

Chapter 1.

THE TWO CANVAS BAGS banged against his hip and legs as he clambered up the last flight of stairs. At the top he paused, huffing, staring down a dark hallway. Behind, red lights spun flashing away the dark, his ambulance, outside, parked beneath the stairwell window. Ahead, the long hallway, rows of doors, and at the end, a window. A crescent moon shown in, casting black bars across the floor and walls. He hustled on as clouds engulfed the moon and was left in the flashing-red dark.

He clicked on his flashlight and read the brass door numbers. *690, 692, 694, 696. Okay, this is it. Chill out, relax.* He turned, “Carmine, this is it. Should we—?” He looked around. *Shit.* His partner wasn’t there. *Where the hell?* Peter was alone, on his first call.

“Carmine...?” he called out.

Nothing.

“Screw it.”

He pounded on the door.

“Hello, ambulance!”

He waited. Nothing.

“Hello! Cavalier Ambulance!” He pounded again. “Did someone call 911? Hello?!” He pounded again, and yelled. No answer. He glanced at the address he’d written on his blue nitrile glove. *It’s the right number.*

Peter tested the doorknob; it turned smoothly. He pushed it ajar, paused, and looked back down the hall. *Should wait for Carmine.* Then he glanced inside, and reason was washed away in a torrent of adrenaline. “Oh, fuck,” he said, and he meant it. Both canvas bags thumped to the floor.

A man lay half-naked, stomach bloated, sallow, face-up on a sofa, emaciated legs and arms lifeless-askew. From the grinning crimson gash that was his mouth, blood trickled. It stained the grey skin of his chest and distended abdomen below.

Shattered syringes and bent needles infected the floor, glistening constellations in the half-glow of the single bulb swaying on its cord. Shadows spun.

Okay, okay, what do I do? He looked at the half-naked guy, then back at the stairwell, trying to will his partner to suddenly appear.

“Carmine!” he yelled, “Get up here!”

Carmine did not suddenly appear.

Fumbling his way to the man’s head, syringes crunched underfoot. “Jesus.” He kicked clear a spot and knelt by the man’s head. “Hey, sir! SIR! You alright!?” he yelled in the man’s ear. Tubes tumbled to the floor when he opened the portable suction kit. “Sir, you okay?”

Stupid fucking question: what do I do? Overdose, okay, relax, deep breath, another deep breath, ABC’s, airway first, then breathing, then something, then, something else.

In the distance, in the back of his mind, Peter might have heard the leaden *thwomp* of Carmine stomping his way up the stairs. “Hurry up, Carmine!” he yelled.

Okay, guy’s not breathing.

Peter pried open the man’s mouth. Blood, pooled to the brim of his lips, spilled out. “Jesus.” With crimsoned fingers he felt for a carotid pulse, wondering if he couldn’t feel it because it wasn’t there, or because his skills sucked. *Shit. He’s dead. Defib, where?* He looked around. *Carmine’s got it. Shit. Suction, guy needs suction. Still warm. Fucking reeks.*

The suction unit chugged to life when Peter switched it on. It slurped and hissed and gurgled as he dipped the catheter into the guy’s mouth, making all those nasty sounds from dentist’s office just before he says, “Spit!” Red twisted and twirled up the tubing towards the collection container. “Hey Carmine!”

Feet stomped, somewhere, the stairs?

Peter pushed the rigid tip of the catheter deeper, gurgling violently, and the man convulsed. Peter sprung back ninja-quick, saving his uniform and boots from the stream of crimson vomit.

The suction chugged.

Sputtering and coughing, hacking, the man gagged up a mouthful of blood and other stuff.

“Sir, you okay?” he asked, stepping forward. “Just hang on a second. We’re gonna get you to the hospital. I’m gonna give you some oxygen.”

The man was doubled over, sputtering, hacking.

“Sir? Maybe you should sit down?”

Standing now, the man pounced forward and latched onto Peter's jacket and throat, his grips vises.

