

Preamble

“Blessed are they who didn’t see, yet still believe” were the last words anyone heard Nico utter as he moved his index finger through the .38 caliber hole in his shirt just above his heart. Nico examined the enormous, slightly dented church key that saved his life, or at least stopped the bullet from ripping into his chest. He held it for just a moment before he dropped it to the ground. Ordinarily, the sound of a large brass key clanging off the marble floor in the stone church would have sounded like a rim shot from a drummer in a marching band, but in this instance, nobody heard it. Or noticed it. Or really cared at all at that moment. Except for those few souls on the altar, no one else even saw when Nico slowly pulled himself to his feet after taking one in the chest at damn near point blank range.

Father O’Toole may not have killed Nico, but when his gun erupted in pure violence and anger, it killed all the hopes of all parishioners and non-parishioners alike within the church’s walls who believed that they had a front-row seat to witness something special that was about to happen, even if they weren’t sure just what it would be. The muzzle blast and the lightning crack from the pistol, amplified by the numerous microphones on the altar, shattered several stained-glass windows closest to the altar and momentarily robbed attendees of their hearing. Fear never sounded so visceral nor looked so raw. Parents yelled for their children to flee, but the temporarily deaf kids could do little more than simply grab someone close to them and cry. Fear froze them in place like so many of the stone statues of saints that adorned the altar. Sadly, this paralysis was cured quickly by the frantic collision of bodies attempting to navigate around the statues to escape outside. After the initial shockwave had ceased, the sound of rolling thunder filled the stone church. Doors slammed open and nearly ripped from their hinges. Church pews were upended with frail, elderly bodies pinned underneath.

At that moment, no one saw Nico on the altar. No one saw a beloved priest who single-handedly breathed life back into St. Mary’s Parish, or even the most honored and respected Vatican Council. They saw a madman shooting a gun in a church packed two floors deep with people who were terrified beyond anything they had ever experienced. The splendid church grandeur alongside the chaos and destruction was a bizarre juxtaposition that normal comprehension could not grasp.

Even the sight of Dylan Ray, the religious nut-job who tried to assassinate Father O’Toole a year earlier in that very same location, paled in comparison to the sight of the victim-turned-predator dressed in an Army officer’s uniform and pulling a trigger on the one who many believed to be the Second Coming. It was Dali-ist surrealism on steroids.

Those fortunate enough to escape the pandemonium simply kept running. Not to their cars or in any particular direction. They just ran. Others fell to the ground after escaping and wept whole-heartedly at what they had just witnessed, even though they didn’t know the full extent of it all just yet.

When Nico finally rose to his feet, Detective Martin backed away, which is the exact opposite of what a law enforcement officer trained to assist people should have done. Father O’Toole and Detective Kelly did the same, but when Father O’Toole saw Nico put his finger through the bullet hole in his shirt, the priest fell fast to both knees. Detective Kelly, who had one hand cuff on O’Toole and the other firmly in his grasp, was pulled down with him. Father O’Toole

stopped when his knees hit the ground, but Detective Kelly stopped when his face slammed off Father O'Toole's head, knocking both men out and rendering them mutually motionless on the altar floor. Detective Martin and the Vatican Council rushed to give aid to the fallen detective and the elderly priest.

And in that one particular moment, no more than a couple seconds in duration, Nico left. Or vanished. Or ascended. No one knew for sure, because nobody saw him leave or disappear or whatever he actually did. He was simply gone. The hundreds of screaming crying churchgoers didn't notice. And a trained law enforcement officer who'd basically stalked Nico for the past several weeks didn't notice. And the Vatican Council, who spoke Italian to Nico and had traveled a great distance just to witness him first-hand, didn't notice either. When the smoke cleared, as Father O'Toole and Detective Kelly sat on the ground rubbing their heads, all parties finally realized that Nico was no longer with them, at least not physically. Detective Martin rushed to the back room behind the altar and yanked open closet doors. He pushed open the back door and ran outside to look up and down the street, but there was no sign of Nico. Not anywhere.

