

**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

the Vatican. Behind the Vatican walls the growing consensus is to cover this up if it turns out to be true. You have three days four at the most to recover the ring. If you have not solved the case by then Mr. Steele I am certain they will consider the matter closed. I cannot let this rest. This could be the tip of the iceberg. How many more rings are out there? There is one more thing Mr. Steele. Last week when quarterly inventory was taken at the Vatican it was discovered that a ream of paper with the watermark and official royal Vatican seal was missing and most likely stolen. This is why I am totally convinced the original ring is somewhere here in Philadelphia. Al said you were the best. He also said you love a good mystery; well this is about as mysterious as it gets. Will you take the case Mr. Steele? I have been authorized to pay you \$50,000. I can have half of the money wired from the Vatican bank into your account tomorrow.”

Alexander Steele was intrigued by the case. He was also impressed with how efficient the Vatican Intelligence Service was. Steele thought to him self, geez, these guys even have their own bank, what a sweet gig. Maybe I should have been working for them all of these years. He reached across the table and shook Julius’s hand.

“Well, you’ve given me almost nothing to go on. One picture and a phone number that’s practically useless, but I’ll see what I can do.”

Julius breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you Mr. Steele. I know you will do your very best.”

Solving this case would be like unraveling a ball of string. Steele would have to find where the string began in order to make any headway and seventy two hours was not a lot of time. He was a tad apprehensive about going up against the D’Angelo brothers but in the end he concluded that Nickolas and Fabio D’Angelo bleed just like everyone else.

Steele dropped his new client off at the Marriott downtown before returning to the club. As it turned out Stan and Brenda, the two he needed to help him with the case were still sitting at his booth. Stan was one of the top hackers in the country and Brenda had been working at the phone company for more than twenty years. Those contacts would help give Steele a running start on this unusual case.

Early next morning Steele learned from Brenda that the missing man had purchased the disposable phone recently from a local convenience store in Fish town. Steele made a quick call to Al in Montreal Canada to make sure Julius’s story checked out. Stan spent the night checking hospital emergency rooms and morgues for John Doe’s. At 7:45a.m. Stan hit pay dirt. Steele had just gotten up and was getting dress when the black cell phone on his dresser began to vibrate.

“Hey man its Stan. I got something for you.” Steele’s ears perked up, “Great, put the coffee pot on. I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

Stan lived alone by choice. He was an attractive guy who loved the thrill of chasing the ladies. His computer skills made him enough money over the years to avoid the drudgery of a nine to five but still live a lavish lifestyle. When Steele arrived Stan was still in his expensive dark blue silk pajamas and robe. The large TV screen on the far side of the living room doubled as Stan’s computer screen. The scene was familiar; it was one the two men had replayed many times while working dozens of life or death cases over the years. Since their childhood days running the streets of South Philly Steele was always seen as the analytical one but Stan was different. Before the age of ten he spent most of his summer days on the porch taking apart old broken discarded radios and repairing them with spare parts from radios that were beyond repair. His fascination for machines drew him into the world of computers even before he was old enough to own one.

As the two sat sipping hot coffee in front of the big screen Stan pulled up an image of the main branch of the Philadelphia Library. He put down his cup and began tapping on the black keyboard.

“The police picked up a guy around two a.m. on the steps of the library on the same night your friend from the Vatican was supposed to be there. His estimated age was between 62 and 70. No ID. Died from a heart attack. This could be your guy.”

Steele stared at the picture of the building on the screen. He noticed the gray security camera’s mounted on the corners of the building. “Stan, can you hack into the libraries security system?”

Stan quipped, “Is the Pope Catholic?”

By the time Steele was about to pour his third cup of hot, strong, Arabian coffee Stan put down the keyboard, clapped his hands as he rose slightly from the sofa. “Yes! I still got it bro.”

Steele and Stan watched quietly as a balding, grey haired man sat nervously on the library steps. It was a clear night. The grainy footage was in black and white. It was like watching a silent movie from the forties. The only difference was the clock timer clicking down the seconds and minutes in the bottom left hand corner. 11:45, the man got up and walked out of the camera’s view. 11:50 he returns and waits until 11:57 when he is approached by a man with his back turned to the camera. A brief conversation takes place then some completely unexpected catches Steele by surprise. A sudden flash of light appears near the second man’s hand and the older balding man lurched backward and falls onto the steps like a rag doll. Seeming unfazed by the motionless man the attacker looks around then quickly rummages threw the old mans pockets before running off into the night.

Steele rose from his seat, “Stan, stop the tape!”

