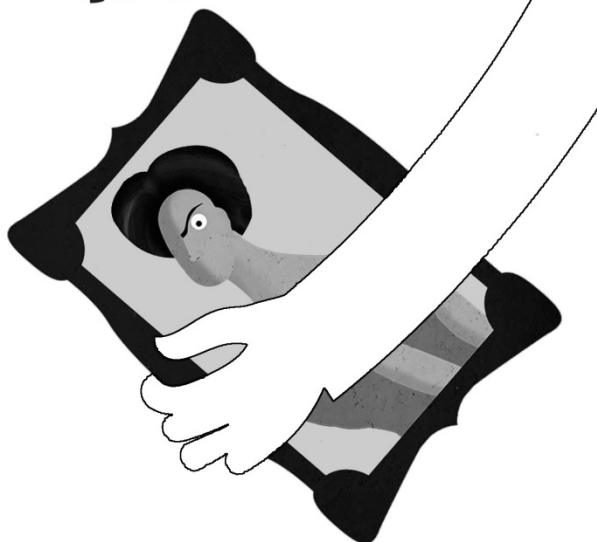


STEALING GHOSTS



THE DEWITT AGENCY FILES #2

A NOVEL BY
LANCE CHARNES



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No animals were harmed in the writing of this novel.

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Chapter 1

The first thing you notice is her eyes.

Big, dark, luminous. She's no blushing ingénue; those eyes grab you and pin you to the wall. *Think you got what it takes?* they say. *Come find out.*

If you don't fall in, you see the face around those eyes. High cheekbones, a razor-sharp jaw, a long semi-Roman nose, full lips parted just a bit. Maybe you surprised her. The dark chestnut hair's cut at jaw level and shingled so it hugs the curve of her skull. Her graceful neck's arched just so, circled by a doubled strand of lapis and gold.

If you make it down that far—and you should, you really should—you'll see the moss-green silk yoke draped across the points of her shoulders, then plunging below her shoulder blades. That creamy bare back and her sleek, bare arms are a shade darker than your typical society woman's skin; she's from somewhere warm, where the cypress and olive trees outnumber the firs. An ibis outlined with silver embroidery and gold seed beading spreads its wings across her back. Beaded lotus flowers and papyrus stalks tangle on the yoke and skirt. The dress is fashionably shapeless, but it can't hide her curves.

The weathered Ionic column just to her right holds up a portico that casts a warm, brown shadow behind her. She glows against that darkness.

She's royalty. She's a young empress and you're the servant. You don't mind being the servant because you get to look at her. And sometimes, like right now, she looks back.

Her name's Dorotea. She's ninety-one years old. One look stole my heart.

Now I'm stealing her.

Chapter 2

EARLIER THAT DAY

Someone's pounding on my hotel room's door. I know what time the clock says, but my body says the clock's full of shit. Eleven hours on an airplane does that.

That pounding sounds familiar... doesn't it?

I'd crawled out of this humungous king-size bed at what my brain said was the middle of the night (even though it was light outside) to catch breakfast downstairs. When I got back, I closed my eyes for just a minute, I swear. Two hours vanished.

Where am I?

I let myself off the bed easy—the platform's high enough that if I jump, I'll break something—detour past the desk (Sofitel London Heathrow, that's where I am) and shuffle to the door peephole. *Knew it.* I yank open the door and catch her in mid-slam. "What?"

Carson folds her arms and glares at me. "Pack your shit. Allyson's waiting."

Allyson's... *what?* She's *here?* "Since when?"

"Since she emailed. It's almost nine. Haven't read your email yet?"

I try to grind the grit out of my eyes. "You know what time it is? It's twelve fifty-five a.m. Matt Daylight Time." I pull the door open. "You get to watch."

She swings a black laptop carry case into my chest as she stalks by. It doesn't knock me over, though it's a near thing. She scans the room, then flops in the butter-tan, wingback swivel armchair near the little round-topped cocktail table by the window. She doesn't say anything.

So I do. "Good to see you, Matt." Yes, I sound grumpy, even to me. "How're you doing? I'm fine, Carson, thanks for asking."

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What've you been up to?"

"Yeah. That."

"What's with you? I thought we'd moved past the I-hate-you stage in Milan."

"Supposed to get time off," she grumbles. "Allyson called me back."

"Sorry," I say, and I am. She shrugs.

Carson's in her mid-thirties (like me), about five-nine, and on the okay side of plain. Her ice-blue, long-sleeved tee is snug across her broad shoulders, biceps, and chest, and she fills her black jeans well. She'll never make the cover of *Vogue* (though you should see her in a tight dress), but she's smart and tough and good to have around when things go south.

