

PRIESTS, KINGPINS, AND PROPHECIES a novella

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PROLOGUE: The Physics of Expansion July 1863

The Star of Erin did not glide into New York Harbor; it limped, groaning under the weight of three hundred souls packed into the steerage. The air down there was a solid thing—a thick, suffocating stew of unwashed bodies, bile, and the

damp rot of the hull. It coated the back of
Heinrich's throat like grease.

When they docked, they thought they had found
sanctuary. instead, they stepped off the gangplank
into a city that was eating itself alive.

The Draft Riots were in their third day. The sky
over Manhattan was bruised purple with smoke.
Mobs roamed the cobblestones, hunting. They
weren't soldiers; they were neighbors, butchers,
dockworkers, turned savage by the heat and the
conscription notices.

Heinrich pulled Sarah into an alleyway off Worth

Street to avoid a roving pack of men carrying torches and clubs. He had no weapon but a heavy iron tool he'd stolen from the ship's carpenter.

A man stepped out from the shadows—a looter, his eyes wide and rimmed with soot. He raised a pistol, an old single-shot percussion cap.

The bang was not a thunderclap; it was a flat, dry crack.

The ball missed Heinrich but struck the brick wall behind him, sending a spray of red dust into the air. Heinrich didn't think. He lunged, driving the iron tool into the man's temple. It was wet work. Vicious.

Necessary.

Later, when the streets were quiet, Heinrich dug the bullet out of the mortar where it had lodged. It wasn't a round musket ball. It was conical. A Minié ball.

He held it up to the moonlight for Sarah to see.

"Look," he whispered, his German accent thick. "It is hollow at the base."

When the gunpowder ignited, the gas expanded into the hollow skirt, forcing the soft lead to flare out

and grip the rifling of the barrel. It spun. It traveled faster. And when it hit a man, it didn't just pass through. It flattened. It became a jagged coin the size of a half-dollar, taking bone and organ with it.

"The city is like this bullet," Heinrich said, pocketing the piece of lead. "It waits until it is inside you. Then it expands."

CHAPTER 1: The Invisible Man November 1938

The rain in Manhattan didn't wash the streets; it just made the grime reflective.

Marguerite sat in her office on the third floor of a tenement on the Lower East Side. The room was a study in shadows and cheap tobacco smoke. On her desk, the radio—a walnut-veneer Philco with a glowing amber dial—hummed with the voice of a panicked news anchor, squeezed between bouts of static.

“...and in Europe, Chancellor Hitler’s demands continue to...”

She switched it off. The silence was heavier than

the noise.

She wasn't looking at a law book. She was staring at a small, black notebook she had lifted from a dead man's pocket three hours ago. It wasn't a register of numbers; it was a list of dates and locations, written in a code that looked like prayer citations.

Matthew 21:12. John 2:15.

Bible verses about cleansing the temple. Or, in this case, moving narcotics through the rectory.

The telephone on her desk—a heavy black Bakelite

fortress—trilled. It was a jarring, mechanical sound.

Marguerite picked up the receiver. "Algonquin 4-6620."

"Miss LeRoux," a voice said. Smooth. Cultured. Like velvet wrapped around a razor blade. "You have something that belongs to the Church. We would like to discuss a donation."

"I don't donate to the collection plate, Father," she said, recognizing the cadence, if not the voice.

**"I am not a priest," the voice replied. "Meet me at the
Paradise Theater. The projection booth. Midnight.
Come alone, or the Rabbi finds his synagogue
darker than usual."**

The line went dead.

**The Paradise Theater was a palace of escapism in
the Bronx, its ceiling painted with twinkling stars
and drifting clouds to make the unemployed forget
the breadlines outside. At midnight, it was empty,
save for the ghosts of the silver screen.**

**Marguerite climbed the narrow steel stairs to the
projection booth. The air up here was hot, carrying**

the chemical scent of celluloid and carbon arc lamps.

Two men were waiting.

One was sitting on a metal stool, cleaning his fingernails with a matchstick. He was thick-necked, wearing a suit that cost more than Marguerite's education. This was Vincenzo "The Hammer" Moretti.

The other man stood by the small viewing port, watching the blank screen below. He was slender, handsome in a sharp, terrifying way. He wore a fedora pulled low. He kept his hands in his pockets,

not casually, but rigidly.

Joseph Bonanno.

"You're the lawyer," Bonanno said, not turning around.

"And you're the man who thinks he owns the Bronx," Marguerite replied.

Bonanno turned. His eyes were dark, intelligent, and flickering with a high-voltage anxiety. He checked the door behind her, then the window.

"I own nothing," Bonanno said softly. "Ownership implies a paper trail. I am a ghost, Miss LeRoux. I exist only in the whispers of people who are afraid to speak."

"You're afraid," Marguerite said, stepping closer. "I can see it. You're not worried about the police finding your heroin. You're worried about them finding you."

Bonanno flinched. He took a step back, his hand twitching in his coat pocket.

"Al Capone," Bonanno hissed, the name tasting like poison in his mouth. "Al went to Philadelphia in '29.

He was carrying a .38. Just a heater. That's all it took. One beat cop. One frisk. And they locked him up. Not for the bodies. Not for the beer. For a gun."

He pulled his hands out of his pockets. They were empty. He held them up, palms open.

"I don't carry, Miss LeRoux. I don't sign checks. I don't put my name on deeds. And I certainly don't let little black books with my associates' names float around the city."

He nodded to Moretti. "Vinnie handles the heavy lifting. Vinnie signs the papers. Vinnie carries the

iron."

Moretti grinned, a gold tooth flashing in the dim light of the projector booth. "I'm the executive vice president of operations."

"Vinnie is a target," Bonanno corrected. "I am the atmosphere."

Bonanno stepped into her personal space. He didn't smell of cologne; he carried the scent of expensive soap and fear.

"That book you found," Bonanno whispered. "It links

the shipments to De Becker. It links De Becker to the Bishop. And it links the Bishop to the Cause in Italy. If the Feds see that, they don't just arrest a few bootleggers. They start an investigation. A hearing. They turn on the lights."

He leaned in, his voice dropping to a terrifying monotone.

"I cannot abide the lights, Miss LeRoux. I require the dark. Give me the book."

"I don't have it," Marguerite lied. "I gave it to a priest."

Bonanno stared at her. For a second, she thought he would signal Moretti to throw her off the balcony. Instead, he smiled. It was a thin, bloodless expression.

"A priest," Bonanno chuckled. "God's middleman."

He turned to Moretti. "Vincenzo, it seems we need to go to confession."

Bonanno adjusted his hat, checking his reflection in the glass of the projection port to ensure he looked like nothing more than a respectable businessman.

"You have twenty-four hours to get it back,"

**Bonanno said to Marguerite. "After that, Vinnie
pays a visit to your friend. And Vinnie... he lacks my
appreciation for subtlety."**

**Bonanno walked out, moving silently, leaving
Marguerite alone with the hum of the cooling
projector and the realization that she wasn't
fighting a thug. She was fighting a phantom who
was willing to burn the whole city to stay invisible.**

Marguerite checked her watch. 12:15 AM.

She needed a Rabbi. And she needed a drink.

CHAPTER 2: The Fabric of Sin

The Garment District didn't sleep; it just changed shifts. Even at 1:00 AM, the streets south of 40th buzzed with the sound of delivery trucks idling and the hiss of steam pressing irons from the sweatshops on the upper floors.

Marguerite didn't take the elevator to Jacob's loft.

She took the freight stairs, her heels clicking on the metal grate, echoing like gunshots in the stairwell.

She found the door unlocked. Bad tradecraft, Jacob would say. An invitation, she thought.