Stan was puzzled, “what the hell was that” he asked.

Steele’s look went from curious to serious as he answered his friend’s question. “Stun gun, he was tasered. Stan, run it back and slow it down.”

Stan re-ran the video until he reached the part with the flashing light. “There, Steele pointed, look at his hand.”

After watching the footage a few more times Steele pointed out that the man was still moving after the assailant fled the scene. Stan was still confused, “I still don’t get it man, if he wanted to kill him why didn’t he shoot him or stab him in the heart or something?”

Steele poured another cup of coffee as he explained, “He wasn’t trying to kill him. He wanted to scare him. Don’t you see he wanted to torture him into giving him information? Did you watch near the end? He went through his pockets. I bet you ten to one the old guy had a bad ticker.” Steele placed his hand over his heart. “He probably had a pacemaker. The jolt from the stun gun is what most likely killed him. Well, the good news is that he ring is still out there. The bad news is that dead men don’t talk.”

### **Message from the Grave**

**Steele picked up the Vatican security agent from the hotel just as he was about to leave for the airport. He knew that with Julius's credentials he would have no problem having the body exhumed. Twenty four hours later Julius DiBona was on a flight to New York City. If Steele could not wrap up the case in two days DiBona would be headed back to Rome.**

**Alexander Steele took the Schuylkill Expressway and headed uptown to Chelton Hills Cemetery. It was a quiet spring afternoon at the cemetery where bodies of the dearly departed rested. That peace would soon erupt into a deadly encounter.**

**Steele felt in the air, it was not feeling of fear from the dead, it was a sense that something was not quite right, a sense that has kept him alive through dozens of deadly cases. As he scanned the grave site for anything that looked out of place Steele couldn't help notice how nervous the caretaker was as he watched the three grave diggers milling around the gravesite waiting for the backhoe operator to maneuver the big yellow machine into place. For a brief moment Steele caught a glimpse of flashing light from behind a tree on the north mound about four hundred feet away. The reflection of the sun bouncing off a watch or maybe eye glasses from the uninvited guest in the distance. Steele began making his way toward where he had seen the light flash. When he reached the half way point a short man in dark clothing bolted from behind a weeping willow and began running away as fast as he could. Steele was in hot pursuit. When the man with the glasses realized he could not out run Steele he turned, pulled out his gun and fired three shots in Steele's direction. In one fluid motion Steele dove and rolled behind an old gray, four foot high head stone and drew his weapon. He crouched down behind the small wall of granite and carefully peered around the side. He noticed the man was still running further up the mound. When the gun toting attacker stopped at the top of the hill turned to fire again Steele was ready. He pumped two rounds dead center into the man's chest causing the assailant to drop his weapon and roll slowly in Steele's direction. By the time Steele reached his attacker the man was barely alive. Steele held his gun close to his chest. He kneeled next to the man who was bleeding profusely from his wounds. He took shallow breaths as he slowly moved his head side to side. Steele moved closer to his face, "Who sent you," he asked.**

**The man tried to speak but no words came out. Steele tried again, "who do you work for?"**

**The man's eyes rolled around in his head for a second and in an instant he was dead. Steele quickly searched the dead man for ID but didn't find any.**

**Alexander Steele was angry. He knew that being shot at was an occupational hazard but he had never gotten use to it. He wanted answers and there was still one man alive who could give them to him. Realizing that the workers had taken shelter inside Steele stormed into the cemetery caretaker's office. After taking one look in Steele's eyes the workers scattered and left their boss to fend for him self. Sweat was pouring off the nervous man as he tried acting normal. Steele grabbed the man by the collar and pressed his Glock against the man's temple.**

**"I hope you don't have a hearing problem cause I'm only gonna ask you this one time! Who did you tell I was coming?"**

**The man was now shaking uncontrollably but didn't hesitate to answer, "Nick, it was Nickolas D'Angelo. He told me to call if anybody came round asking about that body. He ain't the kinda of guy you say no to. He promised me two hundred dollars. I didn't care about the money; I just wanted him to go away."**

**The sound of police sirens could be heard off in the distance. Steele released the man and put his weapon away.**

It was late afternoon when Steele returned from police headquarters that the locals refer to as the Round House because of its shape. His friend Detective Vance gave him a lift back to the cemetery. During his time at the station the body had been exhumed and was ready for transport. In less than five minutes Steele had found out everything he could from the recently deceased. This strange case was growing stranger with every turn. Detective Vance was much older than Steele. He stood in the background against the dark wall with his arms crossed watching Steele do his thing. Steele slipped on a pair of latex gloves, as he examined the body he filled Vance in on the case.

