

FATHER JACK

John Boston

Jules Lowry was named after Jules Verne. His father thought he was the most fascinating human being that had ever walked this Earth. If his parents had named him anything but Jules, it would have been okay with him. He was just one month shy of his eighteenth birthday. That meant he was in the big leagues. He was practically an adult, except he had no life experience to draw upon, just like most eighteen year olds.

He had been raised in a strict Catholic household. His parents were devout Catholics. They told him his future was in the hands of the Lord. That meant the seminary and priesthood. That was all fine and dandy until Jules discovered not only were priests forbidden to marry, they were expected to be celibate.....for the rest of their lives. Whose brilliant idea was that? So, in his mind, the priesthood was a very quick *thank you, but no thank you* proposition.

Of course, Jules was no dummy and like most bright young men, he was beginning to see that this whole religion thing *wasn't quite adding up*.

The sum was not equal to its parts. Not all of it. The priest in his church took over for another priest who had been defrocked, as in kicked out of the church for sexually abusing 2 young men. He was shown the door out of the church and led right into his new home in prison.

His parents said little about the affair. What could they say? The good Lord liked to hire pedophiles it seemed. Jules was a part of a youth group who were not shy about expressing their opinions. The victims of the priest were now not much older than he is.

“I think he should spend an entity in hell for what he’s done.” said Janet in the group.

“He should go to prison and be held accountable, but I think an eternity in hell is a bit too much. I mean it’s not like he killed them or anything.” replied Jules.

“He killed a part of them. A part of them is lost forever. They will never see the world the same way again. He took their childhood. For that simple fact alone, he should go to hell.”

Jules knew it was pointless to argue with her when she was hot and bothered. Problem was, not only had this priest hurt the children, he had done even more financial damage to the congregation. It was barely half of what it was a year ago. Collections were down eighty percent. His father said if they could not turn things around, the church might actually have to close down. The rest of the diocese was not in any better shape. They were hurting. Not just from the bad press, but from the simple fact that young people were avoiding religion like the plague.

There were still several die-hards whose families had been going to the church for decades. There were still baptisms being done. There was an active choir. There was a youth group. There just wasn’t really

anyone to hold it together. The fact that this new priest was married rubbed some eyebrows, but many people saw it as a positive sign.

Hell, at least the priest liked women.

Jules' father had recently had a “crisis of faith” not some much with God, but with the church itself. The fact that a dozen cardinals that ran the whole operation seemed slightly out of touch with the layman was not helping. Their *hear no evil, see no evil* attitude regarding the sex crimes and abuse within their ranks was not helping. His father grew up in much the same type of environment. He chose a family over the priesthood, but was sort of

“the man behind the scenes” at his congregation. His father actually watched the Catholic Channel on TV. He volunteered and gave money to various causes. Problem was, his father was beginning to see that the root cause of the church’s misfortune and misery as of late was, well.....the church itself. It was after grace one night, as Jules was loading potatoes onto his plate, that his father finally erupted. “It’s just unbelievable. They couldn’t possibly have handled this situation any worse than they did. They actually tried to sue the two boys for defamation! The priest raped them for God’s sake! So, instead of just apologizing, they now have to pay out two million dollars each to the boys. Where on Earth are we supposed to get that kind of money? I just wish someone, anyone that was in charge nowadays could make an intelligent decision and do the right thing. It would be the equivalent of Moses parting the Red Sea.”

Jules' mother gave her husband a very nasty look. Even she, who was normally a hundred percent supportive of her husband and the church had begun to see that they needed to make some changes.....*and quickly*. Otherwise, the churches would soon be empty on Sunday mornings. “I’m not going to force you two to do anything. If you don’t want to go to the prayer retreat this weekend, you don’t have to.” he said to them.

Jules’s sister, Mary, was eighteen months younger than him. She went through the motions of being a good Catholic, but as soon as she moved out of the house, she vowed she would never set foot in a church again. It just wasn’t her scene.

The prayer retreat was held every three months or so. The church owned a cabin in a very rural area in the panhandle, along with some other property nearby. The new priest had decided to hold an informal “get to know his parishioners” type of thing over the long weekend.

It consisted of a lot of sitting around and doing nothing but getting to know Jesus. Normally, Jules would have passed, but this particular weekend, he heard that Amanda Nunez would be going. It seems young Amanda had gotten into some trouble at school and her parents thought this might give her time to reflect on her transgressions.

Jules thought Amanda was stunning. She was a year older than him, but in many ways, was far older than just a year. He would just stare at her in church. She was second generation Mexican. Her family were devout Catholics who went to a mostly white church. His dad thought little of anyone who didn’t speak English, but thought very highly of the Nunez clan.

Good people, the Nunez family. Nothing wrong with them at all. He said once after a church function. Amanda was not exactly a “practicing Catholic”, but she wanted to make her parents happy. She had been caught smoking at school and making out with a boy. That was enough to land her in *caliente*

agua with her parents. Jules didn't know if this was to get her away from the crowd she was running with, or if they really thought the Lord would sway her thinking. Either way, when he discovered she would be there, he decided he just might tag along.

"Yeah, I might go. I always have a good time at these things. Made some good friends last time." he said in between bites at the table.

"Well, it's fine with us. I'm curious to see what you think of the new priest." said his mother. After dinner in his room, his sister, Mary, knocked on his door. She never wanted to talk to him unless she wanted something. She was rather predictable in that sense.

"May I help you?" said Jules looking up from the TV screen.

"You actually want to go to that lame ass thing this weekend?"

"I thought it might be a nice change of pace for me. I was getting rather bored around here."

"Right. We both know the only reason you're going is because Amanda Nunez is going."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on. You've had a crush on her for ages. Jules, you're a pain in my ass, but I don't want to see you get hurt. That girl wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire."

"I'm just getting to know her, that's all. it's not like I'm going to ask her out or anything."

"You can do that anytime."

"Yeah, but there won't be any distractions up there. It's just us and the Lord."

"It's you and your boner, that's about all."

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe, just maybe, Amanda might actually be into me?"

"You've got to be kidding. I've seen some of the guys she's dated. They are the complete opposite of you."

"You have to kiss some frogs before you find your prince."

"Man, you are really going to crash and burn up there. I almost want to go, just to watch. I'm sure it's going to be epic."

"I think you will be pleasantly surprised by the end of this weekend." said Jules.

"I doubt it. Have you even kissed a girl yet?"

"That is privileged information. Now, if you don't mind, I've got some football to play here." he said going back to his XBOX.

“The flock” consisted of a total of seven people. There were bound to be more who would stop by for the weekend, but not spend the night. Jules liked the new priest. His wife went with them. He knew some others in the group from his youth group. He was just about to give up hope on Amanda when he saw another car pull in and out came Amanda. She certainly didn’t seem thrilled about being here. She didn’t even say goodbye to her mother and just slammed the car door shut. She climbed in the van and didn’t say a word to anyone. Mary had been elected to go this weekend as well. Jules hoped they would not get cell service and she would actually have to interact with the rest of the group.

Let the good times roll.

The priest of the congregation was Matthew Fowler. Father Fowler. He had come to the church after spending six years in the Marine Corps as a chaplain. Since the church was in dire need of priests, they apparently overlooked the fact that he was married. He was ordained after he was married and the church hierarchy had come to the realization that if the church was going to continue, they were going to need normal, married heterosexual males out in front. He was their new golden boy and with good reason. Unlike the previous pastor, Father Fowler had a Purple Heart from combat in Afghanistan. He was also a genuinely nice guy, and this parish desperately needed nice guys after their last debacle. Everyone in the group was just floored by him, especially Jules. He was so remarkably different from their last priest, who showed little interest in anything outside of church politics. Even Amanda was taken in by him. Jules could almost read the expression on her face.

Man of the cloth or not, that boy is fine. she thought to herself.

“Father.....did you receive your commission from ROTC?” asked Jules.

“No, not exactly. I had to go to regular boot camp just like everyone else. Then I went to Advanced Infantry Training, then I went to Officer Candidate School at Quantico.”

“You went to Marine OCS? Man, that must have been tough.”

“It wasn’t easy, I can tell you that. They didn’t let up on me a bit because I was a chaplain. I can honestly tell you at times the only thing that kept me going was my faith.”

“Father.....my dad says you were in Afghanistan.....that true?” said someone from the back.”

“Guys, you can call me Matt. Only when we’re in church, do I expect you to call me Father.”

“Is it true Matt? Were you really in combat?” asked Jules

“Our platoon was attacked by the Taliban. One of my soldiers was killed and two others were wounded, not a good day for anyone.”

Jules was blown away. Finally, the church had a real man up front, not some perverted whacko like the last guy. Jules liked where things were headed, especially with Amanda in the back seat.

He was trying no to stare at her. The girl was gorgeous. Long, black hair and a curvy Latina body. He knew he had to break the ice with her. He didn’t want to come on too strong. He had to have a game plan. Of course, since they were only a few feet away, now was as good a time as any.

“Amanda, are you going to play soccer this year?” he asked, turning around to look at her.
“My parents say I can’t do any sports, unless I get my grades up.”

“That sucks. You were really good.”

“I have to get right with Jesus and get my grades up. I just need a few more months, then I’m outta here.”

“Really? Where are you going?”

“To live with my sister in Miami. She has a condo on the beach. Too many rules in my house. My parents still think we’re in Mexico.”

“Well, we’ll miss you.”

“Amanda, I know I might sound like a broken record here, but have you thought about your faith and letting Jesus guide you?” said Father Matt.

“Well, Father Matt, I guess I haven’t. Girls in my family are supposed to get married by twenty and just start popping out babies. But, like I told my mother, we aren’t in Mexico anymore. Doesn’t seem to do much good.”

“Nothing wrong with getting married and having babies. It’s just a whole lot easier to do once you have a faithful and reliable husband. My mother was a single mother. If it weren’t for the church, I wouldn’t be where I am today. It’s easy to ignore your faith in today’s world. Too easy. I’m hoping this weekend, we can put things back into perspective. A little praying, a little talking, some good food and maybe even a little swimming. I hear there is a small lake on the property.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty deep too, for a Florida lake. We were there last summer. It even has a small beach.” said Jules.

“Well, I’m from Wisconsin. Any beach is a good beach to me.” he said

His sister turned to him and whispered in his ear.

“Marcia Foxx is going to be here this weekend.”

“What? That old crazy woman?”

“Yup. If I knew that, I would have just stayed home. She’s going to ruin everything. She always makes it about her and her drama.”

“Yeah, she’s weird.”

“I hear it was her who called the police on our priest.” said a boy in the next seat.

“Well, that’s not such a bad thing. She only did what she thought was right.” said Jules.

“She’s just so weird. Mom thinks she has Asperger’s.” said Mary.

“What’s that?”

“I guess it’s like Autism.”

“I don’t know, maybe.”

“She’s definitely weird. She goes to confession every week. How many sins does that girl have?”

“She’s a real Catholic. You know, mom used to go to confession every week.” added Jules.

“Why did she stop?”

“I guess she figured having kids was punishment enough for her sins.”

Matt read the instructions carefully. It wasn’t too hard to find. Most roads in Florida intersected with other roads. The cabin was on private property, surrounded by a state forest. Elgin Air force Base was very close.

The houses and farms quickly disappeared once they left the highway. Matt was surprised that even in a densely populated place like Florida, there are still some very remote areas untouched by human development. They were on the dirt road for almost ten minutes, surrounded by nothing but cypress trees and swamp grass.

“I lost my signal. Does anyone have service?” asked Matt’s wife.

“Nope. This is the right way. I remember it from last year.” said Jules.

Minutes later, they finally arrived at their destination. The cabin was rustic, but had everything they would need. It was powered by a generator. No one was certain if it would start.

“Here we are! Wow, look at this. Not a soul around for miles.” said Matt as he stepped out of the van.

Marcia was already there. She had her dog with her. The poor thing looked miserable. This should be paradise for a dog, except he was stuck with a human master he didn’t really like.

“Well, good news, I got the generator running.” she said.