The loft was a cavern of shadows and suspended dust. Bolts of fabric—wool, silk, cheap rayon—stood like sentinels against the brick walls. In the center, under a single cone of yellow electric light, sat Rabbi Jacob Levinson.

He wasn't praying. He was hunched over a drafting table, a jeweler's loupe screwed into his right eye, examining the pages of "The Book" Marguerite had

left with him earlier.

A bottle of rye—cheap, legal swill that smelled like paint thinner—sat open next to a half-eaten corned beef sandwich.

"You're late," Jacob said, not looking up. "And you smell like the cinema. Popcorn and disappointment."

"I met Bonanno," Marguerite said, tossing her wet trench coat onto a stack of gray wool. "He wants the book, Jacob. He gave me twenty-four hours before he sends 'The Hammer' to redecorate your

synagogue."

Jacob finally looked up. He took the loupe out of his eye. His face was angular, unshaven, his eyes dark with a fatigue that went deeper than sleep deprivation. He looked like a prophet who had seen the burning bush and realized it was just an arsonist.

"Bonanno," Jacob scoffed, reaching for the rye. He poured two shots into tea glasses. "The man thinks he's Caesar because he pays off the precinct captain. But he's right to be worried about this."

Jacob tapped the little black book.

"It's not a ledger, Marguerite. It's a roster. I decoded the first section using a Gematria cipher—simple number substitution based on Hebrew text. It's clever. To the naked eye, it looks like a prayer schedule for the Feast of San Gennaro."

"And to the trained eye?" Marguerite asked, picking up the whiskey.

"It's a shipping manifest for the Port of Naples," Jacob said, his voice dropping. "They aren't just moving heroin, Marguerite. They're moving gold. Bullion. Stamped with the fasces. Mussolini's gold,

coming into New York to buy influence, buy unions, maybe even buy politicians like De Becker."

He downed the drink. "The Church isn't just looking the other way. They're the bank."

Marguerite felt the cold reality of it settle in her stomach. This wasn't local crime. This was geopolitics bleeding into Hell's Kitchen.

"We have to burn it," Jacob said, standing up. He moved toward the small coal stove in the corner. "If Bonanno knows we have this, we're dead. If the Feds find out we have this, we're dead. This isn't a lever, Marguerite. It's a grenade with the pin

pulled."

"No." Marguerite grabbed his wrist. Her grip was iron. "We don't burn it. It's the only thing keeping us alive. It's insurance."

"It's a death sentence!" Jacob shouted, spinning on her.

They were close now. Too close. The smell of rain on her skin mixed with the rye on his breath. The fear in the room was a physical pressure, a static charge building between them.

"We fight," Marguerite whispered. "We take this to Damien. We find where they're storing the shipment."

"Damien?" Jacob laughed, a bitter, sharp sound.

"The priest? He's part of the machinery, Marguerite! He wears the uniform!"

"He's a man," she said. "Just like you."

The argument died in his throat as he looked at her. The adrenaline of the threat—Bonanno, the gold, the imminent violence—shifted into something else. It was the biological imperative of people standing

on the edge of a cliff.

Jacob's hand moved from her wrist to her waist. It wasn't gentle. It was a desperate claim. He pulled her against him, his mouth finding hers with a hunger that had nothing to do with romance and everything to do with obliteration.

She didn't pull away. She kissed him back, biting his lip, tasting the copper of blood and the burn of whiskey. She needed to feel something other than the cold fear Bonanno had instilled in the projection booth.

They didn't make it to the cot in the corner. He

lifted her onto the drafting table, scattering the papers, the code breaking, the evidence of their doom hitting the floor.

The sex was frantic, a collision of bodies in the half-light of the garment loft. There was no tenderness, only the friction of survival. His hands were in her hair, on her hips, anchoring himself to the only real thing left in a world going mad. She arched against him, the rough wood of the table scraping her skin, the sound of their breath drowning out the distant wail of a police siren.

For a few minutes, there was no Bonanno. No De Becker. No coming war. Just the heat.

Afterward, the silence returned, louder than before.

Marguerite buttoned her blouse, her fingers trembling slightly. Jacob sat on the edge of the table, head in his hands. The shame of the devout man who had just succumbed to the flesh was already setting in.

He reached over and turned on the radio, needing a voice to fill the void.

“...reports of smashed windows in Berlin... synagogues burning... the Chancellor declares...”

Jacob squeezed his eyes shut. "They're doing it there, Marguerite. And Bonanno is helping them do it here."

He slid off the table and picked up the black book from the floor. He handed it to her.

"St. Jude's," he said, his voice flat, dead. "The cipher references a storage cellar under the bell tower at St. Jude's. If the gold is anywhere, it's there."

"Will you come with me?" Marguerite asked.

Jacob looked at the dark window, then at her. "I'm a Rabbi, Marguerite. I can't walk into a church rectory at midnight."

He paused.

"But I know a man who can pick a lock on a reliquary. I'll meet you there. 3:00 AM."

Marguerite nodded. She touched his cheek—a brief, fleeting apology for using him, and for enjoying it.

"Bring a crowbar," she said.

"I'll bring a gun," Jacob replied.

3: The Confessional

Hell's Kitchen lived up to its name in November.

The wind coming off the Hudson River didn't just blow; it carried the grit of the coal barges and the slaughterhouses, stinging the eyes and coating the back of the throat with the taste of iron.

Marguerite LeRoux walked up Ninth Avenue, the elevated train track overhead acting as a dripping

steel umbrella. The "El" thundered past, a deafening rattle of iron wheels on iron rails that shook the pavement beneath her feet. It was the heartbeat of the neighborhood—loud, dirty, and relentless.

She pulled the collar of her trench coat tighter. It was a man's coat, bought second-hand from a surplus store on Canal Street. It smelled of damp wool and mothballs, but it was thick enough to stop the biting cold. Underneath, she wore a bias-cut skirt of dark navy gabardine that clung to her legs when the wind whipped, and a cream-colored rayon blouse that she had mended three times at the elbow. Her stockings were silk, a rare extravagance she justified as a business expense, though the seam on the right leg was currently crooked, twisted by

her frantic exit from the Rabbi's loft.

She stopped in front of St. Jude's.

It was a fortress of blackened sandstone, built in the previous century by Irish bricklayers who wanted to prove their God was stronger than the poverty that surrounded them. The stained glass was dark now, covered by wire mesh to protect it from the stickball games and thrown bottles of the neighborhood boys.

Marguerite pushed open the heavy oak door. It groaned, a sound like a dying breath, and she

slipped inside.

The silence was immediate. The roar of the city—the shouting vendors, the honking Packard taxis, the wail of the sirens—vanished, replaced by the dense, scented air of the sanctuary. It smelled of beeswax, frankincense, and the damp, mildewed hem of a thousand winter coats.

The nave was lit only by the rack of votive candles flickering in the side chapel. Their red glass cups cast long, dancing shadows against the vaulted ceiling.

A man was kneeling at the communion rail, his

back to her.

Father Damien Leclair.

He did not look like a priest from the back. He looked like a dockworker who had stolen a cassock. His shoulders were broad, stretching the black fabric of his soutane tight across the back. He wasn't praying; he was scrubbing the marble floor with a rag and a bucket of gray water, the sleeves of his cassock rolled up to reveal forearms that were thick with muscle and mapped with scars.

Damien was thirty-nine years old, but his face carried the erosion of two lifetimes. He had the

high, sharp cheekbones of his French father and the heavy, brooding brow of his Irish mother. His hair was black, cut short in a severe military style that hadn't changed since 1918.

He had been a boy of the neighborhood, a street fighter who broke knuckles for spare change, until the Great War took him. He had gone to France with the 69th Infantry—the "Fighting 69th." He came back with a piece of German shrapnel lodged near his spine and a silence in his soul that only the priesthood could fill.

