

Peter Belial awoke to the sound of the intense scream of a gust of wind outside. He rubbed his eyes, looked around briefly, and then stood up from his couch. He stretched his entire body out by crossing his legs, arching his back, and sticking his arms far out to his side.

The room he was in was fairly large, with off-white walls. Peter walked across his white textured-saxony carpet—a feature of his house which he was particularly proud of, as it had taken a number of trials to get the right feel: that messy, casual, low-maintenance feel he particularly enjoyed. He looked at the frame hanging on the wall to the right of the house's entrance, the sole piece of decoration in his entire house. It was a large, well-crafted glass frame edged in stained black wood, and inside it, about an inch below the spotless glass, was a slightly off-center front page of a newspaper. In the clipping was a picture of himself in the upper-left corner of the story, directly below the headline "FORMER DEACON SAVES COUNTRY FROM CORRUPTION."

Peter stared at the picture, and began to feel his age. It had only been five years since the picture had been taken, but his reflection in the glass of the frame showed an entirely different man. His once dark, silky head of hair had started to fall out. He also felt that his eyes had started sagging a bit more, his face had certainly lost its boyish look, and become far more gruff, which was in no small part aided by the unshaven pricks of hair covering the lower portion of his face.

The howling that had awoken Peter started up again, and he now realized that the weather outside was worsening. It had felt like a lifetime since he had even seen the sun, and every day the weather managed to get *worse*. Today the wind was whipping around his house, repeatedly slamming his window shutters against the outside walls of his

house. Just as soon as this gust had stopped, another one started up, bringing with it gallons of rain, which poured through an open window. Running over to it, he jumped up and slid the window closed with a loud slam. He wondered why a window would be positioned so high, but his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of his door slamming open into the adjacent wall.

"Why is that window so high up there, anyway?" A voice boomed behind Peter. He turned around to see a large man in a black trench coat standing in front of the open door, the back tail of his coat rippling in the turbulent wind behind him. A crack of lightning illuminated his body against the dark clouds behind him the instant before he reached his hand out to slam the door behind him.

"I dunno," Peter responded as he turned to face the voice; it was Frank. He was a tall man, and always dressed in a very dark style of clothing: black silk shirt, black pants and jacket, black leather trench coat, and a grey fedora. He tried to pinpoint exactly how long he had known Frank, but couldn't, it was like he had always known him.

"We need to leave, Peter, we need to leave soon," Frank said, "And we need to find a new church," Peter flinched at the idea.

"Already? Can't you stay at a single one for longer than a week?" he asked.

"Do it," Frank said, his dark eyes staring intensely into Peter'.

"Fine," he said.

"That's a good boy. Now go to sleep, I have work to do," Frank ordered, and Peter fell to the couch.

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Peter opened his eyes, and jumped off the couch, his head filled with the image of a necklace with a cross pendant being flung to the ground. The last thing he remembered from his sleep was blood splattering onto the fallen necklace, a scream of pain, and then—he woke up. He sat up on the couch, shook his head for a moment, rubbed his eyes, and rose slowly. He turned around to look at the window on the far wall, torrential rain burst through the bars of the window, the wind—wait, he thought—the bars?

"Oh, what the *fuck* is this?" he asked, as he looked around for Frank. His house was small (it only had one large room), and Frank was nowhere in it. Peter looked again at the window, standing near the door to achieve a proper viewing distance; in front of the window now were two rows of six steel bars each, with a third row of six bars on the outside half of the window frame. Peter hit the wall with his bare right palm and recoiled quickly as the pain reverberated through his arm into his chest.

Peter went to the couch to sit down, and rested his head in his hands, the right hand still aching with pain. "I need to get a hold of myself," he thought. The image of a series of bars appearing in his window pulsed in his brain. "Screw that, I need to get the hell out of here." He ran to the door, and just about forced it off its hinges before realizing that he needed to unlock it—he did so—then whipped the door open with a loud slam as the door hit the wall.