"Anything in your backgrounder?" Carson asks. She's swiveling her chair back and forth, watching as I stumble around collecting my things.

"Who are you working for this time?"

"Allyson."

"Only?" Last time, I found out she had a second boss. Nobody was happy.

"Yeah. Your backgrounder?"

"I didn't *get* a backgrounder." In my two other agency projects, I got a little blue thumb drive with all the details Allyson decided to share about what I'd be doing. Not this time. "The only reason I knew to pack for cool weather was the itinerary had me terminating at Heathrow. What's in yours?"

"Fuck-all. Three to six weeks in northern Europe."

I concentrate on re-stuffing my bashed-up black roller bag so Carson doesn't see my reaction. Six weeks is a problem. I'm still on supervised release for two more years and I'm not supposed to leave the U.S. That's why I'm traveling on a fake passport. I can scam Len, my Federal probation officer, for a couple weeks, but longer is gonna get complicated. "Still got your Brooklyn number?"

"Yeah." She snorts. "We still a thing?"

"As far as Len knows." On my first project with the agency and with Carson, I told my PO I was in New York City when I was really in Milan. To explain why I didn't come home on time, Carson pretended to be my new Brooklyn-Russian girlfriend. Hey,

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it worked.

I zip my luggage, stow my work phone (a big quad-band Samsung), and pile the duffel and laptop case on my roller for towing. “What’s it like outside?”

“It’s great. Let’s go.”

A sturdy South Asian in a black suit and peaked cap holds up a sign saying “Mr. Simon” (me for this trip) near the rectilinear marble water feature in the main lobby. I follow him out to the curb; Carson detours to the front desk. It’s a clear and chilly morning, with a sharp breeze spiking down the road. I remind myself to never ask a Canadian (like Carson) about the weather.

The suit sets my bags in the trunk of an idling midnight-blue BMW 440i Gran Coupe and guides me to the left front passenger’s seat.

Allyson’s behind the wheel.

I’ve never seen Allyson drive. I didn’t know she could.

“Mr. Friedrich.” She doesn’t look at me. It’s chillier inside the car than outside.

“Ms. DeWitt.” The agency’s formal name is DeWitt Associates. Yes, she’s the boss.

I sit down and try not to stare. Her black wool pique pencil skirt is hiked halfway up her very shapely thighs. One night around five years ago—long before she hired me—I found out exactly what’s under the several thousand dollars’ worth of clothes she’s wearing. If I close my eyes, I’ll still be able to feel her skin under my fingertips. I keep my eyes open and locked on the Range Rover ahead of us. Getting fired isn’t on my agenda.

“Acceptable work in Mexico,” she says in that smooth, toe-curling alto of hers. It’s the frostiest compliment I’ve ever gotten.

“Thanks. Everything went fine.” As far as she needs to know.

Carson climbs into the back seat. “Why are you driving?”

Allyson flicks a glance in the rear-view mirror. “Please fasten your seat belt.” Then we glide away from the curb like we’re in a vintage Rolls and not an autobahn burner.

I risk a glance at Allyson while she negotiates the parking lot. She’s somewhere in her mid-forties and not conventionally pretty, but her presence makes you look when she comes into the room. Unfortunately, she’s everything I like in a woman—deep brown

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eyes, thick black hair that splashes off her shoulders when it isn't up in a bun like it is now, olive skin, great cheekbones. And the legs. And, for that matter, everything else.

Gar Heibrück, my ex-boss at my ex-gallery, schooled me in high-end fashion so I could tell how much money our clients had. Allyson's wearing a flame-red St. John knit jacket with a shawl collar, one-button closure and belled three-quarter sleeves. It's a perfect color for her. She's one of those women who wears clothes and wears nothing equally well.

The little brain still wants a rematch with her. The big brain knows I'd have to sleep with one eye open and my back against a wall.

Allyson says, "I want to brief you both before you go on your way. I'm sure you noticed I provided no background information. I believe you know what that means, Ms. Carson."

"No documentation. Something illegal."

"Exactly."

I say, "You gave us background for Milan. We were doing illegal stuff there." Especially Carson. As illegal as it gets. "Why is this different?"

"That client wasn't likely to tell the world about it. This one is."

We circle a wide left-hand curve onto a two-lane frontage road that parallels a small river. The massive pewter brick of Terminal 5 slides by my window.

Allyson pulls a five-by-seven card from her door's side pocket and holds it out to me between two fingers. "What can you tell me about this?"

I can't control the gasp that slips out when I see the picture. "Wow. Sargent. *Dorotea DeVillardi*. The last portrait in oil he finished before he died." It's a gorgeous work, like John Singer Sargent knew this was the end and he wanted to go out with a bang.