He heard her heels clicking on the stone—the distinct, sharp clack-clack of a woman's pumps.

He stopped scrubbing but didn't turn.

" The church is closed, Miss LeRoux," he said. His voice was a baritone, roughened by years of breathing altar smoke and cheap tobacco. "Mass is at six."

"I didn't come for Mass, Damien," Marguerite said, walking down the center aisle. "And I didn't come to watch you do penance for sins you haven't committed yet."

Damien dropped the rag into the bucket. The water

splashed, dark and murky. He stood up, unfolding his frame to his full height of six-foot-two. He wiped his wet hands on a towel tucked into his cincture—the rope belt tied around his waist.

He turned to face her. His eyes were the color of slate, usually guarded, but tonight they looked raw. He looked at her—really looked at her—taking in the disheveled hair, the flushed skin of her neck, the faint, undeniable scent of whiskey and another man's cologne clinging to her coat.

A muscle in his jaw jumped. He knew where she had been. He knew Jacob Levinson. He knew the hunger that existed between the lawyer and the

rabbi, a hunger he watched from the periphery,
shackled by his vows.

"You smell like a distillery," Damien said, his voice
tight.

"I've been drinking with the Rabbi," Marguerite
replied, stopping a few feet from the communion
rail. "We were celebrating."

"Celebrating what?"

"The end of the world," she said. "Or maybe just the
end of this parish."

She reached into her coat pocket, bypassing the pack of Lucky Strikes, and pulled out the black notebook. She held it up in the flickering candlelight.

"Do you know what this is, Damien?"

Damien's eyes flicked to the book, then back to her face. His expression hardened, turning into the stone mask he wore for the Sunday sermons.

"I see a great many books," he said dismissively.

"Usually held by people with cleaner souls than

yours."

"It's a shipping manifest," Marguerite said, stepping past the rail, invading the sanctuary. "Decoded by Levinson. It lists dates, weights, and locations. And it lists a storage facility."

She took another step. She was close enough now to see the gray flecks in his stubble. He hadn't shaved since morning.

"The storage facility is here, Damien. Specifically, the cellar beneath the bell tower."

Damien stiffened. "That cellar has been sealed since '22. Since the coal chute collapsed."

"Has it?" Marguerite challenged. "Because according to Joseph Bonanno, it's receiving deliveries every Thursday night. Crates marked 'Liturgical Supplies.' But they don't contain Bibles, Damien. They contain gold. Bullion stamped with the Italian fascist seal. Mussolini is buying influence in New York, and he's paying rent to your Bishop to do it."

"Lies," Damien whispered, but there was no conviction in it.

"Are they?" Marguerite tossed the book onto the

altar steps. It landed with a heavy thud. "Open it. Read the dates. Tell me you didn't see the trucks. Tell me you didn't see the men in the fedoras waiting by the side door while you were hearing confessions."

Damien looked at the book as if it were a venomous snake. He knew. Deep down, in the place where he buried his war memories, he knew. He had seen the Bishop's new Cadillac. He had seen the sudden influx of cash for the roof repairs. He had chosen blindness because sight would require action, and action would require violence.

And Damien Leclair had promised God he was done

with violence.

"Get out," he said, his voice trembling with a rage that was aimed inward.

"No," Marguerite said. She reached out, her hand hovering near the sleeve of his cassock. She wanted to shake him, to wake the soldier sleeping inside the priest. "Bonanno knows I have this. He knows Jacob has the code. He gave us twenty-four hours."

She lowered her voice. "They're going to kill us, Damien. And then they're going to keep using your church as a bank vault for murderers."

Damien closed his eyes. He took a shuddering breath. The scent of her— of rain, of whiskey, and desire—was overpowering the incense. It was a torture he had invited by letting her into his life.

"The cellar key," Damien said, opening his eyes. They were wet. "It's not in the rectory. The Bishop keeps it."

"Where?"

"In the sacristy safe. But you can't get in. It's a Sargent & Greenleaf dial. Three tumblers."

"I don't need to get in," Marguerite said. "I need you to get in."

"I am a priest!" Damien shouted, the sound echoing off the vaulted ceiling. "I am not a thief! I am not a soldier! I am a shepherd!"

"Then protect your flock!" Marguerite shouted back. "Because the wolves are in the basement, Damien! And they are eating the sheep while you scrub the floors!"

The silence that followed was heavy, charged with

the energy of two people standing on the edge of a cliff.

Damien looked at his hands—the hands that had held a bayonet in the Argonne Forest, the hands that now held the Eucharist. They were large, capable hands, currently trembling with the effort of restraint.

He looked at Marguerite. He saw the fear behind her bravado. He saw the woman he loved but could never touch, standing in the center of his life's work, holding a match.

He turned away from her, walking toward the dark

wooden booth in the corner.

"Where are you going?" Marguerite asked.

Damien opened the door of the confessional. He didn't step inside the priest's side. He held the door open for her.

"If we are going to do this," Damien said, his voice dropping to a whisper that carried the weight of a final judgment, "we are not doing it in the light. Come inside. Tell me the plan. And ask God for forgiveness, Marguerite. Because I cannot give it to you for what you are about to ask me to do."

Marguerite walked toward him. She stepped into the darkness of the booth, the smell of old wood and whispered sins enveloping her. Damien stepped in after her, closing the door, sealing them in the blackness together.

For the first time in twenty years, Father Damien was not separated from a sinner by a screen. He was standing right beside her, in the dark, ready to fall.

CHAPTER 4: The Mercury Theater on the Air

****CBS Studio 1, Madison Avenue****

****Sunday, October 30, 1938. 8:00 PM.****

The "On Air" light bled a dull, warning red through the haze of cigarette smoke in the control booth.

Orson Welles stood at the center of the studio, a twenty-three-year-old prodigy with a face like an unbaked loaf of bread and a voice that sounded like it was carved from granite. He held a glass of brandy in one hand and a script in the other. He had loosened his tie. Sweat beaded on his upper lip, not from nerves, but from the sheer, manic energy

of creation.

He looked at the sound effects man, who was crouched over a toilet bowl filled with water, holding a plumber's plunger.

Welles raised a finger. *Now.*

The sound man worked the plunger. *Suuuuck.
Plop. Suuuuck.*

To the studio audience, it looked ridiculous. But Welles knew that through the ribbon microphone, traveling over the airwaves to millions of living

rooms across America, it wouldn't sound like a toilet. It would sound like the unscrewing of a Martian cylinder in a farmer's field in Grover's Mill, New Jersey.

Welles leaned into the mic, his eyes dancing with arrogance.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the most terrifying thing I have ever witnessed... The end is curling up... someone's crawling out of the hollow top..."

He wasn't just performing a play. He was conducting a psychological experiment. He was proving that in a world already terrified of Hitler

**and the Depression, people would believe anything
if it was delivered with enough static and authority.**

**He was lying to the world. And the world was about
to scream.**

****St. Jude's Rectory, Hell's Kitchen****

****8:12 PM****

**Three miles north, the panic was already taking
root.**

In the Bishop's private study—a room of mahogany paneling and velvet drapes that smelled of old money and sealed secrets—a Philco radio sat on the desk, glowing amber.

"...jets of flame! It's coming this way! The heat ray is coming this way!"

Marguerite LeRoux ignored the radio. She was on her knees in front of the wall safe, holding a flashlight steady.

"Hold the light lower," Father Damien whispered.

He was crouched beside her, his ear pressed against the cold steel of the safe door.

"The announcer sounds hysterical," Marguerite murmured, adjusting the beam. "Is it real?"

"It's theater," Damien said, his fingers turning the dial with the sensitivity of a safecracker, a skill he hadn't used since the Argonne. "But the fear is real. Listen to the street."

