

THE FIRST COMING

Chapter 1

CHICAGO, MODERN DAY – The cigarette was just about to burn Pete Stein’s fingers when ‘The Victors’ rang out from his cell phone, rousing him from a somnambulant trance. His ex, Vanessa, had programmed the song for him. Now she was gone and the tune remained. He had never bothered to change it, never wanted to.

Pete would not have said he was lost in thought, not at this point in his life. He was only staring out the window, watching the rain run down the dirty glass. Several panes were cracked and water dripped through onto the worn green carpet. He could have afforded something better, *but why bother?* No one else ever came there, and he did not care about the appearance. The apartment felt as uncomfortable as any other place he might live in Chicago.

Another chorus of the song and he flipped the phone open, only then feeling the heat of the cigarette on his skin. *Shit.* He skillfully flicked the butt into a dead potted plant. Someone on the phone was shouting his name through the cacophony of rain. Caller ID said it was Bob Marshall, one of the captains over at District 9. Bob had been stuck as Watch Commander of the first watch for the last eight years. His dedication had won Bob the promotion to captain but lost him his wife. Too many hours on the job and women who left were two things Pete and he commiserated about over beer.

“Hey old man, what’s up?” Pete ran a hand through his ruffled salt-and-pepper hair, straightening out some of the short, wiry curls. Bob could not see him, but cleaning up a little made him feel more like he was ready to talk shop.

“You gotta see this one, Pete.” The connection was filled with noise due to the storm, but still it sounded like Bob’s voice was shaking.

“See what?” Pete thought he heard footsteps splashing in the rain, as though Bob were walking away from the rest of the officers on site.

“You just gotta see it. We’re at the corner of 47th and Archer. Get out here as soon as you can.” Bob seemed on the verge of pleading, apparently out of earshot of his men.

The rain came down in sheets on Pete’s windows. Even through the static he could hear it pounding on the pavement. “It’s raining buckets out there, for Christ’s sake. And you want me to come out in this?” The apartment was not much, but it was dry, mostly.

“Come on, Pete. Someone needs to take a look, someone with a background like yours.” There was a pause. “Hey, you’re the college man,” Bob joked, apparently trying to either cajole or flatter Pete into coming out in the rain. Once again, his degree in criminal science from the University of Michigan bit him in the butt. Bob’s voice flattened out again. “It’s the strangest damn thing I’ve ever seen, Pete.”

“Jesus.” Pete checked the time on his phone. It was already 11:20 PM. But he and Bob had been friends since the academy. He could not leave him out in a storm without some support. “Fine, I’m coming. Give me twenty minutes to get there.”

“Appreciate it, buddy. We’ll be waiting.” In two clipped words that ran together Bob added, “Thanks, Pete.” The line went dead.

Pete flipped his phone shut. *Bob said thanks? What’s up with that?* After throwing on his leather jacket, he snatched the rest of the pack of Lucky Strikes off the

scratched kitchen counter and grabbed a Coke from the fridge. Another glance out the window told him that, if anything, the rain was getting worse.

Lighting snaked across the Chicago skyline, briefly illuminating the flat roofs and wet streets with each flash. A tingle itched in the back of Pete's mind. The odd sensation had goaded him since he was a boy whenever something important was on the verge of his understanding, so close that if he tried hard enough he just might be able to grab it. *What the hell is going on tonight?* he wondered.

Another flash crackled off in the distance, followed by a low rumble. "Jesus." For a brief moment, Pete smiled, thinking how Vanessa used to tease him, a good Jewish boy using Christian euphemisms. *Eh, I was never that good.* A single laugh escaped his lips before a hiss of wind through the loose windowpane focused him on the job at hand.

The smile faded completely as he flipped his collar up and locked the door behind him.

Chapter 2

As he pulled up, the headlights of Pete's white police-issue Ford Crown Victoria flashed along the crumpled automobile. A body lay face down on the hood. There was no other vehicle, no large debris in the road, nothing. Only the one smashed car. *Yeah, that's a little strange...*

He left the Crown Vic running and climbed out into the rain. The torrent immediately flooded down the back of his collar. *Damn. Should'a done like Mom always said and worn a hat.*

Bob came over and eagerly offered an umbrella. "Check it out, Pete." His eyes were wide against his dark skin and darted back and forth from Pete to the wrecked car.

Pete's friend had risen quickly in the department because of his natural ability to take control of a situation, but the man also had a nose for trouble. *What's got him so spooked?* he wondered. Anything that would worry Bob gave Pete reason to pause. The captain cleared his throat, took a deep breath and pulled himself up straight as they walked toward the car, reassuming his air of command in front of the other officers with some apparent difficulty.

Three police cars had cordoned off the scene, forming a narrow circle like three wagons protecting a few desperate pioneers. A spotlight from the captain's unit struggled to overcome the darkness imposed by the storm. "Stan, will you take care of him?" Bob stopped and pointed with his free hand toward a lonely newspaper photographer stepping under the police tape tied between a streetlight and the cyclone fence along the broken sidewalk. An officer reluctantly climbed out of his unit where he had been guarding the scene through an open window and headed toward the man.

Poor guy must have drawn the short straw to be out on a night like this. The photographer did not protest as Stan directed him back under the tape. His camera flashed once and he jogged back to the dry warmth of his car. Pete took the umbrella and headed toward the accident.

The old Chevy Malibu was totaled. The engine had been pushed most of the way back into the passenger compartment but the headlights remained in place. He glanced around to see if there were any dented streetlamps but saw none. *Would've knocked one over at that speed.* Gasoline and oil formed a sheen on the flow of water draining off the

pavement into the storm sewer. Pete lit a cigarette anyway. *What's the chance of an explosion in this weather?*

He borrowed a long, black Mag-Lite from one of the officers dedicated enough to be standing in the rain and started to examine the body. *White male, mid-forties maybe.* The top of the head was smashed from the impact. *Huh, from just going through a windshield...* He surveyed the front of the vehicle. *It must have collided with something,* but another car could not have driven off after an impact like that. And the shape was all wrong. The Malibu sat in the middle of the street like it had hit an invisible telephone pole. *In the middle of the street?*

There's no way. Bob must have moved something. Pete shook his head and called over his shoulder, "Did you move this car?"