“Wonderful. How long have you been here?” asked Matt’s wife.

“A few hours. I wanted to clean up and get dinner going. I hope everyone likes pasta.”

“Who doesn’t like pasta?” said Matt as he began unloading.

“Matt, I don’t do carbs. I’m on the Keto Diet.” said Amanda.

“Oh, well, I’m sure there’s something else you can eat.”

“The hell is that chick on the Keto Diet for? I’d kill to have her curves.” said Mary.

“Maybe she’s just being proactive. Best way to lose weight is to never get fat in the first place.” said

Jules.

The more time he spent with Amanda, the more he liked her. She was a wayward soul, a fallen angel. Jules took it upon himself to save her. It was a Herculean task, one that would test his resolve and his faith, but a girl like her was worth it.

As luck would have it, Matt paired the three girls up with one another, but that left Jules on his own. Mary's bestie, Janet was with them. Matt asked her if she was okay with Jules sleeping in their room and Janet said something to the effect of: *Matt, he's practically one of the girls anyway.*

It was kind of upsetting to Jules, but the saving grace in all this, the thing that really made all of this worth it, was the fact that Amanda would be staying with the girls also. That meant she would be sleeping in the same room as him. Thank God for small miracles. Matt gave him a very unmistakable look like: *son, don't even think about it.* A look that said more than one of his sermons possibly could. That meant he trusted Jules. His wife wasn't too happy about it, but there simply was not enough room. Jules did offer to sleep on the floor, but dear Janet would have none of it. Jules was pretty much her brother also and why would she be weirded out by her brother?

Amanda didn't seem to care where she slept, as long as the bed was clean. She couldn't believe her mother forced her to go to this retreat. She hadn't even been to any of the youth group meetings in over a year. Her little sister was the one who told her parents about the retreat. She could have killed her. She would rather just sit in her house and watch Mexican television with her grandmother than be here. It wasn't that she didn't like any of these people, they were all very nice, she just didn't belong with them. This was not her scene. This was not her crowd. She usually just dated jocks and rich white boys. Still, as miserable as she was, she told herself that she was going to make the most of it. No one likes sour grapes. That Jules kid was pretty much sleeping right next to her. That was kind of weird.
Matt forgot to leave a little space for the Holy Spirit.

The first night consisted of everyone sitting around the fire pit and making small talk. No one really wanted to let their hair down with Father Matt just an earshot away. Amanda was bundled up like they were staying at a research facility in Antarctica, even though it was fifty degrees outside. Matt went to get some more firewood. Jules sat fairly close to Amanda, but not *too close.* He made small talk with Janet who just wanted to talk about her getting into The University of Florida. To Janet, getting into college was the be all and end all of life's events. She even had a scholarship. Jules was genuinely proud of her. She had worked hard to get where she was. She was as Mary described her, *a closet catholic.* The kind who went to church once in a while, when she felt guilty or just needed some one on one time with the almighty. You could spend hours talking to her and never realize she held such strong views. Abortion was simply not tolerated. It was not even discussed. Janet and some of her fellow students had nearly come to blows last year when discussing abortion in class. She went to church on Good Friday and like most good Catholics, actually gave something up for those long forty days and nights of lent. This year she gave up internet videos....all of them. Not just the top rated ones. It was a very long forty days.

She had even volunteered for a Republican congressman who took a very strong stance against abortion. She didn't care about the church, or the church hierarchy, she just did what the priest told her. She was more than just a little taken by Father Matt.....*she was downright giddy at the thought of being close to him this weekend.*

“What ya going to major in down there at Miami?” asked Matt.

“Political Science. Maybe economics. I just want to make it through my freshman year. I was 3rd in our class this year. Missed Solitarian by one tenth of a percent. I think that’s what kept me out of Loyola....well, that and the price.”

“What are you going to do with a degree in Political Science?” he asked

“I’m going into politics. I’m going to be the one to help make the laws, instead of the one who just follows them.” she said.

“I thought only rich people got to do that.”

“No, determined people get to do that. The future belongs to those that want it the most. Last thing I want is some heathen idiot making laws. It’s bad enough that homosexuals can marry. Imagine what our society will look like in twenty years?”

“Come on Janet, gay people have a right to be happy too.” said Amanda

“They can be as happy as they want to be. I just don’t think they should be allowed to marry.”

“Should they be allowed to adopt children?” asked Jules.

“Um....no.”

“I can’t believe people like you are still around? What on Earth gives you the right to dictate who someone can and can’t marry?” asked Amanda, getting a little hot under the collar.

“Society decides that, not me. In this case society clearly said homosexuals should not be allowed to marry....remember Proposition 8 in California? When they gays didn’t get their way, they just used the courts to force their agendas on the rest of us. The Federal court rules Proposition 8 was unconstitutional....whatever that means.”

“It means the court was right.” said Amanda.

“So the votes of millions of people don’t count? That’s unconstitutional.” replied Janet.

“Well, I can see we’re off to a good start here.” said Father Matt as he dropped off the firewood.

Amanda got up and headed back to the cabin. No one really said a word. Matt decided to try and break the ice.

“So Jules, that swimming hole. How far is it?”

“Bought a mile down the road.”

“Are there snakes in there?” asked another girl.

“No....just alligators.” Jules said.

“Yeah, I think I’ll pass.” said Janet.

“We swam in there last year. No snakes or alligators. We’re too far inland.” said Jules.

“Dinner is ready!” said Marcia from the cabin porch.

“Great, I’m starved!” said Jules.

The group broke apart. Most headed into the cabin. Jules and Father Matt decided to check on the generator. They headed towards the small shed that housed the generator and Jules saw Amanda heading off into the woods by herself.

“Father, I’m going to check out the woods. Nature is calling.” said Jules.

“Okay. Just don’t go too far from the cabin. I want everybody present and accounted for dinner.”

“Yes sir.”

Jules stayed a good distance behind Amanda. Last thing he wanted was to be spotted. The sun had almost gone down. Another ten minutes, the woods would be completely dark.

Father Matt wasn’t kidding. It would be very easy to get lost out here. There were only two small lights on the cabin porch. That was the only light for miles around.

The moonlight lit up the forest. Even though it was nearly dark, Jules could clearly see Amanda puffing away on her electronic cigarette. Jules got very turned on. Amanda wasn’t just the girl from the other side of the tracks.....*her train had come off the rails a long time ago*. Jules thought she looked stunning in the moonlight. She tried to get a cell phone signal, but it was hopeless. They really were cut off from everyone out here. Jules knew confronting her was risky, but he didn’t want her to get lost. One wrong turn out here and it was pretty much game over.

“Amanda.” he said softly.

She nearly jumped out of her skin. She quickly hid her cigarette behind her back.

“What are you doing?” she screamed.

“Dinner’s ready.”

“Yeah.....cool, got it.”

“Don’t get lost out here.”

“I’ve got a flashlight on my phone.” she said holding it up.

Jules turned around and left somewhat deflated. He had her right where he wanted her and he let her slip through his fingers. He kicked himself, but he knew there would be other opportunities. He just had to be patient. Patience was a virtue.....or so they say.

Dinner may not sound like much to a teenager, but to a forty year old cat lady in waiting like Marcia Foxx, dinner was a very big deal. It was a chance to make a good first impression for her newest love

interest, Father Matt. It made no difference to her if he was married, or in love with his wife, or anything. Coveting thy neighbors husband wasn't a sin, in her mind, it was something to strive for. Her husband had left her five years ago, when she was found to be infertile. Dropped her like a hot potato. He packed up and left the house within two days. Gone.....as in I'm never coming back. He left with such force. and speed, it still stunned her to this day.

Like a fart in a wind tunnel.

She married him right out of college. They did missionary work in Africa together. They did everything together, right up to the day he told her he was leaving. They were the church's power couple, the shot callers. Even if their last priest was a waste of space, it didn't matter, because this was *their church*. *They ran the whole goddamn thing from start to finish.*

Her husband leaving her didn't just break her heart.....it shattered it into a million little pieces. She was a broken woman in dire need of repair. She talked and she prayed. She still had a lot of friends in the church, who were always there for her, but at the end of the day, it was always just her and her loneliness. It was always there, like a migraine that just won't go away. Her husband remarried within a year after leaving her and now had two small children with his new wife.

Some days she would just sit in front of her TV and cry herself to sleep. She knew this was a test from God, but Jesus was never tested like this. He never had the love of his life just dump him like stale milk and hook up with someone else. No, that wasn't temptation.....that would just be downright cruel.

That's what life had become for Miss. Marcia. A cruel, sick joke. All that changed the day she met Father Matt. She could almost feel the connection between them. Of course, she understood that a man in his position had to be careful.....very careful. That wife of his was never too far away. She knew the reason she came out with him was just to keep an eye on him this weekend. She could probably sense their attraction and wanted to douse the flames before they spread.

Not that it would make any difference. She understood now, why she had been put through such torture over the past five years. It was to prepare her for her new husband. She just had to get rid of his current one....somehow.

Right now, she was serving lasagna to her new man. She had perfected the recipe. There really is quite a bit of truth in that whole "the quickest way to a man's heart is through his stomach crap." Her mother practically drilled that into her head. Marcia was no slouch in the kitchen. She could cook with the best of them. Father Matt was very appreciative of her efforts.

"Marcia, this is excellent. I didn't know lasagna could be this good."

"Yeah Marcia, this is great." said Jules.

"Wait till you see dessert." she said.

Her hand just grazed Matt's as she served him. The spark was almost electric. Just a few more meals like this, followed by some wine and small talk and the two of them would be adulterating in no time. She had come to see herself as a servant of the lord, but that didn't mean she had to follow all of the lord's commandments. They were more like suggestions. Of course, killing was wrong, but our government does it everyday. Adultery was more like: *hey, life happens. We get it.*

She really couldn't stand that wife of his. She was like a little Barbie Doll. Christian Barbie....that's what she was going to call her. Ten years younger than him and in many ways so much more. She played nice, she had too, but behind the scenes, she was sure that bitch was just making his life hell. Father Matt was so much more man than the last loser they had in the church. She wouldn't have followed him to a car wash. No, Matt was the real deal. He was the guy who was going to make it all happen. She just had to get him away from that twat of his.

Marcia made an apple pie for dessert. Homemade apple pie, not that crap from the store. This was made with love, not chemicals. Everyone ate theirs, even the Latina....Amanda something or other. She was pretty easy on the eyes and noticed more than once that she was checking out her man at the dinner table. That was going to have to stop. This was a two player game, not three. She would have to keep an eye on that one, for sure.

There were others as well, but none of them were much of a threat to her. Janet was too involved in herself to notice Matt. Mary was simply along for the ride, still a little green. Neither of them seemed like much of a threat.

She did like the Jules boy. Nice kid, well mannered, very bright. A nice breath of fresh air from most of the millennial flotsam she encountered. She could tell that boy was going places. She also took note of the fact that he couldn't keep his eyes off the Mexican girl. Not that she would pay him any attention. He needed to find a nice Catholic girl. One that was as handy in the bedroom as she was in the church choir. A real woman was a lady in public and a whore in the bedroom. She had done things for her husband that almost made her vomit, looking back in it. She wanted to keep him happy, that's what matters in a marriage. Matt understood that. His wasn't really so much a marriage, it was just a little fling. It's easy to get distracted by new and shiny things. That dolt of a wife wouldn't have the slightest idea how to be second in command of a congregation. He needed a real woman....*a seasoned woman* to take control and have his back. True, she was no spring chicken, but she more than made up for it in many other areas. Experience is everything in life and her resume was more than padded.

