? The bullets?”

“You broke in while I was asleep and set that shit up. It’s some sort of illusion,” Caleb smirks. “A magic trick or something.”

“A magic trick?” The old man grows impatient.

“Yea.”

“Ok then. How do you explain last night? You burned to death when your van caught on fire while you were trying to light a cigarette.”

“You set that up too.”

“Oh, did I? How? Do tell.” The old mans’ irritation begins to show.

“Yea, you must have drugged me somehow. I hallucinated that.”

“Ok. What would you like for me to do to prove it to you?”

Caleb laughs. “I don’t know Mr. GOD. You tell me what it would take for me to believe you.”

“Name it. Anything.”

“Anything? Ok. I’ll play your stupid little fucking game but – “ Caleb doesn’t get to finish his sentence.

The old man snaps his fingers and instantly the walls on the house are gone and Caleb finds himself floating in orbit above the planet. His eyes grow wide as grapefruits as he struggles to breath but realizes that he cannot. Attempting to scream proves useless as he realizes he also cannot speak. He continues trying to speak as the old man floats calmly besides him. The old man turns around and points behind Caleb motioning for him to turn himself. Caleb slowly spins 180 degrees and is greeted by a stunningly beautiful view of the sun. Caleb’s mouth is agape as he stares in awe at the beauty in front of him, but still unable to voice his disbelief.

“You cannot speak in the vacuum of space.” God speaks through telepathy. “Just think whatever you need to say.”

“What the fuck is happening??” Caleb’s thoughts are frantic.

“This is what you were going to suggest isn’t it? You wanted to see the sun.”

Caleb still in awe, glances to his left at a satellite that is headed their way. It slowly passes in front of them getting close enough for Caleb to reach out and touch it.

“It’s real Caleb. This is not a hallucination.”

“How the fuck are you doing this? How is this possible?” Caleb’s thoughts are still frantic.

“I told you already. I am God.”

Suddenly the old man raises his arms, he and Caleb begin to descend towards the earth. They move slowly at first, but rapidly pick up speed. The ground begins to close in on them at the speed of light and within seconds they are back in Caleb's warehouse. Visibly shaken, Caleb jumps up from the table at breakneck speed, tripping over a table in the process.

“What the fuck? Stay the fuck away from me old man!” Caleb's voice is trembling.

He grabs another gun and points it in the direction of the old man. God, unnerved by Caleb's behavior, follows him around the room with his eyes.

“Ok, I don't know what the fuck is going on, but you need to get the fuck out now and stay the FUCK away from me!!” Caleb screams.

God stares at Caleb momentarily before pointing his index finger directly at him as if he is pointing a gun as well. He lowers his thumb imitating a revolver hammer dropping on a bullet and makes a clicking sound with his teeth. At the same time the gun Caleb is pointing turns into sand, the grains flowing through his fingers to the floor beneath.

“Holy shit!”

God lifts himself one inch from the floor and begins levitating towards Caleb. Growing more frightened Caleb is visibly shaken and his voice trembles as he shouts at God.

“Stay away from me old man!!! Stay away!!” Caleb yells.

“I know why you no longer believe Caleb.” He replies as he lowers himself down in front of Caleb.

The room begins to morph right in front of Caleb's eyes. The paint on the walls starts dripping to the floor with the walls themselves following suit as if everything is melting from intense heat. The liquid walls flow to the floor before racing back up and being reconstructed in a different position. Caleb looks around the room as pictures begin to emerge on the newly painted

walls into a setting that seems all too familiar to Caleb. Once the room settles Caleb recognizes the surroundings as his former home that he shared with his family. He hears a voice behind him, and upon recognizing it, a flood of emotion is sent through his entire body.

“Bye Dad.” Jonah prepares to leave the house for school. His brown curly hair lies evenly on his head complimenting his light brown eyes perfectly. Dressed in jeans and a freshly pressed blue polo shirt, he grabs his lunch and green lantern book bag off the front table and heads towards the door. All the energy of a normal 11 year old boy he is the spitting image of his father, Caleb, when he was that same age.

“You got your lunch?” Caleb replies.

“Yea dad I got it.”

“Got your book bag?”

“Yep.”

“Ok buddy. Have a good day at school.”

“Ok.”

Caleb watches himself give his son one last hug not knowing that day would be the last time he would see him alive. Tears swell up in his eyes and he clenches his fists at having to relive the events so vividly. He turns to God obviously distraught with an angry disdainful look. It was as if the life had been sucked out of him. The cold soulless stare he gives God is that of a madman ready to embark on a quest for blood.

“That was the last day I saw my son alive.” Caleb’s voice is a mere whisper.

“I know.” His sorrowful response brings no solace to Caleb.

“Bring him back.”

God’s solemn expression is full of sincerity, “I can’t do that Caleb.”

“What do you mean you can’t? You said you’re God now bring my FUCKING SON back!” Caleb’s voice cracks with sarcasm and anger as he strains to maintain his sanity.

“It doesn’t work like that.”

Caleb is unable to keep his emotions from overwhelming him and lashes out, unleashing a tirade of expletives. “FUCK YOU!!! WHERE WERE YOU??! WHERE WERE YOU WHEN HE WAS KIDNAPPED? WHEN HE WAS MURDERED??”

“I’m truly sorry.” God responds stoically only enraging Caleb even more.

“Sorry? You’re sorry? Is that what you FUCKING SAID?? My son was RAPED and TORTURED! They found his head and body in two separate bags in a FUCKING DITCH!! They put my boy in TRASH BAGS and all you can say is you’re FUCKING SORRY??” Adrenaline is flowing through his veins causing his blood vessels to bulge from his temples.

Caleb’s tears are flowing like a natural spring when he picks up a laptop throwing it in God’s direction. Unflinching, God remains in place. The laptop passes through his head as if he weren’t standing there and smashes into pieces on the wall behind him.

“Fuck you old man!” Caleb screams.

Caleb walks away, sitting down on the couch weeping inconsolably. He puts his head down in his hands as God casually walks over next to him placing his hand on his shoulder.

“You got justice for your son though didn’t you?”

“Damn right I did. That’s because GOD, or YOU didn’t do a damn thing!”

“But you didn’t do it alone Caleb. I was there.” His voice is reassuring.

Caleb looks up at God curiously. “What?”

“The police had a suspect, but they had no evidence. They couldn’t prove anything. So I helped you find him.”

# 12

Three years ago was a desolate time for Caleb. He was in and out of every hole in the wall bar he could find, and sleeping with every prostitute that would take his money. After the loss of his son he went on a downward spiral. His wife had left him a little over a year after their son was murdered, and he gave up hope on life altogether, falling into a deep depression. On this particular night he was imbibing at one of the few strip clubs that hadn't banned him yet. The bartender is staring at Caleb, who has ordered an entire bottle of patron and is taking back to back shots by himself.

He isn't talking, but his level of inebriation is apparent as he spills more and more liquor on the bar with every shot he pours himself. Naked women are in abundance, but Caleb is too distracted with reaching the end of his bottle to be bothered with any of them. Directly behind him two strippers are having a conversation when one of them loses her balance spilling her drink on Caleb's back, ruining his shirt.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Caleb snaps, jumping from his seat startled by the feel of ice bleeding through the shirt onto his skin.

Their eyes meet and there is an instant connection. Caleb knew the first time he met Candice that there was something intriguing about her even though he couldn't figure out what it was. He pauses for a minute to gaze at her before the chilling feeling of his wet shirt snaps him back to the current moment.

“Oh God I am so sorry.” Candice grabs some napkins and begins trying to wipe the spilled drink from his shirt.

“Dammit.”

“I’m really sorry. Hey, how about I give you a free lap dance?”

Caleb stops in his tracks and stares at Candice to consider her offer. “Shit, why not.”

“Ok. Come on, follow me,” She says, eagerly taking his hand to lead him to a more secluded section of the club.

Candice gives Caleb a few lap dances while he drinks more tequila before he passes out. When he wakes up, he is naked in Candice’s bed and his head feels as if its stuck in a vice and he can barely remember any of the events leading up to this point. He looks around at the ransacked room holding his head. Candice is passed out lying next to him naked snoring. Caleb slowly crawls out of the bed and searches for his clothing in the dimly lit room, trying to make as little noise as possible. He has been in this type of situation before and understands that not knowing where he is could potentially turn dangerous. He thinks to himself, all it would take is for some tweaker high on crystal meth to hear a noise and burst in the room with a loaded shotgun in search of a pack of rabid, gold hoarding leprechauns.

Once he is dressed he slowly navigates through the dark apartment, passing through the kitchen on his way to the front door. Dirty dishes fill the kitchen sink and a massive mound of garbage littering the floor indicates it hasn’t been taken out in weeks. The smell permeates throughout the entire apartment as Caleb makes his way through the dark. A familiar sight catches his eye as he fumbles through the living room. On the floor in the corner, underneath a pile of junk and just out of plain sight, is a faded, worn book bag with the green lantern insignia emblazoned on the front.

He would have never noticed it had the streetlight from outside not been beaming through the window at just the right angle to illuminate the bag. Making his way over to the corner slowly he removes the junk covering the bag and picks it up. It's visibly faded, and looks to have been sitting in that same spot for years, but it's the same type of bag his son used.

A flood of memories overcomes Caleb as he has flashbacks of playing with his son. Knowing that his son wasn't the only person to possibly have this exact same book bag makes too much sense to Caleb, and he pauses momentarily pondering this strange coincidence. His son had written his name in the inner flap of his book bag, and Caleb knew that the probability of the name Jonah being written inside was extremely low.

Still though, the uncanny feeling in his stomach wouldn't leave him if he didn't check and he needed to be certain. The zipper on the bag seemed to move in slow motion as Caleb pulled it back. Having obviously not been opened in a while, it was stuck from years of neglect. After tussling with it for a few seconds he finally manages to get it open. A lump forms in Caleb's throat as he slowly pulls back the flap to reveal the name written on the inner portion of the bag. He takes a swallow as the anticipation boils over in his mind, and sees most of the writing had been smudged off.

The smeared off lettering and the writing were clear though. He gritted his teeth at the sight of his dead sons name scrawled inside of the bag, and a wave of anger engulfed every atom of his being. His emotions swelled up on him as if he has been covered in a lava bath, as he stormed toward Candice's room, no longer struggling to be quiet. He bursts into the room grabbing Candice out of the bed. Her half naked body hits the wall with such force that it shakes the entire room as she violently ripped from her drunken slumber.

“What the fuck man??” Candice is still half drunk and half sleep.

“Where did you get this??”

“What?” Candice is still out of it struggling to gain consciousness.

“THIS BAG!! Where did you GET it?” Caleb is raging causing Candice to quickly sober up.

