

**The Case of the Deadly Ring
An Alexander Steele Investigation**

by
Lawrence Johnson Sr.

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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The Case of the Deadly Ring
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Alexander Steele and the Case of the Deadly Ring

By Lawrence Johnson Sr.

Fatal Encounter

Street savvy, private investigator Alexander Steele wants to put his P.I days behind him. Steele wants to focus on running his exclusive night spot called Inner Sanctum. Over the years his grit, tenacity and eye for detail has kept him at the top of his game. The Philly detective has solved dangerous cases from Montreal to Mexico but a new challenge is on the horizon.

It was a typical spring morning in the city of brotherly love. The sun was shining, the birds were singing and the trees have begun to bloom. Alexander Steele wore dark jeans and a gray sweatshirt with the sleeves pushed up. He carefully sipped his blue mug of hot coffee as he watched people headed to work and school from the oval shaped window at the back booth inside his club. This was normally the time he would spend each morning catching up on the latest news but the paperboy was late again. Steele had just defeated his most formidable foe Chameleon. He sat quietly reflecting on his latest near death experience and wondering how long the peace and tranquility would last. Before the day ended he would have his answer.

Sugar Bear was the manager of Steele's Club Inner Sanctum. The dark skinned man with the stocky build and friendly smile looked excited as he walked towards Steele's booth with a copy of the latest Philadelphia Inquirer.

"Hey boss, check this out." Steele attempted to wave him off but Sugar Bear was persistent. He slid into the booth opposite Steele and pointed to Steele's horoscope.

Sugar Bear and Steele had been friends since childhood, and every since that time Sugar Bear had been attracted to anything odd or unusual.

Steele sighed, "Look Sugar Bear first it was space ships, then the disappearance of Jimmy Hoffa, after that Crop Circles and now it's this." Steele pointed to the paper. His disbelief didn't deter his friend from giving Steele the celestial news update.

"Listen to this boss, a stranger from a distant land will enter your life. He will seek out your counsel on matters of health or religion," Steele snickered as he shook his head.

"Sugar Bear, would you please give it up? Those things are never right." Sugar Bear's mood was deflated.

"Well, here's you paper. Just wait till December 21, 2012 comes. We'll see who's right then."

Later that evening the club was packed with the usual after work crowd. Inner Sanctum's decor was a welcoming eclectic mix of today modern style combined with the elegance of the old style night spots of the sixties. Various shades of dark reds, blues, medium grays, and a touch of steel gave the club warmth, style and originality that made people feel at home. The lower level was referred to as Sanctuary. Comfy, dark, oversize couches lined the walls while pool and chess tables filled the rest of the downstairs area.

Both the AC and music was on full blast. Stan and Brenda were sitting in his back booth with Steele. The two men amused themselves by watching Brenda stuffing lipstick and other cosmetics into a small plastic bag inside her pocketbook. When she was just about through Steele noticed the blue flashing light on the wall.

It was a phone call from Leroy the gate keeper at the front door of the exclusive club. "Mr. Steele there's someone here to see you. He says it's urgent but he won't give me his name. He says he came all the way from Italy." Steele's mind immediately jumped back to the conversation he had that morning with Sugar Bear.

He found himself saying “No way.”

Not realizing that Leroy could hear him Leroy answered “Yeah, he’s standing right in front of me. Should I send him in?” Steele instructed Leroy to keep the stranger at the front door until he got there.

The well dressed, middle aged man wore a beige suit, white shirt and yellow tie. He looked to be in his late fifties. Strains of gray sparkled throughout his brown hair. They were most noticeable in his sideburns.

The two men meet in front of the club. Steele greeted the well dressed man with a firm handshake. “Thank you for agreeing to meet with me Mr. Steele.”

Steele had never been to Italy but as a young boy growing up in South Philly his father used to take him to the Italian market on Saturday mornings. Based on the man’s strong accent and the style of his tailor made suit Steele had already begun sizing up his new visitor.

“I am in need of your services. I have been told that you can be discreet. Oh, please forgive me.”

The man reached in his back pocket, pulled out a white card from his wallet and handed it to the detective.

“I am here of official business” he explained.

Steele noticed the seal of the State of Vatican City in the top left hand corner. It was round embossed tiara resting in the center of two keys however the rest might as well been written in Arabic. He struggled in his clumsy attempt to read the card aloud

“Corpo della Gendarmeria dello Stato della Città del Vaticano.”