After dinner, the group helped Marcia clean up. Jules and Matt washed the dishes, while the girls just stayed out of her hair. Amanda took an instant dislike to Marcia. The two of them were like the same ends of a magnet. To Amanda, Marcia was just most white women she encountered. Selfish, unattractive and just very lame. She could sense that Marcia had her guard up around her. She got that from a lot of white women. She could sometimes almost feel the eyes of their husbands on her. She liked to wear tight and revealing clothing. Nothing slutty. Just enough to let the boys know what's behind the curtain. One of her teachers had come on to her a few months back. He was also her soccer coach. She brushed him off. She liked him and if the situation had been different, maybe it could have worked, but it just didn't feel right. She knew she had the power over men and intended to use it to her full advantage. Her mother on the other hand was driving her nuts. She expected Amanda to follow in her footsteps by getting married and knocked up by age 21. To her, that was a prison sentence. The last thing she wanted was to be tied down. Her older sister had escaped to Miami, where she lived with her boyfriend. Her mother had pretty much disowned her. She did nude videos and web modeling. Nothing graphic, she was just showing off what she has. To her mother, she was a disgrace to her family and to God. Amanda was determined to escape that life her parents had led. To her, it made no sense to live in America and drag your old customs with you. The reason her family had left Mexico was for a better life. She would not have a better life if she did what her mother had wanted. She hated how the church took advantage of Hispanic families. To her, this was just another ages old racket and her parents had fallen for it hook, line and sinker. Her mother was still stuck in 1975 and probably always would be.

She can barely read and write Spanish, let alone English. They needed to escape their past, Amanda was determined to do just that.

There was no TV or internet at the cabin. No one really seemed to know what to do. They talked and prayed as a group, asking the Lord to guide them along his path, to be a lighthouse in a stormy sea. Jules spent the entire time imagining what Amanda looked like naked. Father Matt got a boner thinking about what he and his wife were going to do to one another when they got back home. Marcia had spent enough time thinking about Father Matt. She needed a little diversion from the battlefield. She couldn't help but steal glances at Jules, who was completely oblivious. Amanda thought Father Matt was the hottest priest she had ever seen. All in all, everyone was sinning and no one was really praying. They were going through the motions, but no one was really doing anything. The four sided love triangle was beginning to take form.

Now, Marcia knew full well that she could not even think about Jules that way. He was just a boy. A very nice, very Catholic boy who did very nice, Catholic things. Fornicating with a woman over twice his age was not really on that list. Still, she fancied him as something of a diamond in the rough. She knew he was a Catholic, but that didn't mean he wasn't a teenage boy, with teenage boy urges and desires. Of course, if Matt were to get a whiff of something like that, well, their budding romance could quickly sour. She just wanted to tease him a little. It had been five years since she was with a man. Even though Jules wasn't a man, he was close enough as far as she was concerned.

Amanda decided right then and there that she was going to screw Father Matt. She heard all kinds of horror stories about what priests did to altar boys, thank God Matt wasn't like that. It would be such a waste. She knew that annoying wife of his was going to be something of a challenge, but all she had to do was get him alone. She had never been turned down before in her life.

If Amanda Nunez had you in her crosshairs, you were as good as dead.

Father Matt and his wife were trying to conceive their first of many children together. Even though she was ten years younger than he, they were madly in love with one another. She had been raised as a Baptist, but had crossed the aisle out of her love for her husband. She thought the Catholic Church in many ways was a fossil, an outdated dinosaur whose time had come and gone. None of her pastors had ever been accused of sexual abuse. They were all married. Some were even divorced. That's what normal people do.

They had sex three times before they left this morning. She was ovulating and wanted to be sure. She didn't think it was possible to love another human being as much as she loved her husband. In her eyes, she was the luckiest woman alive.

Jules tried to concentrate on his prayer, but with Amanda within farting distance of him, there was just no way. He really had no idea what it was about her that set him off. He kind of thought she was just a little too into herself, but most pretty girls are. He wanted a girlfriend, but he also wanted to be a good Catholic as well. He had an angel on one shoulder and reality on the other. It was the thrill of capturing a girl like her. It was all about the thrill of the hunt. She was nice enough for a pretty girl, but he knew back in the real world, there was no way she would even look twice at him. But, this was the middle of the Black Water State Forest, not the real world. Out here, anything was possible. Amanda had her wolf pack at school and these girls were clearly part of it. She barely even said two words to anyone. If she didn't want to be here, that was fine. This wasn't really about what she wanted anyway.....*this was about what he wanted.*

Father Matt and Marcia brought out some board games. Most of the kids in the group had only heard about them in passing. Jules thought it funny that at one time, this is actually what people did to pass the time. He played Connect Four as a kid, hopefully, he would be connecting this evening with Amanda.

Jules was about as green as green can be when it came to the fairer sex. That said, he had done a lot of research on the subject. He knew to just play it cool, let the girls talk about themselves and try to pretend he didn't look very interested. He wanted Amanda to know he was nice.....*but not too nice*. Last thing he wanted was to be friend zoned with Miss Nunez here.

"Amanda, I heard Mr. Cianci got arrested over the weekend. DUI. I hope he doesn't lose his job, I rather liked him."

"Yeah, I kind of liked him too. Guess it's up to the school board." she said reading the instructions for Monopoly.

"Who's Mr. Cianci?" asked Matt

"Our Civics teacher. Not an easy subject to be teaching with us over sensitive millennials. I feel like he was able to be straight forward and objective, without ever taking a side. He let us do that." said Jules. "Mr. Cianci was a good chap. He was a drunk, but the bible teaches us to hate the sin, but love the sinner." said Janet.

"I doubt he's going to be able to keep his job. Too bad. Everybody makes mistakes. Those idiots on the school board aren't perfect either." said Marcia.

"Have you ever made a mistake, Marcia?" asked Amanda without looking up.

Jesus child, you have no idea. Marcia thought to herself.

"Well, Amanda.....we all make mistakes. That's what makes us human." said Marcia.

"Right.....Father Matt, you were really in Afghanistan?" asked Amanda.

"Yup, for almost a year. Toughest year of my life. My faith was tested in more ways than one."

"How so?" asked Marcia.

"Well....let's just say I saw some things I wished I hadn't. War is the most horrible thing there is and I was right in the middle of it."

Everyone in the room was dying to ask Matt if he had ever killed anyone. Thankfully no one did.

"I guess I just felt like it was my duty. My father was a chaplain in the Marines and so was his father before him. I won't make my son join unless he really wants to."

Jules noticed that Matt's wife gave him a smile. Clearly she wasn't to fired up the prospect of sending their children off to die on some pointless war. Jules sensed that Matt's experience with the Marines was not a very good one. He would later find out that Matt had to give last rites to dying soldiers, as well as the Taliban if they asked for it. He was put right smack dab in the middle of a major shit storm

and asked to come out smelling like roses. Amanda got wet just thinking about him. Marcia wasn't too far behind. The only female in the room Matt was interested in was his wife. They were both thinking of some way to have sex without being discovered.

"Well, we start the day with a prayer, we should end it with one." said Father Matt.

He gathered everyone in a circle and they held hands. Jules actually got to hold Amanda's hand. He was elated, but did his best not to show. Amanda got to hold Matt's hand. She was elated as well, and didn't care if she showed or not.

"Heavenly father, we thank you for this day. We thank you for our friends, our community and most of all, being able to enjoy another day on this earth. We thank you for Marcia's good food and Jules' great conversation. We ask for another wonderful today tomorrow and beyond. We ask this in your name, Amen."

The group finished praying and sat down on the sofa. Monopoly was actually designed by an unemployed architect during the Great Depression almost as satire against what the banking industry and the super rich had done to the United States. Eighty years later the same super rich nearly destroyed the United States with their bird brained get-rich-quick schemes. Jules was still too young to wrap his head around what had transpired and how dangerously close the United States economy came to completely collapsing. When Obama declined to prosecute the Wall Street bankers who had orchestrated the crash, his father had literally become unglued.

"Well, that's just great. We send blacks to prison for years for stealing candy bars, but when some rich asshole steals billions he just gets a free pass.....unbelievable. I guess if you're a psychopath and stupid you got to prison. If you're a psychopath and smart, you got to work on Wall Street."

When his mother made her: *honey, could you please calm the fuck down* look, it only made things worse. Mom had tried to put out a raging fire with a gallon of gasoline.

"FOR CHRIST'S SAKE, JOHN THAIN SPENT TEN MILLION DOLLARS REDECORATING HIS PERSONAL BATHROOM WHILE HIS COMPANY WAS GOING DOWN IN FLAMES!"

Yes, it was not a good time to be in under the roof of the Lowry household. His father's business had nearly gone under and his mother was laid off from her job at the library. Jules grandfather had to step in and help, something that had irritated his father to no end. Truth is, it was a difficult time for everyone, not just the Lowrys. To Jules, rich people weren't bad people, they were simply the enemy. Kind of like how the Germans and Americans viewed one another during World War 2.

The board games lasted for about an hour. With no electronic stimulation to keep them awake, most of the group were ready for bed by ten. Amanda had to sneak away to take a puff on her e-cig. There were ten people and only one bathroom in the house.....it was like she was back in Mexico.

Yeah, these gringos really thought that one through.

Amanda stepped outside for a few minutes. She knew Jules had seen her smoking. She hoped he would just keep his mouth shut. He seemed pretty cool, unlike that dork of a sister and her friend, Janet. She couldn't really stand any of the women in this group. When you're the prettiest girl in the bunch, you're going to have haters. Amanda's attitude was molded over years of having to deal with catty girls

and overly sexual boys. She once had to fight off her own cousin who was trying to force his way onto her. Her parents didn't even do anything when she told them about it. Just like all good Mexicans, they didn't want to make any trouble, even if trouble had found them. She was so angry at her parents, she didn't speak to them for nearly a month. She would have left and gone to live with her big sister, but she was out of the country. She promised herself that very moment, if she ever had a daughter, that she would never treat her the way her mother treats her.

Sure mom, let's all just get knocked up and pop out kids we can't afford. There's a reason the gringos think so little of us.

Amanda was going places. She would rather be dead than be the person her mother expected her to be. America was the land of opportunity and she intended to make the most of it. She was working part time in a bank. It was sort of an internship. When she turned 18 next month, she could be hired on full time. Banking had to be the best business in the world. You didn't do shit and you still got rich. She would never forget what her boss told her on her first day of work. He was this old, fat white guy who had more money than brains.

Amanda, I'm going to let you in on the biggest secret in the world.....now what it is? The best way to rob a bank is to own one! That's right. It's all legal. We get rich and everyone else gets poor. That my little Chiquita, is the American Way.

She realized that this really was the easiest way to make money. Just take other people's money and charge them to use their own money. Brilliant. You would think people would have figured out this scam years ago, but no.

Banks are just as, if not more powerful than they were before the crash of 08. The old guy had two Mercedes. Not one, but two. Just in case one broke, he could still be seen in his new Mercedes. Amanda wanted to be like that. She wanted to drink two hundred dollar bottles of wine and take vacations to exotic islands on the weekends. It wasn't about the money, it was about the freedom. That's really what money buys. The ability to say: *hey gang, I'm outta here. I'll see ya when I see ya. Hasta la vista.* The very last thing he wanted was to be like her mother, or her grandmother who just undressed their drunk husbands and took care of the family when their husbands were out screwing around. She was going to be the first person in her family to go to college. She was going to major in finance. One day, she was going to own one of those goddamn banks and she'd have plenty of minions to do the heavy lifting for her. She was going to make something of her life, or die trying. She made sure she gave Matt a big hug before she went to bed. She pressed her tits against his chest, just for added effect. His wife gave her a nasty look. She gave her one right back.

Don't even bitch....if I really wanted him.....I'd have him. She thought to herself as she walked away.

She and Janet gave each other a very polite looking scowl as they passed one another in the small hallway.

Jules sat in his cot and tried not to stare at Amanda. His sister and Janet were within spitting distance of each other. He carefully plotted his next move. Had to play this one carefully. He figured Amanda saw him as man Jello, so that needed to be fixed ASAP.

He lay motionless in his cot. His sister and Janet left the room to try and get cell service, but Jules knew it was hopeless. They were many miles away from a cell phone tower. He waited until they were

out of the room and he leaned over to Amanda.

“Amanda? Look, I know you must be dying to smoke. I’ll get everyone’s attention and you can sneak out the back.”

Amanda was caught off guard. That was the last thing she expected him to say.

“I’m okay Jules, but thanks.”

