

*All Souls' Day in New Orleans is more than Father Paul McDougal can handle without a stiff drink – especially when he draws the short straw and has to teach Purgatory 101. Whether the ghosts of New Orleans be pious, pompous or rowdy, nothing can prepare them for their final exams.*

### Purgatory 101

Father Paul McDougal opened his eyes and the hangover hit him like a herd of rampaging elephants.

Swatting the alarm off, he groaned and covered his eyes as the world returned in a nauseating rush of sound and color. Now he remembered why he'd given up drinking – the consequences far outweighed the temporary benefits.

*If one imbibes in the evils of drink, one gets what one deserves* – or at least that's what his dear departed mother had always said.

Filtering the world through his fingers he slowly sat up and the pounding in his head intensified to truly agonizing levels. His mother would be pleased to know he was getting exactly what he deserved.

The high vaulted ceiling and plain sparse furnishings of the dimly lit room were as familiar to Father McDougal as the back of his own hand, but tonight Christ seemed to stare accusingly down at him from the crucifix over the bed and he murmured a quick prayer of apology for his transgression.

His head throbbed again reminding him why he'd gotten drunk in the first place – he had drawn the short straw. He had to teach . . . *the class* . . . this was the challenge year – the year that *she* was coming. Father McDougal found that his hands were trembling, and it had little to do with the whisky.

He forced himself to get up, get into the shower and get dressed. There was no getting out of it – they would be waiting for him, and so would *she*.

When he crossed into the sanctuary at St. Louis Cathedral Basilica, he found the pews filled and all eyes turned expectantly to him. Most were the same familiar faces that had become quite dear to him, with a few new ones mixed in, but *she* wasn't here yet – perhaps there was time yet to make a difference.

The walls of the church seemed to glow in the presence of so many spirits, but for Father McDougal, the sight held both great beauty and sadness – for those assembled walked a fine line between redemption and disaster this night, and much as he might wish it – he had no control over their fate.

A familiar figure lounging in the front row in a suit of tight red leather and chains caught his attention as he moved toward the altar.

Tommy Cesar, lead singer of Nuclear Poundage, grinned up at him and waved him to a stop.

“Bless me Father, for I have sinned – a lot,” he added waggling his eyebrows unrepentantly.

Tommy's outlandish red, white and black makeup reminded Father McDougal of the painted faces of Chinese opera stars, but fans of opera would have been highly affronted by Tommy's brand of music. Father McDougal gave him a long-suffering sigh.

“Blimey!” The singer's eyes widened as he waved his hand before his face. “Is it seemly for a priest to be imbibing in that much whisky, Father?”

“Seemly?” Father McDougal asked. “What would a man who choked to death biting the head off a live chicken know about seemly?”

Tommy grinned. “It was the evils of drink which made me do it, Father.”

“No, it was your quest for fame and attention that made you try it – the evils of drink just made you dumb enough to think you could succeed.”

“Ouch – you’re in a mood now, aren’t you?” he asked petulantly.

Father McDougal took a deep steadying breath and laid his hand on the other man’s shoulder. “Tommy, you’ve been twenty years dead. You come back here year after year, but you learn nothing. For once, my son, try to pay attention – this could be your last chance.”

Tommy grinned again. “I try, Father, but sex, drugs and rock and roll are in me soul.”

Father McDougal squeezed the other man’s shoulder, willing him to truly hear. “Then you’d best make room for more important things.”

“Ain’t found anything more important yet, Father,” Tommy replied with a wink.

*Saving this one would require a true miracle.* Shaking his head Father McDougal continued to the altar.

It was All Souls Day in New Orleans – the most haunted city in the world. The streets of the city were filled with revelers – some bent on joining this class, he feared – but here all was silence and still expectation. He looked out over the faintly glowing audience of assembled ghosts, trying to touch each face with a welcoming gaze. It saddened him to think that he might lose even one of them to *her*.

“Good evening. As some of you know, I am Father Paul McDougal, and this is Purgatory 101. I see many familiar faces here and some new ones as well, but be you the recently deceased or the old dead, you are all here for the same reason – to atone so that you might find your way to Heaven.”