Even through the thick walls of the rectory, they could hear it. Screams. The sound of car horns blaring in a solid, panicked chord. People were fleeing their apartments, convinced the Martians

were marching on the Hudson.

"20 left," Damien whispered. *Click.* "10 right."

"You have good hands, Father," Marguerite said.

"I have sinful hands," he corrected. "I learned this from a sergeant in the 69th who used to rob banks in Boston."

The heavy iron door of the safe swung open.

Marguerite reached inside. She bypassed the stacks of cash—tithe money skimmed from the collection

plates—and the velvet bags that likely held gems. She reached for the back, finding a small, heavy brass key on a red ribbon.

"The Bell Tower cellar," she said, clutching it. "If the code in Bonanno's book is right, the gold is down there."

"And if it is?" Damien asked, sitting back on his heels, looking at the open safe like it was a gaping wound in his faith. "What then, Marguerite? We call the police? The police work for De Becker."

"We take a crate," she said. "We take one crate of Mussolini's gold to the Federal Building. The Feds

don't care about local graft, but they care about foreign interference. They care about the Neutrality Act."

Damien looked at her. In the half-light of the study, with the radio screaming about the end of the world, she looked beautiful and terrifying.

"You want to start a war," he said.

"I want to win the one we're already in," she replied.

She stood up to leave, but the heavy oak door of the study didn't open. It exploded inward.

The wood splintered with a sound like a gunshot.

Marguerite was thrown back against the desk.

Damien scrambled to his feet, placing himself
between her and the door.

A man stepped through the ruin of the frame.

He was massive, a slab of muscle wrapped in a wet
wool overcoat. His face was a roadmap of old
violence—a nose that had been broken and poorly
set, ears that were cauliflowered. He held a snub-
nosed .38 revolver in a hand the size of a ham hock.

It wasn't Bonanno. Bonanno didn't do house calls.

It was **"The Butcher"****, a freelance enforcer used by the combination when they wanted to send a message that couldn't be ignored.**

"Evening, Father," The Butcher grunted. His voice was wet gravel. "Joe Bananas sends his regards. He said you might be looking for the key."

He kicked the door shut behind him. He didn't look at Damien. He looked at Marguerite.

"And you," he said, pointing the gun at her chest.

"You're the lawyer. Joe said you got a mouth on you."

"Put the gun down," Damien said. His voice was calm, but it was the calm of a man standing in a trench waiting for the whistle. "This is consecrated ground."

The Butcher laughed. "The Bishop stores heroin in the basement, Padre. This ground ain't been holy since '29."

He took a step forward. "Hand over the book, lady. And the key. Or I paint the wall with your brains"

and tell the cops the Martians did it."

Marguerite's hand tightened on the brass key. She looked at Damien. He wasn't moving. His hands were at his sides, open, empty.

"Give it to him, Marguerite," Damien said softly.

"Smart priest," The Butcher sneered. He holstered the gun—a fatal display of arrogance—and reached for Marguerite with his bare hands. He grabbed her by the hair, jerking her head back.

"Where is it?" he growled, his breath hot on her face.

Marguerite cried out, dropping the flashlight. The room plunged into semi-darkness, lit only by the amber glow of the radio dial.

"...black smoke drifting over the city... people are dropping like flies..."

The Butcher raised his hand to strike her.

Damien moved.

He didn't move like a priest. He moved like a shock trooper.

He grabbed a heavy brass candlestick from the Bishop's desk—solid, ornamental, three pounds of metal. He didn't swing it wildly. He stepped into the space, pivoting his hips, and drove the heavy base of the candlestick into the side of The Butcher's knee.

There was a sickening *crack* of cartilage.

The Butcher howled, his leg buckling. He released Marguerite and staggered back, reaching for his gun.

Damien didn't stop. He stepped in close, inside the guard, and swung the candlestick again. Upward. Into the jaw.

Teeth shattered. The Butcher's head snapped back, blood spraying in a fine mist across the Bishop's velvet drapes.

He fell backward, crashing onto the Persian rug, the gun skittering away under the sofa.

He tried to rise, gurgling, spitting blood. He was tough; he wasn't staying down.

Damien stood over him. The priest's face was gone.
In its place was the soldier from 1918. His eyes were
void of mercy. He raised the candlestick high above
his head.

"Damien, no!" Marguerite screamed.

He brought it down.

The sound was wet. Final.

The Butcher stopped moving.

Damien stood there, chest heaving, the brass

candlestick dripping onto his cassock. The radio droned on in the silence.

"...this is the end... smoke is everywhere..."

Damien dropped the candlestick. It hit the floor with a dull clang. He looked at his hands. They were covered in blood. He looked at Marguerite, his eyes wide with the horror of what had just resurfaced from the depths of his soul.

He had broken the commandment. He had defiled the rectory.

"He... he was going to hurt you," Damien whispered, his voice cracking.

Marguerite stepped over the body. She didn't look at the dead man. she looked at the priest. She took his bloody hands in hers.

"We have to go," she said, her voice trembling. "We have the key. We have to go to the tower."

"I killed him," Damien said, staring at the corpse. "I am damned."

"We are all damned, Damien," Marguerite said,

pulling him toward the door. "But we're still alive. Move."

Outside, the city sirens wailed, screaming for an invasion that wasn't there, while inside St. Jude's, the real war had just claimed its first casualty.

CHAPTER 5: Sanctuary Defiled

The staircase leading to the bell tower was a spiral of cold stone, tight and suffocating, winding upward like the throat of a fossilized beast. It had

not been built for comfort; it had been built for penance.

Marguerite led the way, her hand gripping the rusted iron railing, the brass key biting into her palm. Behind her, Father Damien moved with the heaviness of a man walking to the gallows. He said nothing. The only sounds were the scrape of their shoes on the grit-covered steps and the ragged, shallow rhythm of his breathing.

Every step took them further from the carnage in the study, but the smell of the violence seemed to cling to them. It was a metallic tang, sharp and unmistakable, mixing with the scent of the damp

wool of Damien's coat. He had not just killed a man; he had bludgeoned him on the floor of his own rectory. The theological weight of that act was pressing down on him harder than the stone ceiling.

They reached the landing. The air here was different—thinner, colder, and carrying the restless energy of the storm outside. Above them, the great bronze bells of St. Jude's hung in silent judgment, their iron tongues still.

Marguerite fumbled with the lock on the heavy oak door that guarded the storage loft. Her hands were shaking so violently she could barely align the key.

"Let me," Damien whispered.

His voice was a ghost of itself. He reached over her shoulder. His hands were steady, but they were dark with dried blood. It crusted in his cuticles and stained the white cuffs of his shirt. The sight of his stained hands on the brass key made Marguerite's stomach turn, not with disgust, but with a profound, aching sorrow.

He turned the key. The tumblers engaged with a heavy, mechanical finality. He pushed the door open.

The room beyond was a cavern of shadows,
illuminated only by the strobe-light flashes of
lightning cutting through the wooden louvers of the
belfry. The wind howled through the slats, carrying
rain that lashed against the floorboards, making
the wood slick and black.

And there they were.

Stacked against the far wall, covered in oilcloth
tarps, were the crates.

Marguerite moved toward them, her heels skidding

slightly on the wet floor. She pulled back the tarp. The wood of the crates was fresh, pale pine that looked out of place amidst the ancient grime of the tower. Stamped on the side in black ink was a simple designation: *Vatican Import / Export - Liturgical Supply.*

She grabbed a rusted pry bar left on a workbench and jammed it under the lid of the nearest crate. She leaned her weight into it. The wood groaned and gave way, the nails shrieking as they were forced from their hold.

She lifted the lid.

It wasn't gold. Not at first glance. It was straw packing material. She dug her hands into it, pushing aside the dry stalks until her fingers brushed against something cold and smooth.