Bob walked toward the scene hesitantly but stopped short of coming too close to the carnage, Pete noticed. He stood stiffly at least three paces away. "Didn't touch nothing, Pete. What you see is exactly what I saw when I got here. Then I called you."

Pete bent down and shone the flashlight along the crumpled 'v' formed from front end of the Chevy. "There must've been something else here." He looked for traces of other paint, metal, plastic, any clue as to what kind of object might have been involved. *Nothing.* No debris on the road, no tire marks. *Not a thing.* He straightened up, and realized the rain running off the edge of the umbrella had doused the back of his pants while he was bent over. *Shit.*

Bob had retreated to his car, letting the patrol officers battle the downpour. Pete walked to the passenger side of his unit and climbed in, his wet clothes squeaking on the leather seat as he slid in out of the rain. Bob did not even turn to acknowledge him.

Pete threw the wet butt of his cigarette out onto the street before closing the door. “What’s wrong, buddy?” He laid a hand on Bob’s arm, and then, feeling uncomfortable with the gesture, drew it back and pulled out his pack of cigarettes.

Bob stared straight ahead. He seemed to have lost some of his command composure in the familiar safety of his unit. At first, he did not say anything. He blinked, and his mouth started forming words before any came out. “Did ya’ see that shape of that car. And that guy’s head...” His voice trailed off, and then started again in spurts, “It’s like...it’s like it hit nothing... just crashed into nothing.”

“Must have been something, something big enough to drive away. Maybe one of those big-ass garbage trucks.” Pete thought about the shape of the car. “Or maybe one of those cement trucks with the wheels hanging out behind.” He lit another cigarette. Bob did not usually let him smoke in the car, but Pete thought he could get away with it considering the captain’s distracted condition.

“No way, man. There was nothing there.” Bob finally turned and looked at him, apparently not noticing the cigarette. His eyes were wide. Then his gaze returned to the windshield, looking out past the streaks of rain that filled the glass in between sweeps of the wipers.

“How do you know that?” Pete blew smoke out of the partially open window, rain dripping in on the door handle.

“Nothing fits, Pete. I sure as hell can’t figure it out.” The wipers kept gliding over the windshield, their efforts immediately overcome by the rain. Voices cracked and whistled on the police scanner.

Pete opened the car door and flicked his ash on the ground before climbing out. “Go home and get some rest. I’ll finish up here.” His eyes examined Bob once more as he leaned back into the car. “You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” Bob cleared his throat. “Thanks again, Pete.” He leaned over and grabbed the handle of the passenger door without turning his head. It creaked and shut with a slam.

Pete checked his watch as Bob pulled away. *12:30...by the time the coroner gets here and the tow truck....* He sighed and looked around, flashing blue and red lights arresting the raindrops in midair. *Guess I’m not going to get any sleep tonight.*

Chapter 3

The pile of papers on Pete’s desk grew heavier by the week. “Whatever happened to the paperless office?” he muttered, his eyes drifting across the stacks of files. It seemed like every time they got a new computer database to save time and resources, there ended up being three more pieces of paper that had to be printed out for the file.

The wrecked Malibu had been in the back of Pete’s mind for a week. He kept trying to imagine a scenario that fit and came up blank every time. For what must have been the twentieth time he checked the lab database for the results of the analysis on the car and the body. One good thing that had come from technology was the electronic lab reporting. Waiting for those guys to type up a report could take weeks. Now when the computer received it, Pete could see it too. “Finally,” he said to himself when the data flashed across the screen. It only took a minute to read the brief report. “What? That can’t be right.” A click of his mouse sent it to the printer.

Pete grabbed a manila folder and hauled himself out of his chair, headed for the lab. *Someone needs to straighten things out down there.*

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The lab rats were always an odd bunch. There were a lot of tasteless t-shirts and posters of Einstein sticking his tongue out. But what other kind of people would want to spend their days in a room with no windows and a varied assortment of hair, bits of flesh, clothes and bullets? *Good thing they keep them in the basement;* no one would want the public to see the sort of guys their tax money was being spent on.

The main forensic lab for Area 1 occupied the basements beneath the ancient building that served as the Wentworth District headquarters. One of the rats rode down on the elevator with Pete. He wore a lime green shirt with a picture of a fisherman holding up a fish with breasts. "I think it's a female," the caption read. Pete doubted the man had ever fished in his life or even touched a fish, unless it had swallowed some evidence. But the shirt was only slightly less irritating than the popping of his gum. He gladly let the rat elbow his way off the elevator and scurry off down the hall.

Pete tracked down Sandy, the chief rat who ran the place. The florescent lighting reflected off Sandy's bald head as he crawled around on a piece of red, shag carpet that used to be someone's living room. Fully engrossed in a large stain splashed across the rug, he did not acknowledge Pete's approach. "Hey, Sandy."

Sandy's body tensed as he looked up quickly. "Geez, Pete. You almost made me add another stain to this carpet. Don't sneak up on a guy like that."

These guys would never survive one day in the field. Pete snorted and shook his head. "Sorry. Thought you heard me coming."

Sandy backed slowly off the carpet, visually checking each spot where he placed a hand or a knee, and came around to Pete. “What brings you down to the dungeon?” He took off his glasses and squinted, leaning in as if examining Pete for evidence.

“I think one of your guys screwed up an analysis for me.” Pete threw the printout on one of the lab tables. The thin folder made a less dramatic thud than he hoped it would, and skidded away on the polished metal before it stopped. He was forced to take a step forward to reach it comfortably, losing some of the force of his bargaining position. “Brought a wrecked Malibu in here last week. Needed you guys to find me some evidence, tell me what the other vehicle involved in the accident was.” He flipped to the last sheet of paper in the folder. “Report says there was no trace.”