A hand in the audience went up. He recognized the pinched little face and steely gray eyes of Mrs. Agnes Pennycuff glaring at him from beneath her best Sunday hat. He’d been forced to endure that glare from that exact same spot on that exact same pew for twenty years

now. When the old battleaxe . . . er, . . . *dear lady* . . . had finally passed away this year, he thought he was rid of her at last – he should have known better.

“I understand why *he’s* here,” Agnes said, pointing at Tommy seated in front of her, “but why am *I* here?”

Gathering what little patience the hangover had left him, Father McDougal gazed down at her with a pointedly raised eyebrow. Agnes Pennycuff had never been one of his favorite people, but she was still a soul to save.

“When you find yourself in purgatory, Mrs. Pennycuff, it is because you did something to earn your stay here.”

“I’m certain I don’t know what you mean, Father,” she said, her nose in the air. “I was a pillar of the community! I kept this church running like a well-oiled machine for more years than you’ve been alive.”

He nodded. “Yes, and you were also a vile, judgmental gossip and a notorious busybody.”

Tommy burst out laughing and Agnes shot him a poisonous glare.

“That’ll be enough out of you, you painted peacock,” she said, crooking her bony finger at him.

“You’re a sassy old broad, ain’t you now, Love?” he asked, still grinning.

Agnes shook her head indignantly. “There’s obviously been some kind of mistake. I most certainly do not belong here with the likes of him.”

“God,” Father McDougal said with exacting patience, “does not make mistakes.”

“May I ask what makes you so special, *Madame*,” a distinguished gentleman two rows back asked. “I have spent my entire life giving nothing but beauty to the world – for what should I be condemned?”

“And just who, sir, are you?” Agnes demanded.

He inclined his head. “I, *Madame*, am *Monsieur* Jean-Claude Bovie, artist extraordinaire.”

“Well, la-tee-da,” Tommy said, twirling a finger in the air.

Jean-Claude gave him a disapproving glare. “I fully comprehend why the busybody and the . . . witty painted gentleman are here,” he said sourly, “but what have I done besides bring pleasure to thousands of people around the world?”

Tommy laughed. “If making people happy is the key to getting out of here, mate, my millions of screaming fans would have sprung me a long time ago.”

Jean-Claude snorted. “That noise that you call music knows no beauty. You cannot compare it with my paintings of *belle mesdemoiselles* in the full bloom of life.”

“Now I know you,” Agnes said, shaking her bony finger at the painter. “You’re that degenerate who paints pictures of naked women! How dare you compare yourself to me and all the good works I’ve done!”

Jean-Claude stood. “You dare to call me a degenerate when it is you who . . .”

“Silence!” Father McDougal shouted, and then massaged the bridge of his nose with his fingers in an attempt to quiet the throbbing. God as his witness – he would never touch whisky again.

“Agnes,” Father McDougal said, moderating his tone. “None here are without sin – including you. Your gossip and meddling have brought pain to a great many people. Your good works pale in comparison to your misdeeds. You are here because you must atone for the sins that you committed in this life.” He looked out into the audience. “Whether you have repeated this class numerous times, or this is your first time with us, all of you are at the same level in your journey. All of you must repent and make amends for what you have done, only then can

you truly be free.”

A low musical laugh from the back of the church made Father McDougal’s heart stutter. He knew that laugh . . . *she* was here. As one, the ghosts followed his gaze to the back of the church.

She came gliding down the aisle on a veil of darkness, as if her very presence sucked all light from the room. The black of her floor length gown mixed with the shadows until you couldn’t tell where the dress left off and the darkness began. Eerily, the brightly colored scarves tied around her shoulders and hair made her head seem to float down the aisle on its own.

“Good works will get you nowhere with the Holy Father,” she said in that deep, melodious voice. “I spent many years nursing the poor and the sick in this very house of God, and yet still I was barred from my eternal reward.”

She glided to a stop and glared up at him with her dark eyes. The scarlet head cloth covering her hair did nothing to soften the strong features of her face – in fact it made her dark eyes seem to glow with dancing flames.

“It was not by your good works that you were condemned, Marie Laveau – it was by your practice as a Voodoo High Priestess.”