“Okay, but you don’t know when you’re going to have another chance. If Janet or Marcia catch you, they’re going to be major drama queens about it.”

Jules did have a point. She always vaped up before she went to bed. If she didn’t, she’d wake up in the middle of the night and need a fix.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to make sure that everyone is watching me instead of you. I can give you five minutes.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, that was smart, bringing the vape pen. You don’t smell like smoke. You’re smart and pretty.” Jules had just thrown Amanda a major curve ball. She liked to think she was pretty good at reading people, at least as good as an almost eighteen year old can be. Clearly Jules was not the nice little altar boy she thought he was.

He got up and went down the hallway, to Father Matt’s room. He knocked on the door. Matt answered a moment later.

“Hey Jules, what’s up?”

“Father, I seem to have lost my wallet. Can I have the keys to the van, I’m thinking maybe I left it in there.”

“Sure.” he said and handed him the keys.

“What’s wrong?” asked his wife from the bed.

“Jules lost his wallet. I’m going to help him find it.”

“You don’t have to do that. It was my mistake, I should fix it.”

“No problem. I spent ten hours looking for my wallet one time in the Marines. Turns out, I just left it in the men’s room. It fell out of my pants when I was in the toilet. I know how frustrating it can be when you’ve lost something important.”

Jules and Father Matt headed outside. They were out in front, while Amanda headed out back. Once she was out of the reach of the flood light, she disappeared in the darkness. Marcia and Janet came out moments later to assist in the search.

“Jules, can you think of the last time you are certain you had your wallet?” asked Marcia.

“I know I had it with me when we left, but I don’t have it now. I’m not sure if I lost it in the van, or in the house.”

“It’s too dark out here, we won’t find anything.” said Janet.

Matt turned on the dome lights for the van. Five minutes later, everyone was reasonably certain his wallet was not in the van.

“Okay, I must have left it in the house somewhere. It’s fine guys, we can look for it in the morning when there’s more light. It couldn’t have gone too far.” said Jules.

He started looking around outside, near the van, and on the small stone path. Matt and Marcia held the flash lights, while everyone else just searched aimlessly for his wallet.

“Guess Amanda’s too busy to help us look.” barked Janet.

“Is this what you’re looking for?” asked Amanda as she rejoined the group, holding up his wallet.

“Yeah, where’d you find it?”

“It was out back near the fire pit. Remember you sat down there?” she said.

“Oh yeah.....thanks. I owe you one.” he said and carefully took his wallet from her hand.

“Well, that mystery is solved. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m done. I’ll see you all in the morning.” said Father Matt.

“Jules, I’m going to need a hand in the kitchen with breakfast. I’d ask the other ladies, but I don’t think they can boil water. I’ll wake you up.”

“Ok, sure. I’m not much of a cook, just want to warn you.”

Neither was my ex when we first got together. The only thing he could do right was make money and fuck. she thought to herself.

A few minutes later, the group was back inside. Jules sat on the couch. Mary and Janet had gone to bed. Amanda sat down next to him on the couch and waited until everyone else was gone. Jules said nothing but shot her a smirk.

She couldn’t help but smile.

“I owe you one.” she said and put her hand on his lap. It took everything Jules had in his seventeen year old body to keep from getting an erection.

She got up and went back to the bedroom. Jules had to smile. He was proud of himself.

Well played my boy, well played.

Marcia stayed true to her word and woke up Jules at six thirty. It took him another twenty minutes to get out of bed and look presentable. By the time he got downstairs, Marcia was pretty much done. He set the table and poured everyone a glass of OJ. He did finish a few of Marcia's pancakes while she left the kitchen for a moment. Even a rube like Jules could see that the old bird was smitten with Father Matt. Her face lit up like a Christmas Tree whenever he was around.

I wonder if Matt's wife noticed as well? he thought to himself as he scooped the pancakes onto the plate. He had to give Marcia credit, she always came prepared. She brought enough food to feed an army. He sprinkled some blueberries onto one of them and some chocolate chips onto another one. After all: who the hell doesn't like chocolate chip pancakes?

Mary came down a few minutes later, then Janet, then Matt's wife and finally, Matt himself. Marcia came back a few minutes later. Jules could smell perfume on her as she walked by.

"Hope you all brought your appetites." said Father Matt.

"What's on the docket for today, Father Matt?" asked Jules as he dropped a stack of pancakes on his plate.

"After morning prayers, I thought we would all go and check out that lake near by."

"Sounds good. It's supposed to be hot today. Good day for a swim." said Marcia.

Jules noticed that Marcia's personality seemed to change whenever she was around Father Matt. She was normally very quiet and reserved. His mother might even say "*mousy*". She was almost like background noise, never making a sound until she was needed. Thing is, she pretty much quarterbacked this whole operation. She even remembered to bring sunblock. They were only half an hour from the ocean and the smell of the ocean was never too far away. Once Father Matt was on scene, she went from background noise to something else entirely. She almost seemed to be hovering over him, waiting for the precise moment to strike.

Of course, if that really were the case, then why would she do it in front of his wife? What the hell was she thinking. Maybe it was just his overactive imagination, but he was reasonably sure *that old bird was downright crazy over Father Matt*.

Amanda joined the table and now, the meal could finally begin. Father Mat said grace and as soon as it was finished, he broke bread and passed around the plate of pancakes.

"I didn't know you could cook Jules." said Janet.

"There's probably quite a bit about me you don't know." replied Jules.

"I doubt it. I've known you for nine years."

"Well, I just helped. Marcia was really the one who made them."

"Don't be so modest Jules. The ones you made were the best of the bunch."

“Amanda, would you care for some pancakes?” asked Father Matt.

“Well.....maybe just one. They smell delicious.”

“They taste delicious too.” said Father Matt with his mouth full of pancakes

An hour later, the group had finished eating and cleaned up the breakfast table. They had all changed into their swimming attire. Jules was slightly overweight. Nothing horrible, just enough to be noticeable. He was very self conscious of himself, but hid it as best he could. He would just make sure he swam with a tee shirt on. No harm in that.

Just more insurance against the leeches.

Mary and Janet were just wearing cut off jean shorts. Marcia was wearing a one piece. Amanda came out a moment later and was wearing jean shorts with a bikini top. Jules tried not to stare, but it was hopeless. Her tits looked letter perfect. Everyone in the room tried not to stare at her and everyone in the room failed miserably to do so. Janet and Mary both realized at the same instant that they were simply not in the same league as Miss Nunez and probably never would be. Amanda never even thought twice about it. This was what she wore when she went to the beach. The fact that she was surrounded by a bunch of uptight Christians just made it even better.

“Um...Amanda.....you might want to cover up there.” said Janet.

“What? Why?”

“Two words: Marcia Foxx.” said Mary.

“What does she have to do with what I’m wearing.”

“Amanda.....Marcia is like the American version of the Taliban. You step out on stage wearing that outfit and there’s going to be drama. Just giving you a heads up.” said Jules.

Amanda just rolled her eyes and threw on a shirt.

“Is this better?” she said and stormed out of the room.

“Were her boobs real? Cause if they were, that girl has been blessed in more ways than one.” said Mary.

“Of course they are real.”

“How would you know Jules? The only boobs you’ve ever seen were in a porno.” said Mary.

“She comes from a poor Mexican family. I doubt they had thousands of dollars to buy her fake boobs.” said Jules.

“I don’t like the girl, but man, what a rack!” said Janet as they left the room and headed into the van.

The lake was about a mile down the road. There were so many in the panhandle, you could literally lose count. The area had been cleared decades ago and the new vegetation was beginning to come to life. The fact that they had over ten inches of rain last month meant everything wasn't just growing, it was beginning to overtake the road. Matt had slowed down to a crawl and more than once, the van bogged in the dirt. When they reached the lake, Jules jumped out of the van first. He ran down to the beach and was shocked by what he had seen. The lake was no more, as in *gonzo*. It was now just a giant sinkhole in the ground.

“Well this sucks.”

“Where’s the lake?” asked Janet

“It was here last year.” he said.

The group stood around the hole and looked down. Matt stepped forward and threw a rock in the hole. No one could even hear it hit the bottom.

“Sinkholes. They’re everywhere in this part of Florida. Never seen one this big.” said Father Matt.
“Matt, the river isn’t too far from here. We’d have to walk through the forest, but it’s a pretty good size river.”

“Yeah, I just don’t think the ladies are up for an all day adventure through the woods. We better be careful, we don’t want to fall in. Ground is probably very unstable.” said Father Matt.

“So, what are we going to do now?” asked Janet.

Matt seemed thrown off his game for a second. Jules knew he was handed the ball with only a minute left in the game. He was curious to see what Father Matt could pull off.

“Guys. Tomorrow afternoon, we head back to civilization. I know I came out here for some quiet time to think and pray. I know in 2019, that kind of thinking might seem a little antiquated, but let me tell you, prayer works. I mean it really, really works. I guess in some ways, I have to be a salesman for the church. I would never sell something I didn’t believe in. I think we should use the rest of our time here to get to know one another and get to know Jesus. Who’s in?”

Jules figured Matt would lose the girls, but to his amazement, it was Amanda who spoke up in his defense.

“I’m in.” she said.

“Well, I’m definitely in.” said Marcia.

“Count me in as well.” said Jules.

“Ladies.....how bout it?” he said looking at Janet and his sister.

“We’re in too.”

“Christian peer pressure.....you got to love it.” said Matt as he gathered up their belongings and

headed back to the van.

Everyone was pretty bummed out about losing their swimming hole. It was a pretty good selling point for the retreat. No one really wanted to just sit in the cabin and talk. No one was blaming Father Matt, but a bunch of women in a small space can be unpredictable, especially when none of them really seemed to like one another.

Jules was certain Marcia was into Father Matt. Not in a traditional priest and parishioner sense of the word either. Marcia was almost giddy when she was around him. She practically pushed him out of the way to grab the front seat, just so she could be next to him on the drive back. If he saw it, he hoped Father Matt would notice it as well. Jules just couldn't believe she was actually doing this in front of his wife, who had stayed behind to cook.

Amanda seemed smitten with him as well, but it was more like teasing him, rather than pursuing him. She would smile at him and he once saw her slide her hand over his. He wouldn't touch Marcia with a ten foot pole, but he had to wonder how it was humanly possible to resist a girl like Amanda. It was probably a good thing his wife went with them. This could get ugly quickly. Jules had learned, rather painfully over the last few years, that men of the cloth were no different than any other man. Some were nice, some not so nice. He remembers watching the police lead the priest away from his house in handcuffs. That was a very sobering moment in his life. He learned it isn't about what people say, rather it is what they do that makes them who they are. Actions speak louder than words. In this case, the former priest of the church would be defined by his failures rather than his accomplishments. Jules had only recently learned about the other side of his family, the one no one ever talked about. He learned why his parents never mention his great uncle Zeke. Turns out uncle Zeke was really great uncle Zeke, his grandfather's brother who was a convicted rapist in the State of Missouri. He had spent seven years in prison for raping a seventeen year old girl before he and his sister were born. He actually sat down next to Zeke at his grandfather's funeral and talked to him for almost half an hour. Jules thought he was a nice guy. It wasn't until the ride home that he discovered the unpleasant truth about him. His dad actually spoke up in his defense. Both he and his sister were almost in shock. They couldn't believe they had a family member who had gone to prison.

“The only reason Zeke is a free man is because of your grandfather. Zeke’s idiot attorney actually thought they could beat the charge. They actually thought the jury would believe that a seventeen year old girl had consensual sex with a fifty two year old man. Grandpa convinced him to take the plea deal so the poor girl wouldn’t have to testify. Saved his arse. Your grandfather’s other brother Jackson, got drunk one night and slept with his friend, his best male friend. The guy’s wife caught them the next morning in bed together. They were actually run out of town. No kidding, the town made it very clear, they were no longer welcome! I mean you have 20 Titan Missiles parked five miles away in a cornfield, ready to be launched at a moment’s notice. If World War Three ever happened, the town would have been vaporized in seconds. No one seemed to care about that, but two grown men get drunk one night and carry it too far and they get run out of town for it. That’s the whole reason he came to Florida. He was trying to get away from his family. I think it’s safe to say your grandfather was the shining star of that family.”