Peter staggered back, swinging, as the man lurched forward, squeezing, squeezing. Peter's head and back slammed against the wall, and the man leaped onto him, latching onto his shoulder. With his teeth!

"Goddamn!"

Staggering, Peter tore his shoulder free but not his throat. The man hurled him, *smashing*, to the floor. Syringes hopped.

The man crawled on top of him.

Peter gurgled, pinned by the throat.

He fought though, punching, kicking, wriggling.

Growling, the man bore his full weight on Peter's neck. The vises squeezed tight, tighter, and Peter's vision squeezed dark, darker.

His arms flailed limp, then his legs, and then his body. Before he passed out, head lolling back, he saw the horrible pink grimace of the man, the dead man. Only, he wasn't dead, and he wasn't on the couch, and he had ... orange teeth?

The viper smile descended towards him, the suction unit still chugging.

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Darkness ... voices muttering ... incomprehensibabble ... *Oooh, pain, definite pain, make pain stop ...*

"Hey kid" ... *Mmmm smells like barbecue* ... monkey chatter ... *Schluck!* "Hey, kid ... kid, wake up!" ...

More pain ... *Oh, man, stop ... make it stop. Garlic? No barbecue?* "Don't like that much do ya kid?"

Schluck! "Wake up, kid, and I won't do it again" ... *Carmine? Man, my shoulder hurts.*

"Good. You alright, kid?" a voice asked.

Carmine?

"Easy now, sit up slow. Yeah, that's it. Nice, deep breath, Pete. There you go. Another one."

"What the ... huh?"

"Shhhh. Low."

“What happened?” Peter asked, sitting up with someone’s, Carmine’s, aid. Cool night air blew strong, and Peter inhaled deeply; the room reeked of acrid smoke. “Uhhg.”

“Feel better?” Carmine asked; he glanced left and right over his shoulders.

“Hmmm? What?” Peter leaned against Carmine’s pudgy hand, on his back, propping him up. Carmine’s breath was close and reeked of garlic.

Peter almost gagged.

“You okay?” Carmine asked.

“HHHHLLLLLLLLAAAHH!” Peter puked, and then he puked some more.

His head lolled to the side as he came to his senses, and the room swirled into focus. He wiped his chin. “Urrg. God.” Blaring light from a flashlight suddenly glared in his eyes; Peter squinted, blocking it with his hand. Men chattered in the dark.

“What happened?” Peter asked, rubbing his right shoulder; it was sore.

“You almost bought it, kid,” Carmine said. “If it wasn’t for the cops,” he pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, “you’d be toast.” Carmine stood with some difficulty and turned towards the glare, “He’s okay, guys, you can take off.”

“He clean?” asked the man carrying the flashlight. Peter could not see his face; the light was too bright.

“Yeah, spotless, Sarge,” Carmine said. “Just bumped his head a bit.”

“I’ll need a 69-A on him, anyways, Carmine,” the sergeant said. Papers rustled in the dark. He held the thick sheaf out into the light.

“What’s a 69—?” Peter asked, but Carmine punched him in the arm.

“Sure thing, Sarge,” Carmine said, lunging forward to take the papers. “Checked him head to toe, though. Not a scratch.” Carmine glanced at his watch. “Could save yourself some paperwork. It’s almost shift change.”

The sergeant lowered the sheaf of papers for a moment in indecision. He took a deep breath. “You sure he’s clean?” he asked, after a moment, lowering the flashlight for a second. Then he whipped it back up, blinding. “Okay, Carmine, we’re out. Tell him to watch it next time, though. This ain’t a fucking kid’s game, and he sure as hell ain’t ready for the big-boy league.”

"I'll have a talk with him."

"Building's clean, squad three's out," the sergeant said into the mike at his shoulder. Then he and the light were gone out the door followed by the sound of feet pounding down stairs.

"Carmine, what the hell happened?" Peter asked. He rubbed his head and glanced round the room. With the flashlight out of his eyes he could see again. The room, something was different about it. The dead guy, or not so dead guy, was gone, so was the couch, the ceiling, parts of the floors, walls, most of them. Pieces of drywall still clung in places.

