

# ACT OF FAITH

America's longest running criminal conspiracy  
perpetrated against children

Stephen Rubino

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# You Need to Kill It

### *AWAKENING*

A ribbon of daylight hit Elizabeth's face through a small opening in the pulled drapes of her suite. Sleep slowly gave way to semi-consciousness. Alcohol laced with Valium was the elixir for escaping the enveloping darkness of childhood memories. Like so many times before, Elizabeth now had to deal with the morning after.

First came an almost ritualistic self-loathing as anger began to prickle the nerve endings on her bare skin. Elizabeth closed her eyes and tried to remember how she got to her bed and whether she had fucked the young man who bought her a drink at the Round Robin Bar. Lying on her stomach, her bloodshot eyes began to focus on her clothes on the floor. A path of underwear and high heels led to the bathroom, still lit from the previous night.

Elizabeth had played this scene out many times before and she knew exactly what came next. She would simply slide off the bed into the bathroom, gathering her clothes and shoes as she went, and would be dressed and out of the room in under three minutes. It was much easier to face the awkwardness of an anonymous tryst fully clothed in a lobby, rather than naked in a bed. As she lay there, her pulse started to quicken, listening for any sound of someone else on the other side of the bed. Turning gingerly off her stomach, she

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reached her arm and gently touched the other side of the king bed. She was shocked to find she was alone. Turning on her back and exhaling loudly, she felt the adrenaline subside from her system.

Elizabeth wrapped herself in a sheet, walked to the phone and picked up the receiver, which automatically dialed room service.

“Good morning, Ms. Natale. How may I assist you?”

Elizabeth tried to keep her tone civil. The faceless, nameless attendant had no idea who she was talking to but for the name that flashed on her switchboard in the kitchen.

“Good morning. Could you send up some black coffee to Room 820, please?” Elizabeth said, reminding herself that the woman was just doing her job.

Catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror, Elizabeth looked away. But for the happenstance of Sol Reich’s business card falling from her purse, she would not have been alone in her bedroom. Turning back to her reflection, she glared at the mirror. “You’re nothing but a fucking slut,” she hissed. Within seconds, she was transported back to Shepherd Street as a little girl.

Grabbing a sports bra, a pair of long running tights, and a zip-up shell from her suitcase, Elizabeth dressed quickly, retreating into her go-to scenario to escape the incoming tide of madness. As she finished tying up her shoes, her coffee finally arrived.

Elizabeth pulled an oversized chair and ottoman in front of the full height window and threw open the long drapes, taking in the view of Pennsylvania Avenue. While she waited for the caffeine to do its magic, her left foot yo-yoed back and forth as tension consumed her body. The Washington Monument and the west lawn of the White House was to her right, the District Building to the left, and the Department of Commerce directly in front of her window.

Taking in the expanse, Elizabeth was transported back in time. She remembered how, as a little girl, her entire family would trek down to Ellipse for the Peace Pageant every Christmas. At the

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corner of 15th and E Street NW, Elizabeth would race ahead, gravitating towards the live animals and Yule log fire pit where anxious parents dodged the fluttering embers raining down on the delighted children. After what seemed only like a minute or two, Lucy would find her and pull her toward the crèche, where they would spend a ridiculous amount of time simply staring at the nativity scene.

Elizabeth swallowed hard, remembering the loneliness she felt during the Christmas season as the memories of Father Dolan bubbled into her consciousness. No one would ever be able to understand how different she was from everyone else in the world. She quickly opened the mini bar, found two miniature bottles of vodka and downed them both to settle the darkness. She needed to get out on the street.

Elizabeth quickly breezed through the lobby and headed south on 14th Street. Instead of stretching, she warmed up at a slow pace, trying to relax the tension in her upper body. Her pounding headache was made worse by the jackhammering of the sidewalks at the construction site of the Ronald Reagan building. The weather was perfect for running. Windless, in the mid-fifties, the brilliant sun warmed Elizabeth's face.

Putting her head down, she powered through the long block to Constitution Avenue, crossing the street to the Smithsonian Museum of American History. Elizabeth began to formulate a to-do list as her cadence picked up to a "leisurely" seven-minute mile along the bridle path on Madison Drive.