Carson's leaning forward to peek over my shoulder. I hold up the postcard so she can see. She peers at it, grunts "Huh," then thumps back into her seat.

Allyson says, "Go on."

"It disappeared in World War Two. Everybody called it lost—

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the Ormond survey still has a black-and-white photo of it from the '30s. Then it resurfaced in the late '90s." I know this because Sargent is one of my favorite artists, and because I have this freak memory where if I read something a few times, I remember it basically forever. "It got a lot of play in the art press. Some Russian dude owns it. It's on loan to the Moscow Museum of Modern Art."

"It's in the Mainwaring Gallery in Portsmouth for the next nine weeks," Allyson says. We're poking along behind a box truck like we're part of a parade. Either she's stalling or she usually drives like a granny. "You left out the bit that's most important to this project: the original owners want it back."

"We're being followed," Carson announces. She's twisted around to look out the back.

"The black Audi? That's mine. Thank you for your attention."

While we've been talking, I've managed to get a data connection on my work phone. Good thing the agency pays the roaming charges. "Here it is. Ron Bowen. He says the Nazis took the portrait from his family and the Soviets took it from the Nazis. He sued the Russian dude—Arkady Tovorovsky—in federal court and lost twice. The Russians turned down his claim." I look up at Allyson. "Bowen's the client, isn't he."

She hesitates a moment. "Yes."

Carson lurches forward. "Stop. You're breaking the rules. You don't tell us who—"

"You'll find out almost immediately. I may as well tell you now."

When she hired me, Allyson said I'd never know who the client is. Carson went to a lot of trouble to keep it from me on my first project—just as well, as I found out. "You know, what I told you is all public information. Why didn't you send that?"

"Cause we're stealing the picture," Carson says. "Right?"

"The client very much wants his property and doesn't care how we accomplish that." Allyson's voice is unusually guarded. "I'm reliably informed that he isn't a graceful winner. When he gets his painting, he'll tell everyone who'll listen. That may draw more attention to us than I'm interested in deflecting. It's why I'd appreciate you leaving as few fingerprints on this project as you can manage." She pauses for a lane change we don't need. "Which leads

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me to the next two points.

“This is our first project for Mr. Bowen. He’s very wealthy in his own right, and his company is extremely successful. He can be an important client if he’s pleased with your performance. I expect you to please him.

“Because it’s important that we please the client, we all have to make certain... adjustments to the way we do things. Our client is not a trusting man. His representative will monitor you as—”

“A babysitter?” Carson’s screech rattles the windows.

Another long pause. “Yeeesss.” Allyson packs a lot into that word: *I’m sorry. I don’t like it either. Just go with it, okay?* “Her name is Julie Arnlund. She’s the client’s cousin. I expect she’ll report to him everything she sees and hears. Please—”

I ask, “How do we work with a spy?”

“Very carefully, I should—”

Carson lunges between the front seats. “Carefully? Really? How much do we tell her? What if she wants to ‘help’? I’m—”

“Enough.” The spring steel in Allyson’s voice shuts up Carson like pulling a plug. “She’ll supply any background information you need. Show her every courtesy. Protect her. Keep—”

“Does she need protecting?” I ask. This is sounding worse with every step.

“She may. The client referred to her as the ‘family historian.’ I doubt she has Ms. Carson’s skill set.”

Carson makes a rude noise.

“Keep her out of trouble. I understand what an imposition this is, but I have every confidence you’ll meet the challenge.”

I catch Carson rolling her eyes. Then I turn back to Allyson. “Carson’s got a point. What if the cousin wants to do more than watch?”

“Dissuade her politely. If that doesn’t work, find something... innocuous for her to do. Whatever you do, don’t allow her to be arrested. That would be a disaster for us all.”

We lost the box truck some way back and passed all the unloveliness of a major airport’s infrastructure—warehouses, baggage-cart depots, anonymous, square windowless structures, above-ground pipelines. Allyson’s dangerously close to matching the speed limit (40, though I don’t know if it’s MPH or KPH). We

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thread through a hairpin turn and into a traffic circle.

Carson asks, "Where are we going?"

"In this case, it's the journey that's important, not the destination." Allyson nudges us out of the traffic circle and suddenly we're off the airport grounds, driving a divided four-lane road lined with scrubby trees and pastures. "This is your car, by the way. Keep in mind that we don't have vehicle service arranged where you're going, so it's a minimum two-hour turnaround for a new one. Please try to not change cars every few hours the way you did in Milan. That was excessive."

I can hear Carson fuming behind me, but she doesn't say anything. I guess she's bitched out the boss enough today.

