

ACT OF FAITH

America's longest running criminal conspiracy
perpetrated against children

Stephen Rubino

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Running into The Darkness

BARBARA BLAINE GAVE ME YOUR NUMBER

Elizabeth pushed her canvas briefcase under the seat in front of her and stared out the window as United Flight 326 began its final descent into Seattle Tacoma International Airport. The familiar and comforting thump of the landing gear locking into place helped focus her mind.

The flight path for Runway 16 Left drew her gaze directly over the Rainer Golf and Country Club. The verdant, manicured fairways reminded her of how as a junior league player she had used golf to escape her madness. It was a game that did not supplant her ego to a team, a place where her darkness could be aggressively channeled into the singular nature of the sport without worry that her fury would somehow reveal her disgusting secrets.

Despite the irrational hue, a cross country trip to make a cold call to a man Elizabeth had not seen nor talked to for nearly thirty years seemed not at all cringeworthy. Upon reflection, her excursion seemed to be a perfectly rational response to her emerging feelings surrounding Andrew Dolan. Besides, who better to talk to than the man at the center of the Church's ugly cover-up?

Elizabeth believed, despite the passage of time, that she knew Father Thomas Aquinas Atkinson through his press

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clippings and interview transcripts Barbara Blaine had sent to her. That sweet caring teenager, who had been her first love, was now a warrior for the truth in a firestorm of political and moral scandal.

High stakes litigation suited Elizabeth's personality. But her professional judgement was clouded by the debilitating impact of childhood sexual abuse. The sting of Lucy mocking her desire to be a voice for the survivor movement served only to heighten Elizabeth's sense of self-doubt and abandonment by her mother. She was vulnerable and she knew it.

With her satchel of notes and yellow pads under her arm, Elizabeth grew impatient as she moved slowly up the jet-way with the rest of the passengers and into Concourse B of the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. Grabbing a cup of coffee from a kiosk vendor, Elizabeth settled into a semi-private bank of pay phones away from the din of baggage claim and disembarking flights. Taking a deep breath, she punched in her AT&T credit card number and the number Barbara Blaine had given her. With her eyes shut tightly, Elizabeth coiled her torso and legs into a Gordian knot of tension, waiting for the call to connect.

With military precision, her call was picked up on the first ring. "Good afternoon, Base Chaplain's Office, Sergeant Porter speaking. How may I help you?"

"Good afternoon, Sergeant, this is Elizabeth Natale. I'm an old friend of Father Atkinson. By any chance is he available?" Elizabeth asked in a chatty tone. She pressed the receiver to her shoulder as she downed one of the miniature vodkas she had stockpiled from the plane.

"Hold on, ma'am, I'll check to see if he's available."

Her heart started to pound as she listened to the automated hold message detailing the base's religious schedule for the variety of faiths practiced at the sprawling facility.

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On hearing the name of the caller, Atkinson immediately picked up the receiver.

"Is this Lizzie from Notre Dame Academy in D.C.?" Atkinson asked, ignoring the more formal etiquette reserved for an Air Force Captain.

The warmth of the still familiar voice slowed Elizabeth's shaking. She opened her eyes and placed her pen on her pad as a broad smile covered her face. Elizabeth straightened her body and sat taller in her stool. "It is," Elizabeth said in a cheeky tone as she fought to keep her composure. "I'm sorry to call you out of the blue, Tommy – oh excuse me – is it okay to call you Tommy," Elizabeth said, catching herself.

"Of course it is, Liz, the Air Force is kinda loose on stuff like that around here. So, how the hell are you?" Atkinson asked warmly.

Elizabeth hesitated, unsure as to how to open a conversation with a man she had not seen for decades. She took a deep breath and dove headlong into the conversation. "Barbara Blaine gave me your number and sent me to a bookstore to get a copy of Jason Berry's book," she blurted into the phone.

Tom Atkinson knew what that meant. Since he had been fired from his post as a Canon lawyer and secretary to Cardinal Pio Laghi, the Vatican ambassador in Washington, D.C., he had fielded hundreds of similar calls over the last eight years.

Atkinson picked up the cradle for the phone and walked around his small desk, closing the door behind him. "Holy shit, Liz, I wasn't expecting that," he said in a hushed tone. "Where are you, it sounds like you're at an airport."

"I am, and I'm sorry for all the noise," Elizabeth apologized, furious with herself for being so forward. She scrawled the word *asshole* on her notepad and underlined it. "I shouldn't have just put that out there on the phone, Tommy, I'm really sorry. After reading Jason Berry's book I just wanted to reach out and talk to you and I didn't know where to start," Elizabeth said, her voice cracking.

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"No worries, Liz, really," Atkinson said, calming Elizabeth's impending sense of panic.

Atkinson had seen how quickly these calls could get out of hand and if he wasn't careful, he could easily be on the phone for hours.