"No way, dammit, there's no *way*," he said in disbelief as he ran his hands over the row of tall, thick metal bars which had been concealed by the shut door. Rain began to flow through the openings in between the barred door frame, and Peter quickly became drenched.

He shut the door, walked back to the couch, and sat down, as water droplets fell from his clothe. He thought for what felt like an eternity about exactly *how* a person's house can become a prison in the time it takes to finish a nap. The only idea he had was that Frank somehow did all of this. He didn't think it was possible, nor that Frank would even do that to him, but all the while the possibility wasn't far from his mind.

Peter took a look over at the frame that still hung on his wall, one of the few things in his house to remain as it had always been. He walked over to it and brushed his fingers across the wooden trim, and looked at the paper inside. He longed to read the familiar headline which he had engraved into his brain throughout the years, but it was replaced with something completely unfamiliar. "Oh come on, give me a break," he thought to himself. He read the headline to himself, "LOCAL PRIEST BRUTALLY KILLED; MURDERER AT LARGE." Peter continued reading the article summary below the headline, in the same position where his picture used to be.

"Father Jude, a local catholic priest at the St. Francis church was found dead yesterday morning inside the main hall of the church. This is the latest occurrence in a series of similar murders over the last six months. The body was found brutally beaten, but authorities did manage to find a single piece of evidence was left at the scene of the crime: a piece of paper was found in the body's right hand—an excerpt from the Bible, revelations 2:2..."

The article went on, but Peter's mind couldn't comprehend anything further. He had grown up at St. Francis, and Jude had been the priest there for as long as he could remember. Peter said aloud, "I know your works, and your toil and perseverance, and that

you can't tolerate evil men, and have tested those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and found them false."

"Revelations 2:2, Peter, one of my personal favorites," Peter jumped at the sound of Frank's voice.

"Holy shit, you scared the *shit* out of me," Peter said, his mind grasping for words. Then suddenly he remembered, "Wait, how in the *hell* did you get in?"

"I've been lying behind the couch."

Peter looked closely at Frank, "Kind of odd, but then again, it *is* Frank," he thought to himself, "Plus, it's not like even *he* could have gotten in here any other way."

"What do you think happens to a man who commits a deadly sin, Peter?"

"Nothing," Peter said, a tinge of pain in his voice; "nothing will happen to him. There's no hell for him to burn in, and there's no heaven for him to rejoice in." As he said this, he took the frame off the wall, and set it face-down on the ground. The spot which the frame had covered was set against the stained white of the uncovered walls, but what was even more obvious was the pure white of the spot which had once been home to a cross that Peter had put up when he had moved in. Peter looked at it, his body trembling, and put the frame back up on the wall. Peter turned around and looked at Frank.

"Nothing is right. It's up to the people of *this* world to enforce the laws, and when the people fail, it's the individual's *duty* to make things right," Frank said.

"What are you trying to say?" Peter asked, the talk with Frank was making him uneasy.

"Nothing, Peter, nothing at all."

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Peter paced slowly around the perimeter of his house, and every now and then stopping to look at Frank lying on the couch with his eyes closed. Peter couldn't really be sure whether he was actually sleeping, but that wasn't what was really on his mind. All he knew was that something bothered him, something horrible on the tip of his tongue, holding it back from reaching the conclusion his brain was so desperate to communicate.

All Peter really knew was that it had something to do with the article that had appeared in his picture frame regarding Father Jude. Peter had grown up going to St. Francis with his parents and he continued to attend even after he had moved out of his parents' house. He had even become a deacon, and had been under the tutelage of Father Jude, slowly gaining experience before he applied for the priesthood. What Peter couldn't bring himself to remember, though, was when he had stopped attending the church, and no matter how hard he tried, the memory failed him.

"I don't get it," Peter said aloud to himself while he was sprawled out on his carpeted floor. The feel of the carpet helped to soothe his nerves a bit.