"According to the Medical Examiner's report he died from a heart attack but also according to the report he had a pacemaker implanted about seven years ago." Steele pulled up the pant leg of the corpse and gently rolled down his sock. "Hello, what do we have here?"

Steele was careful as he pulled out a blackened table spoon out of the sock.

Detective Vance strained to get a better look. He shook his head as he moved closer. "I've been a cop for a long time and in all my years I have never seen a spoon inside the sock of a dead guy."

Steele held the spoon up to the light, "Yeah, they must have missed it. Looks like it got fried along with the pacemaker"

After checking the fingernails and the label inside the sport coat Steele closed the black body bag. "We're done here."

Vance stepped in Steele's path. "What, aren't you going to take the body back for a full autopsy?"

Steele stepped around his friend on his way to the door.

"Nope, I don't need too. There's nothing else he can tell me."

Vance pointed to the dead body on the table, "Steele, he hasn't told you anything."

Steele held up the spoon and the mug shot taken earlier by the coroner. "This is as good as it gets my friend. Thanks for the ride."

Vance called out to Steele as he was leaving, "Hey Steele, where you headed?"

"South Street" answered Steele.

"Suit City, my Dad used to take me there every Easter to get a new suit. That's where our John Doe brought his clothes. Maybe somebody down there will recognize him."

Vance chuckled softly and thought, "*I guess that's why he makes the big bucks.*"

Steele jumped in his blue jag and made it to Suit City a few minutes before closing time. The blond haired middle aged man with the goatee and yellow tape measure draped around his neck gave Steele a hearty greeting. As it turned out the man in Steele's photo had been a regular at Suit City for years. The salesman recognized him right away.

"Yeah, that's Gus McMillan. He owns the antique jewelry shop on jeweler's row over on 8<sup>th</sup> and Sansom Street. I think it's called Antique Treasures or something like that. Gus was a hell of a nice guy, what happened to him?"

Steele put the picture in his shirt pocket. "That's what I'm trying to find out"



## **Standoff**

Now that he had a name and business to go with the face things were starting to fall into place. The one thing that had Steele baffled was the spoon. He had to work fast with just two days to go before the Vatican would pull the plug on Julius's his investigation Steele was on the move. He had no problem finding the jewelry shop. Steele peered inside the window of the small shop and witnessed a man and a woman arguing near the back.

The sign on the front door window said closed but since the door was unlocked he let himself in. As Steele entered the shop he didn't recognize the woman was but the man with the long black hair in the pony tail was bad news. His name was Nickolas D'Angelo aka Notorious Nick. The shop was in disarray. Draws were left open and the contents of several boxes had been dumped onto the glass counters and floor. The arguing stopped when they saw Steele headed their way. He could see the young lady was upset and had been crying. Nick stood at about 5' 10". He was lean and muscular with biceps that bulged through his tight black tee shirt.

Nick turned to Steele and smiled. "Alexander Steele, I always knew one day you would stick your nose into our business affairs. I heard about your little run-in at the cemetery this afternoon."

Steele hunched his shoulders, "the funeral business is a little slow these days so I thought I'd help them out."

Nick's smile vanished faster than an ice sickle in front of a blowtorch. "That was my cousin, you bastard." He started reaching toward his back.

Steele's instincts kicked in and in a flash both men stood a mere twenty feet away with guns drawn ready to fire. The lady in the shop held her hands to her mouth and screamed as she backed into a corner in fear for her life. She slowly sank to the floor wondering what would happen next. With arms extended and their fingers on the triggers Steele and Nick stood silently with eyes locked on each other. It was a good old fashioned Mexican standoff.

Nick sneered at Steele. "Maybe the cemetery does need more business. Maybe I should follow your lead, starting with you." Steele gave Nick a cold hard stare. "Better men than you have tried. Where's your brother, he's usually the one who likes to beat on defenseless women?" Nick stepped away from Steele.

"He's on vacation. He should be back in about eighteen months. I'm not here to give the lady a hard time; I just came to pick up what belongs to me. A gold ring, it has a fish in the center. You wouldn't happen to know where it is would you Steele?"

Steele knew full well that Nick was the man who murdered the jeweler or put out the hit to have someone else do it but he remained clam. "Well Nick, all I can tell you is that you'll get what coming to you."

Steele's remark nearly pushed Nick over the edge. He kicked a box of jewelry on the floor as he slowly backed toward the front door. Still pointing the gun at Steele's heart, an angry Nick was clearly the one backing down but he didn't want to leave without making a threat.