"We need to talk, Liz, but you caught me literally getting ready to adios the State of Washington. I'm leaving tomorrow for the East Coast. Let me finish packing my truck and I'll call you tonight on my way out of town. You're three hours ahead so how about seven your time, does that work for you?"

"Sure," Elizabeth said, sounding deflated. "But I'm not three hours ahead."

"Where exactly are you, Liz?" Atkinson asked, surprised by Elizabeth's comment.

"I'm not three hours ahead on the East Coast because I'm at SeaTac," Elizabeth said, unwinding her legs and standing up from her stool.

Atkinson's mind raced to the memory of the beautiful dark-haired beauty on the night of his prom at Gonzaga, remembering that she could be a handful and more than a bit complicated.

"So, let me understand," Atkinson chuckled. "You've been talking to Barbara, she gave you my number, you read Jason's book and you hopped on a plane to run me down?"

"Actually, I read it three times," Elizabeth said, interrupting Atkinson in mid-sentence. "But the short answer is yes."

"So, I guess I really shouldn't be surprised you're in Seattle, thirty miles away from me," Atkinson said causing them both to share a laugh and breaking the tension in Elizabeth's body.

"I know, I'm sorry for being so forward," Elizabeth said, biting her lip.

"You're not being forward at all," Atkinson said, trying to stay calm but more than a little annoyed.

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"You never were a good liar, Thomas Atkinson. But I do appreciate you trying to make me feel a little better," Elizabeth said, a tone of embarrassment creeping into her voice.

Atkinson had been looking forward to a singular cross-country journey as an opportunity to come to grips with his own crisis of isolation. He was questioning everything about the priesthood. Scorned by the very men he had looked up to as a young priest, he found himself disconnected from all he thought he had wanted as a man. His only recourse at this stage was to use this trip to figure out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life and why he became a priest in the first place. Slowly he began to think that Elizabeth may be a good sounding board for what he was trying to accomplish on the long road back, not to mention that as he remembered her from college, she was pretty damn easy on the eyes.

"Lizzie, I have a proposition for you."

"That's interesting, coming from a Catholic priest," Elizabeth said playfully.

Grateful that he was alone at his desk, Atkinson's face flushed as long dormant memories of Elizabeth flooded his mind.

"Okay, Lizzie, point for the Natale team. But seriously, I have an idea. Please don't take this the wrong way, but what are you doing for the next ten days?"

Elizabeth was confused by the question, as she fingered the cap of an unopened miniature of vodka. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, like I said you caught me leaving town, but I'm going by way of a cross country road trip to my next duty station. I only have Boomer as my co-pilot--"

"Who's Boomer?" Elizabeth interrupted.

"He's my dog. Why don't you come along, and we can talk along the way and more or less unpack all the crap that got you on a plane. I've got some unpacking to do myself. How does that sound?" Atkinson asked.

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Elizabeth was shaken by the offer. Her heart rate increased as she felt a familiar darkness pushing into the conversation. She opened her last bottle of vodka and downed it in one pass. Ten days alone with the man at the center of an international shitstorm was a terrifying thought and at the same time an exhilarating prospect.

The pause in the conversation stretched to an awkward length. Atkinson finally broke the silence. "It's okay if you don't want to come but if you still want to chat about why you called me, it'll have to wait until I'm off the road and settled so we can have a meaningful conversation."

Elizabeth tried to think of something sensible to say. She felt awkward, embarrassed and vulnerable. "Do you think it's okay, me riding with you and you being a priest and all?"

Atkinson let out a howl of laughter. "Jesus, Lizzie, it's not like there's a bumper sticker on my truck saying, 'priest and married woman on board.'"

"Who said I'm married," Elizabeth said, her vintage sass reminding Atkinson of her as a teenager.

"I'm sorry, I just assumed," Atkinson said, flustered.

"Nope, never married, no kids and no pets. So far just work," Elizabeth said, tapping the eraser of her pencil on the counter of the pay phone. She silently lamented the mess her life had become and what she was about to lay onto a friend who was offering so much of his time.

"I think two old school friends getting reacquainted while I'm between jobs will not be a problem for me, unless it's a problem for you. Besides, it might be good for you to get out on the road and sort things out."

"Well...I'm not sure. I mean how will it work?" Elizabeth asked, not wanting to raise the issue of sleeping arrangements and her inherent distrust of all men. "I mean what happens at night?"

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“Out here on the West Coast it usually gets dark,” Atkinson said, amused at her shyness. “Of course, you’ll have to pay for your own room, and a little gas money since you’re taking Boomer’s seat.”

Elizabeth let Atkinson’s words sink in as she surveyed the blank faces of a seemingly endless ant stream of passengers in the terminal. Her eyes narrowed to her hand trembling above her notepad and felt a rush of excitement. “Then I’m in. What do I need? All I have is some jeans and my winter running stuff in an overnight bag.”