Suddenly, Peter felt a thunderous bolt of pain in his right hand, as if an infuriated snake was burrowing a hole directly through it. The pain was blinding, all Peter saw was a bright white light as the pain in his hand began to intensify even further; he screamed, he bashed his head against the floor, thrashed his legs around, all in an effort to distract himself from the pain in his hand. As the pain began to lessen, or rather, as the pain's growing intensity began to find a common ground of excruciation, his vision began to clear. Anxious to see what had happened, Peter looked at his hand, and he screamed again.

Where there was once skin covering Peter's hand, there was now blood, and in the center of his palm was a hole about the size of a circular stake. What was almost more disturbing than the hole itself, was the fact that the blood that flowed from the wound appeared to be far brighter than any other wound he had ever seen in his life. Peter also thought he smelled a sweet odor emitted from the wound.

Peter tried to rip his white shirt off with his left hand in order to wrap his right with it, but for whatever reason, he simply couldn't get the shirt off. Then, suddenly, he felt relieved; the pain in his hand had disappeared. He looked over at it; it was still covered in a very bright shade of red, but the hole in the center of his hand had disappeared. He ran the tips of his left hand's fingers over and over both sides of his palm and felt nothing. No scar, no pain at the touch—nothing. He stood up and looked around; there was no one else there. Frank had disappeared, and nothing was different save for the massive bright blood stain on Peter's beautifully textured carpet.

Peter looked back, and Frank was standing directly in front of him.

"There's a name for what just happened, you know that, right? I'll give you a hint; it starts with an 'S' and ends with..." He said to Peter.

"What the..."

"That particular occurrence has far more to do with heaven," Frank said, matter-of-factly.

"So, what you're saying is God has it out for me, and is trying to make me 'see the light' by inflicting a couple minutes of extreme pain on me?"

"Kind of a divine retribution, I'd say."

"Oh, right, of course," Peter said, "And you know this because...?"

"Christ, Peter, don't you fucking *see* it? The paper wasn't enough of a hint to you?" Frank exclaimed, extending a pointing figure in the direction of the newspaper framed on the wall.

"*No*, I don't see it. What does Father Jude have to do with us anymore? *Nothing*."

"Dammit, just think about it!" Frank yelled. "It was about three years ago; you were serving under him as deacon; you found something out about the alter boys..." Frank trailed off.

Peter did everything he could to think of what Frank was trying to help him remember, but it was like there was a large part of his memory that had fractured. Every time he felt close to the missing answers, they just moved further away.

"Long story short, you were pissed at Jude, you called me in, and I took care of it. Just open your damn *eyes*."

And he did.

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Frank walked into the dimly-lit halls of St. Francis, the church he had been going to for about two years. He brushed his hand across the tops of the unfolded picnic chairs which served as the church's pews, slowly accumulating dust on the tip of his fingers as he went. The wooden floorboards beneath the thin auburn carpeting let out a slight creak with every step that he took, sometimes sinking just enough for him to feel uncomfortable. "So these are where the church's donations are going to," he thought, smiling to himself. He continued walking through the pews, until he had reached a slightly elevated platform; on the center of the platform was a large, ornate wooden table, decorated with a gold-trimmed white cloth, which had the image of a cross with a slight

golden aura of light shining behind it. A white dove in flight was pictured slightly above the cross. The cloth itself looked like it was bought from a dollar-store liquidation sale.

"Why, hello Peter!" An old, raspy voice rang through the halls of the church. Frank looked up from the cloth to find an old man, dressed in a tight black suit, with a white collar poking out from the neck, a relatively large grey cross hung below the collar, swinging with every step the old man took. His hands were clutched around what appeared to be a very tall cane in the shape of a cross, his knuckles were white as day, a side effect of grasping the wooden cross a bit too hard.

"Close, but no, old man," Frank said, appraising the old man's stare as he spoke, "I'm a good *friend* of his though. I'm Francis—but my friends call me Frank."

"Well, I'm Father Jude. Nice to meet you, Frank—"

"I said my *friends*, Father," Frank interrupted. He enjoyed what appeared to be a hurt look on Father Jude's face—in fact, he relished it. Frank took a look at the leather-bound Bible with the gold-tipped pages that was the sole object atop the table.