"You better watch your ass Steele. If I were you I won't go walking near any open windows."

Steele got a kick out of getting under Nick's skin.

He chuckled and said, "Thanks for your concern about my safety Nick but I won't be going near any windows above the third floor, I'm afraid of heights."

Keeping his eyes on Steele Nick used his free hand and felt around until he found the handle to the front door. Once he made it outside he slammed the door so hard the glass shattered.

The dark haired woman in the shop was Kathy McMillan, Gus's daughter. Steele helped her up, walked with her to the back of the shop and held her gently as she broke down in tears when he told her about her father's death.

Kathy wanted to give her dad a proper burial. After claiming the body Steele took her to her dad's apartment to pick out a suit. On the way he asked her why she didn't report him missing. Katy wiped the tears from her face and told him about the e-mail she had received a few days ago.

"It was normal for dad to go out of town on business trips, you know, conventions, estate auctions, that kind of stuff. So when he sent me an e-mail saying he would be gone for a while I just thought it was another trip to pick up more antique jewelry."

Once inside the apartment Kathy was devastated by what she saw. The entire apartment looked as if it was hit by an earthquake. Sofa cushions, pillows and mattresses were ripped open and everything throughout the apartment was tossed about or broken. In the kitchen Steele was able to match the spoon found on Mr. McMillan with the silverware in the drawer. Once he was able to calm Kathy down again he picked up a half eaten container of Chinese food. "Your dad wasn't much of a cook was he? I noticed the same fast food bags and hoagie wrappers back at the shop."

Kathy brushed back her hair and shook her head, "No, he hardly cooked at all. Why do you ask?"

Steele showed her the spoon.

"Do you have any idea why he would be carrying a spoon around with him?"

She thought for a moment then nodded no.

"Look Mr. Steele I know my dad wasn't a saint. He's done some pretty crappy things in his life, things he thought I didn't know about but he didn't deserve to die like this. I have no idea of where the ring is or why he would carry a spoon around inside his sock of all places. I definitely don't know who this Nick person is. I feel like I'm in a nightmare and I just want it to end."

Once family members started to arrive Steele excused him self and drove to the nightclub.

## **Revelation**

On the way to Club Inner Sanctum Steele called Stan and asked him to bring his laptop with the security footage from the library. All the pieces were there but the weary detective just couldn't put them together.

While Stan spent most of the night trying to pick up women in front of the club Steele was self sequestered in his back booth. He watched the footage over and over again until he felt a rather large presence standing over him. It was Sugar Bear. One of his predictions had finally come true and he was there to gloat.

"Hi boss, heard you had a visitor the other day."

Steele nodded slowly, "Yes Sugar Bear, I had a visitor from out of town. You might want to get your tape recorder ready because you won't hear me say this too often. You were right. A guy from Italy came to see me. He needed my help. I took the case and soon it will be over."

Sugar Bear simply grinned then pumped his fist in the air and walked away.

After the club closed Steele went home and tried to get some rest but as tired as he was also restless so he spent hours tossing and turning. He still had questions.

"Why would Mr. McMillan set up a meeting with Julius and not bring the ring? If Nick doesn't have it then where is it?"

3:17a.m. Steele got in his car and drove to the scene of the crime hoping for a burst of inspiration. Whenever he had a difficult case he found it best to get out and clear his head. There was a chill in the air. After twenty minutes he turned up the collar of his windbreaker and walked from the library over to the parkway. Steele sat on the very top step of the Art Museum. There were no tourists at the famous Philadelphia landmark at four a.m. so he took advantage of the view and the quiet. Replaying the mental pictures in his mind he realized the yellow and white box of sandwich bags seemed out of place among the food wrappers at the victim's home.

Steele was tired; the number of cases he had taken on over the past year was catching up on him.

The next morning he had overslept but with the much needed rest came clarity. Right smack in the middle of his shower it was as if the heavens opened and the angles sang. All the live chess pieces had fallen into place.

Steele made three phone calls. He felt that Kathy McMillan had a right to know exactly how her father had died. He also phoned the Vatican agent Julius DiBona who was packing to leave New York for Rome.

It was a balmy night in Philadelphia when Steele, Julius and Kathy meet on the steps of the library. Steele was not the dramatic type but in this case he was pleased with himself and knew the parties involved would indulge him. Besides, there was a killer on the loose and if everything went according to plan everyone would be satisfied with the outcome.

Mr. DiBona checked his watch. "Okay Mr. Steele, the suspense is killing me. It's almost midnight why are we here?"