The drama appeared to be lost on Sandy anyway. His focus was on the paperwork, not Pete. “Let me see that.” He put his glasses back on and snatched the folder off the table. The glasses came back off after only a cursory review. “No mistake, Pete. I did that one myself.” Sandy tossed the report down and folded his glasses before sticking them into the pocket of his white lab coat. “There was nothing to find.”

Pete scratched his head, smoothing down his salt-and-pepper curls afterward. His right hand was buried deep in his pocket, rattling the change he found there. “What are you talking about? The way that car was totaled? The shape of the front end?” He flipped his hand up as he spoke.

“What do you want me to do? Make something up?” Sandy said emphatically, tipping his head back slightly. “There was nothing. No paint, no bark, no venison pâté, nothing.”

Pete picked up the paperwork and pointed to a description of the smashed body. “What about the guy’s head? It hit something.”

“That was odd...” Sandy’s attention seem to drift back to the analysis, his eyes loosing focus as though he were looking at the victim’s body lying on one of the morgue tables. “We combed though what was left of it.” His gaze locked back onto Pete. “All I found was glass from the windshield, and that wouldn’t have caused much damage. Guy’s blood alcohol was off the charts, but no surprise there, not in that part of town.” Sandy shrugged and brushed back a memory of the hair he might have had once. “It was the strangest thing I’ve seen in a long time.” Considering what Sandy saw in the lab, that said something. He reached his right hand up over his head to scratch above his left ear, revealing a large patch of sweat under his arm. “But I couldn’t find any evidence that either the car or the guy hit anything solid.”

Pete started to protest, but Sandy held up his left hand to cut him off. “I know, I know, something else was involved. The car was a wreck. But there was no trace, and believe me, I looked. God only knows what that guy ran into.” Sandy stared off at the institutional green cinder block of the basement wall. “I’m telling you, Pete, I’ve never seen one like this. Don’t know what to say.”

Pete screwed up his face and rubbed his neck, looking over the lab report once more. “Well, thanks for the info, Sandy. At least I know it wasn’t a mistake.” He stuck the folder under his arm and made to head back up the elevator. “If you think of anything on this one, let me know.”

Sandy had already drifted back to his piece of stained carpet armed with a small pair of scissors and seemed to be searching for the precise spot where he had entered the remnant previously. “No problem,” he said over his shoulder.

Right, Pete thought as he left the lab, *that’s probably the last thing I’ll hear about this case.*

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Pete opened the ICAM database and pulled up Bob’s report on the accident one more time. *What am I missing?* He chewed the cap of his pen. There was not much to go on. Anonymous caller, description of the scene when Bob arrived. The 911 operator had tracked the phone number to a payphone near the scene of the accident. Male voice, but that was it, no ID on the caller. There was a note from dispatch saying that the man had been extremely upset, but had refused to wait at the scene when requested. No one had been there when Bob arrived.

That’s a little odd. Most people liked being the big shot, talking to the police, hoping to get their picture in the paper. Something about the case was not adding up.

Pete clicked on the hyperlink that led to the audio file from the phone call. Static hissed through the speakers of his ancient desktop computer. “What the hell?” He turned up the volume and clicked on the link again, his eyes following the small bar as it traced its way across the bottom of Windows Media Player. The same static played again, only louder, causing the skin on the back of his neck to prickle. *File must be corrupted*, he thought. “Goddamn technology,” he said to the empty office, wishing one of the tech nerds had been walking by.

“Ah well.” Pete shrugged, “probably wasn’t important anyway.” He logged off the computer and headed back to his empty apartment.

Chapter 4

PALESTINE, 33 AD – Quintus sat on the bottom step of the governor’s mansion tracing patterns in the dirt with the tip of his short sword. He was not important enough to be up near the top with the centurion and his favorites. Being the fifth son of a Roman merchant had not provided him much opportunity; he was lucky to have made it into the army. Unfortunately, he had been sent to Jerusalem. *Nothing but dust and rebels.*

He wanted to go home. He was tired; his centuria had been up all night shuttling one of the locals around the city. First to the Jewish high council, then to one of their priests, then back to the council again. Now they had him before Pilate. *What next?*

There was some movement at the top of the stairs. Quintus and the other pedites shot up and blocked the steps against the crowd that had formed in the courtyard. *They’re getting agitated.* Something bad was bound to happen.

The governor was speaking, although Quintus could not quite hear what was happening over the roar of the locals. The only word he could understand in all the shouting was the name of Caesar. *That was good,* if unexpected. At least their faces showed excitement rather than hatred when they said it, at least what he could see of their faces under the beards.

Quintus heard something splash on the marble and glanced over his shoulder and up the stairs to see Pilate washing his hands. An Arab slave poured water from a silver pitcher. *At last,* he sighed. The trial of the Jew might be over soon. He could not

understand why it was taking so long. Usually they hung the rebels up and were home by the evening meal.

His centurion took the Jew by the arms and led him down the steps. The crowd grew louder; men and women shouting their barbaric gibberish and shaking raised fists at the prisoner. Quintus and the others formed a guard around their commander and the captive. The officer said nothing and started pulling the man by a leather thong tied around his wrists as those in the crowd reached out to beat the man. Quintus and the other soldiers were left to catch up. *I hope I don't get killed trying to protect one of these rebels.*

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The day dragged on as the hot sun crept across a cloudless sky. At least Quintus had gotten a little wine and bread while they flogged the prisoner. But he needed some sleep. The way things were going that was not going to happen until the Jew was dead.

Now the prisoner was carrying his own torture stake up to the hill. He collapsed under the weight, and the centurion roughly recruited one of the locals to help. By the time they reached the top of the hill, the other man pulled from the crowd looked as bad as the prisoner, his clothes ripped and his face and arms covered in the prisoner's blood.

The soldiers stood with their backs to the man as he was nailed to the stake. His arms were fastened straight up over his head; that way he would die faster. The crowd was getting uglier by the minute, and Quintus was hoping it would all be over soon. After the prisoner was fixed to the stake, they lifted the heavy pole and slipped it into a hole that had been dug. They repeated the process twice for the other two criminals being executed that day.