“Excellent. Keep it that size; I’m packed to the gills. Maybe we’ll pick up some hiking boots along the way.”

“Hiking boots!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “What the hell, Tommy, are we walking to Maine?”

Atkinson laughed. “Okay just bring some comfortable shoes as there are a couple of trails along the way that have overlooks that I want to see.”

“I have running shoes with me,” Elizabeth said, eyeing her carry-on.

“They’ll be fine. Okay, so here’s the deal, what terminal are you in?” Atkinson asked.

Elizabeth scanned the overhead signage trying to figure out where she was. “Okay, there it is. I’m in Terminal 3, Tommy.”

“All right, I know exactly where that is. You hang out at the airport for a couple of hours. Just outside at Terminal 3 baggage claim there’s an overhead sign that says ‘passenger pick up.’ I’ll be there at three o’clock sharp.

“That sounds perfect,” Elizabeth said, stuffing her yellow pad and empty bottles into her canvas briefcase. “I’ll have a bright red running hat on.”

“Elizabeth, one more thing,” Atkinson said, his suddenly serious tone causing a flutter in Elizabeth’s stomach. “I’m really sorry we have reconnected under these circumstances but I’m really glad we have.”

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Relieved by the sincerity in his voice, Elizabeth added, "I am too, Tommy, and thank you for saying that. This has been a little awkward for me and you've been really sweet about me just dropping out of the sky and showing up on your doorstep."

Elizabeth closed her eyes as she hung up the phone. She clasped her hand to her mouth and tried to slow her breathing. She had no idea what would happen next, but she sensed that whatever happened, she would be safe with her old friend. Elizabeth watched the time and waited in the United Club room. Her feelings of excitement were tempered by the reality of why she had traveled across the country to meet with the whistleblower of the entire Church scandal. Several vodka and tonics and trips to the ladies room to adjust her hair and makeup assuaged the nervous tension that filled her body.

She replayed the night she was going to tell Atkinson her secret. It was the same night she had fallen in love with him. They were meeting because they both had news to share. Elizabeth wondered how different her life may have been had she not insisted that Tommy go first with his news. Atkinson told Elizabeth he was entering the seminary, and Elizabeth, trying to disguise the gut punch she had just taken, demurred on her secret and instead told him that Villanova was recruiting her for track. That was the instant that Elizabeth concluded she was alone in the world.

YOU DON'T LOOK SO BAD YOURSELF

A few minutes before 3:00 P.M., Elizabeth stood under a sign for passenger pick-up waiting for a priest in a white truck who would take her on a journey to bare her soul. The irony was thick with sadness.

Elizabeth used her compact mirror for one last check, adjusting her ponytail out the back of her red ball cap when the deep rhythmic bellow of a hundred-pound, flop-eared boxer echoed through the underground lane for cars picking up passengers.

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Atkinson's diesel truck grumbled to a loud idle right in front of Elizabeth. Nearly half of Boomer's torso was hanging out the rear of the cab. His tail was wagging furiously, his jowls flapping with each bark.

Elizabeth smiled at the spectacle, her feet still planted on the curb.

Atkinson slammed the gearshift into park and jumped out of the truck, his face beaming with excitement. "I'm sorry, Liz, he can be really embarrassing sometimes, but he'll settle down. God, Liz, you look great, I mean look at you," Atkinson gushed as they hugged at the rear tailgate of his truck. "You don't look a day over thirty."

"Ha, well we both know that's not true," Elizabeth exclaimed with a nervous laugh.

Elizabeth did a quick inventory of Atkinson. She had wondered what he would look like after so many years and here he was. She expected some kind of uniform or priest type clothes, maybe even a bit of a paunch, but Atkinson was dressed in jeans, a flannel shirt and a waxed leather vest. He was gorgeous. Lean and close to six feet, Atkinson was clean-shaven with sandy brown hair and a weathered complexion set off by tortoise-shell glasses. When they hugged, she could feel the hardness of his shoulders and back. *This is a tough guy, just like Barbara said*, she thought. Nothing at all like the men she had known.

"You don't look so bad yourself, Thomas Atkinson," Elizabeth said warmly as she lifted her carry-on toward the back of the truck.

"Let me get that for you." Atkinson grabbed her suitcase and put it into the last space available in the bed of his truck. "So, are you hungry?" he asked.

"I'm starved," Elizabeth said, gathering her purse and waiting to see if she should get in the truck.

"Don't worry, Liz, he's friendly."

"He's so big, Tommy, you sure it's okay?"

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"You'll be fine, Elizabeth." Atkinson made direct eye contact with his dog. "Boomer, down," Atkinson said crisply.

Elizabeth peeked her head through the front passenger window as Boomer obeyed the command.