Jules had only vague recollections of his grandfather, but they were all good ones. It seems as if Christians are meant to suffer like no other. it's almost as if God wanted to weed out the true believers from the posers and imitators.

His family didn't suffer for just forty days and nights, they have been suffering every day since Zeke

raped that poor girl all those years ago. No matter how many times you say it, sorry just isn't good enough.

When they got back to the cabin, they were surprised to find an old Cadillac parked at the edge of the driveway. He slowed down and saw a man and woman standing next to it. Matt stopped and rolled down the window.

“Hi there? Are you with the church?”

“Well, in a matter of speaking. My name is Jack Slade, this is my wife Elizabeth. We are starting a community church in Crestview. We’re going door to door to spread the good news of the Lord to anyone who will listen.” said Jack.

“I’m Father Matt Fowler. I’m taking some of my church members on a weekend retreat. I’m kind of surprised you guys found us all the way out here.”

“We were just about to turn around when we found the cabin.”

“You folks hungry? We’d be happy to have lunch with you.” said Matt.

“Oh, I don’t want to impose.”

“Not a problem. We can’t quite turn water into wine, but my wife makes an excellent pasta salad.”

“We’d be delighted to.”

“Great, then come on in.”

“Guys, is that okay?” asked Matt.

No one really seemed to care. Most of the group except Marcia had pretty much already written the weekend off anyway. Jules liked meeting Christians. He loved to go head to head with other Christians. He had won some and lost others, but never shied away from a challenge. Marcia was just bummed that the two strangers were going to get in the way of her master plan of slowly seducing Matt. She wanted his focus on her, not on these two.

Besides....what if the two of them were complete psychos? What the hell would they do then?

Jack was dressed in a suit and tie. Marcia wore a pretty evening dress. Nice, but not too nice. This is the panhandle of Florida after all. Most people just went out in shorts and flip flops. They didn’t want to come across as too well dressed.

Matt introduced them to his wife and formal introductions were made to the rest of the group. “Jack, this Amanda.” he said.

It was at that exact moment that Amanda realized something was wrong with Mr. Jack Slade. Their eyes met for only a second, but she could almost read his thoughts and he had only one thought on his mind at that exact moment. She was glad they weren’t alone, cause if they were.....*she would be in real trouble. She recognized that look. Her cousin had the same look right before he tried to force his way*

on top of her.

The rest of the group were totally oblivious. Sometimes being the pretty good isn't all it's cracked up to be. You get attention from all men, even the ones you didn't want. This guy just made her skin crawl. "Jack, you and Elizabeth are more than welcome to eat whatever you like."

"Well, bless your heart Matt. We could use a good meal. Being pious often times being frugal. I guess the challenge is the blessing." said Elizabeth.

Marcia wasn't quite sure what to make her new guests. She was pretty sure that Jack liked to hit the bottle. He had the look of someone with a broken soul that was held together with glue and that glue was usually 100 proof. Her husband had the same look on his face in the months leading up to their split. She recognized the look and she didn't like it.....*Not one goddamn bit.*

"Well Jack, as I'm sure you've noticed, we are a catholic church in Pensacola. My wife and I took over about three months ago. I've always felt that growing a church was kind of like growing a garden. Plant it, water it, feed it and watch it grow. That's the power of the holy spirit." said Matt.

"Matt, we you ever in the military?" asked Jack

"Yes sir, six years in the Marines. How bout you?"

"Three years in the Army. Longest three years of my life."

"I know what you mean. I wouldn't have made it if it weren't for my faith."

"I was a tanker in Germany. Most pointless job there was. I was only nineteen, didn't have a clue what I was signing up for. I just wanted to get out of the house and see the world. So, there I am sitting in a tank right in the middle of the FULDA GAP, ready to take on the Russians. Of course, a year into my enlistment, the wall came down and I think a few years later, East and West Germany were back together. There wasn't much point in sticking around. World War Three was pretty much over at that point."

"What denomination is your church Jack?" asked Jules.

"Non denominational, as in check your baggage at the door. No offense Matt, but the church and I just don't see eye to eye on most things anymore." said Jack helping himself to some pasta salad.

"I understand. I've questioned the church myself on more than one occasion. I guess old habits die hard. The church has been good to me and my family, they just haven't been very good to some others." said Matt

"After I left the service, I bounced around a bit until I got accepted into ST Jo's Seminary. "Really? Wow, I hear it's very tough to get into?" said Jules.

"Not really. I had to apply three times. I was weight listed my second time, then one student didn't show up, so I got the call. I almost wish I hadn't."

"You didn't like the seminary?"

“Matt, half of the class wasn’t even from America. Truth is, there are so few regular Americans interested in being priests, they take whatever they could get. I don’t know, I guess I didn’t leave the church as much as I felt, it just left me. Most of the aspiring priests were um.....well, let’s just say they were not the most heterosexual of men I have ever encountered. Until they let priests marry, I’m afraid they aren’t going to go anywhere.”

“Jack, where exactly is your church in Crestview?” asked Marcia.

“Right off the main drag, next to the Ford Dealership.”

Marcia said nothing else and went back to her pasta salad. She wasn’t sure what it was about Jack, but Marcia wanted him gone as soon as possible. Something about these two was just.....*off*. Jack looked like he had just returned from a war on the front lines. Elizabeth or *Liz*, as she preferred, was quiet. Almost too quiet. It was as if she was just watching from the sidelines, waiting for the big move. No way this girl was a catholic. Not a chance. Mormon, perhaps. Maybe Seventh Day Adventist. She looked like she had just come from Sister Wife training school and would do whatever her husband commanded, no matter how *unchristian* it was.

Amanda felt Jack’s eyes on her at the dinner table. He reminded her of a wolf stalking it’s prey. He was polite, at least for now, but she knew it wouldn’t take much prodding for Jack’s true desires to make their way to the surface. Too bad, if he took better care of himself, he might actually look halfway decent. That wife of his creeped her out as well. She was like a Stepford Wife who’s batteries were needing a charge. Nothing about these two seemed normal. Amanda wasn’t sure what they wanted, but it certainly wasn’t to sell their church. They seemed to have other things on their minds.

“That’s quite a car you have there. Is it a 69 or 70?” asked Jules.

“You know your cars. Somebody raised you right. It’s a 1970. I restored it myself. Cost me an arm and a leg. Gets eight miles a gallon if I take it easy. I’d love to take you guys for a drive. Not too often I have passengers in it.”

“Jack, do you work in the church full time, or do you have another job?” asked Marcia.

“Oh, I wish I could preach full time. Not quite there yet. I plan on building my church piece by piece. I work as a mechanic at the dealership next door. Gotta pay the bills somehow.”

“Well Jack, we were going to have bible study after lunch, you and Liza are more than welcome to join.”

“Matt, we’d be delighted. Thank you so much for the meal. You’ve all been very kind.

“Well, I’ll go and get dessert. Amanda, could you help me?”

“Sure.” she said and got up.

Once they were out of earshot, Marcia grabbed her and pulled her into the kitchen.

“Amanda.....I’m a little worried about our guests out there.”

“No shit. That guy hasn’t stopped staring at me since he got here.”

“The Ford Dealership in Crestview closed about eight months ago. I know because I was going to buy a car from them.”

“So, then how can he be a mechanic if they closed?”

“You see the problem we have here? I’m going to venture that he doesn’t have a church. Something about all of this isn’t adding up.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Nothing we can do now. Matt has opened the door to all kinds of things I’m afraid. If we force them to leave, it could provoke them. Right now, they don’t know we’re onto them. I’m just afraid of what will happen when they do.”

Amanda stopped abruptly when Liz came into the kitchen.

“Need any help?” she asked.

“Could you grab the serving spoons in the top drawer?”

Marcia gave Amanda one of her very strong *Marcia Foxx Looks*. The kind that said a lot without saying a word. Amanda was now very worried. Maybe this was all for nothing. Maybe Jack just didn’t want to admit that he was broke and unemployed and too poor to feed him and his wife. Maybe.....or maybe not.

“I guess we’ll be reading from the Gospel according to Mark. The passion exhibited by Jesus in defiance of the Roman Empire is just incredible. Jesus has to face many obstacles and hurdles while preaching the word of God in the ancient Roman territories. I thought I’d turn the podium over to Jack and Liz, to hear what they think about it?”

Jack seemed genuinely surprised. He smiled at his wife and walked up in front of the group. It was obvious for all to see that Jack was not comfortable speaking to groups of people. Strange, he certainly didn’t seem shy. He was going to have to overcome his fear of public speaking if he was going to make his church succeed.

“The Gospel according to Mark. Matt is right, it’s very inspirational. If Father Matt will oblige, I’d like to just steer the discussion off track for just a few minutes. I’m going to ask each and everyone of you a question. No right or wrong answers, just yes or no, okay?”

“As long as it pertains to the subject material, go ahead Jack.” said Matt.

“My question is simple: is it ever okay to kill?”

Everyone in the group looked at one another. They just shrugged their shoulders and answered as a group.

“No, it is not okay.” said Janet.

“What if your life depended on it? Like, what if you either killed them, or they killed you?”

“That’s self defense, not murder.” said Jules.

“I didn’t say anything about murder or self defense, I just asked if it was ever okay to kill some one?”

“Well no, it’s never okay. That doesn’t mean it isn’t necessary from time to time. It’s kind of a loaded question.” said Matt’s wife.

“Not really. See, I think if you really didn’t believe in killing, which is the very first commandment, then you would never do it, even if it meant you would yourself be killed.”

“Fair enough. But, even as Christians, we still have to live in a society that has very strict rules about killing.”

“The reason I ask is because I think if you can convince a Christian that it is okay to kill someone, then you can probably convince them of anything. Only God has the right to decide who lives and who dies. When we break God’s rules, it never ends well for anyone.”

“Jack, if I follow your logic here: then you wouldn’t kill someone who was going to kill you and your wife. You would just let them do it?”

“Yes. As difficult as it is, as horrible as it sounds, we would be doing what God wanted, we would be following his commands. God wants Liz and I to die. That is all part of his master plan. I just fail to see how you can break God’s numero uno commandment and still call yourself a Christian.”

“Jack, what exactly does this have to do with the Gospel of Mark?” asked Matt.

“Maybe nothing.....maybe everything. You would agree that Jesus was up against a monster in the Roman Empire, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, I certainly would.”

“They killed the son of God. Just because he was deemed a threat to the Empire. Nailed him to a cross and just let him bleed to death. Pretty horrible way to die, if you ask me. Not once did he curse his captors and executioners. Not once did he ask God to save him. I mean if he is the Son of Man, you would think that is the least God could do for him. Jesus practiced what he preached, right up until the moment of his death. You might say his beliefs got him killed, but those beliefs are what inspired billions of followers. See, I was a preacher in Aleppo, Syria for the past two years. I worked in the government controlled section of the city. I saw first hand what our government did to the people of Syria. We committed the worst sin imaginable and most Christians are completely unaware of it. Mossad and the CIA created these mercenary armies which terrorized the country. Granted ASSAD didn’t do himself any favors, but he isn’t the one who created this situation. We did, along with the SAUDIS, the TURKS and a few others. We have done horrible, unspeakable acts to the people of Syria. I had to watch as our government pretended to be fighting ISIS and the other terrorist groups, but were secretly arming them and supplying them. I tried for years to get the church interested and involved in what was happening. The church is worthless. Men of God on TV are worthless. Everyone is worthless and the people of Syria have paid for it. If only we had real men of the cloth, like Daniel and Joseph Berrigan, or Father Coughlin, maybe the slaughter of the Syrian people would never have happened. Maybe, I can only hope.” said Jack as he pulled out a large caliber revolver from his jacket

holster. Everyone in the group held their breath. No one had seen this coming. Matt was the first to speak up.

“Whoa, Jack.....easy there man. I know you’re upset, but this is no way to handle it.”