As Quintus turned to stand guard, he noticed his centurion dragging away the man that had helped carry the stake up the hill. The Jew must have collapsed from exhaustion. It was strange that an officer would bother to help a local. But he had been acting oddly all day, saying little and looking down at the ground. Usually the centurion spat in their face when he gave their orders. Moreover, he smelled worse than his normal unwashed self, like a rotten animal had been stuffed inside his red tunic.

Quintus watched as the plume of the centurion's helmet disappeared past the edge of the hill. Then he glanced up at the Jew on the stake holding his left hand up to shield his eyes from the harsh sun. The man was still alive. Quintus shook his head. *Now there will be more waiting.*

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Clouds began to form, like a storm might be brewing. By the time the centurion returned in the middle of the afternoon most of the crowd had dispersed, the day's events having lost their earlier excitement. Only a scattered remnant remained. On one side of the hill two women and a man waited. The looks of pain on their faces indicated they must have known the prisoner. Quintus turned his gaze away toward the city.

The wind started picking up. Flying sand struck his face where the cheek guards of his helmet did not cover the skin. *How much longer?* Finally, the centurion ordered some of the men to break the legs of the prisoners. *Good, Quintus thought, it will be over soon.*

Before the soldiers approached the prisoner in the middle, the man yelled something. Quintus had never learned the local dialect. He had no idea what the man

said. But afterward, his head fell to his chest. Quintus looked up at him. "Is he dead?" he asked one of his fellow soldiers. The other pedite shrugged.

Suddenly the sky went dark. Thunder roared out so loudly it felt like the ground was shaking. Quintus braced his feet on the hard, rocky soil and drew his sword as he glanced around. No one moved.

And then it was done. The sky lightened and the wind began to drop. The centurion ordered a soldier to poke the man's side with a spear to make sure he was dead. Dark blood and clear liquid seeped out from the body. *Good!* Now Quintus could finally go home and get some rest.

They pulled the pole from the ground and laid it flat. One of the locals had permission to bury the prisoner. The centurion seemed upset by that suggestion. He told Quintus to remove the nails; they would need them again soon.

As he pulled the dead man's hands past the spikes, he paused briefly to glance at his face. *Something's not right.* The body was bloody and dirty, almost unrecognizable, and there were plenty of cuts and bruises, but he did not look quite the same as the man that had been beaten. He looked like most of the ordinary rabble after a decent day's work. So did the man the centurion had carried down the hill, for that matter.

Something about the face.

Quintus had not examined the prisoner closely to start with. Why bother? The Jews all looked alike anyway. He shrugged as he finished removing the body and rolled it onto the ground. Several of the other soldiers took the pole away. The centurion ordered the body sewn into a bag and carried to the grave. *Why?* Quintus wondered. He was about to ask, but right then the officer ordered several of the men to guard the

prisoner's tomb. The answer was not so important after all; he did not want to be one of them.

As he left the hill, Quintus turned to see the unlucky soldiers recruited to stand guard carrying the body off down the road. He was going home to sleep. He needed it. He was so tired now that he could have sworn they had executed a different man than the one condemned by Pilate.

Chapter 5

ROME, MODERN DAY – Cardinal Lascalia stood and watched Pope Severinus II crawl about on his knees. *That man should always be on his knees before me*, he thought. But despite the Cardinal's desire, the Pope was not there to do obeisance to him.

It was Holy Thursday, three days before Easter. Cardinal Lascalia was the last of twelve priests with the honor of having been chosen for the *Pedilavium*, the ritual washing of the feet in imitation of Christ. Pope Severinus crept forward and reached out to sprinkle water on Lascalia's right foot. But before he could, the Cardinal knelt down and tried to lift the Pope gently by the elbow. The crowd gathered in St. Peter's Square became silent, as if wondering whether Cardinal Lascalia was going to refuse such an honor.

"You should not be washing my feet," he said loudly to the Pope. Although the Cardinal loathed the man, he was determined to humble himself before the crowd to atone for his previous indiscretions.

The Pope looked straight into Lascalia's dark brown eyes. "You can have no part in the kingdom of God unless you let me wash your feet. Christ himself said this."

The old man's voice was quiet, but Lascalia thought it sounded weak. "Then wash my hands and head also," the Cardinal repeated the Apostle Peter's words quietly, but with a sarcastic undertone. Then in a clear, strong voice he added, "As you wish, Your Holiness." Lascalia kissed the Pope's hand and sat back into his chair, extending his foot.

The Pope took the proffered appendage in his hands, washed it, and kissed it gently. Then he stood and looked down for a moment at the Cardinal. With a sigh, he blessed him first and then the rest of the twelve before turning to the cheering throng gathered in the square.

"What a wonderful sound." Lascalia smiled as he gazed out over the crowds. *It will be my turn next!*



Tomaso Lascalia had always been a competitive person. As a boy playing soccer in the fields outside of Lucca, he was the first to score in every game. His friends and teachers thought perhaps he would choose the sport as a career, but his father had other plans. Signore Lascalia was a devout Catholic, and had determined that his oldest son would take Holy Orders. Tomaso knew that from an early age and was never allowed to forget it.

As much as he loved the game, he loved...or respected...his father more, and entered the seminary as he should. But his devotion to his faith did not change his nature. Tomaso approached the priesthood like he would any other competition, and he was determined to be the best.

Not that he did not perform his duties well. He ministered to the poor, aided the sick, and gave counsel to the weary of heart. All was done with a sufficient affectation of sincerity to ensure that he was deeply loved by his flock.

His first mistake was in offending Franco Richese his last year at the seminary. A man equal to Tomaso in desire for power, but lesser in his ability to minister. The faithful whom Franco pretended to serve were forever in arrears to him, and he never forgot a single debt.

Individually, the incidents were innocent enough, Tomaso's answering a question in class before Franco could, reciting the *pater noster* with enough depth to garner the Bishop's sad smile. But the light in Franco's eyes changed permanently when Sister Rosalita tripped and fell on the flagstones outside the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Turin, following a visit to the shroud. Both reached out their hands to her, and she chose Tomaso's. The two did not speak thereafter, except when necessitated by the Church.