First, she needed to talk to Francis. It had been two years since they last spoke and through her ebbing mental fog, she recalled that their last conversation went poorly. Housing and a car would come easily, as money was all that was required to secure an adequate place to live and reliable transportation. Elizabeth increased her pace to make the light across the 12th Street overpass to continue

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her route up Madison Drive toward the Capitol. Then there was the matter of Sol Reich and Barbara Blaine. Elizabeth felt a spurt of vodka-tinged reflux seep into her esophagus. She had become an expert in beating back the emotional and physical pain during her runs, but the thought of unpacking her childhood memories, especially those involving Dolan, overwhelmed her. She reached for a water bottle on her fanny pack to dislodge the bile in her throat. She wanted to find Dolan, she wanted to face him, and she wanted to hurt him like he hurt her.

Dolan had robbed the little girl who lived on Shepherd Street of her childhood, leaving her lost in a wasteland of emotional blackness, addiction and self-loathing. Her fists clenched as she imagined her hand on the gun in her father's nightstand. She pictured Dolan's head exploding as the bullet crashed into his skull spewing bone, flesh and tissue. Her pace picked up to competition level, each foot making a perfect strike on the gravel path. She powered past the National Gallery, the East Annex for modern art and across 3rd Street to East Capitol Circle, taking a serpentine path toward the Supreme Court and the Library of Congress then turning west on Independence Avenue toward the Lincoln Memorial. Elizabeth focused on taking in long draws of oxygen through her nose. Her legs were now absorbing the punishing blows of a full racing stride, fueled only by a dwindling supply of glycogen and an overwhelming sense of loss and anger. Wallowing in the exquisite details of her homicidal fantasy, Elizabeth let loose a full-throated "The mother-fucker raped me," startling several tourists walking in the opposite direction.

Ignoring the stunned faces of the people around her, Elizabeth turned onto Independence Avenue past the Canon Office Building, reserved mostly for junior Members of Congress. She crossed against the light at Independence Avenue and 1st Street, ignoring a shrill whistle from a Capitol Police Officer standing on the opposite

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corner, incredulous at how helpless she was to control the cascade of terrible memories.

Elizabeth's face contorted with rage as she remembered that first time Dolan had assaulted her. It was as if she were looking at a video recording. There she was standing in front of the vestment mirror, her small hands grabbing the side of the frame, her back to Dolan with her dress pushed up to her waist, her white underpants around her ankles. It was afternoon when she had gotten home. She felt a pressure and a burning sensation in her vagina and dampness in her underpants. Francis was not home but both her mother and grandmother were in the kitchen preparing dinner. They wanted her to talk about her day, but Elizabeth told them she had to go "number two" and rushed upstairs to the bathroom, the only private refuge available in the small house. She remembered them both giggling, telling her to use spray.

Elizabeth's brain was saturated with details of the past as she headed downhill toward the U.S. Botanical Gardens Building.

Sitting on the toilet, she stared at Joseph's shaving kit arranged neatly on the counter and the magnetic plastic Jesus planted neatly on the metal cup holder grouted into the checkerboard of pink and green tile on the wall. Lucy had suggested that she keep it next to the sink to remind the family to say their prayers before bed, but Elizabeth sat there trying to process the incongruity of being sexually assaulted by the very priest who awarded her the plastic Jesus prize for the third grader who raised the most money for the rescue of "pagan babies" during Lent. "Who the fuck were those pagan babies anyway?" she blurted out in full stride.

Elizabeth felt her heart pounding in her chest as she relived the memories of that first afternoon of being alone in her bathroom. She was still amazed that Dolan got her to stay silent.

As her legs pounded the pavement, she felt tears running down her cheeks.

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Was anyone in the hallway? Could anyone hear her? What would she do with her blood-stained underpants? Would her mother notice she was walking funny? How could she hide them without her mother finding out? Elizabeth recalled in vivid detail breaking her trance-like gaze of the plastic Jesus and looking down to her underpants stretched wide by her legs. She was disgusted by what she saw but decided to put them back on and sneak out of the house after dinner and put them down the sewer outside when no one was looking. If somehow she were missed for the few minutes she would be gone she would say she wanted to look at the night sky.

Suddenly, a knock at the door made her jump.

"What?" Elizabeth snarled through the door.

"You gonna be in there all day?" Francis answered.

"Frannie, I'm going number two. Do you mind?"

"Don't stink it up, jerk face."

"You're a jerk face. Now shut up, Frannie, and go downstairs and wait."