"One more thing." Allyson pulls off the highway onto a two-lane road, then stops. "There are two countries I absolutely detest working in. This is one of them. There are cameras everywhere. We know that GCHQ is monitoring the telephone system in a way your NSA could only dream about. The Tories have proposed a law that would let the security services keep records of every person's internet use for a year. That they're asking for permission tells me they're already doing it. Be very, very careful. I don't know how well I can protect you here."

I swap a glance with Carson. She blows out a long breath and shakes her head. The black Audi slips up behind us. "What's the other country?" I ask.

"Yours, of course." She pulls what looks like a black leather Lanvin Sugar shoulder bag from under her legs. Two months of my pay for pushing coffee, right there. "I suggest the A3 for Portsmouth. It's dual carriageway all the way, it's marginally more scenic than the M3 and there are slightly fewer traffic cameras. The M25 is infested with cameras from here to the A3, so behave yourselves. Olivia has your hotel arrangements."

"Olivia knows about all this?"

"Olivia knows everything, as usual." She pushes open her door, steps out, then leans into the opening. "Ms. Arnlund will join you tomorrow. I suggest you get as much done as you can today. Good luck."

Chapter 3

The BMW's loping along half-asleep, heading southwest on the A3 through a whole lot of Technicolor green trees and pastures. Carson apparently took Allyson seriously and isn't practicing for the Indy 500 like usual.

Carson almost always drives. When we first met, she said she's a "bad passenger"—a huge understatement—so I'm happy to let her have her way and avoid the explosions. It's one of the few things I know about her.

"You're quiet," she says.

"You should talk."

"I'm always quiet."

True enough. "Ripping off a museum's like scamming a granny. It's not all that hard, but it's a pretty scummy thing to do. And it's seriously illegal."

"So?"

"So? You're sure you were a cop?" That gets me The Look. "I haven't had to do anything seriously illegal so far."

"Fraud? Transporting stolen goods?"

"You know what I mean. Nothing really bad. Not like *some of us*." I go for the laser stare, but her shields are up. "I mean, sure, I've cut some corners, blurred some lines. But in Milan and Mexico? I just let crooked people do what they wanted to anyway and took advantage of it. Nothing like this."

"Get over it. You know you gotta do it." Carson tears herself away from the road for a moment to scowl at me. "Same reason I do."

Yeah. For the money.

I owe \$530,000 in mostly non-dischargeable debt. Some is student loans, more's medical bills, and a lot is restitution. Being a convicted felon limits my (legal) career options. That's how a graduate architecture degree qualifies me for a not-full-time job

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with the Green Coffee Empire. My pay's going up to ten bucks an hour in January—thank you, California minimum wage—which makes it even easier to figure out how long it'll take to get out of hock.

As a junior associate, Allyson pays me a thousand euros a day on this job plus “reasonable” expenses, including really nice hotel rooms and all the food I can shove in my mouth. Put another way: each *day* spent stealing one already-stolen painting pays more than a whole *month* feeding West L.A.'s caffeine addictions.

But there's a downside: what if Inspector Morse busts me? (Yes, I know, he's dead. Lewis, then. Pick a copper, anyone but Luther.)

It won't be pretty. I'll be at Her Majesty's pleasure for however long she wants me. When the Brits finally give me back to the Feds, they'll throw me into the hole again for busting my probation in all kinds of ways. It won't be a nice, safe pen like PEN (Federal Prison Camp Pensacola), where I did time with naughty Wall Street types who had bad lawyers. This time, it'll be a real prison with real prisoners. Animals. Predators.

As much as I hated the confinement and dehumanization at PEN, I didn't have to worry about getting knifed in a race riot.

But being half a million in the hole to the government and the banks truly sucks.

I turn to watch the greenery slide by and start to obsess about something else: why am I even *here*?

I'm not a burglar—that's Carson's thing. It's not like this project is going to take much art knowledge to pull off. Does Allyson think I know more about museums than I do? I grew up in museums, true. Mom would take me every time she had a chance. But we never got past the “Authorized Staff Only” signs.

So, what's she up to? She's got an angle. She's *always* got an angle.

Maybe it's because of Ida Rothenberg. Maybe Allyson thinks I have something to make right, some long-term guilt to bury. Maybe she thinks that's more of an incentive than the money.

Maybe she's right.

Chapter 4

The Mainwaring Gallery is on Commercial Road in downtown Portsmouth. An online PDF of a quaint 1955 pamphlet says it's in what used to be the city's main Lloyd's Bank building, a pale gray, four-story, Art Deco-style limestone block built in 1950. Two banners hang from the second-floor cornice to the thin granite band course ringing the top of the ground floor: the garnet one on the left reads "Mainwaring," and the other's for the special exhibit.