She pulled it out.

It was a bar, heavy and dull in the low light. She held it up as a flash of lightning illuminated the room. The stamp was unmistakable: the Fasces—the bundle of rods with the axe blade—the symbol of Mussolini's Italy.

"It's true," she breathed. "All of it."

She turned to Damien. "Look at it, Damien. It's not just a rumor. Your Bishop is banking for the Fascists."

Damien didn't look at the gold. He was standing by the open louvers, the rain soaking the front of his cassock, washing away the blood in thin, pale pink rivulets. He was staring out at the city below—a city that was currently screaming in terror over a radio play, unaware of the very real monsters sleeping in their church towers.

"I killed him," Damien said. He wasn't talking to her. He was speaking to the wind. "I stood over him, and

I brought it down. I felt the skull give way. I felt it."

He turned to face her. The lightning caught the hollows of his cheeks, making him look skeletal.

"I have celebrated the Eucharist every morning for fifteen years," he said, his voice trembling. "I have held the body of Christ in these hands. And tonight, I used them to murder a man in my own study."

He sank to his knees, not in prayer, but in collapse. The strength that had allowed him to wield the candlestick evaporated, leaving only the ruin of the man beneath the vestments.

Marguerite dropped the gold bar. It hit the floor with a heavy, dead impact.

She crossed the room. She didn't know what she was doing—she wasn't a priest; she couldn't offer absolution. She was the lawyer who had brought the war to his doorstep. She was the reason his soul was currently fractured.

She knelt in front of him. The floor was cold and wet against her knees.

"Damien," she whispered.

He wouldn't look at her. He was staring at his hands, scrubbing them against the rough wool of his cassock, trying to wipe away a stain that wasn't just on the skin.

"Look at me," she commanded softly.

She reached out and took his hands. They were freezing. She stopped his frantic scrubbing. She brought his hands to her face, pressing his palms against her cheeks. The blood was sticky, the smell of iron overwhelming, but she didn't pull away. She needed him to feel something living. She needed him to feel the heat of her skin, the pulse in her jaw.

"You are not damned," she said fiercely. "You are alive. You saved me."

"I am a priest," he choked out.

"You are a man," she countered. "And you are here with me."

Damien looked up. His eyes locked onto hers. The torment in them was absolute, a swirling vortex of guilt and adrenaline. But beneath the guilt, something else was waking up. The adrenaline that had helped him kill was now coursing through him,

demanding a release, demanding proof that he was not just a vessel of death.

The proximity was intoxicating. The smell of the rain, the ozone of the storm, and the musk of his own sweat created a primitive atmosphere that stripped away the sanctuary. This wasn't a church anymore. It was just a stone room in the sky.

He leaned forward. It wasn't a decision; it was gravity.

His mouth crashed against hers.

It was not a kiss of romance. It was a collision. It was desperate, rough, and tasted of salt and iron. Marguerite gasped, her hands tangling in the wet hair at the nape of his neck, pulling him closer. She felt the stubble of his jaw scraping her skin, a friction that sparked a fire in the center of her chest.

Damien made a low sound in his throat—half-sob, half-growl. His hands moved from her face to her shoulders, gripping her with a strength that could bruise. He pulled her against him, the wet wool of his cassock pressing against her silk blouse, the cold dampness seeping through to her skin.

He was seeking oblivion. He wanted to drown the memory of the Butcher's shattering skull in the sensation of her body.

Marguerite met him with equal force. She had been holding this back for months—the attraction to the forbidden, the desire to touch the man beneath the robes. But now, with the gold staring at them from the crate and a dead body downstairs, the social contract dissolved.

She pushed him back, her hands fumbling with the buttons of his cassock. The heavy black garment, the symbol of his containment, felt like armor she had to breach. He helped her, his fingers clumsy

and frantic, tearing at the fastenings.

When his skin met hers, it was like touching a live wire. His hands slid under her blouse, hot and rough against the cool curve of her waist.

Marguerite arched into him, a gasp torn from her throat as he buried his face in the crook of her neck.

"Marguerite," he whispered against her skin, his voice broken. "God help me. God help us."

"He isn't here," she whispered back, pulling him down to the floorboards. "Only us."

The storm outside raged, the thunder shaking the tower, but it was distant noise compared to the storm between them. They moved together on the hard, unforgiving floor, surrounded by the stolen wealth of a fascist regime. It was an act of sacrilege and salvation entwined—a frantic, heated reclaiming of life in the face of overwhelming death.

Damien moved with the starvation of a man who had denied himself for decades. Every touch was a confession, every breath a plea. Marguerite held him, anchoring him to the earth as he fell from grace, her own tears mixing with the rain on her

face.

For a suspended moment in time, there was no Bonanno, no De Becker, no impending war. There was only the friction of skin, the heat of breath, and the desperate, human need to be held in the dark.

When it was over, the silence returned, heavier than before.

They lay on the floor, entangled, the cold air of the belfry cooling their sweat. Damien lay with his head on her chest, his breathing slowing, his eyes closed. He didn't move away. He didn't scramble to cover himself in shame. He simply lay there,

shattered and remade.

Marguerite stroked his hair, her fingers tracing the scar behind his ear from the Great War. She looked at the open crate of gold, the dull yellow metal mocking them from across the room.

She had come for the evidence. She had found it. But in the process, she had dismantled the man she loved.

"We can't stay," Damien whispered finally, though he made no move to rise.

"No," she agreed. Her voice was a husk. "We have to move the body."

Damien flinched against her, the reality of the night rushing back in. He sat up slowly, the heavy cassock pooling around his waist. He looked at his hands again. The blood was still there, faint now, diluted by the rain and the sweat of their union.

He looked at Marguerite. His face was changed. The torment was still there, but the panic was gone. It had been replaced by a cold, steel resolve. The priest had entered the confessional, but the soldier had walked out.

"The river," Damien said, standing up and buttoning his shirt with steady fingers. "The tide is going out at four."

Marguerite stood, smoothing her skirt, feeling the ache in her muscles and the ghost of his touch on her skin. She nodded.

"The river," she repeated.

She picked up the gold bar and placed it back in the crate. They didn't need the gold tonight. They needed a shovel, a car, and a miracle to survive until dawn.

CHAPTER 6: The River Styx

The rain had turned the streets of Hell's Kitchen into slick, black mirrors reflecting the neon sins of the city.

At the side entrance of St. Jude's, a black 1934 Ford V8 idled, its headlights cut, the engine a low, nervous rumble. Rabbi Jacob Levinson sat behind the wheel, gripping the Bakelite steering wheel with white-knuckled intensity. He checked his

watch. 3:14 AM.

He reached into his coat pocket and touched the cold steel of the Colt 1911 he had borrowed from a bootlegger in the Garment District. It felt foreign and heavy, a clumsy tool for a man who lived by the text.

The side door of the rectory opened.

Jacob didn't see gold. He didn't see triumph.

He saw Marguerite and Father Damien struggling out into the alley, dragging a heavy, limp shape

wrapped in a blood-soaked Persian rug.

Jacob felt his stomach drop. He scrambled out of the car, the rain instantly plastering his shirt to his skin.

"What did you do?" Jacob hissed, rushing to grab the feet of the bundle.

"He was waiting for us," Marguerite said. Her voice was flat, hollowed out. She looked exhausted, her hair wild, her silk blouse buttoned wrong at the collar.

Jacob looked at Damien. The priest was pale, his eyes thousand-yard stares. He wasn't wearing his collar. His cassock was gone, replaced by trousers and a shirt that was soaked in rain and sweat.

Jacob looked between them. He saw the way Damien stood close to her, a protective, possessive gravity that hadn't been there three hours ago. He saw the flush on Marguerite's neck that wasn't from the cold.

He knew.