She was riddled with shame and guilt because she made a priest sin. The crisis passed, as she heard Francis going down the steps. Elizabeth clambered on top of the toilet seat to look at herself in the mirror, making sure there was no blood on the back of her legs. All through dinner she was terrified that the bleeding would start again, and questions would come that she could not answer. She wished God would take her right on the spot so it would be all over. She vowed to never tell a soul what had happened. Not her parents, not a doctor, not her teachers. No one.

The haunting memories from her childhood and the physical punishment of the cement had taken their toll. Elizabeth's legs began to cramp with lactic acid, forcing her into a grotesque limp. She hobbled toward the restroom in the southeast corner of the lower lobby of the Lincoln Memorial for water and a piece of fruit from a street vendor.



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Trying to catch her breath, Elizabeth refilled her water bottle. Stretching her legs out on the edge of the sink the cramps slowly subsided. She took the elevator to the main chamber and mixed with the tourists marveling at Daniel French's masterpiece. She could not help but notice the contemplative yet determined look on Lincoln's face as he rested a closed left hand on the pedestal and an open hand on the right.

*That was a guy who knew his course*, she thought as she gathered herself for the long walk back to the Willard Hotel. Elizabeth looked at her watch. It was time to get to work. She had a score to settle.

### *I WANT TO EXPLAIN SOME THINGS*

The "Do Not Disturb" sign was hung from Elizabeth's door. After a long shower and two large glasses of chocolate milk ordered up from room service, she reviewed the notes on her yellow legal pad, waiting for her body to fully recover. She wrote out a list of priorities, and with a deep breath she began to execute. First, she owed her brother Francis an apology. Elizabeth picked up the phone and tucked it under her chin so she could steady her hand to dial the number.

"Good morning, St. Stephen's Rectory. How may I help you?" came the cheerful voice on the other end of the line.

Elizabeth closed her eyes. "Good morning, this is Elizabeth Natale, Father Natale's sister. Is he available by any chance?"

"Oh, Miss Natale, of course; let me see if I can find him," the office secretary said. "Can you hold for a minute?"

"Yes, I can wait," Elizabeth said, her gut churning as she fidgeted in her chair. Staring at the two empty Smirnoff miniatures in the wastebasket next to her desk, she nervously tapped her pad with her pen as she waited for the call to be connected.

"Hello."

The tone was flat. Elizabeth was hoping for something less intimidating from her brother.

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"Hey, Frannie, it's Liz."

"I know that," Francis said curtly. "Mrs. Howard, our secretary, told me you were on the phone."

"Okay, listen, I realize you are still angry with me..."

"You're damn right, Elizabeth, I'm still really angry with you. I've reached out to you a dozen or more times. Nothing. Momma has called you—nothing. You didn't come to my ordination. You've never seen me say Mass. I've been to maybe a dozen chamber music recitals in New York over the years, I invited you to each one and you never even gave me the courtesy of a response. So, yes, Elizabeth, I'm pissed off. Perhaps we can conclude this before I say any more," Francis fumed.

"No, please, don't, Frannie; please don't hang up on me. I know I've been an asshole; I want to apologize; I want to see you. I want to explain some things you may not know about. Let me take you out to dinner. Frannie, you're my brother. I know we can't go back but I want at least to try and make things right, or at least make things civil between us. Let me take you out to dinner. I'm in the city. Please, Frannie," she begged, pushing the phone even closer to her mouth.

"Does this have anything to do with you quitting your job in New York," responded Francis, trying to tease more information out of the call.

"Why, have you been talking to Momma?" Elizabeth asked bluntly.

"Of course I talk to our mother. I talk to her every week, usually about you."

"Frannie, please, give me a couple of hours of your time and if you think I'm full of shit you don't ever have to talk to me again."

"Don't be ridiculous, Liz. I do think you're full of shit but you're still my sister."

"Where and when?" Francis added in a formal tone.

"How about Tiberio's on K Street at seven, tomorrow night? It has great Italian food," Elizabeth offered.

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"I know that place. My extra money goes to people in need. I can't afford Tiberio's, and I have confessions on Tuesday night in any event."

"Well, I'm buying. What about Wednesday?" Elizabeth persisted.

"I can do it Wednesday, it's my day off. Did you say seven o'clock?"

"Yes, seven. By the way, Frannie, do you remember Tommy Atkinson, the kid I wanted to go to the prom with?" Elizabeth asked.

Francis was well aware of Atkinson. For the last ten years Atkinson had been a pariah in the eyes of the Catholic hierarchy and Francis had secretly cheered him on.