“What the –that? It was probably from some foster kid my Uncle Brad used to take care of. He used to sleep in the basement!”

“Your uncle??”

“Yea this is his place! He is probably sleeping in the other room.” Candice finally comes to her senses. “You’re fucking crazy man let me go!”

Caleb releases his grip and she drops to the floor. “You need to leave NOW!” He yells.

“What’s the deal? It’s just a fucking book bag.”

Caleb turns back to Candice and gives her a deathly stare that sends goose bumps running down her back. She can tell by his demeanor that whatever was about to happen wasn’t going to be good.

“It belonged to my dead son.” He replies gritting his teeth as he storms out of the room.

“Oh my god.” She whispers to herself.

By the look on his face Candice can tell that there was no need to ask how he can be so sure. She hastily grabs some things just as Caleb is kicking in her uncles’ bedroom door. Uncle Brad is in bed, jarred from his sleep by the sound of the door frame being kicked to splinters by Caleb. Though he is in his mid-sixties, Uncle Brad looks at least 20 years older. The effects of hard drinking and drug use have caught up with him. His teeth are rotted to the roots and his breath smells of cheap tequila and vodka. Thin strands of white hair adorn the sides and back of his head accentuating his receding hair line. His frail frame looks as if he hasn’t eaten in days

and his skin sags at the joints as he stands there motionless in his under clothes staring at Caleb charging towards him. Caleb puts his hand around his neck slamming him against the wall constricting his ability to breathe.

“You killed my son!”

“What? Who the hell are you?” Barely able to breathe, due to Caleb’s hand still crushing his throat, the words come out as a raspy whisper. Caleb holds the worn green lantern book bag up to his face.

“That?? I found that in the dumpster behind the building!”

“Lying sack of shit!” Uncle brad is flung across the room by Caleb into a nearby dresser, breaking it to pieces. His adrenaline is raging giving him seemingly superhuman strength.

“Where is the basement?”

“What?”

The FUCKING BASEMENT!!!” Caleb screams, his voice filled with anguish.

Hey man, fuck YOU! Get the fuck out of my house before I call the –“

Caleb pounces on Brad again grabbing him by the leg and dragging him through the apartment. Candice is running through the kitchen and stops just in time to look back at Caleb before running out the front door.

Uncle brad is dragged through the hallway until Caleb locates the basement door and kicks it open, throwing Brad down the stairs. He flips down the stairwell backward, tumbling over and over until he finally lands at the bottom on the concrete floor below.

“Shit, you broke my leg you asshole!!”

Walking down the stairs behind him, Caleb is astounded at the scene he has just walked into. In the basement there is a wall lined with multiple baseball caps, too small in size to be able

to fit the head of an adult. Most of them are adorned with cartoon characters; the entire wall is covered with at least 50 or more children sized caps. Another corner of the basement is a large pile of children's artifacts. Books, backpacks, stuffed toys and clothing are stacked to the ceiling. Some of the toys look to be at least a decade or two old, some possibly even older.

Attached to the floor with bolts is a set of rusty shackles. The dried blood and hair that is visible on them makes it apparent that they have recently been used. Next to the shackles is a makeshift operating table and sink covered with dirty surgeon's tools. Caleb scans the rest of the room with his eyes, still in awe at the possibility of what has been going on in this basement for years undiscovered. In one of the dark corners of the room his eyes catch a glimpse of something moving and he slowly walks towards what he believes to be a human foot. As he approaches he sees what he saw as a foot, but its attached to a leg which is attached to the rest of what he can now fully see hiding in the shadows. A young boy no older than 8 years old is chained to another wall with duct tape across his mouth. He has cuts on his arms and his wrists are scarred from the shackles restraining him. Caleb turns around and looks at Brad with disgust.

“You SICK son of a BITCH!”

“Wait, I can explain! It's not what you think!” Brad pleads with Caleb to no avail.

Caleb impulsively grabs a hammer lying on top of nearby washing machine and plants it directly into Brad's face. The hammer makes a crackling sound as his skull is fractured in multiple places spewing blood everywhere. He pulls the hammer from brads face as brad crumples to the floor continuing to hit him repeatedly until what's left above his neck is nothing but an unrecognizable lump of crushed bone and bloody flesh. The hammer falls from Caleb's grip and he walks over to the restrained child releasing him from the shackles that bound him to the wall.

“It’s ok, you’re safe now.” He softly mutters as he removes the tape from the child’s face.

# 13

“You expect me to believe you had something to do with that?” Caleb dismissively states.

“How else would I know anything about it?” God states.

“You don’t find it odd that the police never came looking for you? You left fingerprints, DNA, all the evidence in the world and yet, no one came knocking on your door. No police, no FBI, nothing. Did you even hear about it on the news?” God’s matter-of-fact tone strikes a nerve with Caleb.

Caleb stands silent, trying to recall anything he may have heard on the news but he cannot. The fog and drunken haze he has lived in for so many years is taking a toll on his already spotty memory. He takes a seat probing his mind to make sense of it all.

“What do you want from me? You want me to thank you?” Caleb asks.

“No.”

Well what then?”

I don’t want anything but to help you.” God replies matter-of-factly.

“Help me what?” Caleb replies curiously.

“Help you keep doing what you’re already doing”

“What does that mean?” Caleb intriguingly answers looking at God.

“I want you to keep destroying churches. Wiping out the people spreading lies in the name of religion.”

Caleb obviously confused puts his head down in his hands and takes a deep breath. He looks back up at God bewildered.

“Wait, you want me to keep killing the people who worship you?” Caleb replies stunned.

“I want you to keep killing the assholes that lie in my name and coerce others to believe those lies.”

“Lies? If you’re actually God how is it all lies?” Caleb is belligerent in his tone. “As a matter of fact why don’t you just show everyone that you’re real? Hold a fucking press conference or something. You don’t need me.” Caleb replies snidely.

“If I thought that would work I would.”

“Why won’t it work? Aren’t you god? Make it work.”

“Because people are too indoctrinated into the lies that have been twisted and perpetuated for century upon century.”

“Wait. What lies are you talking about?” asked Caleb his tone turns to curiosity.

“The Bible.”

“The Bible is a lie?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re saying nothing in the Bible is true?” Caleb answer with complete sarcasm.

“I’m saying that people have taken what’s written literally and abandoned common sense. I had nothing to do with any version of that damn book. And even though I knew it was being written I didn’t attempt to shape its creation.”

“Why not?”

“Because I trusted man to do what was right. I felt that it would help people live better lives. I thought it would bring about unity among mankind, but it’s gotten out of control. People

have taken religion and used it to destroy and divide one another. That wasn't supposed to happen."

"Wasn't supposed to happen? You make it sound like you added the wrong ingredients to a cake."

"Very poor analogy, but, in a way you're correct," God looks away, seemingly embarrassed.

"What do you mean?"

"I can show you better than I can tell you," God pauses for a moment before continuing. There are numerous religions I could explain, but for now I will focus on what you're most familiar with, Christianity."

God walks over to Caleb, placing his hand on his right shoulder. Their surroundings are instantly morphed into a scene from ancient Egypt. The pyramids are in front of them and workers are moving huge stones and building the Sphinx.

"The Egyptians were the first to put it all together. They were able to anthropomorphize the seasons. They did this with the winter solstice which in turn gave them the power to control entire civilizations," God narrates the scene.

"I don't understand," Caleb replied, still confused.

God points to the sky as everything goes dark and the stars are illuminated brightly. Four stars begin to glow brighter than the others and line up diagonally at an angle pointing directly towards the sun.

"The brightest star closest to the sun is named Sirius. The three smaller stars behind it burning brightly are still called what they were called thousands of years ago; the three kings.

The three kings and the star Sirius all point to the place of the sunrise, or birth of the sun. Oh, and the sun? Well, that was referred to as God's sun."

While god is speaking, the stars become animated, acting out his every word much to Caleb's fascination. He marvels at the sight as God continues to narrate the movie he is witnessing, with the stars as God's actors in a lunar production.

"The Virgin Mary is simply the constellation Virgo, which in Latin translates to virgin. Virgo is also called the house of bread. The representation of Virgo is a virgin holding a sheath of wheat. The house of bread and the symbol of wheat represent a time of harvest which in your time is usually around August or September. So, Bethlehem, which literally translates into House of Bread, is a reference to the stars, not a place on earth."

"I don't believe this," Caleb replies, still in awe.

As winter grows closer it becomes more difficult to maintain crops due to the cold weather. This was referred to as the death of the sun. By December 22<sup>nd</sup> the sun reaches its lowest point in the sky and seemingly stops moving. The sun remains in the vicinity of the Southern Cross or Crux constellation for the next three days. On December 25<sup>th</sup> the sun seemingly begins moving again. So basically this is symbolic of God's sun dying on the cross and after three days is resurrected. This is what is known as the winter solstice. The entire core of Christian religious beliefs is based on this natural occurrence."

Standing with his mouth agape Caleb struggles to understand what he is seeing. God continues explaining as Caleb stands there listening intently.

"In 3000 BC the Egyptians were the first to make this more relatable to man by creating a story that people would believe. His name was Horus. This story would be adapted and told by other civilizations for generations to come. The Greeks in 1200 BC called him Attis. The

Persians around the same time period called him Mithra. In India around 900 BC there was Krishna and the Greeks in 500 BC took the same story and renamed him Dionysus. And, currently the most popular iteration of this same story is told in the Holy Bible. His name is Jesus Christ but in the Old Testament his name was Joseph. And all of these supposed sons of mine were created in my name with one purpose in mind. Control.”

“How can this be possible?”

“This is just the tip of the iceberg.”

“I knew this was all bullshit. If this is true why can’t you just stop it?”

“Do you think I haven’t tried? Every single time it ends badly. People start out innocent enough, but once the power goes to their head people begin to die. Do you remember the holocaust?”

“Jesus.”

“Exactly. That fictional son of mine is the cause for millions of innocent people being put to death. I’m tired of it.” God pauses again before continuing. “I’m tired of people slaughtering each other in my name.”

“Then why don’t you do something about it? You’re fucking GOD!”

“The only thing stronger than free will is death. I would have to wipe out all of humanity and start all over again. Of course it wouldn’t take 225,000 years the second time around, but that’s not the point. Do you really think I created all of mankind and the entire universe in 6 fucking days? Do you think I want to do it again?”

“So what the hell am I supposed to do?” Caleb asks frustrated.

“Keep doing what you’re doing.”

“But I’ve killed people too.” Caleb answers confused.

“You’re killing the right people for the right reasons. People need to realize that this is all there is. I created this to be heaven. There is no other heaven. There is no hell. There is no burning sea of flames where people who do bad shit go to burn for eternity. There are no pearly gates. THIS is heaven for humanity. Do you really think I want 100 billion people in my house singing gospel songs to me for an eternity? I would rather create a hell and let myself burn. People need to stop believing there is something else after they die because there isn’t.”