Through the years, both rose to become cardinals in Rome, but only Tomaso had insinuated himself into the heart of the Church by myriad deeds of apparent devotion. He had the potential to be the next Pope, and Franco hated him for it.

Thus, when Pope John Paul III finally gained his heavenly reward after a lingering illness, Tomaso yearned to take his place at last in the annals of church history. *If only Father were still alive to see it.* Had the old Pope died sooner as he should have, Tomaso's father could have been there. But Lascalìa comforted himself with the thought that the signore would be watching from heaven.

What a shock it was when Cardinal Petremoulx became Severinus II. Lascalìa almost wept, and may have if not for the satisfaction it would have given Franco. The

grin on his rival's face evidenced what Franco had done, calling in debts from his fellow servants. Most of the college avoided Lascalia for months afterward.

Lascalia's second mistake was suggesting to some of the cardinals that the election had been influenced. The college was an intimate group, and word got first to the other cardinals, and then to the press. Lascalia had apologized sincerely and humbled himself before Severinus. But had he won back the crowds?

Perhaps Lascalia would still get his chance. He would just have to outlive both Franco Richese and the upstart Pope.



The day's events finally ended. Lascalia was tired of smiling and having to stand behind Severinus. As did the other cardinals, he dutifully kissed the papal ring before leaving the platform. Severinus reached out and caught him by the elbow as he turned to go. "Go in peace, my son." The Pope's green eyes seemed sincere.

Lascalia bowed. "Thank you, Father." He turned without looking up to hide his own eyes from further scrutiny.

Chapter 6

CHICAGO, MODERN DAY – "Please don't make me come to Chicago, Pete." He could still remember a time when Vanessa's voice did not carry the bitter tinge of disappointment he heard in her tone over the phone at that moment. There was a surge of warmth in his heart when he thought about how sweet she used to sound in person. *But that was when things were going well.* Now her voice hammered him with the electronic twang of long distance from Washington, D.C.

He ran one hand through his unwashed curls and squeezed the back of his neck. The sky outside of District 2 headquarters was fading from blue to purple. Pete was the only one left at his desk. The streetlight outside the window flashed to life, casting a harsh orange glow across the dimly lit room. “I’m not trying to make you come to Chicago, Ness. I just don’t want to deal with the furniture right now.”

“You were the one who recommended we leave everything in the apartment until I got a job in DC.” She sighed so heavily into the phone he could almost feel her breath blow past his cheek. “And you said you’d take care of it when that happened. Well, I’m in DC. Can you at least do one thing you promised?”

Ouch! It had seemed a nice gesture at the time, not making her divide up their things while she could still use them before leaving Chicago. No, it was not just an act of kindness that motivated the decision. It was something more. *A lot more.* He liked the thought of its all still being together in one place and her being with it. And maybe he would even get to see her once in a while if he needed something. Now the idea did not seem quite so good. *You know where nice guys always finish...*

Pete cleared his throat loudly in an attempt to build some courage. “Guess I hadn’t planned on having to deal with this quite so soon.” He took a breath and a moment to organize his thoughts. “It’s just that I’m working on a couple of odd cases at the moment and...”

“Whatever.” Pete could picture her brushing back her auburn hair, one eyebrow raised as she shook her head ever so slightly and rolled her blue eyes. He had found that attractive once. *Hell, I still do....*

“Either you go over there and get that stuff sold, or I’ll have my lawyer cart it all away.” By the noises in the background he could tell that she had already moved on to another activity, Bluetooth slipped over her ear. She would hardly be listening from that point onward.

“You don’t want any of it?” *Not one single memory?* he thought. There was a quiet pause. *Deciding or distracted?* Pete held his breath and glanced over to the silver frame that still graced his desk.

“No.” The phone line went dead. *Just distracted.*

“Well, shit,” he said to the picture. Pete slammed the drawer on his metal desk closed without bothering to turn the key.

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Damn, can’t anything stay the same? Pete sat in the Velvet Lounge on Cermak Road. It was probably a mistake to come to the new bar. The old version on South Indiana Avenue had been a great dive: dark ratty wood, smoky interior, chandeliers casting their red glow everywhere, and pictures of jazz greats hanging on the walls. The painting of a topless lady on black velvet was called simply “The Velvet Lady.”

He and Vanessa would go there for *avant-garde* jazz. He would have a highball; she would have a cranberry martini. And then they would spend the night touching hands and talking softly, leaning in across the dark table. *Her hands...her skin always so white.*

Pete slumped over his gin and tonic and his mind drifted away. Next thing he knew he was making love to Ness in his mind. The smell of Beautiful on her skin, the taste of mint in her mouth, always chewing gum after her last drink. Long auburn hair cascading around her thin shoulders as she looked down at him and smiled.

“Would you like another drink, sir?” A twenty-something brunette waitress was standing by his table tapping with one foot. Pete blinked and looked around the nearly empty club. Its new brightness and clean tile floor contrasted harshly with the images still drifting through his mind. He glanced at his watch. It was 1:30 AM. “Um...” he cleared his throat to dislodge the gin. “No, I’m good. Thanks.”

The waitress was already on her heel before he finished the last word. *Always leaving, never coming.* Then he smiled at his own joke and climbed out of the chair. He threw thirty dollars on the table and nodded to The Velvet Lady that had been brought along like a relic from the old location. Then he headed for the exit.

How did we ever end up together in the first place? Pete paused outside the door and lit a cigarette. He heard the lock click into place behind him. The well-groomed manager smiled through the glass, making sure no one was coming back in so late at night.

Pete wandered along Cermak, but his feet walked across the campus in Ann Arbor. He had first spotted her on the diag – the central plaza of the university – when they were both juniors. A clear October day, the maples red and orange. *Glorious.* But nothing compared to her. Her gestures caught his attention first as she talked to a classmate, and then her hair reeled him in.