The realization hit Jacob harder than the sight of the body. The jealousy flared, hot and ugly, but he

swallowed it. He looked down at the rug. A heavy, dead hand flopped out, the knuckles tattooed with scars.

"The Butcher," Jacob whispered. "You killed the Butcher."

"I killed him," Damien said. His voice was unrecognizable—gravel and ash. "Open the trunk."

They lifted the body. It was dead weight, heavy and awkward. They shoved it into the trunk of the Ford, bending the knees to make it fit. Damien slammed the lid down. The sound was like a gavel strike.

"Get in," Jacob said.

The drive to the Hudson River was silent. The only sound was the rhythmic thwack-hiss of the windshield wipers and the sloshing of the tires on the flooded pavement.

Marguerite sat in the middle of the front bench seat, the heat radiating off both men. To her left, the Rabbi, vibrating with intellectual terror and suppressed rage. To her right, the Priest, a statue of broken commandments.

"Where are we going?" Marguerite asked, watching the streetlights blur past.

"Pier 54," Jacob said. "The Cunard White Star line. It's abandoned at night. The current is strong there. It pulls everything out to the Atlantic."

Damien stared out the window. "We left the gold."

"The gold isn't going anywhere," Jacob snapped. "But if Bonanno finds out his favorite hammer is missing, he'll tear the city apart before breakfast."

He glanced at Marguerite. "Did you find the book?"

**"We found the key," she said. "The gold is real,
Jacob. Crates of it. Stamped with the Fasces."**

**"And the cost?" Jacob asked, his eyes flicking to
Damien. "What was the cost of the key?"**

**Damien turned his head slowly. "The cost is paid,
Rabbi. Drive the car."**

**Pier 54 smelled of creosote, dead fish, and the oil-
slicked water of the Hudson. The rain had eased to
a drizzle, but the fog was rolling in, thick and gray.**

They backed the car up to the edge of the wharf.

**The water below was black, churning violently
against the pilings.**

**They hauled the body out of the trunk. The rug was
soaked through now, heavy and smelling of wet
wool and copper.**

**"On three," Damien said. He had taken the
shoulders—the heaviest part. He was doing
penance through labor.**

"One. Two. Three."

They swung the bundle. It cleared the edge of the pier and plummeted into the dark.

A hollow splash rang.

The sound was swallowed instantly by the river.

The Butcher was gone, dragged down by the weight of the Bishop's rug and the sins of the parish.

They stood there for a moment, three silhouettes against the gray fog.

Jacob lit a cigarette, his hands shaking as he cupped the flame. He inhaled deeply, the ember

glowing bright orange.

"So," Jacob exhaled smoke. "We are murderers now."

"We are survivors," Marguerite corrected. She leaned against the railing, looking down at the water. "Bonanno will know he's gone by morning."

"He'll think he skipped town," Jacob said. "Or he'll think he crossed the wrong guy. He won't think a priest and a lawyer beat him to death."

"He will if De Becker tells him," Marguerite said. She turned to face them. "We have the leverage now."

We know where the gold is. We can trade it."

"Trade it?" Damien asked, wiping rain from his face.

"With who?"

"With Albert De Becker," she said. "He's the politician brokering the deal. He wants the gold more than Bonanno does. Bonanno is just the muscle. De Becker is the architect."

"You want to make a deal with the devil to save us from the demon," Jacob mused.

"I want to walk into the Waldorf Astoria tomorrow

morning," Marguerite said, her eyes hard, "and offer him a choice. He gives us immunity and gets Bonanno off our backs, or we call the Federal Bureau of Investigation and tell them there's ten million dollars of fascist bullion in a church basement."

"He'll kill you," Damien said.

"He won't," Marguerite said. "Because I won't tell him where it is. And I won't be alone."

She looked at them. The Unholy Trinity.

"I need a suit," Damien said suddenly. He looked down at his ruined clothes. "If I am going to walk into the Waldorf, I cannot look like a grave digger."

Jacob looked at the priest. The animosity was still there, but the shared crime had forged a bond. A dark, rusted chain linking them together.

"I have a suit," Jacob said. "It's a little wide in the shoulders, but it's clean. Come back to the loft."

Jacob looked at Marguerite. "You too. You can't go home. Bonanno might be watching your building."

"Fine," Marguerite said.

She walked back to the car. Jacob watched her go.

He turned to Damien.

**"You crossed a line tonight, Father," Jacob said
quietly.**

Damien looked at the dark water swirling below.

**"I didn't cross it, Jacob," Damien whispered. "I
erased it."**

CHAPTER 7: The Gilded Cage

The sun rose over Manhattan not as a dawn, but as a gray bruise healing on the horizon.

In the garment loft, the air was stale, smelling of old coffee and the lingering, metallic scent of gun oil. Jacob Levinson sat at his drafting table, cleaning the Colt 1911 with a rag.

Marguerite stood by the desk, staring at the telephone. It was a heavy, black Bakelite model, a

monolith of communication with a rotary dial that clicked like a loaded revolver cylinder.

She lifted the receiver. The hum of the dial tone was a flat, electric drone.

She placed her finger in the metal hole for *E*.

Dragged it clockwise to the silver finger-stop.

Click-whirrr.

Then *L*. *Click-whirrr.*

Then *5*.

****ELdorado 5-3000.****

The Waldorf Astoria.

The connection clicked open. A voice, crisp and transatlantic, answered. *"Waldorf Astoria, how may I direct your call?"*

"Mr. Albert De Becker's suite," Marguerite said, her voice steady. "Tell him it's the woman from the projection booth. Tell him I have the key to the cellar."

There was a pause, then a click as she was patched through.

De Becker didn't say hello. **"You're alive. I'm disappointed."**

"And you're exposed, Albert," Marguerite countered. "I know about the shipments. I know about the gold. I'm coming to the hotel. Suite 42-A. We are going to make a deal."

"If you come here," De Becker purred, "you realize you are walking into the belly of the beast."

"I'm bringing a priest," she lied. "So try not to have anyone killed in the lobby. It's bad for the tourist trade."

She slammed the receiver down. The bell inside the phone chimed once, a final note.

She turned to the corner of the loft.

Damien Leclair was standing in front of a cracked mirror. The cassock—his armor, his identity for twenty years—lay in a heap on the floor. He was dressed in one of Jacob’s suits: a charcoal double-breasted wool that was slightly too tight in the shoulders and too short in the cuffs.

He looked at his reflection. Without the collar, his

neck looked naked, vulnerable. The tan line where the white plastic usually sat was stark against his skin. He didn't look like a priest anymore. He looked like a boxer who had put on a suit for a court appearance.

"You look like a gentile," Jacob muttered, not looking up from the gun.

"I look like a target," Damien corrected. He adjusted the tie, his fingers clumsy with the silk knot. "Do we have a plan, or are we just walking into the most expensive hotel in the world to beg for our lives?"

"We aren't begging," Marguerite said, grabbing her

coat. "We're trading. De Becker wants the gold. Bonanno wants the gold. If we give it to De Becker, he uses his influence to call off the dogs. He gets rich, we get to live."

"And the gold?" Jacob asked, sliding the Colt into his waistband. "It funds the Fascists?"

"We live to fight another day, Jacob," Marguerite said. "The gold is the ransom."

The taxi ride uptown was a journey between

worlds. They left the grime of the Garment District, passing the breadlines that snaked around the block on 34th Street—men in flat caps staring at the pavement, defeated.

Then, they crossed 42nd, and the city changed.

The ****Waldorf Astoria**** rose from the pavement of Park Avenue like a limestone cliff.

Opened in 1931, it was a monument to defiance.

While the rest of the country starved in the Dust Bowl, the Waldorf had been built on the bones of the old New York Central railroad tracks, a forty-seven-story Art Deco cathedral dedicated to the

worship of money. It was the tallest hotel in the world, a city within a city that generated its own electricity and had its own police force.