“This is insane.” Caleb is livid. “You’re telling ME to kill people? GOD is telling me to KILL the people who WORSHIP him?”

“Didn’t I just tell you that none of that shit in the bible is real? I never told people to get together and sing kumbaya. I never told people to throw money at me. What the hell do I need money for? And what’s the problem you’ve already killed thousands of people.” God reminds Caleb.

“It was different before. When I thought there was no God. But it’s not the same, so what’s the point?”

“The point is for people to live in peace. As long as people believe in something that isn’t there they will argue, and when they argue they get violent, and then people die. Do you know how many wars have been fought because of religion? Those damn Muslims blow people up on a daily basis believing they will get virgins in heaven. Do you know how ridiculous that sounds? That if you blow yourself up you get to fuck a bunch of virgin souls in heaven??” God yells at Caleb.

Caleb sits down on the couch and lowers his head into his hands. The confusion he feels is coupled with an intense feeling of anxiety. But for some reason everything makes sense now.

“So what am I supposed to do?” Caleb asks.

“You were right. Religion is a virus and it needs to be stopped. I want you to lead the war on religion.”

“How?”

“I want you to destroy the heart of organized religion, the head of the snake. Once you do that everything else will follow.”

Caleb looks confused at what God says. He gives god a bewildered stare then it's as if a light bulb went off in his head.

“The Vatican?”

“The Vatican. I want you to assassinate the head of the Christian church. I want you to kill the Pope.”

Caleb glares at the ground for a few moments. He takes a deep breath before looking back to God with a smirk on his face.

# 14

A beat up yellow taxi pulls up to the airport terminal. Caleb opens the door and steps out of the back seat heading to the trunk to pull his luggage out. Dragging his bags behind him he pays the taxi driver and heads inside of the airport. Caleb drops his bags off at the check in counter and hands the attendant his passport. She glares at his passport for a moment and looks back at him, and back at the photo once more before stamping it and smiling, handing it back to Caleb.

“Enjoy your trip.” The attendants’ attitude is perky and upbeat.

“Thanks,” Caleb dryly replies before walking away.

The airport is bustling with activity this particular day. Drove of people stand waiting at their gates and carts full of eager passengers weave their way through the waves of people on foot. Making his way through the busy airport Caleb stops at customs, handing the agent his passport and boarding pass. The agent, who is dressed in a wrinkled uniform with a bit more pounds than you would think a government official should have, looks uninterested as Caleb approaches.

“Good afternoon sir,” the agent is flat and unemotional.

“Afternoon.” Caleb replies just as dryly.

Looking at Caleb’s credentials he glances back up raising an eyebrow as he looks back and forth between Caleb and the photograph.

“It’s an old picture I know. I need to get renewed.” Caleb tries to sound reassuring.

“Yea, but I can tell that’s it’s you. First time to Rome?” the agent perks up a bit but only slightly.

“Yea, first time.” Caleb’s response is curt

“Business or pleasure?”

“A little bit of both I guess. My job is sending me on a trip to meet a new client.” Caleb tries to sound more upbeat now.

“What kind of work do you do?”

“Missionary,” Caleb’s sarcasm goes over looked.

“Oh really?”

“Yea, going to visit the Vatican.”

“How long is your stay?” the agent probes for more information.

“One week.”

“Anything to declare?”

“Nope.”

The agent looks at Caleb’s passport picture and then back at Caleb again before shrugging, stamping the passport and handing it back.

“Enjoy your trip sir,” his demeanor reverts back to unemotional.

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Caleb’s flight is midway to Rome when he begins to doze off from exhaustion. The low rumbling of the 787’s engines can be heard cutting through the atmosphere, as they propel the flight over 30,000 feet above the ground. The flight is quite long, and numerous passengers

aboard are all reclining their seats. Some of the passengers have utilized the over head lamps to illuminate their areas. Some individuals read books while others are covering themselves with blankets and putting on their headphones to take advantage of the inflight movies that are being shown.

Half asleep, Caleb takes in his environment trying to make note of every little detail about his surroundings. He is seated next to a pretentious looking business man in a cheap suit. The missing middle button of the three piece ensemble he is wearing gives that much away. A pair of unpolished and scuffed loafers he decided to wear with the outfit were also a good indicator of his frugality. Although he appeared to be past middle age with more salt than pepper in his hair, he still had a bit of a youthful spark in his demeanor. Caleb's eyes are growing heavy with the weight of his exhaustion, and before long he can no longer keep them open. His reclined seat has made him too relaxed to do anything but fall into a deep trance.

“He is using you,” The eerie, raspy voice was too close to ignore.

Caleb slowly opens his eyes. He turns his head and glances at the man next to him, who is casually holding a magazine. He glares back at Caleb dead in the eye much to Caleb's chagrin. The man never breaks his menacing gaze with Caleb which unsettles him a bit.

“He is using you,” he repeats himself in a diabolic whisper never breaking his deadpan stare on Caleb.

Caleb attempts to speak but quickly realizes he is frozen in his seat and incapable of doing so.

“You are nothing more than a pawn in his game.” The man continues. “When he is finished with you, you will die.”

Caleb struggles to move but he is still frozen where he sits. The eyes of the passenger begin to shine a dark crimson red, and smoke comes out of his mouth and nose with each breath. His flesh begins dripping from his face like cheap makeup on a woman caught in a storm with no umbrella. Under the dripping flesh is skin which is colored a deep hue of crimson and seems to glow on its own. Small points begin to protrude from his forehead which seems to be growing into large horns that resemble those on a Dall Goat.

“Go back! Go back now before it’s too late!!” His whisper now growing more urgent.

Caleb is now struggling with all of his strength to no avail as the passenger is morphing into some sort of demonic creature in front of Caleb, inching closer to his face.

“GO BACK NOW!” His voice is now more angered.

The passenger is now fully engulfed in flames setting his seat on fire with the rest of the plane. Other passengers have now gotten out of their seats with their skin sliding from their bodies approaching Caleb. The horde of demonic passengers reaches him and he feels his own skin has begun to burn as he finally breaks free from the paralysis sitting straight up in his reclined chair. A flight attendant is standing in the aisle next to him and the passenger sitting next to him has gotten out of his seat standing behind her.

“Sir? Excuse me, Sir?”

Caleb looks around startled realizing he was having a bad dream.

“Sir, are you ok? I think you were having a night mare.” The flight attendant looks worried.

He looks up at the passenger who was sitting next to him cautiously. The passenger looks as if he just saw a ghost and stares back at Caleb fearfully.

“Would you like some water?” the flight attendant asks calmly.

“What?”

“Would you like some water?” She asks again handing him a bottle of drinking water.

“Thank you,” Caleb replies reaching for the water.

“You’re welcome.”

“How much further?” Caleb’s voice is anxious.

“Actually sir, we are on our final approach now. Please remain seated and fasten your seat belt,” The flight attendant is pleasant but cautious.

“Do you mind if I sit over there please?” The passenger Caleb was seated next to eagerly points to an open seat further away. “I don’t feel comfortable here.”

“That’s fine sir, just fasten your seat belt.” The flight attendant calmly walks away.

Moments later the flight attendant announces over the speaker system that they are on their final approach, and informs everyone to remain seated as the plane begin its descent towards the runway. The plane lands with no issues and passengers begin to disembark from the aircraft. Caleb waits until everyone else is off the plane and exits, making his way to the baggage carousel area of the airport.

His luggage finally comes around the machine, and he notices the passenger he was seated next to standing on the other side of the baggage claim staring at him. Thinking nothing of it he grabs his luggage. Taking another glance in the direction of the passenger, he realizes the man is still staring at him, only this time his eyes glow a dark crimson color. Caleb is taken aback by what he sees before someone walks in front of him and the man disappears.

# 15

The night air is brisk on the outskirts of Vatican City as Caleb checks into a cheap motel he has reserved before departing. He ambles up to his hotel room and puts the key into the door. The door seems stuck from lack of use and Caleb has to forcibly hit it with his shoulder a few times before it reluctantly gives way. Entering the run down room dragging his bags behind him he encounters a strong odor of bleach, mixed with fresh paint. It's obviously a failed attempt at covering up the unsanitary conditions of the room, which still has a faint smell of mildew. As he makes his way into the room, closing the door behind him, he reaches for the light switch. As soon as the light comes on God appears sitting in an old chair in the corner of the room waiting for Caleb.

“What took you so long,” God’s voice is impatient but calm.

“Very funny.” Caleb replies as he examines the confines of the dingy hotel.

Caleb calmly walks over to the window and peeks out the blinds. He makes note of the vehicles in the parking lot below and closes the curtains tight as to not let any light from outside enter the room. He casually walks over to the bed and runs his hands along the comforter before ripping it off quickly and looking at the sheets.

“We don’t have a lot of time to waste.” God quips.

Caleb looks at the sheets closely, paying extra attention to whether or not there are any visible stains. After being satisfied he rips the sheets back to scrutinize the mattress. A few stains

are visible to which Caleb frowns. He kneels down and stares at the mattress meticulously before god chimes in breaking his concentration.

“What the hell are you doing?” God snaps.

“Looking for bedbugs.” Caleb retorts. “What the hell does it look like I’m doing?”

“It looks like you’re wasting time.” God says, growing impatient.

“It’s not like I can just beam myself here,” Caleb snaps. “Speaking of which, why the hell didn’t you just snap your fingers and bring me here?”

Caleb stands up and walks over to the bathroom mirror and stares in it for a brief moment. He turns on the bathroom light and stares at the toilet before glancing up at the ceiling. He notices the water stains where it appears that a water leak of some sort has caused mildew. Obviously unhappy with the discovery, he frowns and walks back over towards God. He grabs his suitcase off of the floor and throws it on the bed. Opening it, he pulls out a bottle of scotch setting it down on a nearby table.

“Because, it would kill you.”

“What?” Caleb replies never stopping his activity.

Walking over to the bathroom sink Caleb grabs a plastic cup before heading back to the table to the bottle of scotch and pouring a drink for himself.

“I said it would kill you,” God sounds annoyed at having to repeat himself.

“No, I heard what you said but it doesn’t make any sense,” Caleb take a sip of scotch.

“How exactly would it kill me?”

“When I created this place I created it with rules. You’re still a human, flesh and blood, and you are bound by those rules. Now I could’ve done that, beamed you here but you wouldn’t

have survived. And then I would have had to bring you back to life and, well, I just didn't feel like doing that today!" God's cynicism is apparent.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'm old," God quickly snaps back growing tired of being questioned.

"Whatever. So what am I supposed to do now? I am assuming you have some sort of plan."