As the audience of two sat on steps where Mr. McMillan was murdered Steele began to explain what happened. Steele pointed to Julius,

"Mr. McMillan had every intention of giving you the ring that night but he was afraid, tired and nervous. He didn't know who to trust so he left his ID at home. A few minutes before midnight, Mr. McMillan got up from these steps and walked out of the security camera view for about two minutes. It was the spoon that really baffled the hell out of me but I finally figured it out. If Nickolas D'Angelo would have found the spoon he may have also figured it out. Kathy,

your dad was a smart man, that why he put the spoon in his sock. He knew no one would look for it there. Everybody please be absolutely still and quiet.”

Steele pulled out his phone and dialed McMillan’s number. It was faint but a few feet away you could hear the ringing. Steele, Kathy and Julius followed the sound to the grass a few feet away. Steele passed the phone to Julius. He used the spoon to digging around a small shrub. It only took a few seconds for him to pull up the sandwich bag containing the phone and the missing Fishermen’s ring. Both Kathy and Julius were amazed.

Steele remembered how Brenda used a similar bag to keep her cosmetics from ruining the inside of her purse. He explained to Julius and Kathy how he found dirt stains on Mr. McMillan’s knees and dirt under his fingernails. He also recalled how Kathy told him that he always tried to protect her by not dragging her into his illegal activities so I was convinced she was not involved and that her dad didn’t slip her the ring.

Steele handed the plastic bag to Julius and watched as he held it up to the light.

“Steele, how did he know we would find it before the battery went dead?”

Steele sniggered, “he didn’t. His main goal was to keep it out of the hands of the bad guys. It’s possible that ring could have stayed buried there for a hundred years. Either way he would have accomplished what he set out to do. Now the D’Angelo brothers will never get their hands on it.”

A chilling voice from out of the darkness behind them startled the group.

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that Steele.” Nick D’Angelo stepped out of the shadows holding a nine mill directly at Steele. He turned the gun on to Julius.

“Hand over the bag now! I already have the Vatican paper and a top notch forger. Now that I have the ring I gonna make a shitload of money.”

Julius slowly handed Nick the bag with the ring and the phone. Steele was not the least bit surprised. He knew that Nick would be reluctant to shoot them. It was late and quiet. A gunshot would have every cop within three miles racing to their location.

“So Nick it was you who killed Mr. McMillan.”

Nick laughed out loud. “So this is where I’m supposed to confess to murder and a bunch of cops swarm in from all directions. You don’t know when to give up do you man?”

Steele nodded, “it’s a simple question, did you kill him or not?”

Nick laughed again. “You know Steele; you’re a real pain in the ass. No, satisfied, I didn’t kill him. You ain’t gonna get a confession out of me. Now where are the cops?”

Steele corrected him, “Cop not cops, it’s just one and he’s right behind you. Good evening Detective Vance. Thanks for coming.”

Even in the dim lighting everyone could see Nick turning pale when he heard the voice behind him say, “Anytime Steele”

Suddenly Nick whirled around and fired two shots in the direction of the voice behind him but Vance was on the move. Before he could turn back to face the others Steele had drawn his weapon and placed the barrel in the back of his head.

Steele yelled, “Drop the gun asshole or your funeral gonna be closed casket!”

Detective Vance emerged from the bushes and took Nick’s gun. He reached inside Nick’s back pants pocket and pulled out the stun gun. “I don’t need a confession; I got you, your little toy and your prints on the ring. Say hi to your brother for me.”

The following evening Steele and his girlfriend Shakia stopped by the club before going to the Dell East to catch Carlos Santana in an outdoor concert. He handed Sugar Bear a book. Sugar Bear briefly examined the cover then read the title out loud.

“Escape 2 Earth 2012, hey thanks boss. Sounds interesting, glad to see you’re finally coming around.”

He found Brenda and gave her a bottle of her favorite champagne and a box of sandwich bags. She smiled, hugged Steele and gave him a peck on the cheek.

“Thanks for the bubbly baby but what’s with the bags? Steele smiled and said “Brenda, it’s a long story. Just do me one favor.”

Brenda sat back in the booth and said,

“You got it sugar, what is it?” Steele kissed her on the forehead and said,

“Don’t ever change.”

The End

Follow Alexander Steele as he goes up against drug kingpins to try and stop a shipment of poison drugs from hitting the streets of Philly in Alexander Steele and the Death Dealer.

Other Alexander Steele Investigations as of May 2011 in the order they occur in.

Blackout (novel)

The Ring of Death (short story)

The Death Dealer (short story)

Case of the Missing Men (novel) coming soon

Legacy of Death (coming soon)