Peter glanced around. It were as though he sat within the vulture-gleaned ribcage of some long-dead giant. Wall studs, like bones, lay bare, charred, cracked, splintered, jutting from floor to ceiling and across. The skin of drywall and plaster was blasted mostly away. "Jesus," Peter said. Soot stained everything. Pieces of ceiling fell and shattered as they hit the floor. Looking out past the charred bricks, Peter could see buildings, lights of the city. The red lights of his ambulance whirled below, along with blues.

He rubbed his shoulder. "Police Line Do Not Cross" tape zipped back and forth from wall to wall, from floor to ceiling.

"Jeeze, who were those guys?" Peter asked. "Cops? SWAT team?"

"Containment squad," Carmine said.

"Containment? What happened to the dead guy?" Peter asked. "He grabbed me. He wasn't dead. Not even close. I thought, I mean he wasn't breathing, had no pulse, I thought."

"Well, he's dead now, kid, don't you worry. Cops cooked him," Carmine said, bending over. "Here, let me help you up."

"Cops torched this place pretty good, huh?" Peter said. "For one guy?" Movement from the next room caught Peter's attention. What was moving he couldn't see; a section of Swiss-cheesed, charred drywall and police tape blocked his view. It was dark in there, too, darker.

"The Padre," Carmine said following his gaze.

Peter took an involuntary step in that direction, but Carmine's hand was on his chest, stopping him. "You don't need to see that."

"But what—?"

“Last rites, kid,” Carmine whispered, taking a deep breath. “Last rites.”

“On the what? The dead guy?” Peter asked; his shoulder throbbed now. He scratched it; there was something soft and bulky beneath his shirt.

“No, that guy had his last rites a long time ago,” Carmine said. “No, bunch of junkies. Got what was coming to them. Should’ve known better. Stupid bastards.” Carmine frowned. “Let’s go, kid, grab the bags and the stair-chair, I’ll take the suction.”

“Sure, okay.” Peter’s gaze lingered on the next room, partially obstructed by the char and tape. Within, he could see a man kneeling over something, muttering dark words, words Peter could not make out.

Garbed in black, a wide-brimmed preacher’s hat on his brow, the man rose from his knees. He was tall, very tall; the ceiling seemed too low to contain him. In his hand he bore a cane. With a swift jerk he stabbed it down, *thunk*, skewering something on the floor, and in one clean motion he whisked free a blade from within the cane, an arc of light in the darkness, and swept downward, *schluck*, and he sheathed it. He doffed his hat and bowed his head. Peter craned his neck to see.

“Ashes to ashes,” the Padre said, donning his hat, “they all fall down.”

The Padre, face wreathed in shadow, turned. Through a blown-out section of the wall, ducking, he stepped, and strode smoothly past, sloshing with each step. Dropping a hand on Peter’s shoulder, the Padre moved past; his hand was wet. “Do not go in there, my son,” rumbled a voice from the depths of the shadow of the preacher’s hat, and then he was gone, out the door, glistening footsteps trailing in his wake.

“What’d you—?”

“C’mon Pete,” Carmine said, pulling him around. “We gotta go. C’mon, grab the bags.”

“But, I want to see.”

“Grab the bags.”

“Fine, whatever,” Peter said. He grabbed the first-in bag and slung it over his shoulder. “Ahhh! What the hell?” He dropped it to the floor. “Jeeze.” He pulled his collar down a bit and peered inside.

“Not here, Pete,” Carmine said, pulling Peter’s shirt up.

Peter jerked away and examined his shoulder; a bandage was on it.

“You got bit, Pete,” Carmine said softly. Carmine’s dark glance lingered on Peter’s shoulder and then met his eyes.

“What?” asked Peter.

“I said,” Carmine took a deep breath and snatched a glance out into the hallway, and then back at Peter, his voice a dropping to a whisper, “you got bit, by the dead guy, on the shoulder.”