"Please don't touch that, young man—" Father Jude tried to say, before he was interrupted once again.

"I've always found it interesting how a Bible, a holy text, could come in such a pretty package. How many books have you ever seen that are published in such a visually pleasing form?" Frank asked Father Jude, further testing the Father.

"It's the Word of God, son, it's a symbol of our—"

"Our *what*, Father? Our faith? Our devotion?" Frank paused for a moment to see if the Father would make any motion to respond—he didn't, so Frank continued talking as he slowly walked closer to Father Jude. "I'll tell you what the hell the Word of God is,

Father. It's dangerous," Frank said, his voice gaining intensity with every syllable, "It's dangerous, as you've so very well demonstrated over the years," Frank paused for a moment, "Tell me, Jude, where exactly did all those altar boys go over the last couple of years?"

Father Jude's eyes grew wide; his body overcome with a feeling that Frank recognized as terror. Frank's hands gripped the book in hands with an intensity which Father Jude felt as he fell backwards, his feet missing the step between the elevated platform and the height of the church floor. Jude opened his mouth as if to say something, but no words came out, just a muffled sigh.

"That's right. You were careful, *really* careful, but Peter found the bodies. He found them and he ran to talk to the bishop about it. Then, after listening to more than two years of the bishop's bullshit, Peter finally figured it out: you were being protected," Frank paused. "The bishop knew all along what you were doing, and we made sure he found *penance*," Frank just looked in disgust at the huddling mass of wrinkled skin and decrepit bones that laid on the ground before him.

"And now, Father Jude, I am here to enact your retribution."

Frank walked over to Father Jude and asked him in a far more calm and unfeeling voice, "But, first, I have a question for you." Frank stopped for a moment and looked around the church, stopping to focus on the crucifix. "Do you think there's a difference between the Will and the Word of God?" Frank turned his head from the crucifix fixed to the far wall and he looked at Father Jude, who was still holding himself in a frightened ball on the ground. Frank raised the Bible over his head and a series of loud thuds massacred the silence of the isolated church.

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Dr. Jones walked into her office for a brief break from checking up on her patients; as soon as she crossed the threshold between her job and her office, her beeper went off.

"Son of a bitch," she sighed as she walked back out of her office and to the nurse's station to find the person that had paged her, "What's the problem?"

"Room 106 again," one of the nurses responded.

"Of course it is," Dr. Jones thought to herself, "of course it is." She jogged quickly down the hallway, into the staircase, and stepped to the bottom, and swung the door open. She took a quick right, and ran down the hallway—just follow the screaming, she thought.

She ran up to the barred door of room 106, turned the handle, and pulled—the door resisted.

"For the love of God, will *someone* unlock the door?" She asked while backing away from it, and glancing at the three nurses standing to the left of the room. A brown-haired chubby nurse stepped up with a ring of keys in her hand, and stuck one into the slot in the center of the door handle. She twisted, failed, pulled it out and tried another key in the ring.

"Christ, get out of my way," Dr. Jones commanded as she grabbed the key ring out of the nurse's hand, picked a very well-worn, rusted brown key from the line-up, and slid it into the slot. She turned the key clockwise, and the lock gave way with a *click*.

Dr. Jones walked into the room, and looked around; she could see the clouds through the very high-placed barred window across from the door, and the white-padded

walls on every side of the room. The bottom of the room was covered in a slightly harder padding, the color darkened and battered by the number of times over the years in which the man in the room had paced and ran around screaming.

"Can you hear me, Peter?" she asked the man who was cowering in the corner, who gave no response. Dr. Jones asked again loudly, "*Peter*, can you hear me?"

"Frank, I remember!" Peter exclaimed towards the floor, he then sat in silence for a moment before saying, "I remember Frank, now I remember."

"Dammit," Dr. Jones said, agitated by the situation. "Alright, nurse, sedate him, and prepare him for his 6:30 session," with that she walked out of the room, to re-attempt a brief break in her office.

"I remember it all," she heard Peter mumble as she walked down the hallway, away from the cell.