"Oh, wow, that was impressive," Elizabeth said, surprised at the dog's response based on his wild yodeling as Atkinson pulled in.

"Sometimes I have to help him find his off switch, but generally he's a real sweetheart. Liz, I take it you're not a dog person."

"Well, I've never had a dog, but I wouldn't say I'm not a dog person. At least not yet."

"Fair enough, you'll know by the end of the trip whether you are or you're not," Atkinson laughed.

"You ready to go, Elizabeth?" Atkinson asked, formally extending his hand across the front seat to Elizabeth.

"I am," Elizabeth said, excited by the prospect of such an impromptu journey.

Atkinson motioned to his backpack in the front seat. "There are a few Triple A books and an Atlas in my pack, get them out and I'll show you where we're headed. There are some nuts and pretzels in the glove box to hold you over until we get to Ray's," Atkinson said as he pulled onto the northbound lanes of Interstate 5 for the thirty-minute drive to Everett, Washington, where Route 2 begins its trans-continental journey.

"What's Ray's?"

"It's a burger joint that's been around since 1952. They do plain road food very well. If you like fish and chips, it's the real deal. Jimmy Doleshel, the owner's son, hand cuts and batters fresh Alaskan cod and deep-fries it with the potatoes. Add some malt vinegar and it's a feast."

"That sounds great. I'm getting hungry all over again," said Elizabeth as she got the maps out of Atkinson's pack. "Will Boomer be okay if I open the pretzels?" Elizabeth asked as she turned in her seat to eye her four-legged road companion.

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“He’ll be fine until you give him the first one,” Atkinson said with a twinkle in his eye. There was no good way to open an unpleasant conversation, so Atkinson plunged in. He put the truck on cruise control and adjusted his seat. “So, Elizabeth Natale, what got you on a plane to come out here unannounced?”

Elizabeth did not know why, but she was surprised at the directness of the question. “Jesus, Tommy, I don’t even know where to start,” Elizabeth said, staring out the passenger window.

“Start with what you want to tell me,” Atkinson said as he merged into the right lane.

Elizabeth exhaled loudly as her leg started to bounce against the truck’s floorboard. “I met Barbara in New York. Actually, I ran into one of her demonstrations coming out of my office. It was in front of the Cardinal’s residence, and I was drawn to the picture of her as a girl when she was being abused by a priest.”

“I see. You said you were coming out of your office, what do you do?” Atkinson asked.

“I’m a lawyer.”

“You don’t say, Liz. I’ve been dealing with a lot of lawyers lately. So, you saw Barb’s picture as a young girl, then what?”

“Long story short, it kind of threw me into a tailspin,” Elizabeth said, resting her chin in her palm and avoiding Atkinson’s gaze. “It’s been with me since I was little and over the last week it made me deal with the fact that what happened to Barbara happened to me when I was little. I know one thing, Tommy.”

“What’s that?” Atkinson asked.

“I didn’t feel as alone after talking to her,” Elizabeth said, tapping her fingers against the armrest on the door.

“Does your perpetrator have a name?”

Elizabeth seethed as she spoke the name of the man who sexually assaulted her. “Yeah, Tommy, he has a name alright, it’s fucking Andrew Dolan and I’d like to kill the son-of-a-bitch.”

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Atkinson waited for the rawness in Elizabeth's voice to settle. "I'm not surprised. As I remember, Dolan was the only priest that was in regular contact with your family. Am I right about that?"

"Yes," Elizabeth said tersely. "He gave my brother piano lessons for years and he was always over at Campus School," Elizabeth said, trying to keep her foot still.

Atkinson kept his eyes on the road. "First things first, Liz. I want to apologize for what a Catholic priest did to you. I know it doesn't mean much to you under the circumstances, but with everything I've seen, I believe it's something that needs to be said."

"It means a lot coming from you, Tommy, but truthfully it should have come long ago from someone in the Church," Elizabeth said as the first tears streaked her cheeks. "Shit, that didn't take long," Elizabeth said, wiping her face with the sleeve of her shirt.

"There's a box of tissues under your seat."

"Thanks, I'll be fine," said Elizabeth as she dabbed her eyes with the cuffs of her shirt, trying to keep her eyeliner from running down her face.

Elizabeth turned in her seat to face Atkinson and to change the subject, as she was not comfortable having Atkinson see her so upset. "So, what do you think, Tommy? Do my wardrobe choices fit the trip?"

Atkinson did not press the issue any further. "They do, Lizzie. You got the sweater and the jeans thing going. An insulated parka, ball cap, I'd say you're road warrior worthy. Cocked, locked and ready to rock."

Valiantly trying to keep her anxiety at bay, Elizabeth fidgeted with the atlas in her lap, exhaling a loud nervous laugh. "Well, we'll see about that, Tommy."