"Vaguely, Liz, why do you ask?"

"I had a terrible crush on him in high school and I always wondered if he actually became a priest. Do you remember Tommy? He asked me to go to his senior prom at Gonzaga High School and then Sister Angela wouldn't let me go because I was a sophomore and Momma went along with her. I was so pissed off. I don't think I talked to anybody for a week."

"It was weeks, Liz," Francis laughed. "Do you remember I went and talked to Tommy?" he asked.

"I do," Elizabeth said with a smile. "And I also remember he didn't want to go to the prom without me and instead we went to Gusti's. He did that for me. I'll never forget it. Anyway, he somehow got tickets to the Carter Baron Amphitheater to see Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass, and we had our own prom."

"To be honest, Liz, I'm not sure if he entered the priesthood. I know all the priests in this Archdiocese and he's not a priest here."

### *NO ONE WANTS TO HEAR ABOUT THIS*

Francis hung up the phone, pounding his fist on the desktop. Lucy had called Francis to share Elizabeth's recent outburst about the sex abuse scandal during her brief visit. During the call, Francis

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deflected the conversation, distracted by the traumatic memory of Lucy's grief-stricken wail when Monsignor Ryan told her that her husband was dead.

The subject made him feel uncomfortable and isolated. The arc of his entire life had been built on secrets to preserve the status quo. Francis knew it was just a matter of time before Elizabeth would connect the dots and his story would unravel, harvesting a well-deserved punishment from God.

Francis had the number for the direct private line to Bishop Ryan's desk. He had been told to hang up if Ryan did not personally answer by the second ring. Ryan answered on the first ring.

"Bishop Ryan here."

"Good morning, Bishop, this is Francis."

"Good morning, Brother Daniel, it's good to hear your voice from the mid-continent. Are you well?"

Francis was impressed with how nimble Ryan had become as people must have been in his office. "I am, Bishop, thank you for asking. I got a call from my sister Elizabeth. Would you like me to call back?" Francis inquired.

"Just hold on." Ryan turned to his visitor and apologized for the unexpected interruption. "My dear Father Long, would you please give me a moment? I need to speak privately with a brother bishop in the Midwest," Ryan said as if the call had been scripted days before.

Francis heard Ryan's heavy oak door close just as he came back to the receiver.

"Are you still there?" Ryan asked.

"Yes, I'm here, Bishop."

"Now what's this business about a call from your sister?" Ryan asked in a tone that mixed harshness with curiosity.

"We have been somewhat estranged for several years but this morning she called me out of the blue. She said she wanted to

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explain some things from the past. I presume she believes this explanation will make her behavior more understandable. And she wants to meet for dinner.”

“Francis, I’m at a loss as to what the urgency here is.”

“Well, the urgency here is that right after you left my mother’s house two weeks ago, my sister came in from New York. She announced to my mother and Aunt she had just quit her job and was contemplating applying to Canon Law School at Catholic University. This morning during our call she wanted to know if Tommy Atkinson ever became a priest. You would know ‘Tommy’ as the Reverend Thomas Patrick Atkinson, formerly secretary to the Papal Nuncio Pio Laghi, and now a powerful advocate for abuse survivors.”

Ryan exhaled deeply into the phone. “Good God, how in the hell does she know Atkinson?”

“I think he was her first love in high school,” Francis said, stabbing a pencil onto his notepad, breaking the lead.

Francis recalled his own memories of being sexually abused by Dolan and how he had participated in what could only be described as a cover-up. He was a victim of Dolan but because of his own selfishness and shame he had become complicit in a decades long secret. He had thrown his own sister into a toxic cauldron to fend for herself and had ceded power over his life to Cletus Ryan. When his conscience bothered him, he would remind himself of the fear he felt as a teenager and the very real threats Dolan made to guarantee his silence. That rationale did not hold up as an adult, and still he said nothing.

“You said she quit her job in New York. What did she do?” Ryan pressed.

“She was a lawyer who had just made partner at McCabe, Willis & Houghton and quit.”

“Jesus, Francis, did I know that?”

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“With respect, Bishop, I don’t know what you know. I know I didn’t tell you because, quite frankly, it never entered my mind to advise you of my sister’s work history.”

“Listen to me, Father Natale. You pursued your vocation in a manner that took advantage of your musical talent. Did I not support you in that endeavor?” Ryan hissed into the phone.

“You did, Bishop.”