“It’s funny, isn’t it.” said Jack as everyone in the room went completely silent.

“What’s funny?”

“No one takes you seriously unless you have a gun. No one in this world does a damn thing out of kindness or decency, they do it out of fear. That’s the only way you ever get anyone to do anything, make them fear you.”

“That’s not very Christian, Jack.”

“Neither is destroying defenseless third world countries, but no one in the room seems to have a problem with that.”

Jules looked nervously around the room and could see that everyone was thinking pretty much the same thing he was. He had to get that gun away from Jack or this could all end very, very badly. He looked over at Father Matt who just looked back at him. They both knew what they had to do, they just weren’t sure as to how to go about doing it.

“Are you seriously just going to sit there and let him do this?” asked his wife as she turned around and looked right at Liz, who just put a finger up over her lips and made the silence gesture.

“I know you’re angry Jack, but we aren’t the enemy.” said Matt.

“No Matt, you aren’t the enemy, but that doesn’t make you innocent either. You may not have directly killed all those poor Syrians, but you didn’t do a damn thing to stop it either. You didn’t protest when MOSSAD’s mercenary armies were running wild through Syria, destroying everything they touched, sending millions of them running away from their own homes. You didn’t do anything when that psycho bitch Hillary and Obama murdered Muammar Gaddafi. You didn’t do anything when Obama bombed the cranes at the Yemen City of Hodeida, which was used to offload humanitarian aid. Nope, not one of you wonderful Christians has ever lifted a finger to stop the evil forces in this world, the same forces you all claim to devote your lives to stopping, just pathetic.” he said waving his gun.

“Jack.....there’s a right way and a wrong to handle this and this is not the right way.” said Matt.

“Have you ever done one goddamn thing to help anyone in this world, Father Matt? Have you? Or, do you just read your bible and watch the world go to hell in a handbasket every night and tell yourself that chaos, death and destruction is *God’s Will*? ”

“Jack, I think you and your wife had better leave.” said Matt rather forcefully.

“Fuck you Matt, you sorry piece of shit!” he said and shot him in the chest.

The deafening bang caused everyone in the room to jump out of their chairs. They watched Matt clutch his chest and collapse on the ground. His wife screamed and ran over to him. Jack shot her in the head. Matt was on the floor fighting for his life when Jack stood over him and shot him again, killing him almost instantly. He opened the cylinder on his .357 magnum and unloaded the empty shells. He put six

fresh ones in. Jacketed hollow points. On shot, one kill.

“Okay, kiddos. Who else wants to die?”

No one in the group said anything. Jules was the only man left. He thought for a split second about rushing Jack and trying to get the gun away, but Jack saw right through that plan.

“Go head kid, try it. You’ll be dead before you hit the floor.”

Most of the women in the group were sobbing. Marcia was just convulsing, she was having a full blown panic attack and was hyperventilating.

“Probably the first time any of you sluts have ever seen a real man.” said Jack., waving his gun.

“Alright, let’s load these bodies up into my Caddy. I have to take them to my church.”

“What do you mean take them to church, *they’re fucking dead for god’s sake!*” Marcia.

Jack grabbed her by her hair and pulled her out of her chair. He stuck the gun in her mouth and pulled back the hammer.

“Mind your manners, Marcia. You don’t want the kiddies to have to see this now, do you?”

“Jules ran over to Father Matt and lifted him up off the ground. Amanda and Janet followed behind him. They pulled the bodies, which were covered in blood, outside and across the lawn. Jules was completely out of breath as he reached Jack’s car. He ran over to help Amanda with Matt’s wife.

“We gotta make a run for it, while he’s still inside.” said Amanda.

“He’s got my sister and Marcia and Janet still inside. He knows we won’t go anywhere.”

“GO HEAD KIDS! MAKE A RUN FOR IT. I DARE YOU. I’LL KILL THEM BOTH AND CUT THEM UP INTO TINY PIECES!” shouted Jack from the porch.

“Jesus, I’m sorry Jules. I have to go.”

“Amanda, you might make it, but you’d be killing all of us.” said Jules, fighting back the tears.

“This guy is fucking crazy!” she said, sobbing.

“Yeah, I’ve noticed. I can’t leave my sister.”

“COME ON KIDS. PLAYTIME IS OVER. GET YOUR ASSES BACK IN THE HOUSE.”

“He’s going to kill all of us.” she said softly.

“No.....he could have done that any time he wanted to. He’s got something else up his sleeve. We just have to find out what.”

“I’ve never prayed before in my life Jules, but I sure am going to start.” said Amanda as they both headed back to the cabin.

Jack motioned for them to sit down on the sofa. Marcia was still breathing heavily, but was holding it together, for now.

“I’m glad to see I am dealing with level headed young people, not fucktard millennials.”

“What do you want?” asked Jules sister

“Liz, could you clean up this mess and make us some coffee?” asked Jack

“Sure dear.” she said and headed into the kitchen.

“What I want is for you kids to feel what I have felt for the last five years. I want you to know what your country and fellow Christians have done and the pain they have caused. I want you to realize that our government really is the *Great Satan*. We have become the very thing we sit in church every Sunday and claim to be fighting. I am going to expand your minds. That is the kind of church I run. A reality based thinking church.

Amanda and Marcia just hugged one another and began sobbing. Janet and his sister both sat next to one another and held hands. Liz returned a moment later with some glasses of milk and a plate of cookies. She offered one to Marcia and Amanda who slowly took one off the plate and began to slowly nibble on it. Jack went into the kitchen and opened the fridge. He quickly closed the door shut and looked disgusted.

“It just figures this ass wive wouldn’t have any beer in the fridge. Okay, let’s sit together and start praying. Jack grabbed Liz’s and Jules took her hand. Jack bowed his head, closed his eyes and began praying.

“Dear Lord, we are gathered here today to honor you.....aw fuck. We are here to help some ignorant children become less ignorant. We are here to try and save them from themselves. I know it’s asking a lot, but a lot was asked of you. I ask for your guidance and wisdom in these difficult, turbulent times. Maybe if these kids somehow manage not piss me off, they might just live through this.....maybe. I want them to understand that I am not doing this to inflict pain on them, I am trying to help them, please help me to help them.....amen.”

“Amen.” everyone said slowly.

“I meant what I said. This is a learning experience for you. Matt and Mrs. Matt were too far gone to be able to save. There’s still time for you.”

“Jack, if you’re going to kill us, just do it. Don’t make us wait for it....if you have a shred of humanity left in you, then just get it over with.” said Marcia between sobs.

“Marcia, it’s people like yourself that are flat out ruining Christianity. You go through the motions just like everyone else, but at no point whatsoever, do you really believe any of it. You just want to know what it can do for you and you can benefit from it. That is not being a good Christian woman. I’d rather try and convert a heathen or pagan than have to deal with the likes of you.”

“Yes, you are a big man with that gun, now aren’t you? If you really believe what you say, you

wouldn't have to do your talking through the barrel of a gun, now would you? You're just as fake as I am." she said.

Jack seemed put off by her resilience in the face of death. He looked over at his wife, who got up and offered her another cookie.

"Get away from me! Come on, Jack. You want to really hash it out, well fine. I can take you a whole lot more seriously when you've put the gun away."

Jack tucked the gun into his pants. He sat down in the love seat.

"Fair enough, but understand, this is my show. Try and steal the spotlight, I can guarantee it will not end well for you."

Marcia sat back and took a cookie.

"Then, let's get this show started."

"Honey, run out to the car and get my briefcase, if you would?" asked Jack as he took a cookie and began to chew.

Liz left the room and went outside. She returned a minute later with a large, very professional looking briefcase. He took out several photos of the carnage in Syria and passed them around for the group to see. They were difficult to look at. Amanda had a hard time looking through them.

"These were taken by the Syrian Army and Russian Forces in Syria. Never in my life, did I ever think the Russians would be the good guys, but here we are. The Iranians and the Russians are the only ones trying to stop this slaughter. If Obama were serious about stopping ISIS, he would just shut their financial network down. They actually get paid on ATM cards for Christ's sake! Shouldn't be too hard to track. Look at the devastation we have caused. What on Earth did any of these people ever do to us?"

"Come on Jack, we didn't do this, terrorists did." said Jules.

"Terrorists we pay and train. That makes us just as guilty."

"Guilt by association? I'm sure lots of people have blood on their hands then." said Marcia.
"Jack.....I'm not questioning your intentions here, I'm just not sure what any of this has to do with starting your own church." said Marcia.

"Marcia.....don't you see? How can you call yourself a Christian and allow this horror to continue? Did you see the Pope or Billy Graham leading anti war protests during the Vietnam War? Of course not. Do you ever see any religious leaders trying to stop war or destruction? If so, please name one."

"What are you going to tell Jesus when you meet him in Heaven sir?" asked Jules' sister.
Jack turned and looked right at her.

"I'm going to tell him that I am the only one of his followers that actually tried to stop this horror show. I tried to do something to help the people of Syria. I fed them and clothed them and saved several of

them on the battlefield. What are you going to tell him, when he asks you why you didn't try and stop this from happening?"

His sister said nothing. For a split second, Jules thought about just tackling him and getting that gun out of his hand. Jules was only average size for a seventeen year old boy and Jack was about fifty pounds heavier. He figured his best strategy was to just play along and wait for Jack to lower his guard. He just needed a second and this whole thing could be over. He just had to hope that Jack didn't have another gun on him.

"Okay.....okay, Jack, you made your point. You're right. I will admit it. You are absolutely right, we as Christians should be ashamed of ourselves for letting something like this happen right under our noses. It's our government doing this, not people like us. We didn't drop those bombs or arm these groups. No one in this room had anything to do with what is going on in Syria." said Marcia.

"But you just admitted, that as a Christian, as a woman go God, you bear some responsibility for all of this."

"Every American bears responsibility for their government's actions, but that isn't the same thing. Matt and his wife would have done everything they could to help the people of Syria. You had no right whatsoever to kill them, none. Whatever you are feeling, whatever horrible things you saw, none of us in this room have anything to do with it." said Marcia, getting visibly upset.

"Yet, you did absolutely nothing to stop it. Imagine if you and a million other Christian women in this country marched on Washington, or blockaded your senator's office until he withdrew his support for this war. Imagine if you had traveled to the country and actually done something to help them. No, instead you just want to blame somebody else for your own failures. It's not my fault, it's Satan's fault. Well, I did something. I just didn't sit on my ass while my own government slaughtered millions of innocent people."

"Well, you should be proud of yourself Jack. Congratulations. You are still a murderer. No amount of talking is going to change that." said Marcia.

Jack didn't even hesitate. He shot Marcia twice in her chest. She bounced backwards, then collapsed on the floor, holding her chest. She was gasping for air. Jules rushed over to her to try and help. Amanda and Janet were just screaming. Jules had no idea a woman could scream that loud. He grabbed something to try and stop the bleeding. Janet's face was turning blue from the loss of blood. Jack kicked him out of the way and put another round into her chest. This one killed her instantly. Jules rushed Jack, who simply sidestepped him, causing Jules to fall onto the floor. Jack put the gun right to his head.

"Do that again and you can join your friend here." he said coldly.

Jules just put his hands up in the air and closed his eyes. Jack took the gun away. He was spared for now. If Jack took him out, he could do whatever he wanted with the girls. He was angry at himself for blowing the first good chance he had to get the gun. Clearly, Jack was no amateur. He had done this before.

"Come on, you know what to do." he said pointing towards the door.

Jules picked up Marcia's lifeless body and dragged it outside. He opened the trunk and threw her body inside. He knew he should run for it. He also knew what Jack would do if he did. This may be his only chance. He also had to do everything possible to keep his sister and the girls alive. The trunk of the Cadillac was lined with a large plastic tarp. Jack knew exactly what he was doing. Just how exactly did Jack know they would be here? Did he just drive around, hoping to run into his next defenseless victim? It was almost as if he planned this whole thing, right down to the last little detail.

"Come on Jules." shouted Jack from the porch.