"The unofficial palace of New York," Marguerite murmured as the taxi pulled up to the grand entrance.

"It's a tombstone," Damien said, looking up at the twin towers piercing the gray sky. "With better room service."

They stepped out. The doorman, resplendent in a greatcoat with gold braiding, eyed them. He saw the ill-fitting suit on Damien, the exhaustion etched

into Marguerite's face, the nervous energy of the Rabbi. But this was New York; if you walked with enough purpose, no one asked for your ticket.

They pushed through the revolving doors.

The lobby was an assault of opulence. The floors were covered in mosaics—"The Wheel of Life" by Louis Rigal—composed of a hundred and fifty thousand pieces of marble. The walls were paneled in burl walnut. In the center of the room stood the Great Clock, a nine-foot bronze masterpiece commissioned by Queen Victoria for the 1893 World's Fair, chiming the quarter-hour with a sound that was polite, rich, and utterly indifferent

to suffering.

Men in tuxedos and women in bias-cut silk gowns moved through the space, trailing scents of Chanel No. 5 and expensive cigars. They laughed, holding martini glasses, oblivious to the fact that three murderers had just walked onto their carpet.

"Floor 42," Marguerite whispered. "The Towers."

They moved to the elevators. The operator, a young man in a pillbox hat, looked them over.

"Floor, sir?"

"Forty-two," Damien said. His voice had dropped into the command tone of the confessional. The operator snapped to attention and closed the brass gate.

The car ascended smoothly, the sensation of gravity increasing. Marguerite watched the floor numbers light up on the brass dial above the door.

10... 20... 30...

Her heart was hammering against her ribs. She could feel the phantom weight of the brass key in

her pocket.

"Remember," she whispered to the men. "De Becker is a politician. He doesn't want a scene. He wants a signature."

"And Bonanno?" Jacob asked, watching the numbers climb.

"Bonanno isn't invited," she said.

40... 41... 42.

The car stopped. The gate rattled open.

The hallway of the Towers was silent, carpeted in plush crimson that swallowed their footsteps. It smelled of fresh lilies and floor wax.

They walked to the end of the hall. Suite 42-A. The door was solid mahogany with a brass knocker in the shape of a lion's head.

Marguerite took a breath. She looked at Damien. He nodded, his jaw set. She looked at Jacob. He touched the bulge of the gun under his coat.

She raised her hand and knocked.

The door opened immediately.

It wasn't a butler.

It was **Vincenzo "The Hammer" Moretti****.**

He was wearing a tuxedo, smiling his gold-toothed smile. He held a glass of champagne in one hand and a submachine gun—a Thompson with the drum magazine removed for concealment—resting casually against his hip.

"Miss LeRoux," Moretti grinned. "Mr. De Becker is expecting you. And look... you brought the holy rollers."

Marguerite's blood ran cold.

"Bonanno isn't supposed to be here," she said.

"Plans change, sweetheart," Moretti said, stepping back to let them in. "Just like the numbers."

They stepped into the suite.

It was a panoramic view of the city—the Chrysler

Building gleaming to the east, the Hudson to the west.

Sitting in a leather wingback chair by the fireplace was ****Albert De Becker****, looking pale and sweaty.

Standing behind him, looking out the window at the city he claimed not to own, was ****Joseph Bonanno****.

Bonanno turned. He held a cigarette in a long holder. He looked at Damien's cheap suit, then at Marguerite.

"You made a phone call, Miss LeRoux," Bonanno said softly. "Using the Eldorado exchange. A public line. Did you really think the switchboard operator at the Waldorf doesn't on my payroll?"

He tapped ash onto the Persian rug.

"Welcome to the party," Bonanno said. "I hear you lost something of mine in the river."

The door slammed shut behind them. The lock clicked.

They weren't guests. They were the main course.

CHAPTER 8: Pepsi

The suite reeked of lavender and impending death.

Joseph Bonanno didn't shout. He didn't wave a gun. He simply walked to the sideboard, poured a glass of mineral water, and looked at the three intruders with the weary expression of a schoolteacher disappointed in his students.

"You drowned The Butcher," Bonanno said, turning

the glass in his hand. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a man who can break a femur without vomiting? It's a specialized skill set."

"He broke into a church," Damien said, his voice low, vibrating with the memory of the candlestick. "He threatened a woman."

"He was working," Bonanno corrected. "Just like you are working now. Just like Mr. De Becker here is working."

Bonanno gestured to the politician in the wingback chair. Albert De Becker was sweating through his silk dressing gown. He looked from Marguerite to

Bonanno, his eyes darting like trapped insects.

"Joe, I didn't know," De Becker stammered, his voice high and thin. "She called me. She said she had the key. I was going to get it for you."

"Albert," Bonanno sighed. "You were going to take the key, steal the shipment, and sell me out to the Feds to save your own skin. We found your packed bags in the bedroom. You were booking passage to Buenos Aires."

Bonanno looked at Moretti, the man with the Thompson submachine gun.

"Vincenzo," Bonanno said softly. "The room is too crowded."

Moretti grinned. He raised the barrel of the Thompson, aiming it squarely at Jacob's chest.

"Wait!" Marguerite stepped forward. "The key. I have it."

She reached into her pocket. Moretti hesitated, his finger hovering over the trigger.

"If you kill us," Marguerite said, holding up the

brass key, "you never find the cellar. St. Jude's is a labyrinth. You'll be tearing up floorboards for weeks while the Feds circle closer."

Bonanno studied her. "Bring it here."

Marguerite walked across the Persian rug. The distance felt like miles. She could feel the heat of the fireplace, the cold draft from the window, and the sheer, suffocating weight of Moretti's gun tracking her.

She stopped in front of De Becker's desk. Bonanno stood five feet away, near the open balcony door,

the wind whipping his tie.

"Put it on the desk," Bonanno commanded.

Marguerite placed the key on the polished mahogany next to a heavy crystal ashtray and a sharp, silver letter opener shaped like a Roman gladius.

"Smart girl," Bonanno said. He looked at De Becker.

"Albert, check the key. Make sure it's the Sargent & Greenleaf master."

De Becker scrambled out of his chair, desperate to

prove his loyalty. He lunged for the desk.

"Now, Vinnie," Bonanno said.

The air exploded.

**It wasn't the Thompson. It was the deafening blare
of the Colt 1911 from the back of the room.**

**Jacob Levinson hadn't waited. The moment
Bonanno's eyes shifted to the key, Jacob drew the
pistol from his waistband. He didn't aim for the
head; he aimed for the biggest target.**

The bullet hit Moretti in the shoulder, spinning him around. The Thompson roared, spraying a jagged line of holes across the ceiling, plaster raining down like snow.

"Damien!" Jacob screamed.

Damien didn't need the prompt. The boxer took over. He launched himself across the room, tackling Moretti before he could level the machine gun again. They crashed into the side table, sending a Ming vase shattering to the floor.

Chaos. Pure, unchoreographed violence.

De Becker, panicked by the gunfire, grabbed Marguerite. He wasn't trying to save her; he was using her as a shield. He hooked his arm around her throat, dragging her back toward the fireplace.

"Stop shooting!" De Becker shrieked. "I'll kill her! I swear to God!"

Marguerite couldn't breathe. The politician's arm was crushing her windpipe. She clawed at his sleeve, her vision swimming. Her hand flailed blindly across the desktop.

Her fingers brushed cold metal. The letter opener.

She gripped the handle. She didn't think. She didn't weigh the moral consequence. She swung her arm backward with every ounce of strength she possessed.

The silver blade drove deep into De Becker's neck, just below the jawline.