"As a matter of fact I do," God quips proudly.

Caleb pulls a chair from the table and takes a seat in front of God. "I'm listening."

"Tomorrow afternoon the Pope returns from his trip to Naples. He will more than likely be tired. So tomorrow night is the best time to go in.

"Won't they just elect another person to take his place? Caleb quips back in a very condescending tone. "Just find another pawn in this stupid game?"

"Yes. But in the meantime the church will tear itself apart once they realize that the pope is just a man. People look at him like he is god himself. Once they realize that he has been killed by a man with no intervention, it will cast doubt on those who believe. The ignorant will begin to wonder why I didn't step in a stop it from happening. All it takes is one shred of doubt to shape a thought. Once that doubt is deeply rooted it will take on a life of its own."

"And how do I get close enough to pull this shit off," Caleb asks, unsure of the vague plans.

"Oh, I am sure you will figure something out. Use your imagination." God reassures him.

"Yea, I will figure something out."

"Get some rest." God turns and walks towards the door to leave. "You have a long day tomorrow."

“Wait,” Caleb sounds nervous. “There was something, on the plane I saw something.”

God stops in his tracks turning to look at Caleb with a concerned look on his face. “What did you see?”

“I don’t know exactly. It’s like I was dreaming and this, I don’t know but it seemed so real. I couldn’t move and it, it told me not to trust you. It said you were using me and then –“ Caleb doesn’t get a chance to finish his thought.

“Who told you not to trust me?” God snaps quickly.

“How the hell do I know? Never mind it was probably just a bad fucking dream.”

“It wasn’t a bad dream. Did he say anything else?”

“He? Wait, what do you mean it wasn’t a bad dream?” Caleb replies, concerned and bewildered.

“You were probably dreaming but that’s how he works. That’s when people are most vulnerable.” God replies shaking his head.

“Who are you talking about? How who works?”

God walks back over to the table where Caleb is sitting and sits back down in front of him taking a deep breath. “His name is Aka Manah.”

“Aka who?”

“Aka Manah. One of the Daevas from the scriptures of one of the oldest religions in existence, Zoroastrianism. God shoots Caleb a indifferent gaze. “He is a demon that controls the evils of the mind, including sexual desires, and greed.”

“So what the hell are you saying?” Caleb’s confused expression is obvious. “Is that like the devil or something?”

“That’s what you may call him, but for lack of a better term, yes.”

“Wait, so you’re saying the devil is real?”

“As I have always been so have the Daevas, and although man has twisted the interpretation they have never changed. So, not in the way that you have been lead to believe, but yes.”

“I thought you said that the bible wasn’t real.”

“The bible is real. You probably have one in the dresser over there,” God replies sarcastically.

“That’s not what I fucking meant!” Caleb yells at God, mad at his condescending attitude.

“Well you need to be more specific.”

“What the fuck? What else are you not telling me? And what the hell does he want with me?” Caleb grows impatient.

“He only shows up when someone is doing the right thing. So that means whatever you’re about to do, is something he would prefer you didn’t do. It means he is afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes. When people believe blindly in things that aren’t true it makes him stronger. You are about to destroy the heart of his strength. So, he is afraid.”

Caleb finishes his drink and sets the cup down staring at God distrustfully. “So what am I supposed to do if he tries to stop me?”

“The only way he can stop you is if you listen to him.” God sounds reassuring.

“All he does is try to influence people. I gave people the gift of free will. He preys on that. If you ignore him he will not hinder your mission. Now, I suggest you get some rest.”

God stands up from the table and turns around towards the door but stops himself. “Oh, and I signed you up for the extended tour at the Vatican tomorrow morning. It starts at 8:30. It will help you get setup for tomorrow night.”

Caleb grabs the bottle of scotch to pour another drink just as God vanishes. He looks around the empty room shaking his head and mumbles under his breath.

“Why the hell didn’t you do that in the first place instead of trying to go to the door?”

Although he is no longer in the room God replies anyway. “I told you I’m old. I forget sometimes.”

# 16

Flurries of cars zip through the streets as Caleb waits outside of his hotel room to hail a taxi. He pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket and hastily pulls one from the pack. Sticking the cigarette in his mouth he pulls his Zippo lighter out of his pocket lighting it. He admires the architecture of the buildings around the city as he stands there puffing on his cigarette.

It's a beautiful day in Italy and people are bustling in the streets which are full of activity. The sun beams off of the cobblestone roads, which cascades into a mosaic pattern full of symmetry. The narrow streets make the buildings look extremely close together as people yell loudly from their windows to one another freely. Caleb watches as people haphazardly ride aging scooters and bicycles through the streets, weaving in and out of cars.

Caleb spots an empty cab and attempts to flag it down. The driver notices him and stomps on the gas. The cab bolts through traffic and pulls up speedily next to Caleb as the driver slams on the brakes. Caleb instinctively jumps back out of the way startled by the reckless driving, dropping the cigarette from his mouth in the process. Caleb bends over and looks down through the window at the driver who is smiling from ear to ear with a silly looking grin on his face. He is an attractive man in his mid-thirties with a five o'clock shadow. His dark hair, flowing down to his strong jawline, shines like black silk. The sleeveless shirt he is wearing shows off his chiseled arms and he could easily pass for a harlequin book cover model.

"Where the hell did you learn to drive?" Caleb asks.

"My grandmother!" his cheerful reply annoys Caleb. "Hop in!"

His thick Italian accent would be barely comprehensible to the untrained ear. Caleb is fluent enough to ascertain his dialect, although he struggles every now and then.

Caleb shakes his head and opens the door entering the cab reluctantly. The cab driver still grinning, turns around to look at him.

“Where to?”

“The Vatican.” Caleb replies unamused.

“OK!”

The driver turns around and steps on the gas, the wheels spin wildly and squeal as the tires emit thick white smoke propelling the vehicle into the street. He doesn't even bother to take the time to look into traffic before proceeding.

“Holy Shit!” Caleb's eyes grow wide with trepidation as he is whipped to the other side of the vehicle as the cab driver speeds off.

“Is this your first time in Rome?” The driver asks happily.

“Yea.”

“My name is Massimo!” The driver cheerfully announces “What is your name?”

“What kind of name is Massimo?” Caleb asks annoyed.

“It is the name of handsome Italian men. Like Me!” Massimo gleefully replies.

“Oh god.” Caleb mumbles rolling his eyes at Massimo's masculine attitude.

“And what is your name?”

“Caleb.” He grips the door as Massimo hastily speeds through traffic and narrowly avoids being sideswiped by a bus.

“Nice! How long will you be staying?”

“A week. Mother Fuc – “ The tires screech as Massimo makes a sharp left turn without slowing down flinging Caleb across the back seat. “You think you could slow down?!?”

“Ha-ha! Not unless I want to get hit!” Massimo quips. “This is the way to drive in Rome! Look out the window!”

Caleb looks out the window at the traffic and sees cars driving erratically in all directions. He spots a traveler on a motorcycle that darts out in front of another motorist narrowly avoiding a collision with a double decker bus and speeds the wrong way through traffic cursing at the vehicle he almost hit.

“Good God.” Caleb is taken aback.

“Ha-ha! Oh he cannot help you in this traffic!”

Massimo takes a hard right and shoots down an alleyway cutting off another motorist in the process, flinging Caleb to the other side of the vehicle.

“Why are you so gleeful for no fucking reason??!” Caleb asks becoming more annoyed by the second.

“Oh I guess because I drive in this traffic every day and I am still alive!! Ha-ha!”

Massimo is unmoved by Caleb’s attitude.

“Fuck me.”

Speeding through a red light Massimo jumps in front of other vehicles before darting down another side street almost running over an old lady walking her dog. She jumps out of the way before looking in his direction angrily and putting up her middle finger at the car. A few moments later the torrential ride is over as Massimo pulls up in front of the Vatican.

He slams on the brakes again throwing Caleb towards the front of the vehicle. “Here we are! And you are still in one piece! Ha-ha!”

“Shit, I have no idea how.” Caleb mumbles under his breath as he hands him a \$50 dollar bill.

Massimo grabs the cash from Caleb’s hand and stares at it for a second. He frowns and his cheerful attitude is instantly changed as he frowns at Caleb.

“What is this? American money?” Massimo scoffs.

“What?” Caleb is confused at his callous treatment.

“It will cost me half of this to exchange it to euros.” Massimo scoffs again almost insulted.

“Shit.” Caleb reaches in his pocket and pulls out a \$100 dollar bill. “Here, this should cover the exchange rate and the fare.”

Massimo snatches the \$100 bill and offers the \$50 back.

“No, just keep it all.” Caleb now scoffs.

Massimo’s eyes light up and he is back to his overly chipper attitude. “Thank you!! You are very generous!!”

“It’s ok,” Caleb grabs his bag before mumbling under his breath again. “Just stop being so fucking happy.”

“Thank you again my friend!! Thank you VERY much! Enjoy Rome!!”

As Caleb is closing the door Massimo stomps on the gas pedal burning rubber once again. He almost runs over Caleb’s foot while driving off and yelling. “Until next time my friend!”

Caleb mumbles while shaking his head. “Hopefully never.”

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Standing outside of the Vatican Caleb is taking pictures trying to blend in while he waits for the tour to get started. Other tourists are also admiring the building as they also snap photos. He walks inside of the building and starts photographing the artwork as he pretends to be interested in the architecture. As he is taking photos an Italian female tourist with a camera walks up next to him and casually strikes up a conversation.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” She asks Caleb, her thick accent catching his ear. Caleb looks in the direction of her voice and pauses for a moment, taken aback by her beauty. Her long, dark hair is just past shoulder length. Her deep, blue eyes accentuate her red lipstick and the obvious lack of makeup shows off her natural radiance and glowing skin. Her jeans are form fitting showing her curves and perfect figure. Her height is enhanced by the high heeled suede boots she wears which also brings attention to her long legs.

“Excuse me,” Caleb replies hesitantly.

“The building, isn’t it beautiful?”

“Oh.” Caleb pauses before replying. “Yea, it’s nice.”

“Knowing that we are standing inside of something created by God is truly inspiring, wouldn’t you agree?” Her innocent remarks strike a nerve with Caleb.

He stops taking photos and lowers his camera, the admiration he had for her looks lost at that precise moment. He looks at the ground shaking his head and chuckles to himself. “Created by God?”

“Why yes of course. Only god could create something so beautiful wouldn’t you agree?”

Caleb, growing more agitated at this point, takes a deep breath before responding. “I’m sorry I didn’t get your name.”

“Oh, I am Isabella.”

She extends her hand towards Caleb offering a handshake and Caleb looks at her hand but doesn’t reciprocate. Dejected, she reluctantly puts her hand down.