“Witch!” Mrs. Pennycuff shrieked, standing and making the sign of the cross. The room full of ghosts stirred uneasily, a ripple flowing through them like someone had thrown a pebble into a pond. Some grew more transparent even as he watched – as if they could hide from the evil standing before them, but others glowed brighter, turning toward her like a moth to a flame.

“You cannot embrace the darkness and hope to ascend to Heaven – even now its stain clings to you. You are not welcome here, Marie Laveau,” Father McDougal said.

She laughed and the shadows swirled around her like living smoke, writhing and caressing like serpents.

“I thought all were welcome in the house of God, Father.”

“All who come sincerely into His presence are welcome, but you come not out of repentance, but to harm those I am bound to protect. Leave this place, Marie Laveau. Darken God’s house no more.”

Father McDougal wrapped his fingers around the Rosary in his pocket and squeezed until the metal cut into his palm. He had known this was coming, but that didn’t make him like it any better. He wanted desperately to cast her out – he wanted to save them all.

She turned to face the audience of assembled ghosts, her dark eyes burning.

“Is that what you wish? To cast me out? The good Father would be rid of me because he fears I will tell you the truth.”

Hands trembling, Father McDougal pulled the crucifix from his pocket and held it before him. “Be gone, woman! Be gone I say.”

He could feel the blood trickling down his fingers to drop upon the altar like scarlet rain.

Laughing, Marie caught a drop on her finger and then licked it clean. “Do you think me a vampire, Father? It’s noble of you to bleed for your cause, but I walk between darkness and light – you cannot vanquish me like a demon.” She turned back to the audience. “I walk between these worlds, and you can as well. You needn’t stay here and toil beneath the Father’s thumb. There is *another* way – an *easier* way,” she purred. “Like me, you can be free of the moral threads that bind you to this servitude. Who is the good Father to tell you what you must do? He is nothing but a self-righteous man – a puppet. Why would you wish to be a mere puppet when you can be free? Who will join me?” she purred.

Tommy stepped forward and Father McDougal’s heart started to pound, but should anyone freely choose to go with her he was forbidden to interfere.

“Tommy,” she cooed with a sultry smile. “I knew I could count on you. Who will join

Tommy backed away from her as she tried to take possession of his arm. “I believe the good Father asked you to go,” he said, all traces of humor gone.

Marie smiled at him and slinked closer, circling him like a shark. “You don’t really mean that, Tommy. I know you. You are a lover of women and drink and song – there’s no place for you here amongst the righteous dead. Come with me and let the party continue. Come with me and be free once more.”

“I think not, Love,” he said, looking up at Father McDougal with a smile. “I’ve been to your kind of parties – they never end well.”

She pointed to the altar, and then back at the audience. “You would trust him over me? How long have some of you been in servitude? Twenty years now? And he still calls you liars – degenerates – fornicators, but I call you friends. You will never please him! Come, be free of his pious rules and regulations. Come, join me!”

To Father McDougal’s relief, Tommy stepped back from her and resumed his seat. Mrs. Pennycuff went so far as to reach over the pew and pat his arm.

Jean-Claude, on the other hand came eagerly to her side. “If I join you, will you pose for me, *Madame* Leveau?” he asked, his eyes fever bright. “It has long been my dream to paint you in all your radiant glory.”

“It would be my honor, *Monsieur*,” Marie said with a curtsy. She looked to the audience again. “Who will join us? Who will be free?”

One-by-one, a quarter of those present stood and went to her side. Father McDougal tried to will them back to their seats, but none would even meet his gaze.

Marie was smiling as she touched each one of them, marking them with her darkness, making them her own.



*Fools! There were far worse places to serve than purgatory.* Father McDougal wanted to snatch them back, but he could not – this was their trial – this was their test.

Marie turned that eager, conniving smile up to him. “By their choice and with the fetters of my dark master, I claim these as mine, Father.”

As she spoke, heavy, burning chains formed at the wrists and ankles of those she had marked. Realizing now what they had done, they screamed and cried to him for help, raising their bound hands, but Father McDougal could do nothing. They had made their choice. They had failed this most final of exams. Wailing and thrashing, they sank through the floor of the church with Marie’s laughter riding them.

Father McDougal looked sadly at those that remained.

“Congratulations on this momentous step in your journey, and I welcome you to Purgatory 102.”