De Becker made a sound like a wet balloon deflating. His grip loosened. Marguerite shoved him away.

He stumbled back, clutching his throat, blood spurting through his fingers in arterial jets. He collapsed onto the credenza, knocking over the radio.

The impact jarred the dial. The radio sparked to life, volume full blast.

“...Pepsi-Cola hits the spot / Twelve full ounces, that's a lot...”

The cheery, tinny jingle filled the room, mixing with the gurgling sound of De Becker dying on the carpet.

Marguerite gasped for air, turning toward the window.

Bonanno was alone.

He wasn't looking at the body. He was looking at her. He reached into his jacket and pulled a small, pearl-handled .32 automatic. He wasn't a cowboy; he was an executioner.

He raised the gun at Marguerite.

"No!"

Damien rose from the pile of debris where he had knocked Moretti unconscious. He didn't run; he charged like a linebacker.

Bonanno fired. Bang.

The bullet caught Damien in the upper arm, spinning him, but it didn't stop his momentum. The priest slammed into the mobster, driving him backward toward the open balcony doors.

They hit the railing. The wind from forty-two stories up howled, tearing at their clothes.

Bonanno was smaller, but he fought like a rat. He gouged at Damien's eyes, kicking at his shins. He tried to bring the gun around for a kill shot to the stomach.

Damien gripped Bonanno's wrist. He twisted it. Snap. The gun fell, tumbling end over end into the void of Park Avenue.

They grappled on the edge. The city was spread out below them, a gray grid of indifference.

"You're a priest!" Bonanno hissed, spit flying. "You

can't do this! It's a mortal sin!"

Damien looked him in the eye. His face was bloodied, his suit torn, his arm burning with the gunshot wound. He didn't look like a priest. He looked like the Old Testament.

"I resigned," Damien whispered.

He shoved.

Bonanno tipped backward. His eyes went wide, not with fear, but with the shock of a man who realized his physics had failed him.

He didn't scream. He just fell.

Damien watched him go. A small, dark shape shrinking against the limestone facade of the building, tumbling down, down, down, until he was just a speck disappearing into the traffic below.

Damien turned back to the room.

The radio was still playing the jingle. "...twice as much for a nickel, too..."

De Becker was dead. Moretti was unconscious,

groaning in a pile of plaster.

Jacob was sitting on the floor, clutching his side.

His shirt was dark with blood where Moretti's spray had grazed him.

Marguerite stood over De Becker, the letter opener still in her hand. She was shaking.

Damien walked over to her. He gently took the blade from her fingers and dropped it.

"It's over," he said.

Marguerite looked at him. Then at Jacob. Then at the open window.

"No," she said, her voice trembling. "Now we have to leave."

She walked to the desk and picked up the brass key.

"And we have to burn the book."

CHAPTER 9: Ashes to Ashes

The suite at the Waldorf was a wreck of broken porcelain and spilled champagne. The wind from the open balcony door howled, chilling the sweat on their skin.

Sirens.

They started as a low drone from the street forty-two stories down, but they were rising fast, a mechanical wail climbing the limestone cliffs of Park Avenue.

"We have to go," Jacob said. He was leaning against the wall, his face gray, his hand pressed tight against the bloody graze on his ribs. "The house dicks will be here in two minutes."

Marguerite stood by the fireplace. The flames danced innocently, feeding on a log of birch. In her hand, she held the black book. The roster. The proof of the gold, the heroin, and the rot inside the Diocese.

If she kept it, she owned the city. She could blackmail the Bishop. She could crush the remnants of the Bonanno crew. She could be the Queen of Hell's Kitchen.

She looked at Damien. He was wrapping his bleeding arm in a silk napkin from the room service cart. He met her gaze. The fire in his eyes was gone, replaced by a dull, infinite exhaustion. He wasn't a priest anymore. He wasn't a soldier. He was just a man who had seen too much gravity.

"Burn it," Damien said.

Marguerite didn't hesitate. She tossed the book into the fire.

The leather cover curled instantly. The pages—the

names of judges, union bosses, and holy men—
caught the flame. The paper turned black, then
orange, then ash. The secrets of 1938 curled up the
chimney and vanished into the New York sky.

"The gold?" Jacob asked, watching the book burn.

"Let it rot in the cellar," Marguerite said. "Without
the book, it's just metal. Let the Bishop explain it to
God."

She grabbed her coat.

"Service stairs," she commanded. "We separate at

the lobby. Don't look back."

EPILOGUE: The Empty Pew

December 1938

**The winter had come early and hard. Snow dusted
the marquee of the Strand Theater on Broadway,
where the lights blazed in defiance of the gray**

afternoon.

Inside, the air smelled of roasted peanuts and damp wool. On the massive silver screen, *The Adventures of Robin Hood* was playing. Errol Flynn, in impossible, vibrant Technicolor, swung from a rope, laughing as he fought for justice.

It was a lie. A beautiful, bright lie.

Marguerite sat in the back row of the balcony, the darkness of the theater wrapping around her like a coat.

Next to her sat Jacob. His arm was in a sling,
hidden under his jacket. He had lost ten pounds.
The sharp, nervous energy that used to define him
had dulled into a quiet vigilance. He watched the
movie, but he didn't laugh.

"The police ruled it a murder-suicide," Jacob
whispered, keeping his eyes on the screen. "They
say De Becker shot Moretti, pushed Bonanno, and
then... fell on his own letter opener. A tragic dispute
over gambling debts."

"Convenient," Marguerite murmured, lighting a
Lucky Strike. The smoke drifted up into the
projector beam.

"The Church cleaned up the rest," Jacob said. "St. Jude's has a new rector. The cellar has been sealed with concrete. They say the foundation was unstable."

He turned to look at her. In the flickering light of the film, his scars were visible—thin white lines on his jaw where the glass from the loft had cut him.

"I'm reopening the synagogue next week," he said.

"We're holding a Kaddish for the dead."

"For who?" Marguerite asked.

"For all of us," Jacob said.

He reached out and took her hand. His grip was warm, familiar. For a moment, the memory of the loft—the heat, the desperation, the skin-on-skin survival—flooded back. But it was a memory of a war that was over.

Jacob squeezed her hand, then let go.

"I can't save you, Marguerite," he said softly. "And I can't let you save me. We know too much about each other's sins."

He stood up, buttoned his coat, and walked out of the theater, leaving her alone in the dark.

Marguerite watched him go. She didn't follow.

She reached into her purse and pulled out a folded piece of paper. It had arrived that morning, postmarked from a small town in upstate New York near the Canadian border. No return address.

She opened it. The handwriting was jagged, the penmanship of a man with a wounded arm.

Marguerite,

The bullet does not just shatter the bone; it stays in the body. You cannot cut it out without killing the patient.

I have left the order. I am working at a lumber yard in the Adirondacks. The work is hard. The cold is honest. It is a penance.

I think of the bell tower every night. I think of the rain. I think of you. But I also think of the weight of the candlestick. I am not the man who can walk beside you. That man died on the floor of the

rectory.

Do not write to me. Let me be invisible.

— D.

Marguerite stared at the letter. She folded it carefully and placed it in her pocket, next to the heavy lead Minié ball she had taken from her grandfather's journal.

On the screen, Errol Flynn kissed Maid Marian. The music swelled—a triumphant, brassy crescendo.

**Marguerite didn't cry. She dragged on her cigarette,
the cherry glowing red in the dark.**

**She was the Star of Erin. She had survived the boat.
She had survived the riots. She had survived the
Kingpins and the Priests.**

**She stood up, smoothing her skirt. She turned her
collar up against the cold draft of the theater.**

**The movie wasn't over, but she had seen enough.
Marguerite LeRoux walked up the aisle, pushing
through the heavy doors, and stepped out into the
snow-blind streets of New York City.**

THE END