“Isabella, God didn’t create this place, Man did. Man built these walls just like man created this silly religion and all other silly religions that have gotten people murdered for centuries.” The irritation is evident in his voice. “This place was made by a narcissistic female ruler during the reign of the Roman Empire as a flower garden. God had nothing to do with it.”

Isabella seems confused and raises an eyebrow at Caleb. Although, she seems both offended and intrigued at the same time.

“And how do you know this?”

“I read. You should try it sometime,” Caleb’s attitude reverts back to dismissive.

“Well you don’t have to be so rude.”

“Rude?” His attitude shifts again.

“Yes rude, I was only being friendly.”

“I’ll tell you what’s rude. Pushing brainwashed religious views on everyone without having fully researched the bullshit you’re talking about.” Caleb’s tone is disrespectful and condescending.

Isabella steps back in awe at the harshness of his words.

“Let me ask you something.” Caleb continues his ranting. “How much money do you give to the church every year?”

Her demeanor is more defensive now. I don't know exactly, but I don't think that's any of your business." She snaps.

"How much of that do you think goes to God?" Caleb snaps back.

"God doesn't need money he is all powerful." Isabella responds matter-of-factly.

"My point exactly. But priests need it to support the constant cover ups of the molestation of young children in his name and your so called God does nothing. So basically you support pedophilia, not God." Caleb replies callously.

Thoroughly insulted, Isabella's face drops as she stares at Caleb in disbelief at his words.

Caleb looks on coldly awaiting her response but doesn't give her much of a chance to make one. "Anyone who is all powerful can't be all good, and anyone who is all good can't be all powerful."

Caleb turns around and walks away leaving Isabella stunned and speechless at his revelation.

"Wait, I didn't get your name." Isabella asks.

Caleb turns around slowly and gives Isabella an intense looking gaze. "Caleb."

"Nice to meet you Caleb. I will pray for you."

Caleb smirks at her response as he walks away. "Don't waste your time!"

# 17

Caleb is halfway through the tour of Vatican City and has secretly been placing explosive charges in every location that they have visited on the tour. While tourists are marveling at the beautiful paintings on the walls and ceilings of the interior of the building, Caleb manages to sneak away and return without being exposed. Security happens to be low in the area on this particular day due to the Pope being away on a trip to Naples, and Caleb has used this to his advantage. After planting numerous explosives around the grounds Caleb is able to wander off unnoticed and slips into a nearby bathroom. He removes his overcoat to reveal a simple priest uniform underneath.

Caleb emerges from the bathroom and walks through the chapel strolling right past other clergy members unnoticed. Locating the security room where the cameras are monitored, he approaches the guard standing by the entrance door, which is secured with a key card. He reaches for the cross hanging around his neck and lowers his head while speaking to the guard in Italian.

“Be blessed my son.” Caleb’s Italian is rusty, but convincing.

It’s been a while since he spoke in Italian, having learned it during his years at the orphanage from Father Langley. But it all comes back rather quickly. The guard reciprocates the phrase back to Caleb, but, as he lowers his head Caleb hits him in the neck, disabling him with the single precision blow. The guard hits the ground hard, landing on his face and smacking his nose in the process. Caleb drags him out of sight to a nearby closet and puts the unconscious

guard in the room closing the door. He removes his clothing, and security key, leaving him with only his undergarments and ties him up gagging his mouth as well. Caleb, now dressed in the guards' uniform, emerges from the closet and walks towards the guard room when the cameras are again, using the stolen card key to enter the locked room.

The other guards look at him suspiciously, but they hesitantly continue their duties as Caleb acts naturally. He inconspicuously pulls a USB drive from his pocket, slipping it into one of the computers giving him access to the security cameras. Having completed his task, he leaves the guard room and heads toward the building exit to retreat back to his hotel room. As he is making his way out of the chapel, another security guard notices, and tries to stop him.

“Why aren't you at your post?” His thick Italian accent is deep and raspy. “You need to get back now!”

“I had to use the restroom,” Caleb maintains his less than perfect Italian accent.

“Well, get back to your post before I report you immediately.”

“Yes sir. Right away sir,” Caleb turns and walks away.

The guard, who is still watching Caleb suspiciously, notices that he is heading in the opposite direction from where he is supposed to be heading and attempts to stop him again.

“Hey!” The guard's voice bellowed through the halls. “Where are you going?”

Caleb panics and begins to speed up his pace before hastily running away from the guard who gives chase.

“Stop right there!” The guard yells to Caleb. “Don't take another step!”

The guard gets on the radio and calls for backup as Caleb attempts to make his escape. More guards begin emerging from various areas on the grounds as Caleb makes his way to the courtyard and ducks behind some bushes. He quickly pulls off the guard uniform and stashes it

under a bush and walks out towards the exit. The guards are still running around frantically looking for him as Caleb is almost to the exit before another guard spots him from across the courtyard even without the uniform.

“There he is! Stop him!” The guard exclaims.

Caleb darts for the exit but he is confronted by a Swiss guard with a sword pointing at his chest. He quickly disarms and disables the guard stabbing him in the leg with his own sword and keeps running as more guards close in on him. As he finally makes it to the exit, more guards emerge from around the side of the entrance gate stopping him with their guns drawn. The guards that were chasing finally catch up to him and he now finds himself surrounded by angry guards with their guns barreling down on him.

“Get on the ground now!” The guard’s voice is a clear indication to Caleb that he isn’t interested in negotiating.

Caleb, seeing no way out of the situation, slowly drops to his knees with his hands in the air. His plan thwarted, the adrenaline rush been replaced with a sense of despair and wonder. Not knowing what to do now, his mind wanders into a dark place. Believing he can possibly fight his way out, he looks at each guard, sizing the situation up before realizing that an escape is impossible. He quickly deduces that any attempt at escape right now would be a suicide mission. The guards quickly pounce on Caleb, pinning him to the ground before he can make any sudden moves. One of the guards has his knee in the back of his head, smashing Caleb’s face into the cold concrete ground, while others spew profanities at him in Italian. They forcibly put his hands behind his back, almost pulling his arms out of their socket in the process. The handcuffs are wrapped around his wrists so tight he can feel them biting into his skin. As they drag him

through the courtyard, throngs of tourists stare on in disbelief as Caleb holds his head up high in defiance looking around in anger.

“What the fuck are you all looking at?” Caleb yells at the onlookers gawking at him before the guards quickly haul him out of sight

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Caleb sits in the corner of the ancient holding cells located beneath the Vatican, which are in a less than ideal condition to say the least. The narrow cells are barely large enough for a grown adult man to stretch his arms out fully and the damp floor and lack of proper bedding make laying down a very uncomfortable undertaking. The light in the cell flickers constantly, which could drive a person mad if left for prolonged periods of time. Like a strobe light that never shuts off, the intensity of the light could cause severe damage to your retinas if you gaze in its direction for too long.

His cell is under constant surveillance from cameras and multiple guards standing watch ensuring that any escape plans go unfulfilled. The guard whom Caleb knocked out and tied up suddenly storms in, and judging by the disgruntled look on his face, he is obviously still upset at the ordeal that he endured earlier.

“Asshole!” he shouts as he enters the cell pointing at Caleb. “This is the guy who attacked me and tied me up in the closet!”

“How’s your head?” Caleb sarcastically asks.

The head guard walks forward moving the other guards out of the way. He is a bearded tall man in his late forties but doesn't look like he misses much time away from the gym. The frown on his face clearly indicates that he isn't happy with the current situation.

“This is no laughing matter.” His voice is resigned and authoritative. “You have assaulted our guards, violated our security, and desecrated sacred grounds.”

“Sacred? What makes this place sacred?” Caleb's reply is dismissive.

“What do you mean what makes it sacred?!” his voice grows more agitated. “This is holy land and you have disrespected the church!!”

“Holy land my ass.”

“What is wrong with you? Have you no dignity?” he balks at Caleb.

“Have you? You sit in this building guarding a man who condones sodomy and covers it up! An organization that profits from corruption and you have the audacity to tell me I am disrespectful? This whole city is built on lies. All of you deserve to die.”

The other guards all gasp in disbelief at Caleb's defiance. The head guard walks over to Caleb's cell.

“How dare you! Do you know who you are talking to?” The head guard grows impatient.

“Why don't you unlock this cell and I'll show you who I'm talking to, you fucking coward.” Caleb replies gritting his teeth at the guard.

The head guard is finished talking and removes his hat and puts his gun belt down. Just as he is preparing to open the cell to engage Caleb physically, the main door opens and the other guards quickly move to the side and the head guard turns around to see the Pope entering the room. The head guard quickly stands to the side and lowers his head as do the other guards in the room in respect for the pontiff. The Pope walks into the room and slowly makes his way to

Caleb's cell. He stands at the cell door looking Caleb over as everyone stands in silence. The tension in the room was palpable to everyone present as Caleb stands up and walks over to the cell door, looking directly into the Pope's eyes. Unflinching the Pope stares back at Caleb.

"My son, what brings you here?" the Pope's voice is almost a whisper.

"You." Caleb's voice is deep and full of disdain.

"My son, if you wanted to make confession with me that is all you needed to request."

Caleb takes a step back, surprised at the Pope's discrete way of making a sly joke.

"That's not exactly what I was here for but now that you mention it, I think I'll take you up on that offer."

"Make your confession my son. What troubles you?" The Pope is calm.

"Father I have sinned. I'm here to kill you and burn this place to ashes."

The guards all gasp at Caleb's stunning revelation, prompting a slew of obscenities as the pope stands expressionless.

"You blasphemous devil! How dare you disrespect the head of the church!" The head guard yells angrily.

The Pope, still showing no emotion, raises his hand silencing the guards never averting his gaze from Caleb. "Leave us."

"Father, are you sure?" the head guard asks wearily.

"I said LEAVE US!"

"Yes, certainly Father." The head guard motions to everyone in the room. "You heard our father. Everyone get out, NOW!!"

All of the guards scramble to leave the room as the head guard is the last to exit closing the door behind him. The Pope removes his mitre setting it down on a nearby bench and walks

over to the wall on which the keys are hung. He removes the keys and makes his way back to Caleb's cell as Caleb curiously looks on. He casually opens the cell door and enters the cell to Caleb's surprise sitting down on the concrete bench. His obvious lack of fear stuns Caleb and he is cautious believing this is some sort of trick. The Pope slowly motions for Caleb to come sit across from him as Caleb stares at the open cell door before complying with the Pope's request. He cautiously walks over and sits down across from the Pope on the floor.

“My son, why are you doing this?” The pope whispers.

Caleb suddenly feels a rush of adrenaline sitting across from the man he has come to exterminate. It takes everything he has in him to not jump across the cell and smash his head against the brick walls. He manages to contain his emotion and takes a deep breath before deciding to answer his question.