An extremely recognizable young man in his mid-twenties dressed in all black with priest vestments just left the scene of another church shooting, and nobody in the entire Strip District seemed to notice. Within minutes, the sound of police sirens and helicopters filled the air.

Chapter One

SWAT officers arrived first on the scene and once again found that an “Active Shooter” situation was not at hand.

“Martin, you sonofabitch, how’d you beat us here?” said the SWAT Commander in charge not realizing that Detectives Martin and Kelly were in attendance prior to the shooting. “What’s the deal this time?”

“We have the shooter in custody. He got smacked in the head pretty good. So did Kelly. Both are on the altar. We’re just waiting for EMS, then I’ll have someone take him in for processing.”

“Who is it?”

“The priest.”

“Getthefuckout! You serious? If that don’t beat all.”

Detective Martin continued to survey the situation but said nothing. Car tires squealed outside and sirens drew closer.

“Who did he shoot?”

“Rossi. He shot Nico Rossi. He was on the altar with him along with those members of the Vatican Council up there.”

“Wait...what? He shot...well, where is he?”

“Don’t know. Not here.”

“What do you mean he’s not here? How do you lose a shooting victim?” Detective Martin said nothing and continued to scan the church. “Okay, well then if there ain’t a shooter, then you’re in charge. Congrats.”

“Yeah. Thanks. Just what I wanted. Just throw some tape up outside before you leave? I don’t want people coming back into the church and contaminating the crime scene.”

“Least I can do, buddy. Have fun with this one...again.”

The paramedics arrived a minute or two after SWAT and effortlessly made their way to the altar of the now empty church. It had cleared quickly as though the lid had been removed from the top of the church and all the people inside were simply poured out in one swoop. Being the eldest among the injured, Father O’Toole received medical attention first. He had a nice-sized goose egg on his head and wobbled when the paramedics tried to get him to his feet. He may have been concussed or perhaps dehydrated, seeing as how as he ran on nothing but coffee and booze for the past couple months. Perhaps it was exhaustion from the overwhelming workload. Perhaps it was the stress of a miracle which caused everyone from the corner grocer to the Pope to look to him for answers while the same miracle robbed him of both his parish and his legacy. Or maybe it was the simple realization that he just tried to kill a boy whom he had considered to be a son, in his own church no less, and that the remainder of his days, however long or short they may be, would be spent looking through the bars of a prison cell. For whatever reason, he wobbled. The paramedics handcuffed him to a gurney and wheeled him outside to a waiting ambulance. At the hospital he would receive fluids and semi-decent food nutritionally superior to anything he’d

consumed in the past two months, and there he would wait for the wheels of the legal process to start turning.

Detective Kelly certainly took the worst of the head-on-head collision. The paramedics closed the gash on his face with a few butterflies and medical super glue, but he would need stitches. As the small pen light bounced from one eye to the next, no apparent signs of a concussion presented for him, but it was certainly possible that the adrenaline pumping through his system concealed any outward signs of traumatic head injury. Detective Martin hovered behind the paramedics as they treated Kelly. Martin talked to Kelly throughout the entire treatment. Sometimes he asked questions, sometimes made statements, but every word spoken was nervous and often shaky, which was extraordinarily unlike him. Martin's stoic, stone-faced demeanor was replaced by angst over seeing his partner injured and suffering, and he wanted to make somebody pay for causing that pain to the both of them. But who? And how? Kelly just sat on the altar and rubbed his neck but did not respond to his partner's questions or comments. The blank gaze from his occasional eye contact said more to Martin than the craftiest poet could ever communicate. Although a simple *WTF?* may have also captured the essence of the moment at that time.

The paramedics thought it best to take Kelly to the hospital for further treatment and more extensive observation from doctors. When they wheeled the gurney up to Kelly, he politely refused the accommodation. It was as if at that moment, he wanted to walk off the field for the last time under his own power. He showed his age as he trudged and shuffled out of the church and climbed, with assistance, into the back of an ambulance.

The crime scene investigators entered the church as Kelly limped out of it. They wielded their fancy cameras and digital tape measurers to begin the process of dissecting and documenting every inch of the altar.