Realizing he had hand Steele the wrong side the man was quick to flip the card over where it was written in English. It read:

Julius DiBona

Gendarme Corps of Vatican City State

Vatican City, Rome

Steele smiled and shook his hand again.

“Well, well, Vatican secret service, it’s a pleasure to meet you Mr. DiBona. You’re a long way from home. How did you hear about me?” Mr. Julius DiBona raised his finger to the sky.

“From your counterpart up north, your friend detective Al in Montreal recommended you. He speaks very highly of you and your skills.”

Steele suggested they go to his place where they could talk in private. A hundred questions raced through his mind as the two men walked to his car. He knew this would not be an ordinary case.

Once the men were inside Steele’s house Julius showed Steele a photo of a gold ring sitting on top of a white sheet of paper the size of a 3x5 card with a single phone number written on the bottom corner. At the top of the picture in the background was a copy of the Philadelphia Inquirer dated last week.

After giving him a few moments to examine the image he asked, “Mr. Steele are you familiar with this ring?”

Steele nodded that he was not. Julius paused then spoke in a somber voice, “this is the Anello Piscatorio, the Ring of the Fishermen” he explained. “To be more precise this ring belonged to Pope John Paul I. You see a new gold ring is cast with each new pope’s Latin name in raised letters around the upper rim. John Paul’s papacy ended abruptly in September 1978 after serving only 33 days. There are those among us who suspect foul play. The ring is also

used as a seal, a notary of sorts. It is a very powerful symbol. If it were to fall into the wrong hands the damage to the papacy could be great. If word of this ever got out....” Julius DiBona slowly shook his head.

“Under normal circumstances for obvious reasons the ring is crushed by the Camerlango in the presence of other Cardinals.”

Steele pointed to the picture. “Who sent you the photo and how much is he asking for the ring?”

DiBona hunched his shoulders; “I don’t know who or where he is. When I called the number on the photo the man on the phone didn’t want to give his name. He said his life was in danger because of the ring. All he would tell me is that he brought it from a man name Nickolas D’Angelo”

Steele held up his hand. “Whoa, did you say Nickolas D’Angelo?”

Julius shook his head. “Yes, why is that important?”

Steele rubbed his hands together. “Your damn right it’s important. Nickolas and Fabio D’Angelo better known as the D’Angelo brothers are notorious jewelry thieves. Nick threw a guy out the window last year because he cheated him out of twenty dollars on a piece of jewelry worth a hundred grand. They must have found out how valuable the ring was after they sold it to him and now they want it back, poor bastard.”

Steele seemed lost in thought for a minute then turned back to Julius. “So what else did he say during the conversation?”

Julius continued, “he said he had done a lot of shameful things in his life and now that he was getting on in years he wanted to make amends by getting the ring back to the Catholic Church. It was his desperate attempt to curry favor with Saint Peter. Mr. Steele, when the ring is pressed into hot wax to seal a church document it is automatically assumed that the Pope himself has validated that document. Since he is no longer with us there is no one who can verify or deny the validity of any of these documents. I guess by now you are wondering why I’m giving you this history lesson Mr. Steele. Well the answer is simple. Most of my colleagues believe the real ring has been properly destroyed and that this ring is a forgery. My theory is that since the Pope died alone the ring was switched by someone on the inside and that this ring is authentic. Don’t get me wrong, I am not claiming some huge conspiracy theory. Maybe it was only one man’s greed. Perhaps it was a man acting alone or a crime of opportunity. I need you to recover this ring Mr. Steele. The man on the phone and I arranged to meet on the steps of the Free Library on the Parkway here in Philadelphia at midnight but my flight was twice delayed. That was a few nights ago. I tried contacting him by phone but there was no answer.”

Steele dialed the number on the picture but didn’t fair any better than Julius, the phone just rang and rang. Steele sat back in his chair, “I’m sorry you have traveled all this way for nothing, your mystery man is probably dead by now. You never said if he asked for payment.”

Julius waved his arms in the air. “That’s the whole point Mr. Steele, he didn’t ask for any money, not one single euro. He just kept saying for once in his life he just wanted to do the right thing.”

Steele leaned forward and stroked the corners of his mustache. “Why didn’t you tell him to destroy it, run it through a buzz saw or something?”

Julius became more animated; he began using his hands to express himself. “It’s not that simple Mr. Steele. If there is a thief in our midst he must be rooted out. What if there are co-conspirators still on the inside? I need the ring intact to make my case, to get the others to believe me. If the ring is not recovered in tact it would be said that it was destroyed before it left

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