“Because you are a scourge. Pure evil. You prey on weak minded people for your own personal gain. This whole system is corrupt and it needs to be destroyed.” Caleb lets his disgust be known.

“What has caused you to believe such lies?” The Pope calmly replies.

“Everything. I look around at the world and see too much hatred and too much destruction and the cause of it all begins with religion.”

“My son, everyone has free will. That gift was granted by our creator himself. I have nothing to do with the will of man. Take yourself, your actions for instance.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“You've killed innocent people. You've killed children. You had sexual relations with your own mother. Now you're here to kill me. No one forced you to – “

Caleb stands up cutting the Pope's words short. "What the fuck did you just say? My own mother – say that again?" Caleb clenches his fists.

The pope stands up looking at Caleb with a smug grin. "Oh, he didn't tell you did he?"

"Tell me what? Who didn't tell me what?"

Slowly walking out of the cell the pontiff leaves the door open, and makes his way to a darkened corner of the room. He kneels down and reaches for an object in the shadows just out of Caleb's eyesight.

"Don't walk away from me! Tell me what the fuck you're talking about? TELL ME!"

Caleb, now yelling, grows more frustrated.

As he slowly stands up holding the object he just retrieved from the shadows, the Pope turns around and walks slowly towards Caleb with the object in his hand.

"This is what I am talking about." The Pope mumbles as he walks closer his voice growing deeper.

Still hidden by the shadows Caleb struggles to see what he is holding as the Pope walks closer until the severed head of Candice in his grip is illuminated by the light shining through the cell windows into the room. He lifts the severed head up higher so Caleb can get a closer view.

"What the hell??" Caleb is shocked.

Caleb's eyes almost burst out of his head as he immediately feels sick to his stomach. Maggots have eaten the eyes out, and dried blood is coming from the ears and nose of the decapitated head. The pope, gripping the head by its matted hair, tosses it into the cell with Caleb. A dull thud sound is made as it hits the brick floor and rolls over to Caleb's feet. Just as it comes to rest, he buckles over, and a stomach full of vomit explodes from his esophagus, landing on top of the severed head.

“Oh, you think I don’t know about you? You think I don’t know about your salacious past? You don’t even know yourself do you Caleb?” His voice grows eerily raspy with each word.

“Orphaned as baby and told that your mother died giving birth to you. You were sodomized by Father Langley at the St. Godric’s orphanage, until you murdered him while he raped you, running away at 12 years old.”

Caleb stares at him, bewildered at how he knows so much about his life.

“You were homeless for years, earning money by performing sexual favors in back alleys for men and women alike. It’s a wonder you didn’t die. But you got your life together didn’t you? You got off the streets and found reputable work in the oil fields and you were able to start a family and put your past behind you.” The pope is indignant.

He paces around the room taunting Caleb with tales of his past which were unknown to anyone. Caleb grows more disgusted and angry as the Pope circles the cell.

“Until your poor son gets kidnapped, raped and murdered. Then you magically find your sons murderer by bumping into the headless whore over there. Yes, I know you very well. But let me tell you something that you didn’t know Caleb. Your mother, she didn’t die all those years ago. She ran away just like you did only she wasn’t able to take the nightly rapes by Father Langley as long as you. No she wasn’t as strong as you. Your mother, Candice, fell into drugs, depression and prostitution. Only she wasn’t able to pull herself together until she recently found out the truth, embarking on a silly suicide quest much like you’re doing today. Your mother, she abandoned you. Left you in the hands of the same man who impregnated her, and the same man you killed.” The Pontiff exclaims, his voice growing raspier with each word.

“What?” Caleb is astonished by the tale he has just heard. “You’re lying.”

“Yes Caleb, YOU killed your own father and carried on an incestuous relationship and FUCKED your own mother for years!” A sinister laugh leaves his lips as Caleb stares in disbelief.

Unable to move he remains motionless, stunned at what he is hearing. He wipes his face with his hand and snaps out of the trance that had him momentarily frozen in place.

“NO!! No that’s BULLSHIT and you know it! You’re fucking LYING!! You’re just trying to get in my fucking head but it won’t work!! All you do is sit here in this fucking fake temple and push the same bullshit that has been pushed on people for century upon century knowing that it’s all LIES!!” Caleb is livid. “How many priests have raped and sodomized young boys in this building? Where is your God when you are covering that shit up? Where is your god when they are screaming their lungs out for the pain to stop?? Where is his mercy?? And you know what’s funny?? Your God is the one who sent me here to kill you!!” Caleb announces, yelling at the top of his lungs.

The Pope stops in his tracks, his eyes widening. He looks surprised for a moment, then; his look of surprise fades quickly. Taking a deep breath, he closes his eyes briefly before exhaling.

“You don’t look surprised.” Caleb pauses and thinks for a second. “Wait, why don’t you look surprised? What the hell is going on?”

When the Pope finally opens his eyes he stares at Caleb for a brief second then back at the ground. He touches the crucifix hanging around his neck before looking back towards Caleb, chuckling softly to himself.

“You’re right,” The Pope says softly.

“What?”

The Pope shoots Caleb a look of death as his eyes turn a dark crimson and begin glowing. His voice is now a deep and sinister growl. "I said you're RIGHT!!"

Lunging towards Caleb at lightning speed, he grabs him by the throat with one hand, pinning him against the wall effortlessly. Caleb struggle to get loose, but his grip is too strong, blocking his airway and leaving him unable to breathe.

"The only problem is YOU will be the one to DIE!!

Caleb is losing consciousness rapidly as the Pope holds him against the wall. Caleb tries punching his arm to loosen his grip but the effort is futile and he begins to blackout.

"This corruption you speak of, this house, this city, is MINE!! The evil that pulses through these walls, this world, it gives me POWER!! And no one will take that from me!! I told you he was using you. I tried to warn you but you didn't listen. Now, YOU will DIE!!" His demonic voice echoes.

Caleb, no longer struggling, loses consciousness just as the last word slips from the Popes mouth.

# 18

Cameras are being hastily setup the following morning in the Vatican courtyard for the Pope to deliver a special announcement. He has called an impromptu press conference stating that it is of the utmost importance that the world hears his message. Onlookers wait in anticipation just to get a glimpse of the Pontiff himself and hear him speak. In the Papal apartments the Pope sits in a chair alone, staring out of the window when his second in command, the cardinal, knocks diligently on his door.

“You may enter,” The pope is passive in his acknowledgment.

The Cardinal enters the room looking a bit worse for wear. His wire framed glasses sit squarely on his nose, hiding the dark circles under his eyes from long nights and lack of sleep. He looks every day of his sixty plus years old, and his baby blue eyes still shimmer in the sunlight, offering a glimpse of boyhood youth long gone. His bleach white hair is perfectly coiffed and trimmed and his clean shaven face shows hardly a laugh line in sight. Closing the door behind him he approaches the pope, who stands up and faces him as he bows out of respect.

“Your holiness,” the cardinal’s voice is soft yet stern.

“What troubles you my son?” The pope places his hand on the cardinal’s shoulder and he stops bowing.

“Why have you called this emergency news conference? The Holy See and the rest of the clergy are worried and confused most Holy Father.”

“The people need to know about the attempt on my life.”

“Are you sure that’s a wise decision?” The cardinal seems apprehensive. They know nothing.”

“But they will,” the pope responds sternly. “And we needn’t hide behind the veil of secrecy. Not for this. We need to show the people that the church is as strong and resilient as ever.” The pope declares proudly.

“Your holiness I agree. But shouldn’t we turn the assassin over to the proper authorities?”

“NO!” The Pope raises his voice in disagreement. “We will handle this internally like in the old days. He needs to be made an example of. The people need to see the power of the church.”

“The old days?” the Cardinal’s face drops and his tone turns fearful. “Oh God, are you sure -.”

“Leave me.” The Pope cuts him off mid-sentence. “I must prepare to speak to the people. Have the guards prepare the prisoner.”

“Yes your holiness.”

The Cardinal bows, backs towards the door and leaves. The Pontiff walks back towards the windows and looks out at the growing crowd.

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Deep inside the dungeon that hasn’t been used for centuries underneath the Vatican, Caleb is chained to the ceiling. His back is bleeding profusely and he is covered in bruises, his face coated in dried blood. Numerous guards are in the room and one of them has a whip and has

been flogging Caleb continuously for hours. The guard holding the whip looks visibly exhausted as he cracks the whip across Caleb's back repeatedly before stopping to catch his breath.

They beat him to the brink of death only to pause for an hour or two to begin again. Another guard walks over to Caleb with a glass of water and Caleb takes a sip and spits it back in his face. The guard punches him in the stomach and Caleb lets out a muffled grunt of agony.

“Drink the water traitor!” The guard barks at Caleb. “His holiness doesn't want you to die before tomorrow morning.”

“Fuck you,” Caleb is weak but he musters some energy. “Fuck ALL OF YOU!!”

“Just shut up and drink this.”

The guard offers him the water again and Caleb reluctantly accepts and drinks. His lips are chapped and cracking from dehydration as he sips from the cup.

“Why don't you just fucking kill me?”

“Trust me if I could, I would kill you myself. I despise those who conspire against the church. But his holiness has other plans for you.”

He walks over to another guard standing in the corner waiting to relieve him. “Only beat him to the brink of death but do not kill him. He needs to be alive. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir.”

He walks back over to Caleb one more time. “I will pray that God has mercy on your soul.”

“Fuck you and your God,” Caleb answers as he spits a mouthful of blood in the guards face.

The guard frowns wiping the blood from his face before punching Caleb in the temple knocking him out cold. “Piece of shit.” He spits at Caleb’s feet before turning around and walking towards the door.

“Take a break. He will be out for a while.” He instructs the guard relieving him.

He exits the room as the other guards follow him closing the door behind them. Caleb hangs there soaking in his own blood and sweat, slipping in and out of consciousness and hallucinating. The story the Pope told him keeps running through his mind. His eyes close briefly and when they reopen God appears right in front of him.

“You’re a bastard.” He manages to scrounge up enough energy to give God a look of disgust.

“I suppose technically you could be right.” He replies cynically.

“Fuck you. Fuck you and everything about you. Caleb’s voice is barely a whisper. “You think this is funny? You fucking set me up.”

“I didn’t set you up Caleb. You wanted to do this anyway. Didn’t you? Didn’t you want to take down the church? Didn’t you kill all those people in the church bombings?”

“Oh I get it now. You played me. Got me to believe you wanted the same thing I did.”

“I do want the same things you do, but you believed what you wanted to believe. It’s called free will. It’s a gift I gave to everyone. You’re welcome.”

“Fuck you.”

“Well this wasn’t exactly part of the plan, but, I guess I’ll make it work.”

“Wait, what plan?”