Ray's Drive-In, from all outward appearances, looked a little shaky to Elizabeth. It was a plain, one-story white box with red and blue trim around the windows but based on the number of cars in the parking lot you would have thought they were giving food away.

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"So, we eat in the car?" Elizabeth asked, her left eyebrow fully arched.

"Oh, good God, no. That would put Boomer over the edge. Jimmy will cook him a plain hamburger and I'll mix it with some kibble when we're finished."

"So, he waits in the car?" Elizabeth asked as she grabbed her purse from the floor.

"That's the plan, unless you want to take him for a short walk while we wait for the food."

"I would like that. How do you do that? I mean, is there a protocol?"

Atkinson looked over the fender of the car toward Elizabeth, pulling his glasses to the tip of his nose. "Did you just ask me if there was a protocol on how to walk?"

"Don't be a smart-ass, Tommy, you know what I mean."

"I know, I know," Atkinson laughed. "All right, here's the drill. He has a collar and a choker chain collar. When you walk him around roads or in cities, use the choker chain collar. If anyone asks, he's been fixed."

"Tommy, I'm not a dog person. Fixed with what?" Elizabeth asked as she attached the leash to the choker.

"You know, fixed."

Elizabeth looked at Atkinson with a blank stare on her face.

"Lizzie, Boomer is fixed," Atkinson bellowed. "You know, neutered, castrated."

"Oh, good God, Boomer, you poor thing," Elizabeth cooed. "Tommy, why on earth would you do such a thing to the beast?"

Atkinson looked at Elizabeth, a faint smile coming to his face. "Maybe on day five we'll go through that. I'm going to order the food. Cheeseburger or fish and chips?"

"Fish."

Atkinson reached into his pocket and pulled out a blue plastic bag and handed it to Elizabeth. "You may need this."

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"For what?" Elizabeth asked, genuinely confused.

"Boomer may poop, so you put your hand in the bag, like a glove, pick up the poop and turn it inside and out and you're done."

"Really, Tommy," Elizabeth said. "I don't think so." Elizabeth bent down and looked directly into Boomer eyes. "Now, Boomer, don't you poop."

"That's good, Liz, Boomer will add that to his list of protocols and get right on that for you," Atkinson said as he turned to order their food.

After they finished their meal, Atkinson and Elizabeth sat alone in the tiny table section at the front of the building.

"So, what do you think? Were they the best fish and chips you ever had?"

"Tommy, they actually were," Elizabeth said, draining the last bit of her milkshake. "My compliments to the chef."

Atkinson pushed his chair away from the table. "So, Liz, I saw you through the window while you were walking Boomer."

"Okay, I didn't pick up his poop. I'm sorry. I mean, Tommy, it was gigantic."

"That's not what I was talking about," Atkinson said as he doodled on the paper placemat on the table.

"Then what?" Elizabeth asked.

Atkinson stared across the table until Elizabeth finally spoke.

"Oh, that," Elizabeth said meekly.

"Yep, Liz, that. I've been there. I'm an alcoholic. I drank my way through 1983 to 1988. I went through the whole gig. Drinking alone, hiding my bottles, a DUI, a night in jail, rehab, the meetings, relapses, more meetings, the whole shit box. So, when I see you pounding miniatures on the edge of the parking lot, I see a problem. Do you see a problem with that, Liz?"

"No, I don't see a problem, I have a problem," Elizabeth said, pulling her chair closer to the table. "I'm pissed off and I'm not sure

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what to do about it. But one thing I can do is to try to drink it away. And you know what else," Elizabeth added in a tortured whisper.

"No, what," Atkinson said, unmoved.

"It works for me. It's good enough to get me through the day."

"Really, now? How's that working for you, Liz?"

Elizabeth's face flared with anger. "It's not, goddammit, and I don't need you to tell me that."

"I'm not telling you anything, Liz, I'm asking."

Elizabeth jammed her straw into the empty milkshake glass, staring down at an empty plastic basket. "I'm sorry, Tom, I didn't mean to snap like that."

Atkinson reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a tiny leather-bound notebook and handed it to Elizabeth.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Go to the last page that has any writing on it and look at the number on the top right-hand corner. What does it say?"

"One thousand, eight hundred and twenty-five."

"That's the number of days since my last drink."

Elizabeth stared at the number as her eyes began to fill with tears.

"Have you ever detoxed?" Atkinson asked.

"Yes, once by myself at home."

"Why did you decide to detox?"

"I missed a court date."

"How did it go?" Atkinson asked, pulling closer to the table.

"It was a disaster."

"How long did you last?"

Elizabeth, expecting a disapproving look from her friend, emptied her lungs through her cheeks as she grasped the back of her head with both hands. "Five, maybe six hours."

"Geez Liz, that's great. When I first tried, I only made it two hours. Listen, Lizzie, I'm not a therapist and maybe we can revisit the detox stuff later, but I'm not drinking with you."