"Yo, Martin, how'd I guess you would be in charge of this circus," said the lead crime scene investigator as he blazed a blinding flash from his camera into Detective Martin's face just to agitate him. "You turning into church po-lice or something? Being here is like De Ja Vu all over again." They marked the floor where people had stood and photographed the full priest vestments that seemed to be haphazardly discarded behind one of the over-sized altar chairs.

"Hey boss, come take a look at this," said one of the investigators to the lead CSI.

"What is it?"

"Not sure, but it might be the key to the whole case," said the junior investigator. Detective Martin did not react to CSI's ongoing attempt at levity. "Well, would you look at that..." said the investigator as he removed the mushroomed slug from the old brass key with a pair of forceps. "Bullets and keys generally shouldn't be together, right boss?"

And with that, all attempts at levity ceased. The investigators immediately realized that despite the fact that the gunman was in custody and that several people had witnessed the shooting, this case was not going to be open and shut. A large brass key with a bullet lodged in it ensured that more questions and fewer answers would be the only thing uncovered at this crime scene. For those investigators who participated in the first photography session about a year earlier, they already began to dread the late hours of analysis and confusion that were to follow in the back room of the police station. They continued to document the scene in silence.

Detective Martin was antsy and agitated. He wanted out. Unlike the first church shooting where he couldn't be dragged away, this time he wanted to be as far from the church as possible. He knew that nothing valuable would be found inside the church. Any relevant information would only come from Nico. Maybe some from the priest, but hospital regulations and other bureaucratic nonsense would prevent him or anyone else from interviewing O'Toole anytime soon. As Martin

paced back and forth in the church, the high-ranking commanders and even the Chief arrived on the scene. Detective Martin asked to leave to pursue other leads outside the church. He did not have to say it, though it was clearly understood, that he was going after Nico, wherever he may be.

Chapter Two

Detective Martin chose to leave the church through the back door behind the altar because it was the most logical way that Nico would have exited, assuming that he did exit in a mundane traditional manner. Martin took his time and purposefully scanned the vicinity behind St. Mary's Church while the din of the activity at the front of the church dissipated. His eyes focused on the grounds behind the church and the old dilapidated alleyway that was deteriorating back into gravel. He walked away from the church and continued to just look...for something. For anything. Anything out of place. Anything out of the ordinary. Something that didn't belong or fit just right. He was looking...for a clue. It had been years since Detective Martin actually searched for clues, but that was what he found himself doing. Martin thought to himself: *"If Nico left the church, it had to be through the back door, otherwise everyone on the altar would have noticed. Or would they? Maybe it was possible for him to mix with the fleeing parishioners? But if that happened, he would have been mobbed by his followers, right? Maybe there was an accomplice? A get-away driver? Maybe I can find fresh tire tracks apart from the other cars? Yeah right. No chance of that, not on these crowded streets..."*

Detective Martin wandered to the end of the broken old alley where he found his clue. A seemingly abandoned old BMW motorcycle was tucked away in the corner of the alley. Martin thought that it was Nico's bike, but he wasn't exactly positive. He approached the bike and knocked several fallen leaves from the seat and gas tank in search of a VIN number, which he located and logged as the first item of a new investigation file on his iPad. Martin would call DMV later to confirm ownership of the bike, or at least confirm to whom it was currently registered.

Finding the old bike was both good and bad. It was good because it eliminated the way that Nico was able to get from the scene of the crime so quickly, but it was bad in that it made things more complicated, moreso than they already were. If Nico didn't leave on his motorcycle, then he had help — a waiting driver? The only way that a waiting driver made any sense was if this entire ordeal was planned from the beginning. Not just the most recent shooting, but rather from the very beginning, with the Dylan Ray shooting. Detective Martin got a lump in his throat as he considered the possibility that he and everyone else was completely punk'd. It was all an elaborate hoax.