The pedestrianized street's lined with places like this, built after the war to replace what the Blitz wiped out. The ground-floor facades have been updated, but a surprising amount of the upper-story work is more-or-less intact. It's not bad for a commercial strip.

I'm sitting on the edge of the Jubilee Fountain in the busy plaza where Commercial Road and Arundel Street meet. It's a quirky two-tier concrete basin circled by bronze royal beasts—unicorns, griffins, lions, even what I think is a kangaroo—holding coats of arms. It's just a few steps from the museum's front door.

Carson plops down next to me. Halfway here, she'd started crabbing about the client. We both adjusted our attitudes at lunch in the mall next to the museum.

"Feeling better?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Bitching at you won't fix it. You?"

"It's amazing what a good sandwich can do." I lurch off the ledge. "Time to go to work."

The museum's ground floor is rose-and-gray checkerboard granite floors and printed vinyl overlays on the walls featuring art's greatest hits (most of them not here). A big gift shop is on our left, the café's straight ahead, and there's a seating area to our right with teak benches that look like they belong on the *Titanic*. We buy our £10 special exhibit tickets from a chirpy young blonde at the rosewood information desk. Like the other customer-facing staff,

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she wears a garnet long-sleeved button-down with a gold “MWG” logo on the left breast. She hands us a gallery map, and off we go.

In the elevator, Carson wraps her hands around my arm and leans into me. We don't want to look like we're casing the place—though that's exactly what we're doing—so we agreed we'd play it like a couple here for an afternoon of culture. This'll be the third time we've played house like this (twice in Milan), and we've gotten better at it with practice. It's pretty okay to pretend; the women who interest me aren't interested in an ex-con. Carson's so far outside my usual type, though, that it's hard to see an “us” working for real.

The elevator rumbles open at the special exhibit's entry lobby. White copperplate script dominates the textured scarlet wall in front of us: “Stealing Beauty: Portraits of Women, 1750-1950.”

“Getting one of those,” Carson whispers at me. She nods toward the cart renting the audio guides.

Not what I expected from her. “Why?”

“Excuse to stand around.”

I read the thesis statement under the exhibit title—*art reflects the changing roles of women* yadda yadda—and check out the corporate sponsor logos while Carson gets her guide. Then she takes my arm and lets me lead her into the gallery.

The exhibit's laid out thematically in a serpentine plan. Each theme's partitions have a key color. The first one, “Class,” is imperial purple; appropriate I guess, but awfully damn dark. The ambient lighting's restrained, which is a nice way of saying “dim.” It doesn't take long to feel like we're walking through a maze. The labels could stand to be bigger, though I can't remember ever being in a museum that didn't need bigger labels.

You're not writing a review. You're ripping this place off. Concentrate.

We drift past the artwork, sometimes together but often a few feet apart, like we've been a couple for a long time and don't need to constantly hang on each other. From time to time I'll catch Carson standing in front of a canvas holding her audio guide (an overgrown TV remote on a red lanyard) to her ear, but instead of studying the portrait, her eyes are roving all over. I should be looking for stuff, too, but there's a problem.

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I have no idea what to look for.

I did some sketchy things at Heibrück Pacific, my now-dead gallery in L.A., but someone else always stole the hot pieces we sold. So I notice the cameras, but that's about it. Besides, it's so easy to get lost in all the beautiful things here. The first inevitable Gainsborough, for one: *Ann Ford*, an apple-cheeked young woman wearing a billowing brocaded-silver gown and holding a lute.

My mom was an artist and an art teacher. Some of my earliest memories are of her leading me and my sister through one museum or another, talking about color and light. She helped me fall in love with art—hers first, then everyone else's. When I close my eyes, I hear her asking, *What do you see?*

Carson slips up behind me, props a fist on my shoulder, and rests her chin on the fist. "Where's the guards?" she whispers.

"They're the docents." I get a blank look. "Red shirts with the logo? iPads? That's them."

She purses her lips. "They're guards?"

"It's a new thing. Some museums have merged their docent and security staffs. They say it's to make the place less intimidating, but it's also about saving money. The Broad back home does it."

"Whatever." Carson chews over this for a moment. "What about after hours?"

"No clue."

Over three-quarters of the works are on loan, either from private collections or other museums. The logistics of putting this show together must've been brutal.

Stop. Think like a thief.

The displays use what looks like a standard wire hanging system—two-millimeter aircraft-grade stainless cables mounted on a track under the crown molding, then hooked to whatever mounting hardware's on the backs of the works. We used Griplock at Heibrück, but the major systems are mostly variations on the same theme. I'd like to look behind a canvas to see if they're using open or gated hooks or some kind of theft-proof hangers, but even the docents would notice that.