“You’ll see.” God turns to leave but is stopped by Caleb.

“Wait, he mentioned something – my mother. When I was a child they told me she died but, he told me – he said she didn’t die. Did she die?”

God pauses for a moment and looks at Caleb solemnly never changing his dry expression.

“No, she didn’t,” his reply is as grim as his facial expression.

“So what he told me, everything he said, it was all true?”

“Good-bye Caleb.”

He turns to leave again but is again stopped once more by Caleb.

“My mother, what was her name.”

Without turning around God lets out a deep breath before answering. “Candice. Your mother’s name was Candice.”

God vanishes without saying another word, leaving Caleb there to wallow in his own thoughts. The silence in the dungeon is so deafening that you can barely hear drops of Caleb’s blood hitting the floor when they drip from his broken nose. He lets out a small laugh, which slowly turns into an even smaller whimper, before the tears that well up in his eyes are now washing away the blood soaked brick floor as he sobs to himself quietly in the dark solitude of the cell.

# 19

Members of the clergy accompany the Pope as he walks through the halls of the Vatican. He is in ordinary dress today, as this is neither an official or formal event. He wants to appear more common than regal this morning, and his red papal shoes look a bit dusty to fit the part precisely. His white cassock and matching pellegrina are spotless. The white, fringed fascia hangs perfectly across his left shoulder and it all coordinates with the angel white zucchetto, which sits atop his pearly white strands of hair. The crowd has fully gathered in the courtyard and they eagerly await his appearance. As he makes his way to the podium the crowd explodes in uproarious applause. He extends his arm and waves adoringly to the exuberant mass of onlookers. The crowd cheers for several minutes and news reporters broadcast live footage of the spectacle as the Pope beckons for them to quiet so he can begin to speak.

“Thank you all for being here. I am happy to see everyone and I hope all of your blessings have been received from the lord in abundance. The crowd applauds as the Pope continues his speech. “I have called you all here today, to speak on a recent event here behind these sacred walls, an atrocity that has not been seen of this kind in centuries.” The pope pauses while chatter begins among the crowd the abruptly stops as he continues on.

“We have among us a treacherous man, a man who would have seen your faith diminished in the church and God himself. A man who has breached these walls under the cloak of disguise, who wishes to destroy the solidarity, and peaceful nature that we have all worked so hard to achieve. I am here to tell the people that an attempt was to be made on my life.”

The crowd gasps in shock as the last words leave his mouth. The shock is quickly followed by a barrage of boos and derogatory remarks. The crowd is outraged, but after a few moments, slowly quiets to a hush as the pope beckons for them to calm themselves and he resumes speaking.

“But, as you can see I stand here unscathed by the evil plot. And I have captured the traitor who was to carry out this assassination attempt. We have captured the evil soul who would have seen my life taken away!” The pope finishes his sentence to cheers and applause.

The Pope raises his hand slowly as the crowd falls silent. He points towards the back of the courtyard as the guards begin wheeling Caleb out. The crowd gasps in surprise as Caleb is bound by his hands and feet to a cross, a sight that is visually reminiscent of the crucifixion of Christ. His body is bruised from the beatings he has undergone and he is clinging to life as the angry crowd of onlookers begins to taunt him while spewing derogatory names at him. The pick up any loose object on the ground they can find and hurl it at him bruising his frail body even more. Rocks, pieces of the cobblestone, tree limbs, and various other objects, crash into his body. The Pope watches the torture and smirks in elation.

“We have chosen to bring about this treacherous plan and inform you, the people of the church; so that you may know that we remain diligent in carrying out our lords’ message. We will take care of this matter in the way our ancestors have.”

Caleb is still being wheeled through the square in the midst of the angry crowd as onlookers spit on him and curse. He is badly battered and bloodied when he spots Isabella in the crowd. Her demeanor is somber as she looks around at all of the hatred being displayed in the courtyard. She notices that the person who is the object of all of the anguish is Caleb and she gives him a sympathetic look as he briefly glances in her direction. Their eyes meet for a second

and he looks away quickly as she shakes her head in disbelief. The Pope raises his hand again to get the attention of the people.

“In the ancient traditions of our forefathers, the old testament, and the name of our God we will handle this in a manner fitting of the church.” The pope speaks sternly.

“This traitor will be publicly executed by hanging!! Crimes of this magnitude require the swift hand of God for he himself is JUDGE, JURY, and EXECUTIONER!!” The crowd is uproarious at the words of the Pope, and it seems a cloud of darkness descends on the square amidst the chaos as he continues. “He has elected ME to carry out this sentence IMMEDIATELY!!” The Pope’s voice is gruff and overbearing.

Caleb is wheeled to the Gallows that have been setup underneath the Pope’s balcony in front of the crowd. The guards cut him from the crucifix, dragging his limp, broken body to the hangman’s noose and slip it around his neck. He is weak and can barely stand, but he doesn’t struggle as he looks out over the eager crowd begging for his death. As he watches the crowd, the shadows of the onlookers grow broken wings. The clouds grow darker with each moment and the Pope can be heard laughing as Caleb looks over to give him one last stare, his mouth appears to be closed as he watches the events unfolding at his command, without emotion.

A familiar face catches Caleb’s eye as he glances through the winged shadows of the onlookers. God stares back at Caleb from the middle of the chaotic scene and Caleb manages to throw an unfriendly gaze in his direction as the guards tighten the noose around Caleb’s neck to prepare him to be hung. The crowd is silenced as the Pope again raises his hand.

“This traitor has been tried publicly here today by the people of Rome and convicted for crimes against the church including treason, and attempted murder of an elected official of the

church. For these crimes against the Catholic Church you have been sentenced to DEATH to be carried out IMMEDIATELY!!” His words are triumphant as the crowd erupts with elation.

“DEATH TO THE TRAITOR!!” The angry crowd chants repeatedly.

The Pope reacts to the enamored crowd and glances at Caleb; a slight smirk covers his face. Caleb mouths the words FUCK YOU at the Pope before once again gazing out into the blood thirsty crowd to spot another glimpse of god who is nowhere to be seen. Instead he spots Isabella again who is standing alone amidst the crowd with a tear of sorrow coursing down her cheek. Her disdain and disgust at the scene she is watching over comes her and she turns around leaving, unable to watch the hanging of a man in cold blood.

“May God have mercy on your soul.”

The words are cold and unemotional as the Pope stares into Caleb’s eyes. He raises his hand for the last time as the crowd moves in slow motion and as his arm is lowered the guard pulls the lever as Caleb no longer feels the floor underneath his feet. The rope tightens as his weight pulls his limp body down. The sound of his neck cracking could be heard over the evil chanting of the crowd.

## 20

Footsteps echo through the walls of the Vatican as the Pope casually strolls, flanked by two Cardinals and the highest ranking Archbishop. They are discussing the execution which just took place and what they should do with Caleb's body as they walk through the building.

"Your holiness, what shall we do with the traitors' remains?" The Cardinal asks.

The Archbishop has been out of town as well but shortened his trip to return in time to witness the execution. His tall thin frame is cloaked in a beautiful gold and white vestment adorned with a pattern of the cross on the front and back. His thick glasses sit on the edge of his nose all the time as they are about to fall off seemingly suspended in place. A thick mane of silver hair covers his head and his wrinkled face does nothing to hide his age well.

"We cannot bury a traitor of the church on sacred ground!" The Archbishop exclaims loudly, his thin wrinkly finger extended upwards.

"What then?" The cardinal inquires.

"Who cares what we do with him. It is no longer our concern." The archbishop responds seemingly unfazed.

"Although it is no longer our concern we must still show respect for the dead, traitor or not. The Pope is patient in his response.

"Yes your holiness." The Archbishop answers begrudgingly.

Have the guards place his body in the dungeons. We shall cremate his remains later.” The Pope is empathetic. “The people’s faith in the church has been restored. We have no need to rush now. We have more pressing matters to concern ourselves with.”

“Yes your Holiness.” The Cardinal and Archbishop both reply in unison showing their reluctant compliance.

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Per the Pontiff’s orders, the guards wheel Caleb’s corpse into the dungeons. They open the doors to the same cell in which he was previously held captive, placing his lifeless body on the floor. His remains are wrapped up tightly in white sheets. Dried blood coats the sheets in blotches from his wounds. Although he is regarded as a traitor, they show a last sign of respect by reciting a short prayer over him, miming the crucifix across their chest in the process. As they all exit the cell the main guard pauses for a moment. He turns around and spits on Caleb’s body while holding his nose which Caleb injured previously.

“Traitor.” His disdainful words come out quickly before he turns to walk out of the cell locking the door behind him.

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Three days have passed since the execution of Caleb in the Vatican Courtyard. The Pope has just returned from a short trip through Rome and thousands of followers have flocked to the streets and the St. Peters courtyard once again to catch a glimpse of him. Since the execution,

people have declared their undying devotion to him praising him as the highest religious figure on the planet. He is heralded as a living God to most. As he passes through the hordes of people he is greeted by onlookers and observers. He is courteous to all shaking hands and smiling, basking in his newfound fame and enjoying the adoration that comes with it.

As the caravan begins to reach the steps of St. Peters Basilica they see a strange figure standing at the top of the steps. Shrouded from head to toe in a robe, he stands with his arms behind his back, a hood fully covering his head as he looks towards the ground. Confused and startled the Pope stops the caravan and stares at the hooded figure. The crowd has now noticed and grows quiet as the Pope exits the vehicle in which he rode and slowly approaches the hooded figure. As he gets closer one of the security team attempts to stop him.

“Your Holiness – “

Extending his hand, the Pope motions for silence, as he continues his approach towards the steps inching closer to the mysterious figure standing before him. The guard obeys and puts his head down, stepping back to allow the Pontiff to continue. He reaches the top of the steps where the mysterious person is standing and stops directly in front of him.

“My child, may I ask – “ His words are cut short.

The Pope takes a step back as the hooded figure looks up, his face still shrouded by the shadow cast by his hood. Reaching his hands up he slowly pulls back the hood to reveal himself to be Caleb. The crowd is stunned and gasps in surprise at the man they thought was dead standing before them. In one swift move Caleb steps forward, and reaches for the Pope’s neck. His eyes are illuminated a bright white like the moon on a clear night as he snatches the Pope by the neck with one hand lifting him off the ground as he descends the steps. Black clouds cover

the sky, drowning out the once prominent rays of sunlight. Flashes of lightning dance between the roar of thunder above, masking the gasps of the crowd.

“YOU MAY ASK NOTHING!!” The crowd falls dead silent as Calbe’s ominous voice is frightening enough to make their bones quiver in their skin.