That theory did make sense — it certainly complied with Occam's Razor. The hoax theory was the simplest and could explain with any combination of sleight of hand how bullets only travelled 10 feet in the first shooting or how the key in Nico's pocket miraculously stopped a bullet from hitting him in the chest. Detective Martin chuckled as he thought that the only thing that would have made this magic show any better would have been if Nico caught Father O'Toole's bullet in his teeth. Still, Dylan Ray was in jail and had been there for almost a year. Nobody is that dedicated to a prank, especially when there's no payoff. Nothing was gained by anyone less a few minutes of fame for Nico. Now Father O'Toole, like Dylan Ray, was facing attempted homicide charges. Considering O'Toole's current appearance, it was questionable if he would live to his trial.

A hoax was one explanation, but it only solved part of the equation while several variables remained unexplained. Detective Martin had to find Nico. His apartment seemed like a good

starting point. Martin hurried to the front of the church where his squad car had been parked since early that morning. He turned on the siren and navigated among the crowd of pedestrians and police through the Strip District until he arrived at Nico's apartment in Bloomfield.

With no street side service taking place, Detective Martin could park right in front of the building. The low-rent apartment building returned to its normal run-down state with the makeshift altar, cross, and lighting now removed.

"That is odd," said Detective Martin to himself. "Did Rossi do this? When? He must have had help with the clean-up."

The front door was propped open with a wooden wedge that Detective Martin kicked out. He briskly made his way up the stairs to the second floor. A couple of sharp quick pounds with a closed fist followed by "Pittsburgh Police! Open up or I will kick this door down" produced an unexpected result.

A little old man in his mid to late 70s opened the door. "Now why would you do that? Pretty rude of you," snorted the old man.

"Who are you?" asked Detective Martin.

"Nobody really I guess. I just own the building."

"Where is Nico?"

"Who?"

"Rossi. Where is Nico Rossi," asked the impatient detective.

"Oh, Nicholas. I don't know. He hasn't been here for a couple weeks now."

"What!"

"He paid me his last month's rent then said keep the security deposit for cleaning the place and throwing out the furniture. I just got here. Really didn't have time to clean before today. Just seeing if I could do it myself or if I had to hire someone." Detective Martin pushed his way past the old landlord. "Sure. Come right in. Pick up a broom on your way through."

Detective Martin moved through the small apartment. Everything seemed as if Nico was still living in the apartment except that there was a weird-looking framed piece of art in the middle of the living room floor. All or at least most of his clothes were still there. A half-empty bottle of jug wine along with a half empty bottle of prescription sleeping pills rested on a rickety little table with mismatched chairs. Some uneaten frozen toaster waffles remained in the freezer, which was starting to ice over.

"How long has he been gone, did you say?"

"Who?"

"Rossi! Nicholas Rossi. The guy that lived here."

"Oh, him. I don't know. Maybe two, maybe three weeks at most."

"You said he paid you in advance, right? Gave you notice that he was leaving?"

"That's right. Thought that was nice of him. Most people usually skip out on the rent then leave in the middle of the night."

"Yeah, but look at this place. All his shit is still here. Looks like he left in a hurry. Did he say anything else to you? Like why he was moving or where he was going? Did he leave a forwarding address for any mail? Anything like that?"

"Hmm. No. I didn't really know him that well. I only met him to sign the lease. He was with a priest, so I figured he was okay. Never really saw him after that until he gave me that last check. We never really talked, I guess."

"What about the altar and the cross and all the lights? Did you take that stuff down or did someone else?"

“Lights where?”

“At the bottom of the steps to the entrance,” snapped the Detective.

“Lights at the bottom of the steps would be good. It can get dark out front sometimes. Street light doesn’t always work so good.”

“Never mind,” said the frustrated Detective. “Thank you for your help.”

“Okay. Say buddy, if you know of somebody looking to rent, this place should be available in a week or so. Tell ‘em to call me.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

Detective Martin shook his head and sighed as he stormed out the apartment. He drove back to the station to file criminal charges and lodge a warrant against Nico Rossi. Conspiracy and nothing more. He knew that the district attorney would make him withdraw the charges since it’s not often that a shooting victim is charged with conspiracy in his own shooting. Martin hoped it might buy him a little time and maybe Nico might run a stop sign or something, then he’d get picked up on the warrant. At least that way he would be brought in and Detective Martin would have the opportunity to speak to him.