At the beginning of "Motherhood" (shell pink, of course), I find Carson stalled in front of a Millais piece, *Mrs. James Wyatt Jr. and Her Daughter Sarah*, lent by the Tate. I clear my throat gently

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so I don't startle her—which could be deadly—and wrap an arm around her waist. Every time I do this, I'm surprised by how solid she is. I make like I'm nuzzling her ear and whisper, "What've you got?"

She fiddles with her audio guide and holds it between our ears, like we're both listening. "Two wireless cameras per room. Opposite corners, hundred-percent coverage. No motion detectors. Can't tell about thermals or sound. Probably not. You?"

I tell her about the hanging hardware. Her eyes glaze after my first sentence. She says "So?" when I'm done.

"We have to get the piece off the wall. The hardware makes a difference."

"Ask a docent-person." Carson nods at the Millais. "What's wrong with this thing? Looks weird."

"What do you see?" I'll teach her how to look at art if it kills me. Which it might.

She frowns at the double-portrait for a few moments. "Mom and the kid aren't looking at each other. All those—" she waves the audio guide behind us "—happy moms, happy babies. This one..." more frowning "...reminds me of home."

Wow. Personal insight. There must be a blue moon out.

We finally find the first exit partway through "Work," which is mustard yellow and the exhibit's halfway point. Carson grabs my hand in both of hers and nods toward the passageway. "I need to..."

Check out the stairwell, I finish for her. "Okay. I'll wait here."

She waves me away. "You go on. I'll catch up." A nice little playlet for the half-dozen people milling around in this room.

So I go on. Carson's right—I have to get farther out on a limb if I'm going to learn what I need to. But if I do, I make myself memorable. Memorable's great if I'm after a woman, not so much if I'm about to knock over the place.

I'm looking over a Jean-François Millet scene of a woman shoveling raw bread into an open-flame oven—she has Carson's arms—when I realize I'm alone for the first time since I walked in here. Crazy me says, *look behind the canvas*.

Are you nuts?

Do it now.

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I pull my phone and switch it to camera mode before I can think about all the good reasons I shouldn't. I edge to my left, reach for the frame's corner... and freeze. Security cameras. I'll be on tape.

I jump at a flash of red in the corner of my right eye. A docent. Shit.

A young black woman comes steaming toward me. She has colored threads woven into her cornrows, and she's wearing a red museum shirt and a name badge—Kwana—decorated like an illuminated manuscript with what looks like colored Sharpies. "Can I tell you anything about that, sir?"

Did she see me go for the frame? Did the cameras? "Um, no, thanks, I'm fine."

Kwana looks up with big, eager eyes, like she's glad to finally have someone to talk to. "That's why I'm here, yeah? Like to know more about the artist? I can look him up." Her English accent isn't one you hear on PBS very often, though God knows what it is.

"Actually, I'm familiar with Millet. Thanks, though."

Her eyebrows arch. "Are you, now?"

I had to say that, didn't I?

"How's this—I give you a quiz. If you answer the questions, you get a prize. Have a go?"

Aw, hell. Is she being helpful, or stalling until the real guards can get here? She hasn't wrestled me to the floor yet. Maybe that's because I haven't moved. What if I walk away?

No. If I brush her off, she'll remember me as the jerk who told her to get lost. She might start wondering what I was doing right before she showed up, why I was so startled. I can hear the interview a couple weeks from now when the detective asks Kwana if she remembers anything unusual. *Yeah, there was this bloke...*

She's got me. Maybe I can get something out of it. "Where's your blue blazer?"

"My...?" After a moment, the light dawns. "Oh! Like museum guards, yeah? We don't do that here. Just me, red shirt."

"Do they make you sleep here to keep the place safe after they close?"

"Oh, no, there's proper guards for that."

Just what I wanted to find out.

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She leans in, perfectly straight-faced. “You’re not gonna nick something, are you?”

Oh hell...

Then I notice her sly smile and drag my heart out of my throat. “Sure I am. I want one of everything.”

She giggles. At least someone thinks it’s funny. “Well, don’t, or I gotta bop you about a bit with this.” She holds up her iPad. “It’s a deadly weapon, you know.”

I paste on a smile. “I’ll be good.”

I play along with her quiz. Three Millet canvases passed through Heibrück while I was there, so I’d read up on him. I answer four out of five questions—I forgot he had nine kids—but Kwana gives me a red Mainwaring pen anyway. “No souvenirs off the walls, now, yeah?” she says as she walks away.

Blend in echoes in my ears as I finish the “Work” theme. Carson’s not back yet. She’s been gone almost twenty minutes. I text her but she doesn’t answer. Is she okay? Did she get caught? Did she leave?