Vanessa was from Birmingham, way out of his league. Her father had money, they had traveled in Europe, she spoke foreign languages. Pete’s mother worked in a pharmacy in Ypsilanti. He had been to New York City for a cousin’s *bar mitzvah*, once.

He cautiously sat on the grass behind her, leaning against an elm and eavesdropping on her conversation about international business. He did not understand one word, but loved hearing the lilt of her voice.

His luck took a turn for the better when she knocked her latte off the cement bench. Pete picked up the empty paper cup, and then somehow managed to offer to buy her another. To his chagrin and surprise, she accepted. Growing up without a father had made him more than a little shy around women. His mother was always nervous when it came to discussing sex and relationships, and that attitude had carried over to his own life. But something about Vanessa released reserves of courage Pete never knew he had, and they talked long into the night.

They moved in together their senior year, a tiny apartment on Old Geddes, just off campus. Her father offered to get her a bigger place, but she was too independent for that. *The size didn't matter anyway. That way the only place to sit was the bed.* Pete smiled to himself as he searched for a patch of green paint on a lamppost, somewhere amongst the myriad stickers and outdated paper ads where he could grind the butt of his cigarette. He looked up at the Chicago skyline – the lights of the Hancock Building and the Sears Tower shining brightly in the clear night – and lit another. The smoke was thick as it mixed with the fog of his breath in the cold night air.

Pete thought he had reached heaven when they moved to Chicago, and then were married two months later. Their future seemed secure when he landed a job as a detective with the police department. He had majored in criminal science out of desire to see justice done; even as a child he would get a stomach ache when he sensed that something his friends did was wrong. But as time went by, what kept him coming to

work everyday was the satisfaction of helping people. The feeling had caught him by surprise. *Where did that feeling go?*

At first Vanessa was making hardly any money doing marketing for a small trucking business, but the industriousness he had loved about her was what killed them. Soon she was vice-president of the company, then a bigger company, and so on. He was left in the dust of the Chicago streets by the comet of her success. By thirty-four she was CEO of a mid-size marketing firm, then she was lecturing in New York. “Come with me,” she had asked him. *I should’a gone.* But there was his work...and...*nothing.* Deep inside he was jealous of her success when he should have been glad for it. *What a screw up!*

Now she was in D.C., getting ready to join the diplomatic corps. He walked... more stumbled... down the filthy streets on the south side. Chances were he would never see her again. *Maybe if we had had kid?* Pete snorted loudly at the thought. *Nah...I just would’a screwed him up too...*

A metal can popped out of a dumpster in the alley and rolled across the filthy cement, followed quickly by a mangy raccoon. The noise startled Pete out of his reverie. He paused for a minute, locking eyes with the animal. It sat hunched on its back legs, hands in front of its chest, like a begging child. Pete blinked hard, trying to focus. He fished in his pocket for a mint he had grabbed from a tray at the bar and threw it to the sad looking beast. The raccoon took a cautious step forward, sniffed the candy, and snatched it up, scurrying away down the alley. Pete smiled sluggishly, and then shuffled off down the street.

He had been a comet once. Smartest egg in his class. Took courses even in the summer, partly because he liked them, partly because he did not want to go home. Two degrees in four years, criminal science for work, human behavior for fun. Then Vanessa was gone and the drinking began.

His eyes chased a newspaper blowing down Cermak, past a pile of black, plastic garbage bags. So that was his world now. *What a fucking screw up!*

Chapter 7

PALESTINE, 33 AD – He awoke lying in a garden. Palm fronds waved between his eyes and the clear, blue sky. *How long have I been asleep? Hours? Days?* He tried to sit, and the skin on his back burned as though it were on fire. He felt the trickles as blood began to seep out, the scabs over the wounds he suffered from flogging breaking loose from the movement. Nearby was a flowing pool. He rolled over and dragged himself through the dust to get to it. After the exertion of carrying his own stake up the hill, his muscles screamed in protest of the movement, but the gurgling sound and smell of damp earth drove him forward.

Clambering over the rocks guarding the edge of the stream, he eased himself down into the cool water. Blood and dirt from his clothing soiled the clear flow as it washed past him, but it eased his pain and cleaned the wounds. He savored the refreshment it offered, closing his eyes and turning his face up toward the warmth of the sun.

Do I still have the power to heal, Father? He had never tried it on himself before, only on others, for there had never been a need. *Father?* There was no response to the

question he asked in his mind. With no other choice, by laying on of his own hands the wounds closed and the pain subsided. But something was not quite right; he felt weak afterward. Although his flesh was healed, the scars remained. Perhaps the marks were a lesson his father would teach him later on.

He washed again in the cool water and cleansed his tattered clothing. *I will have to find another garment later.* Then, he left the pool to search the garden for any evidence of what had happened.

A short distance along a path was a tomb from which the blocking stone had been rolled away. He went inside and found only a head cloth, nothing else. *Someone must have removed the body.* It was cold and dark inside, and he retreated back into the warmth of the sun.

As he returned to the garden, he saw two women approaching. One of them looked like Mary. He raised his hand to greet them, but their eyes grew wide with fear. They fled from the garden. *They look at me as though I had come back from the dead!*

It was then that he realized what had happened. The old enemy had interfered once again in the outworking of the divine purpose. "Oh, Father," he cried out, and then he collapsed onto the ground and wept.

* * *

The bright orange sunset faded to a deep red as the strange day drew to a close. Three doves sailed silently to land in the fronds of a date palm.

He sat on the Mount of Olives, his knees pulled up under his chin. The borrowed robe helped little against the chill as the light dimmed. There had to be a way to fulfill the prophecies even though his father had not spoken to him all day. But so much work

had already been done. *So much remains to be done.* He would continue nonetheless as best he could, only now along a slightly different path.

He knew Mary would tell the others what she had seen. She was a faithful woman. Later that night he found them gathered in an upper room. The doors were locked, but with some difficulty he was still able to enter. He went in to greet them. Their initial shock at seeing him turned to joy. Those who doubted were convinced. In spite of the enemy's efforts, he would set matters right.