“Did I pressure you to tell your mother what really happened the night your father died?”

“No, you didn’t, Bishop,” Francis said, trying to keep his tone respectful.

“As a priest, didn’t you choose to protect our Archdiocese from scandal? Didn’t you agree that Mother Church was more important than your own individual needs?”

“It’s true, Bishop, I did at the time,” Francis said.

“At the time?” Ryan thundered. “Let me suggest to you that right now is the time for you to support me!”

“I am supporting you, Bishop,” Francis protested. “I called you as soon as I got off the phone with Elizabeth.”

“That’s not enough, Natale,” Ryan growled. “You need to kill it. You need to make sure your sister doesn’t have some goddamn epiphany with her old flame and create problems for this Archdiocese, not to mention the other dioceses that had Dolan before he came to us.”

“And how would you like me to, as you say, ‘kill it’?” Francis replied.

Ryan exploded. “No one wants to hear about this, Francis. Parents don’t want to go to the police. They don’t want to tell their friends or family. They don’t want to be embarrassed in their own parishes. What they want is for the scourge of sexual abuse and the assholes that do this to simply go away. They want someone like me to assure them that they’re doing the right thing by their family and

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that it will never happen again. That's the drill, Francis. Good Catholics do not want to see their Church attacked by scandal. And the last thing anybody wants is a bunch of greedy lawyers trying to make us look bad to the people in the pews. Did you forget that the people in the pews pay all of our bills?"

"And again, Bishop, I'm not arguing with you, but how would you precisely want me to kill it?"

"That's your problem. She's your sister. I'll handle Atkinson. You convince your sister that she's fine and needs to go back to New York and practice law."

"With respect, Bishop, telling my sister to do anything is quite impossible."

"I don't want to hear that, Father Natale. I want to hear you'll handle it. Listen to me, when you finally told your father what Dolan did to your sister, what did he do, Francis?" Ryan whispered into the phone.

"He put me in the car and we came to see you, Bishop."

"And what did your father say?" Ryan asked, turning his back to the door so he could not be overheard.

"He said you would know what to do," Francis said, choking down his rage.

"Exactly!" Ryan wailed. "I knew what to do then and I know what to do now. The reputation of the Church is bigger than any of us. The kids will get over it with some time, and with that time we'll figure out what to do with these priests. The passage of time is what makes this two-thousand-year-old institution tick, Francis. Time is the lifeblood of the Church's longevity. Eternal Salvation, Francis, that's our stock in trade, that's the bargain for loyalty and faith in the institution. That's what the faithful want and that's what we must deliver. The Church has weathered many severe attacks over the centuries, and, with time, this nuisance will pass as well. We both have a lot to lose here. Keep that in mind, Francis. You found

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a home in the priesthood for your lifestyle and your music. You told your father about Dolan, and you watched him have a heart attack in my rectory. I kept your secret, Father Francis Natale, all of your secrets! Remember, Francis, all of your secrets. Now, after you have dinner with your sister, I want you to call me. I want to be kept informed.”

“So, you want me to spy on Elizabeth,” Francis said, rising out of his chair in indignation.

“Don’t get cute with me, Father. If we aren’t clear, you could find yourself playing your precious piano at an old age retirement home for priests and nuns in the middle of bum-fuck nowhere, not that cushy rectory in Bethesda that you’re calling me from. It would be a big change for you, Father Natale. So, again, are we clear?”

“Yes, Bishop, I’m clear.” Francis flinched at the sound of the phones disconnecting and felt his face contort with anger. Stunned by Ryan equating the sexual assault of children to a historical nuisance, he could only hope that Elizabeth would be up to the task.

### ***BIG BEN’S IS RIGHT BEHIND YOU***

A half-eaten turkey club sandwich and a tossed salad crowded the small desk in Elizabeth’s suite. By mid-afternoon, Elizabeth had made progress on her list. She found a spacious one-bedroom apartment for rent at Harvard Hall and faxed over her application. It was in the Adams Morgan district overlooking Rock Creek Park and the west entrance of the National Zoo.

The hotel’s concierge secured dinner reservations for two on Wednesday evening at Tiberio’s. The business of the car was crossed off in red; getting a driver’s license in the District of Columbia was more complicated than it was worth. Elizabeth could not see herself taking a Driver’s Ed course when parallel parking, a requirement of the driver’s test, appeared to be dramatically outside of her wheelhouse. Cabs, trains, planes and buses would have to do for now.