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"I get it, Tommy. I'm not asking you to drink with me and I promise I won't drink in front of you."

"Or Boomer?" Atkinson asked warmly.

"Or Boomer. I won't set a bad example for him either," Elizabeth said, smiling.

"Seriously, Liz, we can surely talk along the way, but I'm not sure I have all the answers you're looking for. I'm a priest with more than a few issues myself, and I'm in the middle of a war with the hierarchy of the entire Roman Catholic Church. It's like a giant swirling cesspool that doesn't have a bottom."

Elizabeth was embarrassed. Half of her wanted to get out of the truck and go back home and half of her wanted to stay. She folded her hands on the table and looked squarely into Tom Atkinson's eyes. "I'm an unemployed lawyer. A single woman who's been running, hiding and drinking most of her life and I don't see any end in sight. Tommy, I have no idea where all of this is going but I'd say we're the perfect couple."

Atkinson slammed his hand on the table and laughed. "Agreed, Counselor. Let's get on the road. Maybe we'll get lucky and sort it all out."

Atkinson pulled his truck onto Broadway and headed south to Hewett Street. "Okay, Lizzie, it's coming up. You see the I5 overpass ahead just past Maple Street?"

"I do."

"My camera's in the glove box. Get it out, I want to get a picture. Do you know how to use it?" Atkinson asked.

"Christ, Tommy, it's an Instamatic, of course I know how to use it. You click the shutter, and it takes a picture," Elizabeth said, feigning intellectual insult.

"Excellent. Take a picture as we go under," Atkinson said excitedly. "That's the western terminus to Route 2. We're headed toward the town of Wenatchee, only 2,500 miles to Houlton, Maine!" Atkinson cackled.

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Passing through the Victorian town of Snohomish and the tiny mining town of Gold Bar, Elizabeth's mood seemed to lighten.

"These mountains are beautiful. It's so different from the East Coast. You open a window and you can actually smell the pine," Elizabeth said marveling at the view.

The miles clicked off effortlessly, punctuated only by the hypnotic tapping of the tires running over each expansion joint in the road. Elizabeth reached between the seat and rubbed Boomer's head and behind his ears as he drifted off to sleep.

"Can I ask you some questions, Tommy?" Elizabeth asked as she stared out at the endless expanse of Douglas fir covering the western foothills of the Cascade Mountain Range.

"Shoot, Liz, we got nothing but time."

"So, when I left my job in New York, I told you about meeting Barbara and reading Jason Berry's book and I came to the conclusion that I would be better served if I went back to school and became a Canon Lawyer and worked on this issue from the inside. I had been thinking about it for a while, and I was collecting articles that appeared in the newspapers. I'm a victim of this type of abuse, who better to inform than the bishops," Elizabeth reasoned.

"So, the reason you want to be a Canon Lawyer is to inform the bishops of their lapse of judgment and total disregard for the safety and welfare of God's children," Atkinson said, scoffing at the suggestion.

"Jesus, Tommy, don't get pissy. But yeah, that's exactly why."

"Liz, I'm a Canon Lawyer. I worked in the Vatican's diplomatic mission in Washington for five years. I saw all of these complaints going over to Rome. I worked for a Cardinal who votes on who's gonna be the next Pope. I watched them hide these assholes in plain sight. I saw the inside of an international cover-up. I saw how the bishops exploited the cops and judges to make all this crap go away and if that didn't work, they would threaten the parents. You said

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you talked to Barbara, so give me a grade on a scale of one to ten on how I did getting the bishops to deal with Catholic priests sexually molesting kids.”

Elizabeth sat silently in her seat staring out the passenger window.

Atkinson persisted. “Really, Liz, I’m serious, how would you say it’s working out for me? I co-wrote a goddamn report to the bishops going through the whole friggin’ history, gave them hard facts on incidence and a solid prediction as to what was financially and morally at stake for the Church. Gave them an overview as to what modern therapy techniques could work for the treatment and retention of perpetrators. The report was shit canned. The topic was shit canned, and I was shit canned. At the rate they’re paying out now I wouldn’t be surprised that our billion-dollar estimate swells to four, possibly five billion. That’s real money, Counselor.”

“So, I guess you’re thinking it’s a bad idea,” Elizabeth said meekly.

“Well, I didn’t think you wanted me to blow smoke up your ass,” he said, accelerating on a miles long ribbon of asphalt.

“I don’t want anything up my ass,” Elizabeth said tartly. “I just want some answers.”

“I’m sorry, Liz. To what questions?” Atkinson pressed.

“Okay, here’s something that makes no sense to me: How do you reconcile the Church’s position on birth control and right to life with the cover-up of sexual crimes committed by priests against children?”