Jules closed the trunk. It wouldn't take too long before the bodies began to stink. Jules was covered in blood. He had it on his shirt, his shorts, in his hair. *He was wearing somebody else's blood. Not something he ever thought he would experience.*

Jack sat him down on the couch. He ran over to his sister and threw his arms around her. Jack stepped out for a second.

"I'll get us out of this, I promise." he whispered.

She just smiled and hugged him.

"Go and get your bibles." said Jack.

Everyone in the group slowly got up. They were all in shock. It was like they were watching the day's events on TV, as if it were happening to someone else and not to them. They returned a minute later and all sat down on the couch.

"Hold them up. Hold them up high!" said Jack.

Everyone held their bibles over their heads.

"Now, take a good look at it. Go on. Look at it. Do you know what you are looking at?"

"I would say we are looking at a Bible." said Janet.

"You are looking at Satan's best friend. You are looking at the best tool the devil ever devised. Have you ever read through it? I have, cover to cover, many, many times. It didn't make any sense the first time I read it and it made even less sense the fiftieth time I read it. Gobbly gook nonsense, contradictions, confusion.....the tools of the trade for ol scratch. I know, what I am going to say may sound ridiculous, to people like Marcia and Matt, it is. They were beyond help, you are not. There's still time to save you."

"Save us from what?"

"From religion. Jules, you seem like a fairly bright young man, so I'll pose this next question to you: if this book is the word of God, why doesn't it make any sense?"

"It makes sense. It speaks differently to different people. That's not to take away from anything in the bible."

“Jules, look at our planet. It’s just been one pointless slaughter after another. One horror show after the next. There really hasn’t been a period of time for the last five thousand years of human history that we haven’t been killing one another. Why?”

“Human nature I guess.”

“Or perhaps there is another reason. Do you believe in the devil? Do you think Satan exists?”
“I’m sure he exists.” said Jules very sternly.

“Okay, but Satan is a God as well, is he not?”

“I guess.”

“So, this God is very powerful, compared to us lowly humans. Maybe Satan decided to put his people in positions of power all over the globe. When you realize the world is run by Satanist’s things make a whole lot more sense. Even you Jules, will have to admit that our leaders are beyond horrible. You have the intelligence necessary to realize just how horrible they really are, why?”

“Power attracts the type of person who shouldn’t have it.”

“True, but why do we just blindly follow our leaders to our deaths?.....why? Because of this damn book and the lies it has told for thousands of years. Because the men who preach it are liars and the people they answer to bow to Satan. Look at our history. When you step back and take all of it in, there is no other answer. We are controlled by Satan and his followers.

“What the hell does that have to do with killing Matt and Marcia, I mean I didn’t like the old bag, but you didn’t have to kill her.” said Amanda.

“Because they believed their own lies. They were too far gone. Satan runs the world by confusion and ignorance. The bible is filled with stories about angels and the afterlife and how Jesus turned water into wine and how he was betrayed by his own followers. He never told you the truth, the real truth, which is to just treat people the way you want to be treated. To be kind to one another, to do whatever you desire, as long as I don’t hurt anyone else. That book is designed to distract you from what Satan and his followers are doing. Worry about the afterlife and how wonderful it will be and ignore the fact that your sons and daughters just had to go and fight another pointless war. Go to church and bow your heads, begging for God’s forgiveness for your sins. If God created man in his image, then what does that say about God? We are horrible to one another. We die horrible, lonely deaths. Satan has pulled the wool over your eyes and this book is greatly responsible. Nothing in the book about the crimes of the Roman Empire, or slavery, or the fact that there was massive starvation going on all around, nope. Just ignore all that and worry about the afterlife. You are not slaves. If God exists, he does not want a slave, because slaves don’t think. Slaves are unable to say no. You don’t have to participate in this insanity any longer. You have a choice and that choice begins right here and now. I was a slave to Satan once as well. I actually thought it was my fault for not understanding the nonsense in this bible. Then I went to Syria and everything changed. Syria is reality. Syria is what happens when good people do nothing. I believe people are basically good, I really do. They are pretty stupid as well, but not evil people. They do evil things because they are convinced it is the right thing to do, even though every fiber of their being tells them otherwise. You can change it all, right here in this room, right this very second, by just swearing off this nonsense and start believing in yourselves. That’s why I’m here. I want to help you start your life over, do it the right way, not their way.”

Everyone in the group looked at Jack and just wondered how someone ends up like him. This guy was a giant black hole, determined to suck all the life and light out of anyone and anything around him. At this point, the group would have said and done just about anything to get them out. Jules also knew there was zero chance of that happening. No way was just going to kill three people in cold blood and let them walk out of here as if nothing had happened. Why go through all this trouble if he was just going to kill them in the end.....*unless*.

“So, if you hate religion so much, then why are you starting a church and becoming a preacher, isn’t that kind of hypocritical?” asked Janet.

“Thomas Paine once remarked that: *my own mind is my church*. My church exists in your minds. I just bury the dead people in the physical church property I rented. You are my first congregation....how am I doing, so far?” he asked jokingly.

“*Just fucking great, Jackie boy. Keep up the good work.*” Jules thought to himself.

No one in the group knew quite how to handle Father Jack. How exactly does one handle a homicidal maniac? Not pissing them off is probably a good start. Jules kept going over different scenarios in his head. None of them ended well for the rest of the group. Jack clearly had no reservations about killing those he deemed unworthy. Maybe if they could convince him he really got to them, they might get him to lower his guard.....*maybe*.

Jules wasn’t listening to Jack at this point, he was trying to think of a way out of this. He knew the longer Jack went on and the more he saw the group as people, not objects, the greater their chances of survival. He seemed to take quite a liking to Amanda, who was clearly repulsed by him, but she knew what she had to do to stay alive. He kept looking at his sister, who just kept looking back at him.

Everyone wanted Jules to do something, but they just didn’t know what. Jules was fifty percent sure that Liz had a gun on her as well. He knew that even if he got a hold of the gun, he would only have a split second to get a shot off. He knew he would have to shoot both of them, not just Jack. It was a hell of a lot to ask from anyone, let alone a 17 year old boy, who was no longer just a boy. The events of that afternoon had propelled him straight into adulthood at warp speed. Gone was the innocent, fun loving, closet Christian and in its place was someone else and that someone else was not screwing around.

Jack took a break from his two hour long montage and the group had dinner. Mac and cheese, with juice boxes. Liz made more than enough for everyone, though no one was hungry. They were all still in shock. They knew they had to talk to one another to try and formulate some kind of plan. Jules had written on a small piece of paper and handed it to his sister underneath the table. It read:

We have to get that gun or we’re dead. I think if we all attack him at once, it might work.

His sister played it off without a hitch. Jack and Liz never suspected anything. If they did, they never let on.

“So Jack, what do you do with all the bodies if you don’t mind me asking?” asked Jules.

“Jules, I have bought a run down church in Crestview. Real estate is something else down here. It was used for decades by the townspeople until everyone and their mothers started moving to Florida. Right

now, I just bury them in the basement. I plan on having a real congregation someday. I always thought it would be hilarious to hold a service full of bible thumpers, knowing that there are tons of dead bodies just ten feet below them. You might say I have a very bizarre sense of humor. I'm kind of like a psychotic Billy Graham."

"I see. Don't you think your time might be better spent in some anti war group or something like that?" "Jules, Thoreau once remarked that *There are a thousand men hacking away at the branches of evil, to the one who is striking at the root.* I'm striking the root. That's the only way to get things done. You have to go right to the source, which in this case is religion itself."

"Jack, have you ever considered the fact that you are using what happened in Syria to justify your actions?" asked Jules.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the truth is, the entire country let those horrible things happen in Syria. Everyone. Whites, blacks, Jews, Muslims, gays, straights. We all did. We all have blood on our hands. Seems like you are just singling out one group, Christians."

"It might seem that way, but that one group was the only group who could have stopped it. They are the one group in the country who should have stopped it. How can you devote your entire existence to something, then turn a blind eye to it when it finally happens?"

"Anyone with a conscience should have stopped it. You don't have to be a Christian to do the right thing." said Amanda.

Jack put his glass down and looked at her.

"That is exactly what I've been trying to get through to you kids. Thank you Amanda. There just might be some hope for this group after all.

"Jack, by killing people who don't agree with you, how are you any better than those mercenary armies like ISIS? Doesn't that make you just as bad as they are?" asked Janet

"Janet.....look. I'm not condoning killing people. I genuinely wish I didn't have to, but I can't have fake Christians going around the world and poisoning fertile young minds like yours. As much as I hate to say it, sometimes, it's necessary to kill people. As unpleasant as it sounds, there's just no other way." "But you said yourself that killing was breaking God's first commandment." said Jules.

"No Jules, it's breaking your God's first commandment. Remember, I'm an *anti-missionary*. My God and I have an understanding about such things."

"Which is?"

"Well, if you kill the wrong people, you to hell, if you kill the right ones, you have schools and streets named after you." said Jack as he dove back into his mac and cheese.

Jack's rules for the sleeping arrangements were all the ladies in one room and all the boys in another. Jules was far too wired to sleep. He knew he had to get that gun away from Jack, but it was easier said

than done. He kept it in a shoulder holster at all times. Jules knew Jack had some kind of master plan in store for them, which was the only reason they were still alive. Problem was, in order for them to escape, they all had to escape, all four of them. He knew the girls could handle Liz without too much trouble, but getting past Jack was going to be a different matter entirely. He hoped if the girls were able to escape, that they just make a run for it, leaving him behind. He was reasonably sure he wasn't going to come out of this alive anyway, may as well accept it.

Jules and Jack slept apart from one another on cots. Jules simply made certain he was not facing Jack. He couldn't stand to look at him. He was just waiting for him to fall asleep. Jules remembered a baseball bat in the closet. As soon as Jack fell asleep, he was as good as dead. He just had to make certain. One false move and it was game over. Jules had always wondered what it felt like to get shot. It looked extremely painful. Jack seemed to have no reservations about eliminating anyone that got in his way.

"It doesn't have to be this way Jules. I don't want to kill you, I really don't." said Jack in the darkness.
"I don't want to have to kill you either."

"I know you're just waiting for me to fall asleep. God luck, I only sleep a few hours a night." said Jack
"What are you going to do to us Jack?"

"I really don't know Jules, but I was very honest when I said I don't want to kill you."

"You know exactly what you are going to do. You wouldn't box yourself in like this unless you had a way out. You're not just going to take four hostages around with you in your Caddy back to Crestview."

"Jules, I want to save you. I want you to see things the way I see them, that's all. I could talk all day long but, at the end of the day, I'm just another lunatic on the street, full of lunatics. No, I had to make a point. I had to let people know I was serious. Killing is just how I get your attention."

"That's a pretty ridiculous reason to go and kill people."

"Is it? I've seen a lot of dead people in my time. A lot of good people, Muslim and Christian. None of them deserved to die like they did. I guess after a while, you just become immune to it."

"How do you get immune to taking someone else's life?" asked Jules

"That's what war does to people. It changes them and not in a good way. Our leaders never have to feel what it's like to lose part of yourself, to lose your empathy and emotion. To the point where killing another human being is no different than taking a dump. They never answer for the crimes they had committed, or the lives they have destroyed. That's the real crime in all this. They can destroy an entire country and never have to answer for it, not in this life anyway."

"Why did you go to Syria?"

"I thought that's where God wanted me. He wanted me there alright, just not for the reasons I imagined. I had to bury a brother and sister, they couldn't have been more than ten or eleven years old. I had to tell their parents they were gone. Can you imagine how hard that is? To have to tell a mother and father that both their kids are dead. They both spoke English, many Syrians speak English, they are

very well educated. I held a makeshift service for them in a bombed out church in Aleppo. It was raining and the roof had partially collapsed, so everyone was getting soaked. That's what happens when people like Father Matt and Marcia run the world. That's why I have to stop them, so that no family will ever have to endure what that family did." said Jack

"Forcing people to accept your belief system while pointing a gun at them isn't going to win you over many followers. Shouldn't you try to win them over? I think everyone would take you a lot more seriously if you put your gun away."