* * *

It had been days since he had heard from his father, since the night he was arrested. Still, he met once last time with his followers upon a hill. He offered some words of encouragement, and with a final effort lifted himself into the clouds. *They will continue without me.* The plan had not been thwarted after all. By all appearances, they would believe he had returned from whence he had come.

But flesh and blood could not inherit the kingdom. And with the prophecies fulfilled, his powers began to fade; he needed them no more. Only his perfect flesh remained.

Far from their view, he settled back to the earth on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, in the Diaspora. The land was Greek. No one would know him there. He could walk along the road as a total stranger without risk of recognition. That was important, lest The Way be endangered. *No one can ever know who I am.*

He found a road heading north, out of Palestine and away from Jerusalem. From there he would walk, although without knowing where he would go. *Perhaps I will visit the continent to the west that men of this land have not yet discovered.*

Chapter 8

CHICAGO, MODERN DAY – Pete supposed it was spring somewhere in the world, but the streets of Chicago's south side always looked the same. *At least they always do in this part of town.* Sometimes the garbage was covered with snow, and that cleaned it up a bit. But for the next eight months he would be looking at the dirty back streets and alleys. Maybe he needed to get reassigned to Area 5 where he could see some nice houses and flower gardens once in a while. *Nah...* He knew his part of the city too well by now. *Hard to teach an old dog new tricks.* The myriad storefronts began to blend in together as they flashed by the windshield of his Crown Vic; he had seen them all a thousand times.

He drove north on State, heading to an incident at a small liquor store. The beat cop had called in a shooting. No one was killed or even hurt, but he had insisted that Detective Stein be sent out to take a look. The officer was either unwilling or unable to say why; dispatch was not sure which. He had asked for Pete by name. *Like I have time for this shit.* Pete shook his head and started to make the left turn onto 26th, just as a Mercedes sped through the yellow light. With a start, he slammed on the breaks, and then moved ahead when the westbound traffic started honking. *Dumbass.*

Flashing lights from two patrol cars made it easy to find the place, halfway between Canal and Stewart, in the shadow of I-94. It was barely a store, perhaps fifteen feet of cracked plate glass covered with tattered sale signs crammed in between two old buildings. A crowd had gathered on the sidewalk, but that was nothing unusual. There was rarely much else to look at in the outskirts of Chinatown.

“Come on folks, make a path.” Pete elbowed his way through the gathered mass, thrusting his badge out ahead of him like the cowcatcher on a train. Some particularly ripe odors accosted his nostrils. He took a deep breath and held it.

Inside the store he found a young African-American officer whose shuffling feet must have been accompanying his dancing nerves. *How green is this kid?* Pete wondered. “You called for a detective,” he said flatly, “show me what you’ve got.” Pete lit up a cigarette and let it dangle loosely from his lips. A small Asian woman in the aisle by the tequila scowled in silence upon seeing the smoke. Pete had a notepad with him, but did not think he would need to write anything down. The young man needed some reassurance, *that’s all*.

“You’re detective Stein?” the young officer asked.

“Yup.” Pete flicked the ash away and looked the kid in the face, ignoring the huff of air and tiny footsteps by the tequila. “Do we know each other?” He noticed the young man’s nametag. It read M. Marshall. “You related to Bob?”

“Sure am.” The kid finally smiled, straight white teeth contrasting sharply with his dark skin. “He’s my uncle.” The young man extended his hand. “Name’s Mike.”

“Right.” Pete grinned and accepted it. “He said his nephew was joining the force. Welcome aboard, kid.” Pete gripped the young officer’s hand firmly to help focus him, holding his gaze the whole time. “Why’d you ask for me?”

“Uncle...I mean Captain Marshall told me about the car accident last month. Said you cleaned it up.” Mike started to get skittish again; his eyes darted about the store like he wanted to make sure nothing stood behind him. “This one is...unusual, too. Thought you might want to have a look.”

Every month on the Chicago police force contained unusual incidents; Pete had nearly forgotten about the car accident. He wanted to roll his eyes at Mike's assumption that this new incident was anything special, but kept them locked on young officer's face. *Not another one...* he thought, trying not to let it show. "Sure, I'll check it out," He mumbled past the cigarette. "What's so unusual about it?"

Mike pointed to an older Chinese man at the back of the store, gesturing wildly to a redheaded policeman and engaged in a conversation consisting of some English and more Chinese. It had taken Pete nearly a half hour to get to the scene, and the man was still agitated enough that he kept cutting off the Asian teenager someone had recruited to interpret. "From what we can tell, someone tried to rob him this morning." Mike paused to wet his lips and glanced nervously about. Pete caught a whiff of sweat.

"Nothing too unusual about that in this part of town," Pete said quickly, trying to keep the conversation going.

The young man nodded. "Right, Sir." He took a breath. "But the owner says that when he was opening the register, a long-haired Middle Eastern man walked into the store. Says that when the man saw the assailant with the gun, he stepped in front of the owner there." Mike gestured again toward the back of the store, giving his fumbling hands something to do. "Apparently, that pissed the perp off pretty bad."

Pete took the cigarette out of his mouth and expertly crushed it on the floor with the toe of his shoe, not having to look down. A knot formed in his gut. He pulled out his notepad. "And?"

“Well...” Mike looked off at the wall and chewed his lip for a moment. “He says that the man opened fire twice... and the bullets...” He started shaking his head, one eyebrow raised.

“The bullets what, son?”

“They just bounced off.” Mike looked Pete right in the eye. “They just bounced off the man.” He released a sigh and nodded. “Says the guy dropped the money and ran, and then the foreign guy left too.” He pointed back to the store owner. “He’s pretty shaken up by the whole thing.” Sweat was actively trickling down from under Mike’s hat. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his closely cropped head.

Does this thing run in the family? Pete was not sure what to make of the young officer’s story, but his eyes seemed sincere. He pursed his lips and sucked in a breath, holding it. A bag that could have been full of cash still lay on the floor. The owner must have been upset indeed if he called the cops without retrieving his money. *But still...* He exhaled with a whistle. “Any evidence that this story is real? I mean, you can hardly understand a word that guy is saying.”