Then I enter “Fashion” and its powder-blue partitions. I instantly forget Carson and Kwana and everything else.

There she is, at the opposite end of the room, all alone in a pool of light.

I finally meet Dorotea DeVillardi.



Carson slides onto the Nelson bench and drapes a hand over my thigh. It’s the hand that brings me back into the gallery.

“You’re still alive.” I try not to show how relieved I am.

“Uh-huh.” I can feel her breath on my ear. “Stairs and toilets all the way down. No cameras, no alarms, one-way latches on all three levels.”

I nod. I’m still distracted—it’s not often you get to see a lost masterpiece in person, especially one like this.

Carson figures this out and spends a few moments checking out the portrait. “Just your type. Dark eyes, dark hair.” She flicks a snide glance my way. “Big tits.”

That describes Carson, too, but I know better than to point

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that out. “You know, I like a nice rack as much as the next guy, but if I have to choose, I go for legs.”

“Did I ask?” She squeezes my thigh hard enough to hurt, then braces her hands behind her and leans back. “Bigger’n I thought.”

“Her boobs?”

This look is less playful and more slicing-open-arteries. “The picture.”

“Fifty by thirty-six and a half. That’s not unusual for Sargent’s three-quarter-length portraits. His second portrait of Sybil Sassoon is over five feet tall.”

“So who is this guy?”

“John Singer Sargent?”

Carson shrugs. “Never heard of him.”

How sad. “An American who did most of his work in Europe. He was the top portrait artist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He also did landscapes, watercolors, murals. But this is what we know him for.” I wave toward Dorotea. “See how alive she is? It’s like she could just climb out of that frame. That’s why people wanted to sit to him.”

Carson pushes off the bench and fiddles with her audio guide while she strolls to the canvas. She stands right in front of it, blocking my view. Deliberately? Probably. I follow and stand close enough to hear a voice buzzing from the guide. For once she’s actually listening to the thing. When the voice stops, she lets the guide dangle from the lanyard around her neck. “What’s with the bird?” she finally asks.

“It’s an ibis. Ever hear of Howard Carter?” She shakes her head. “He opened up King Tut’s tomb in 1923. Everybody went nuts for Egypt. You see it a lot in early Art Deco, and in period jewelry and clothes. This dress would’ve been very *au courant* in 1924.”

She scowls at me. “*Au courant*? Really?”

“It comes with the master’s.” That would be the M.Arch I didn’t get to use for very long, but I’m still paying off. “This Tovorovsky dude’s going to be pissed when he loses this.”

“Know what that means, right?”

“One of Putin’s buddies? I’ve got an idea.” Not a very happy idea, either. “We’ve gotta do this smart, but we’ve gotta do it. He

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went public with the portrait almost twenty years ago and this is the first time he's let it out of Russia. Best reason I can think of for that is, he's pumping it up for a sale. If he sells it, it may disappear again for another fifty years.”

Chapter 5

Carson asks me, “Got a plan yet?”

“No. Do you?”

We left the museum just before it closed at six. Now we’re in Nando’s in Gunwharf Quays, the splashy shopping center on the edge of the channel leading to Portsmouth Harbor. From the mezzanine, we can look down on the semicircular booths with bright geometric upholstery, full of Saturday-night party groups. There’s lots of warm wood and tile and Afro-Portuguese music throbbing in the background.

Carson wipes her mouth and leans her elbows on the wooden two-top. Her half-chicken looks like it lost a fight with a train. “Don’t know enough yet. Be a bitch to take it at the museum. Have to pack it past ten cameras, at least.” We don’t have to worry about being overheard; all the noise comes up here, and I can barely hear her two feet away. She bobs to the rhythm a bit. “How do they move these things?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. I never did museums. I used to haul around six figures worth of canvas in the trunk of Gar’s Mercedes. I doubt they do that.”

She snorts. “Yeah. Too easy. I’ll look at it. Truck’s gotta be easier to boost than that gallery.”

I set down what’s left of my huge chicken sandwich. The nuclear-level peri-peri sauce will keep my sinuses clear for a week. “You know, I’ve been thinking about this whole stealing-the-portrait thing. It’s not that simple.”

“No shit.”

“Let me finish. Let’s go back to why we’re doing this. The client wants his painting back. If we just steal it, it’s, well, stolen. He gets two choices: he either sticks it in his basement until the statute runs out, whatever that is in Britain, or he tells the world he’s got it, which is like saying ‘come arrest me.’ There’s blowback

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either way, and it's gonna go straight through Allyson back to us. The client's not spending all this money to get a dust-catcher."

Carson's getting that sucking-a-lemon look. "So?"