"Maybe, maybe not. I know you want to kill me. I know I should probably kill you, but if I can convince someone like you, bring you over to my side, Jules, that would be the equivalent of Moses parting the Red Sea. I haven't won you over yet but I'm getting there. Are you killing me to avenge Father Matt and the others, or because you know the longer I go on, the more convinced you become?"

"A little bit of both I guess."

"Remember Jules, most women, most real women want their men to lead. The girls are looking at you to get them out of this. All of this *equality* talk goes out the window when the shit hits the fan. They revert right back to girls and want the boys to save them. You aren't going to save them by killing me. You'll be saving them by letting me spend a few more days with them. If you really care about them and I think you do, you will let me do my thing."

"As long as your thing doesn't involve taking your pants off, then fine."

Jack sat up and looked over at him.

"Jesus Jules, I'm a married man and my wife is in the room with them." said Jack almost insulted that Jules had called him out. The kid was much smarter than he looked. He could use a kid like him, which is why he was keeping him alive. He can't do this all by himself. He needed help. Jack was beginning to think that if he had a son, he would look like Jules.

He woke up in the middle of the night and looked over at Jack. He was reasonably certain Jack was asleep. He got up and went into the bathroom to take a piss. When he got out, Jack was waiting by the door with his gun. Jules froze.

"What are you doing?" he asked with his eyes half open

"Taking a whiz. Is that alright?"

Jack looked down at his hands. He could see Jules was unarmed.

"Yeah, sorry. Let's get back to bed.

Jules laid back down in the cot and had to remember to keep breathing. He fully intended to grab the bat and beat Jack to death with it, but he had to pee so bad, he decided to go first. He had underestimated Jack and it had nearly cost him his life. That's all it took to remain alive, or become one of his many corpses, a *split second decision*. In this case, lady luck had been on his side.

Everyone awoke the next morning as soon as the sun came up. They may have been awake before that,

but no one got out of bed. No one really slept either. Jules got out of bed and made a pot of coffee. Amanda found some pots and pans and Liz helped make breakfast. No one said a word and just worked in silence for several minutes. Jack poured himself a cup of coffee.

“Not bad Jules, I just may have to keep you around a bit longer.” he said after taking a sip. Liz handed him a piece of toast. He gave her a kiss and smacked her behind, right in front of everyone. “Jack, not in front of the children.” she said with a big grin on her face.

Jules just couldn’t believe how he had ended up in the middle of this mess. How does taking a weekend camping trip turn into this? He never imagined that people like Jack exist. He was like a real life boogeyman. Jules had painfully discovered that not all monsters have horns. Some are even actually nice once in a while, but they’re monsters and given enough time, their real character emerges. Jack had broken the mold.

Jules wasn’t quite sure what had happened, but in an instant, he saw Janet swing the large kitchen knife right at his neck. It missed, but instead, sliced a large hole in his cheek. He grabbed for his gun and Jules immediately went after him. Jack managed to get off a round, but Jules had pushed his arm into the air and the bullet went through the roof. Jules kicked him as hard as he could, right in the groin. Jack let out a loud scream and partially collapsed. Amanda grabbed the frying pan and hit Jack over the head, as hard she could, knocking him unconscious. The gun fell out of his hand and onto the floor. Jules could feel something beginning to move underneath the floor of the cabin. It almost felt as if they were experiencing an earthquake. Liz grabbed the gun and pointed it right at Jules.

“Bye Jules.” she said.

Amanda brought the frying pan down on her head before she could squeeze the trigger. She just kept hitting her with it, even when it became clear she was unconscious. Janet grabbed the pan from her hand.

“That’s enough. Let’s tie him up or something, before he wakes up. Jules searched him and found only a knife on him and nothing else. He used duct tape to tie his hands. Just as he was about to wake him up, he saw one of the floorboards cracking. Then another, then another. He looked outside and all at once, it became clear what was happening. *The ground was sinking. Somebody had built the cabin directly over a sinkhole.*

“EVERYBODY OUTSIDE, NOW!” shouted Jules.

The four of them ran outside the house, into the front yard and watched in horror as the one bedroom cabin slowly sank into the ground and out of sight within minutes. No one had ever seen anything like it.

“We better not get too close. We don’t know how big the hole is.” said Jules.

They walked over to the Caddy. Jules got inside and sat down. It was a very impressive car. He lowered the sun visor and the keys fell right into his hands.

“Thank God for small miracles.” said Jules.

“You don’t even have your license.” said his sister.

“You going to arrest me?”

“Matt and his wife are in there.”

“You want to walk back to the highway?” he asked.

The girls got in and they drove down the dirt road, till they hit the highway and finally got cell reception at a bait stand ten miles away. Janet was able to call the Florida Highway Patrol and tell the dispatcher exactly what had happened. It was nearly another fifty minutes before the first trooper showed up at the bait stand, then another twenty six minutes back to the cabin. They had been gone for almost two hours. Jules showed the officer the bodies in the trunk and he jumped several feet back. He ran back to his SUV and radioed for assistance. The local sheriff’s department finally arrived and by the time they went back to the cabin, they had over a dozen officers and troopers.

Somehow, in those two hours, Jack had managed to escape. His body was never recovered. Liz’s body was found the next day. She had been crushed to death. It would take weeks for the area to be excavated and cleared of debris, but once it had, the authorities were certain Jack was not in the wreckage. He pulled a rabbit out of his hand once more.

The police removed six bodies from the basement of Jack’s church in Crestview. Two of the bodies were Mormon Missionaries who had been missing for months. It was a gruesome scene.

The problem for authorities at the cabin site was simply the fact that the cavern was massive and parts of it went down for nearly a thousand feet, where it led to a massive underground river. If Jack’s body had fallen that far, there was telling where it would have ended up. He would have had a very difficult time getting out of that sinkhole. It was impossible, but most, it really was. After six months, they declared Jack legally dead.

Jules and the rest of the group weren’t convinced. If there was even a one percent chance of making out alive, Jack would be in that percentage. How a serial killer like Jack could go undetected as long as he did was an embarrassment to everyone in the area. The police had even questioned him about the disappearance of a local months ago, but never followed up on it, because *he was the guest speaker at their local church*. Jack could pretty much play whatever role he needed to in order to get by. He had everyone fooled, maybe even himself.

Life did not get any easier for the group once they returned. The only bright spot in all of this was that Jules and Amanda began dating once they returned. They were an odd couple no more. Jules had experienced more than a man three or four times his age would in just a couple of days. Amanda still wanted to get out of her house but she had realized it was Jules who had kept her and the others alive. She owed him for that. The more time she spent with him, the more she liked him. He had this bizarre confidence about him that just electrified her. He was very smart, almost too smart. He promised her he would never force her to do something she didn’t want to do. He put no demands on her, unlike most Latin guys she had dated. Jules knew what she wanted and he was the only one who could give it to her. She didn’t care what her friends said about him. He was good in a pinch and that’s all that really mattered to her.

In time, the group went their separate ways. Even his sister, Mary had moved to the other side of the country to begin her new life. He only saw them on social media. They always talked about everything

except that horrible day at the cabin. It was almost as if it had never happened, except it did and it had changed them in ways they could never have imagined.

Ten years later, Jules was one week shy of his 28th birthday. Life had been good to him over the last ten years. He was engaged to be married next month to a wonderful lady. He had a house and two cars. He was the finance manager for a string of dealerships in Tampa. He had started selling cars when he was just 20 and by the time he was 23, he was a sales manager for the dealership. He could sell a car to just about anyone. By the time he was 28, he was making almost two hundred thousand dollars a year. It was a high stakes, high stress job but a very profitable one. At this rate, he would be a millionaire by the time he was 30. Life was good and getting better by the day. The owners of the dealership were going to promote him to general manager of the entire operation. All he had to do was smile and keep making them money.

He was surprised to see Amanda's number on his cell phone one morning with a customer. He hadn't spoken to her in over a year. They had dated for three years. He wanted to marry her, but she didn't. They did not part on good terms. It was probably just as well. They loved one another, but just weren't right for each other. He wanted to settle down and start a family. She wanted to travel and just live life to the fullest....without any family baggage. He excused himself and took her call.

"Amanda?"

"Jules....Jesus, have you seen the news?"

"What news?"

"Mary just killed a bunch of people at a church in the panhandle."

Jules quickly checked online and yes, it was true. A large number of church goers had been killed in Bonifay. Police had a suspect in custody. She was identified as Mary Lowry, his sister. Jules immediately called his parents, who had just learned of the news. They all drove down to the police station and met with the detectives assigned to the case. There wasn't much to investigate. Mary had opened fire with a shotgun during a Sunday service. She was tackled when she went to reload. Four were dead, five wounded. Jules and his parents were in shock. Looking back on it now, perhaps they shouldn't have been.

If the last ten years had been great for Jules, it had been just the opposite for Mary. She had a miscarriage and dropped out of college. She began using drugs and her life quickly spiraled out of control. She spent three months in rehab and another two months in the county jail. Her parents had pretty much disowned her at this point. Jules was the only one in the family who still talked to her. One of the detectives came out to speak with the family. He told her she was being interrogated and would be transferred to the county jail within a day or two. They would be able to see her once she was there. She had told them that he was the only one she wanted to see.

He was able to sit down in a face to face meeting separated by a big piece of plexi-glass. He was nervous as he sat down in front of her. Mary was a hottie in high school, now she looked like a pile of barf. He couldn't believe how far she had fallen. There would be no coming back from this one. She would spend the rest of her life in a psychiatric unit or prison. There was no light at the end of the tunnel for her. He picked up the phone.

“Hey sis.....what’s new?”

“You are the only one who will understand. You are the only one who would ever understand. He didn’t die at the cabin. He survived.”

“Who? Jack?”

“Yes. He comes to see me every now and then. I’m not sure if he’s real or not, but he comes to see me to check up on me. He wants to see how I’m doing.”

“That’s very thoughtful of him.”

“I just can’t get him out of my head. Everyday, it’s like I’m still there in the cabin, watching Matt and his wife and Marcia die for their sins. I try and try, but I just can’t get it out of my head. I know what I did was wrong. I know, but it’s what Jack wants. It’s what we have to do. Sometimes, I think he was like an angel or something, that fell out of heaven, sent down here on Earth to save us from ourselves.”
“He was a cold blooded psychopath sis, nothing more.”

“No Jules. That’s just it, he wasn’t. He was like Jesus reincarnated. He was here to save us from ourselves. Only a special kind person can do that.”

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done? You killed four people. Four innocent people, that did nothing to you. Doesn’t that matter to you?”

“No one is innocent in this world Jules, no one. We lose our innocence the moment we enter this world. You know, I was in Syria a few months ago. That’s when it started, that’s when all of this began. I saw him there at a mosque. I knew it was him as soon as I saw him. We talked for a while. He’s not angry at us, he understands. He asked about you.”

“What the hell were you doing in Syria?”

“Trying to understand. Trying to feel what he felt. I see now what he saw. They are doing much better since the war ended. They don’t even hate me cause I’m an American. They are very friendly people. Very understanding.”

“Do you have a lawyer yet? Mom and dad are trying to get you one.”

“I hope you can make them understand Jules. You’re the only one. I tried reaching out to Amanda and Janet over the years, but they just want to forget it ever happened. They heard what he said, but they didn’t listen. He was only trying to help them. He says he will be visiting you soon.”

Jules had pretty much stopped listening to her at this point. She was going on and on about the ancient Coptic churches and open market bazaars she visited in Damascus. Mary had been completely detached from reality. She was gone and would not be returning anytime soon. Jack may as well have killed her as well. He waited until she stopped.

“Jules, what are you going to do when you see Jack? Will you please be polite? He is only trying to help.”

"I know he is. That's what friends do, they help one another." he said and got up to leave, even though they still had ten minutes left.

Jules was not certain of the future or much of anything at this point but, he was certain of one thing. If he ever met Jack, face to face, he would either kill him, or be killed. One of them would not leave alive.