“Ha! Spoken like a true lawyer. The answer is you can’t reconcile those two positions. The better question: What’s the rationale of each position, which would explain why they’re treated so wildly differently by the Church hierarchy.”

“There shouldn’t be any difference,” Elizabeth countered, sitting upright in her seat.

ACT OF FAITH

“Don’t get the dog nervous, Liz. Look at his eyes; you’re making him nervous.”

“It’s okay, Boomie, we’re just talking.” Elizabeth reached down and stroked the boxer’s ears.

The conversation was didactic, but Atkinson found it cathartic in dealing with his own conflict. It was forcing him to examine why he was even attracted to the priesthood in the first place.

“Let me answer that,” Atkinson said, fully engaged. “Elizabeth, let’s just suppose your mother walked in on Dolan abusing you, to the point that she wouldn’t be able to deny that it happened.”

“That’s disgusting. Now you’re making me nervous.”

“Just stay with me, Liz. Knowing your mother as you do, think about these scenarios. Would she want to believe that the bishops had no way to predict or anticipate Dolan’s sexual crimes committed against her daughter?”

“In my mother’s case, absolutely,” Elizabeth said, reaching for her notepad.

“Would your mother not want any of this to be broadcast within the parish?”

“For sure.”

“Would she want to believe that Dolan would never be in a position to abuse another child and that the bishops knew best, with guidance from God, how to handle this?”

“Big yes on that.”

“That if she reported this to the authorities, it would bring public scandal to her beloved Church and her entire family?”

“Yes. Jesus, Tommy, you’re killing me.”

“Now one last question: Would your mother be susceptible to the argument that public exposure of a priest committing a sexual crime against her child is in the end an attack on the Church that would put her quest for eternal salvation in jeopardy with God?”

STEPHEN RUBINO

"Yes, she would. Tom, could you pull over, I need some air," Elizabeth said as she hugged Boomer around his massive neck.

"Of course, Liz. Steven's Pass is right around this next curve and there's a nice turn-out."

Before Atkinson had put the truck in park, Elizabeth got Boomer's leash on and was out of the truck.

"You want any company?" Atkinson yelled after her.

"Nope, just give me a few minutes."

"Okay, but stay on the trail and take this," Atkinson said as he tossed a bear bell to Elizabeth. "Snap that on his collar."

"Got it."

As soon as Elizabeth was out of sight, she raced to the nearest tree to steady herself and vomited up her fish and chips. Elizabeth bent over and heaved until there was nothing left in her stomach. Her head started to throb. She was shocked at how Atkinson's recitation had caused an almost immediate physical reaction.

Twenty minutes had gone by, and Atkinson was worried. He locked up his truck and started out on the summit trail but within a minute he heard Boomer's bell and got back in the truck. Elizabeth opened the passenger side and Boomer bounded in.

"You have a good walk, Boom?" he asked as the boxer settled into the back seat. Noticing Elizabeth was pale and perspiring, he asked, "You okay, Liz?"

"No, but I'll be fine. How long are we going to drive today?"

"I was hoping to get to Spokane. It's about four to five hours. If that's too long, we can stop. Your call."

"Nope, that's fine," Elizabeth said as she pulled hard on the waist hem of her down parka.

"You pissed off at me or something, Liz?"

"No, I'm not, but I'd like to get going."

"Roger that."

ACT OF FAITH

Atkinson put his truck in reverse and backed out of the parking space and eased down from the crest of Steven's Summit. There were 228 miles to go to Spokane, so he slipped Stan Getz's *Desafinado* into his CD player in hopes of mellowing things out with Elizabeth. Traffic was light as the strains of bass, percussion, guitar and saxophone lightly filled the cab of his truck. His sense was that the lawyer was processing information based on the number of pages she was filling in her legal pad, leaving him in his own quandary. If the reason he wanted to be a priest was to be closer to God, how could that even be possible if the organization turned a blind eye to the children who were abused?

The stunning views down the Wenatchee Valley coming into Leavenworth, a surreal Bavarian enclave nestled into the eastern foothills of the Cascades, barely got a glance from Elizabeth.

After two hours of silence and furious writing, Elizabeth exploded. "You know what I'm pissed off about?"

"I'm not sure I want to know, but go ahead," Atkinson said with a wry look on his face.

"I'm pissed off about everything you said a hundred miles back that made me puke my guts out. And I'm pissed off at my brother Francis."

"Why is that, Liz? I mean he isn't involved in any of this, is he?"

"No, but before I came out to find you, I took him to dinner and basically gave him the story on that fucker Dolan. No details, just the headlines. He said if I decided to report Dolan it would be better for me to not be associated with you or Barbara, that I would lose credibility with the bishops. He said it was complicated."

"How did you handle that, Liz?" Atkinson asked, mildly amused.

"I about took his head off. If we hadn't been out in public I would have smacked him."