Still squeezing the Pope by the neck he makes his way to the bottom of the steps as the Pope chokes, struggling to break free from Caleb’s unflinching grip. He holds his captive up for the crowd to see, as the Popes clothing catches on fire burning to cinders as Caleb allows the crowd to watch. As his clothes slowly burn away the crowd gasps to see the Pope turning into something more sinister. His flesh also begins to melt away as Caleb holds him in the sun.

“Do you see? Do you see who you have been following?” Caleb’s voice commands attention as the crowd stares in disbelief. “Are you all still BLINDED NOW?? WILL YOU STILL BELIEVE THE LIES THE CHURCH TELLS YOU NOW??

His flesh now fully burned away, Caleb now holds in his grip the horned demon Aka Manah. His greyish black flesh smokes in the sunlight as Caleb hold him relentlessly. The horns protruding from his head are fiery red and covered in a small iridescent flame. His legs resemble the rear quarters of a thorough bred horse with large hooves where feet should be. His eyes glow a deep yellowish red as he screams in agony from Caleb’s hold.

“You have all been deceived by this CORRUPT INSTITUTION!! You have all been LIED TO!!”

The demon has now stopped struggling and slowly begins to disintegrate. His power obtained by the ability to deceive and control minds now broken by Caleb, having exposed him to his unwilling followers. As he slowly dies, his body begins to deteriorate rapidly in Caleb’s hands as he releases him to fall to the ground in a pile of ash blown away by the wind.

“This is not what our creator wanted for us! This is not how mankind is supposed to live! We were created not to worship the false lies that we have been fed but to live in unity amongst one another!! Religion as a whole is a means of controlling the weak! And WE, my fellow people, were not created to be WEAK!! Any form of religion is a lie!! Our creator did not want this for his children. Religion brings about nothing but destruction. It is based solely upon greed and the narcissistic needs of one person!!” Caleb’s words resonate through the courtyard with authority. The crowd remains silent as Caleb continues to speak.

“It is the main source of evil among all mankind and must be destroyed. Our creator does not want your money!! Our creator does not want your prayers!! Our creator does not want anything but for his children to stop killing each other in HIS NAME!! We are all one people, and we are all here together!! There shall be no more separation!! Return to your homes and remember this place as the source of EVIL that deceives you for so many years. Denounce this place and never return. The Catholic Church and all other churches are not created by or FOR GOD!! YOU the PEOPLE are in control of your own lives and your own futures!!! YOU ALONE shape YOUR OWN DESTINY!! You have been given the greatest gift in the entire world. You have been given the gift of free will. Use this gift wisely.”

The silence of the crowd was overbearing as everyone in the courtyard stood motionless stunned at what they just witnessed. People stared at one another unable to speak. The sound of the wind blowing against the buildings was all that could be heard for moments after Caleb stopped speaking. Then in a brief flash of light he opened his arms looked towards the sun and vanished. People in the crowd shielded their eyes from the intensity of the light as all that was left were the ashes on the steps.

People in the crowd slowly broke from the trance they were in and glanced around at one another. One by one they removed crosses from their necks, throwing them on the ground and walking away. Bibles, some autographed by the Pope himself, were thrown to the pavement as well, with onlookers leaving them behind, pages blowing in the wind. News stations that were broadcasting live footage of the scene continued to film the aftermath, which was being seen around the world. Churches were being abandoned on the spot and church goers openly denounced their previous devotion to the Catholic Church. Other religious institutions followed suit, finally seeing the truth behind that which they had so blindly placed their faith.

## 21

The dark dungeon reeks of Caleb's corpse as his remains have been left untouched for almost three days. The blood stained sheets have begun to attract rodents which are scurrying around the cell floor. A rat scurries close to his body and jumps on top of his corpse sniffing around on the sheets. The rat begins to chew through the sheet when it is startled by a sudden flash of light seemingly out of nowhere. The rat quickly scurries back into a crevice in the wall when he looks up and sees the imposing figure standing looking down on Caleb's corpse. God stands apathetically staring at Caleb's body as he sets his cane down next to him. He removes his sunglasses, his eyes are glowing all white, with no cornea, or iris visible to the human eye. As he is sitting down next to Caleb, he begins removing the blood soaked linen that is covering Caleb. Once the cloth is removed God stares at Caleb's broken body and shakes his head in disgust.

“And this is what I would do?” God softly mutters to himself.

Placing both of his hands across Caleb's chest he takes a deep breath. A dim light begins to radiate from his palms onto the corpse and his wounds slowly begin to disappear. His neck, which was snapped during the hanging, is slowly pushed back into place. The bruising around his neck from the ropes is slowly erased as his skin turns from a pasty gray to its normal healthy color. Broken bones are repaired and returned to normal, while cuts and abrasions are erased almost instantly. After a few moments Caleb's body is fully restored to normal the light dissipates and God stands up next to Caleb. He places his right hand on Caleb's forehead and takes another deep breath before letting out a gut wrenching scream as powerful beams of light

burst from his eyes and mouth. His palm which is on Caleb's forehead lights up as well covering Caleb's entire body with an illuminating light. The light suddenly stops and god collapses to his knees visibly out of breath. He regains his footing and sits next to Caleb for a few moments to catch his breath crossing his arms. God remains seated staring at Caleb before looking bewildered and impatient. Suddenly Caleb opens his eyes quickly jumping up gasping for air grabbing his chest.

"What the hell happened?" Caleb hastily asks, obviously out of breath.

"You died." God dryly responds.

"What?"

"YOU. DIED."

"Shit, you brought me back from the dead??"

"Something like that.

"What the hell is going on?" Caleb is obviously confused and puzzled.

"I just told you, you di – you know what? Why don't you catch your breath first? I'm getting tired of repeating myself."

"No I got it, I died. Why did you bring me back? What am I doing here?"

Caleb looks at himself in awe touching himself to see if he is dreaming. He runs his hands across his neck where the rope burns have been healed amazed that he is back in one piece.

"You have a job to finish. WE have a job to finish."

"What am I supposed to do now? They killed me. SHIT!!! YOU LET THEM KILL ME??!" Caleb yells coming to the realization of what is happening.

"Yea, I'm sorry about that. I wish there was another way but there wasn't."

“What the FUCK?? You’re SORRY??”

God puts his hand up to silence Caleb, pointing to the wall drawing his attention to the sound of the growing crowd outside.

“Do you hear the crowd? All of those people? Everyone is listening. Everyone on the planet is watching right now as he returns. After what happened to you everyone is paying attention to him more than ever. Every news station is here, every channel is broadcasting live right now.”

Caleb stands silent as the information begins to sink in.

“So this was your plan all along?”

“No. the plan was for you to come here and blow this place to dust. But once you got caught I figured I would improvise.”

“What about everything he said about my mother? I had sex with my mother? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you that you had been having sex with the mother you thought was dead? What would that have accomplished? Tell me, what good would have come from that? Everything that happened in your life is what brought you to this point. It’s what made you who you are.”

“What was she doing here?”

“She was trying to make up for what happened to you, leaving you in that place with the man who molested her. Your father. She found out what you were going to do and –“ Caleb cuts him off.

“Who told her?”

“Who do you think?” God retorts as Caleb turns away for a second. “He lured her here.”

“So, now what?”

“Now you go out there and bring down religion, once and for all.”

“How do you know this will work?”

“Because, people are stupid.”

What’s that supposed to mean?” Caleb asks, obviously confused.

“It means people don’t believe the truth anymore, they believe what they see. So, go and show them.”

God stands up and puts his sunglasses on and grabs his cane handing Caleb a hooded robe. Caleb puts the robe on and pulls the hood over his face. His eyes begin to glow bright white as God disappears.

## 22

Central park is bustling with activity on this particular summer day. The sun is shining, and the weather is conducive to all sorts of enjoyable relaxation and people are soaking it up in every which way possible. Dogs chase Frisbees thrown by stress free owners. People speak to each other in passing happily. There is no hatred in anyone's eyes and no animosity between different ethnicities. Couples lay on blankets and children frolic freely as the day passes slowly with everyone fully enjoying the atmosphere.

In the following 50 years after the incident at the Vatican, which some have dubbed, "The Moment", people have been able to fully embrace one another. Everyone was able to unite as brother or sister without the restraints of jealousy, anger, or any of the other moral guilt brought upon by the strife of organized religion. Humanity now exists in a state of peace for the most part. World leaders came together after the moment to eradicate all signs of organized religion and it has not even been spoken about or mentioned since.

A well-dressed young salesperson is standing in the park peddling books at a make shift book stand. His youth is obvious by his hipster style of clothing. His jeans are crisp and cuffed at the ankle showing off his wingtip lace up Johnston and Murphy shoes. His button up GAP shirt is neatly tucked into his pants and the sleeves are rolled up to his elbows. His attempt at growing a beard looks amateur as his stubble looks to be only about 2 weeks old and resembles clumped dog fur. His steely brown eyes are compliments to his dark slicked hair, which has enough chemicals to start a small forest fire if he were to be assaulted by a cigarette.

“This is the gospel of Caleb. As told by those who were there on that fateful day. The day that God sent his son Caleb to die for our wrongs doings.” His voice is confident and boisterous as he speaks. “You need to read this to cleanse your soul of sin. Have you sinned today sir?”

He stops a young man passing by with his girlfriend and attempts to sell him a book. Looking much like a hipster himself, the young man stops to look at the book he is describing.

“Sinned. We have all sinned sir we all need salvation from the evil within ourselves. You should read this book in order to know how to live a more prosperous life,” the book seller is fast and slick with his words.

“Get one babe. It sounds interesting,” The young woman who was walking with the man chimes in to support the book seller.

Digging into his pocket the man pulls out a few crumpled bills. “How much is it?”

“Just five dollars sir and you will be on the road to salvation for your sins,” he smiles as he answers.

“Here you go,” the young man hands him a crumpled five dollar bill.

“Thank you sir, you will not regret this decision,” handing him the book he continues.

“Thank you for your support sir. May Caleb bless you.”

As they walk away the young book seller continues his sales pitch to anyone walking by.

Another passerby walks up to his book stand and stares at his selection of reading material for sale. A hood covers his face and his baggy sweat shirt does nothing to hide the fact that he is a very large, well-built man.

“I’ll take a copy,” his deep raspy voice startles the book salesman as he turns around.

“Oh, that’ll be five dollars sir.”

The man reaches into his sweatshirt pocket and hands him five one dollar bills.

“Thank you sir. You are on the way to salvation for your sins. Caleb died for our sins to be cleansed in the spirit of God,” his words trail off as the man walks away.

He strolls over to a vacant park bench and sits down. He opens the book and starts reading, then slowly removes his hood. The years have been kind to him. Although his wrinkles are visible and more prominent, Caleb still looks much like the same person. As he cracks open the book he just purchased his eyes begin to emit a familiar white glow.

THE END