This is another of those half-assed ideas I really should keep to myself until it turns into something, but it's too late to stop now. "We have to steal it so nobody notices."

She screws her eyes shut. "How the *fuck* do we do that?"

That question's why I should've kept this to myself. "Look, we've got three problems to solve. First, we gotta get it out of the museum. Second, we have to get it out of the country. Third, we have to launder it so the client can show it to his buddies sometime in his lifetime. Each problem depends on us solving the previous one."

"So how do we do it?"

"I'm thinking... we swap in a copy." I get the are-you-shitting-me? look I expect. "It'll have to be a damn good copy so the museum and Tovorovsky don't realize the original's gone, at least, until it's time for them to know. If the museum doesn't know anything happened, we can get the original out of the country easy. Then we can figure out how to doctor its provenance so Bowen can claim it."

Now Carson's rubbing both temples. "How'd Tovorovsky get a fake?"

"For real, or in the story?"

"The story."

"There were forgers around back then." Now I really am saying the words as I think of them, like I'm re-learning how to talk after a stroke. "Han van Meegeren was the most famous. He cooked up Vermeers—new ones, not copies—sold them to the Nazis. Goering got at least one. Maybe... some guy was working that angle in Austria. Copying paintings stolen from the Jews, selling them under the table. The Russians rolled through in '45, grabbed everything they could carry, took the copy back home. It knocked around there until Tovorovsky got it. He didn't have any reason to think it was fake." I hold up my hands. "Or something."

"Fucking lame."

"Give me a break. I just thought of it thirty seconds ago."

Carson sighs and picks at her chicken. "What really

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happened?”

“Nobody knows. At least, not that I’ve seen written down. We can ask the cousin when we meet her, maybe she knows something. But... it’s the only way I can see of solving all three problems. You got a better idea?”

She doesn’t answer. I’ve learned that means “no.” She fiddles with her fork with her eyes focused miles away. “Where we get the copy from?”

“I’ll find a guy who can do the job.”

“Just happen to know art forgers?”

“Allyson’s paying me for something.” Before I can pursue that idea, reality sticks a shiv in my ribs. “Shit. The copy.”

“Now what?” Her voice is getting crabbiest.

Now I’m rubbing my forehead. It’d seemed like such a good idea. At least, it’d seemed like an idea. “If we’re going to fool the museum and the Russian dude, we have to copy *both sides*.”

“What? Why? Nobody looks at the back.”

“You do when you take it off the wall.” I pound the rest of my second Sagres beer. “The back of a painting... it’s like the piece’s life history. You see the aging, how the canvas was prepared, the stretcher design. Maker’s stamps if it’s the right period. Gallery stickers, pencil markings, inscriptions, damage. You flip over a hundred-year-old work and it’s all shiny new on the back? You know it’s a fake, anyone can tell.”

“Wait. That thing about someone forging the picture back before the Russians got it? Wouldn’t they have the same problem with the back then?”

“Not necessarily, not if the forger was working from the original. Also, remember that the portrait would’ve been only fourteen or fifteen years old then, with only one owner. The back would’ve been pretty clean.”

Carson spears the chicken carcass with her fork. That takes some effort. “We gotta break into the museum, take the thing down, so we can look at the back? Really?” She shakes her head. “Fuck it. Let’s just take the damn thing.”

For a moment, that sounds really good. Simple. Even a caveman can do it. “What’s the statute of limitations for grand theft in England?”

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She hauls out her phone and stabs at it for a while. Her face gets darker as she goes along. "None for criminal, just civil. Huh." She shakes her head. "Something new for Allyson to hold over us."

"She'd do that?"

"She'll do anything that gets her ahead."

Great. My boss is keeping a permanent file on me. At least I have practice being thrown to the wolves.

It looks like we have to pass on the hard thing to do and try the damn-near-impossible thing to do.



We finally check into our hotel after eight. When Olivia mentioned the Florence Suite on our call during the drive from Heathrow, I pictured a multi-story glass box surrounded by parking lots. But the Florence Suite is one of a series of newish multi-gabled brick townhouses that blend in with the older buildings along a street in a neighborhood called Southsea. The front office is in the next building. We're both up a winding staircase to the fourth floor, me in Room 6, Carson across the hall in Room 5.

The desk clerk hands me a note-sized envelope when I check in. "Mr. Simon" is handwritten on the front. After I get done unpacking, I slump in a Danish Modern armchair and rip open the envelope. Smooth, practiced script on a folded sheet:

Mr. Simon,

I hope you had a good trip. I'd love to meet you for breakfast tomorrow at the hotel restaurant. Can you come at 8:00? I'll have a Hartford newspaper.

Julie

A newspaper. Someone's been reading too many spy novels.

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