Mike held up a small plastic evidence bag filled with shiny fragments. The orange tag on the side listed the address of the store, as well as the time and date. “Found these on the floor...in two separate piles.”

Pete took the bag and saw what appeared to be shattered pieces of metal. Each angular fragment retained enough shape that with a little glue they might fit back together. “These the bullets?”

“Used to be,” the officer replied.

“But they’re shattered.” Pete held the bag up to the fluorescent light overhead. The pieces did not appear to be smashed or compressed, only fractured. “Looks like they broke up without hitting anything.”

“That’s why I called you,” Mike said slowly.

“And they weren’t scattered around the store?” Pete brought the bag closer to his face and began nodding slowly, trying to scratch away the itch in the back of his head.

Chapter 9

“What’d you say these were?” Sandy spread the plastic evidence bag out on the surface of a light table, examining the rough edges on the pieces of metal.

“Bullet fragments.” Pete tried to lean in for a look past the man’s large frame; it smelled like Sandy had not been home in a while. “I think,” Pete added, pulling his head back.

“Strangest bullet fragments I’ve ever seen.” Sandy took one out of the bag with a pair of forceps and placed it under the stereoscopic microscope. He raised his glasses to his forehead so he could look through the twin eyepieces. “The edges aren’t as clean as I would have expected.”

“Yeah, I noticed.” He took a seat on one of the lab stools, waiting for Sandy to confirm what Pete already knew somehow. He closed his eyes and squeezed the bridge of his nose with his right hand, trying to fend off a headache that had started building when he first saw the broken bullets. It had been a long day and he needed a smoke. But if he lit one up in the lab, Sandy would go spastic.

Sandy brought the fragment into focus and turned on the monitor. “Check out the fracture pattern along the perimeter. These didn’t shatter from any impact. They were broken apart while still in the air. And you found them in piles...” He leaned toward the screen leaving his glasses perched on his forehead.

Pete blinked twice and climbed off the stool, trying to focus on the image. He had already guessed that would be the answer, but he needed to be certain. “But that doesn’t make any sense, Sandy. There’s gotta be another explanation.”

Sandy flicked a switch and cast polarized light across the fragment under the scope. The surface became illuminated with a series of parallel colored lines. “See, no compression.” He lowered his glasses and traced the pattern of the lines on the screen with the cap of his pen. “If these babies had hit something, the lines would be wavy from the impact. But these ones are straight, just like the bullet was fresh out of the box.”

Pete reached around to the back of his neck and pulled down, trying to stretch the muscles in his shoulders. He stared down at the white ceramic of the floor, twirling the Bic lighter in his pocket between his fingers. “How would something like that happen?” he asked, more to the room than to Sandy.

Sandy answered anyway. “Not sure.” He took off his glasses and chewed on one of the earpieces for a minute, staring at the screen. “The only time I’ve seen something like this was an article in one of the military defense tech journals. It was about using focused sound to shatter incoming rounds, or something like that. Shattered the metal before it hit the target.” He chewed on the glasses a bit more. “They couldn’t really make it work, as I recall.”

Pete raised his eyes and shook his head. “This was a grimy liquor store on the edge of Chinatown. Don’t think they’re going to be testing any new military technology out there.” He tried to smile.

“Well, I’ll keep messing around with it.” Sandy set his glasses on the lab table and looked back through the scope, fine tuning the focus. “I’ll call you when I find something.”

“Thanks, Sandy.” Pete wandered back toward the elevator, avoiding the rest of the lab rats. *How could they have been shattered?*



Two files lay opened side-by-side amidst the clutter of old reports and half finished paperwork. One contained Mike’s account of the attempted robbery at the liquor store; the other Bob’s notes from the car accident of a month before, with Pete’s own report as the last officer at the scene.

Pete would not have thought to relate the two incidents except for the comment Mike made when he got to the store. The young officer called Pete because each of the cases felt odd, unexplainable. Seeing Mike’s unease earlier that day brought Bob’s reaction and the details of the car accident back into focus in Pete’s mind. Something in his gut had been tugging at him all afternoon. *Is there a connection?* The toothpick in his mouth had long since turned to pulp; he pulled it out and expertly flicked it into the garbage. The files were so different, he could not see what connection there might be. *Still, they’re both so out of the ordinary.*

The black phone on his desk rang harshly, startling Pete out of his train of thought. Somewhat irritated, he grabbed the heavy handset. “Yeah?” he almost shouted.

“What’s wrong with you?” Sandy sounded taken aback by the tone of Pete’s voice.

“Oh, sorry, Sandy.” Pete leaned forward onto his open palm. “I was just trying to figure something out when the phone rang. Thought it was the desk downstairs sending up another floating phone call.” It was nearing the end of the workday for most of the desk shifts, and the receptionist had a tendency to pass all the nuisance calls through to anyone who would still answer their phone. “Got anything for me?”

There was a pause while it seemed like Sandy was trying to decide whether to believe Pete’s explanation. “I’m closing the file on your fragments, Pete,” Sandy finally conceded, “Nothing else I can do with them. There’s still no evidence that those bullets struck anything, and it’s not like I can test that focused sound tech I read about. Maybe that’s it, maybe not, but it had to be something other than impact that shattered them.”

“You’re sure?” *That was a stupid question.* Sandy did not like to be doubted and Pete instantly regretted asking. Besides, somewhere inside he knew Sandy spoke the truth. Pete’s gut was almost always right, an invaluable tool for a detective.

“Absolutely.” There was a cold pause. “And I’ve got another case to start on in the morning. Have a good evening, Pete.” The phone cut off suddenly, and Pete could picture Sandy dropping the receiver into its cradle as a final gesture of dismissal.

“Thanks. You too,” Pete mumbled as he hung it up on his end. *Those lab rats need to get out more...they’re too sensitive.*

It was ten minutes to five, time to go home. He looked at the files on his desk. *Wonder if there are any more like these?* He glanced at his watch once again and then

turned to the computer, logging into the ICAM incident database. *Might as well stay.*

There was no one waiting for him to come home.