"Liz, I just think he's looking out for you and maybe himself a little bit. My name is toxic with the hierarchy. What diocese is Frannie in?"

STEPHEN RUBINO

"I don't know. What's it matter? He lives just outside D.C. in a parish."

"The clerical grapevine has Cletus Ryan being named Archbishop of Washington. So, I don't want to aggravate you anymore, but your brother is simply drinking his boss's Kool-Aid."

"Did you say Cletus Ryan?" Elizabeth asked, gripping her pen.

"Yes, why?"

"He was just over at my mother's house for dinner. I got into a huge argument with my mother as to what he was even doing there. I think there's something going on between them."

"Whoa, whoa now, hold on there, Counselor. It certainly wouldn't be the first bishop to carnally 'know' a parishioner, but do you know, or do you suspect?"

"I suspect. I said I 'think' there's something going on between them, because I asked my grandmother and my Aunt Rose who lives with Momma and they were all buttoned up, and told me I would have to talk to her myself."

"Did you?"

"Of course not. What am I supposed to say? 'Hey, Mom, you screwing the local bishop?' Don't be ridiculous, Tommy," Elizabeth fumed.

Atkinson smiled.

"What are you smiling about?"

"It's just the way you talk, Liz," Atkinson said.

"Well, when you work in New York most of your life, you learn to be blunt."

Atkinson put the truck on cruise control, slowly moving his head to the beat of the music.

"Say something, Tom!"

"I'm thinking."

Frustrated and out of vodka, Elizabeth reached into her purse and pulled out a bottle of Valium. Without any water, she popped two tablets.

ACT OF FAITH

"What you got there, Liz?"

"I thought you were thinking," she shot back.

Atkinson looked straight down the roadway.

"I'm sorry, Tommy, that was uncalled for. I'm really itching for some vodka, and I'm so pissed off at Frannie I can't see straight."

"Do you want to stop and get some?" Atkinson said, glancing at Elizabeth.

"Are you okay with that, I mean I thought..."

"No, I'm not okay with it, but I'm not here to stop you from drinking. You had your last drink about four hours ago. We can go into Spokane, have a nice dinner with plenty of vegetables and protein and as much water as you can pour down your gullet, then we can take a little detour and go over to Gonzaga University's library and do some work on Dolan."

"What kind of work?" Elizabeth asked.

"I want to show you how to use the Official Catholic Directory to track Dolan's assignments. After we do that, I'll tell you what I was thinking about a bit ago."

Putting her yellow legal pad back into her pack, Elizabeth asked, "What's the Official Catholic Directory?"

"It's published every year, diocese by diocese, parish by parish, and included in that are all the other Catholic institutions, schools and hospitals in a specific area."

Elizabeth did not respond. Instead, she climbed over the front seat and cuddled next to Boomer. Atkinson, smiling, eyed the spectacle through the rear-view mirror as Boomer began his happy groan.

Elizabeth looked at Atkinson in the mirror and Boomer groaned in delight as Elizabeth rubbed his chest. Let's get to Spokane before I change my mind. I'll pass on the vodka – for now."

"You sure?" Atkinson said to Elizabeth in the mirror.

"At this moment, I'm sure. I can't tell you I'll be sure in two hours," Elizabeth said as she held Boomer's head in both of her hands.

STEPHEN RUBINO

Ripples Restaurant and Lounge was a favorite of Atkinson's when he needed to do research at Gonzaga's Foley Library. A Jesuit Institution founded in 1887, Gonzaga had extensive theological holdings and one of the few complete sets of the directory dating back to 1817 on the West Coast.

The weather was warm for early spring in the foothills of the Cascades, so Atkinson and Elizabeth opted for a table on the outside terrace overlooking the Spokane River. As a bonus for Boomer, the restaurant was dog friendly.

"You know, Liz, the key to detoxing is water. There are other things that are going on, but water is critical. Now listen to me, this can be dangerous. Everyone detoxes differently. The fact that you're in decent shape will help."

"Did you say decent shape? Tommy, I'm forty-six and I run between fifty and sixty miles a week."

"Now how would I have known that if you hadn't told me? Okay, so you're in great shape."

"I am in great shape, right Boomer?" Elizabeth asked as she reached under the table to rub Boomer's head.

"The point is, Liz, we're not in a hospital or treatment setting. I don't have any drugs to reduce cravings and if this goes bad I'm going to take you to a hospital. You on board with that?" Atkinson thrust his hand across the table.

"Deal," Elizabeth said, extending her hand to meet his.

"Now keep pounding the water and we'll get some food into you," Atkinson said in a reassuring tone.

"I just lost all the food from lunch. I can't think of food right now."

Atkinson looked directly at Elizabeth and put his hand on top of hers. "Well, Counselor, unless you want to fold your tent and go to a liquor store, you're going to have to."