

AMERICAN STILL LIFE

Caesars of Madison Avenue

Preview of the Novel

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I

Lex Sacrata

'Would that the Roman people had but one neck'.

'Caligula'
Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus
Emperor of Rome
(AD37 - AD41)

He stood up too fast from kneeling on the floor and stumbled backwards, dizzy. Spreading his arms, he stood motionless, eyes shut, waiting to regain his balance in the midnight dark of the room. With a confident nod, he opened his eyes and shuffled across the stone-walled office to one of the matching pair of waist-to-ceiling height leaded stained-glass windows. Unlatching the sash, he pushed it open, sweeping the new-fallen snow off the stony ledge outside. The wind blew the snow into the room, dusting him with a delicate white lace that melted on his face.

With an all-over shiver, he wiped his eyes dry and started slowly walking around the room, playfully stepping in and out of the shadows cast by the moonlight falling through the stained-glass windows onto the hardwood floor and large Oriental rug.

He stopped and panned the room, as if looking for something. Stepping closer to the wall, he started around the room, dragging his fingers over the rough stone blocks as a guide. He passed-up one familiar painting after another. He ignored the gilt-framed photographs arranged in regimented order atop a long wooden credenza.

About to give up, he paused when he noticed a pair of small bronze figurines partially hidden by the clutter atop a massive oak desk pushed up against the wall. He scurried over to the desk, snatched-up the sculptures, then hurried back to the open window and held them up to the candelous light of the full moon.

One of the sculptures portrayed a pair of bespectacled monkeys, standing erect, books, papers and quills in hand, gesturing pompously, aping man. The other bronze depicted two bears: the portly bear was seated in a wooden armchair, head tipped back, mouth agape, an oversized bib tied around his neck. Clutching the arms of the chair, he was staring up at a pair of pliers held above his head by his equally animated companion beside him, a devilish human-like grin masterfully sculpted into his face.

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With a smile and confident nod, he set the would-be dentist and anxious patient onto the window sill, picked up the pair of monkeys and gently traced the delicate features of the simian scholars with the tip of his finger. He then cradled the century-old French Animalier bronze to his chest: he had to have it, even though he promised never to take anything. Knowing that if he was caught, he could suffer the same fate he just meted out. With a 'so what' shrug, he sauntered back to the center of the Oriental rug, knelt down, and gently set his purloined prize on the carpet beside him.

A gust of frigid winter air blowing in through the open window called him to account. Shivering, he dipped the tip of his left index finger into the pool of blood and began to slowly write something on the Oriental carpet between the man's legs. He slowly, methodically, repeated the process for each letter until he had written.....

LEX SACRATA

#

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II

Tiberius

On retiring to Capreae, Tiberius made himself a private sporting-house, where sexual extravagances were practiced for his secret pleasure. Bevyes of girls and young men, whom he collected from all over the Empire, adept in unnatural practices, known as spintriae, would copulate before him in groups of three to excite his waning passions.

Tiberius Claudius Nero
Emperor of Rome
(14 AD - 37 AD)

Scott Grace turned off Route 9W in Palisades onto a private road, killed the headlights on his minivan and slowed to a crawl, enjoying the predawn light he loved so much: elusive shades of gray and pink falling somewhere between dawn and daylight.

Scott muttered, "Atypical light," poking fun at what the reigning kings and queens of fine art often labeled landscape paintings by well-known artists that fell between the cracks of what their royal court had ruled was an artist's oeuvre.

Tall, lean, with baby-blue eyes, a boyish smile and silky blond hair, Scott Grace was almost pretty. In the business of dealing paintings a body and looks like Scott's could be a blessing or a curse. When it came to Peter Goodyear, with his preferences and practiced eye, it proved to be a blessing, which forced Scott to walk a tightrope of carefully chosen words and gestures. And to always stay just beyond Peter's reach.

Puckering his lips, Scott said in his best nasal French, "*Oeuvre*," and started laughing at himself. He still couldn't say it right, no more than he could pronounce *trompe l'oeil*. Mimicking Peter's criticism of his French during their first meeting three years ago, Scott grumbled, "If I give you cash, Mister Grace, will you deliver my painting to me at five tomorrow morning?" Peter had asked politely, revealing a southern drawl. It rang of the deep south; *Gone with the Wind* not *Deliverance*.

Scott smiled at recalling his own unguarded response, when he squeaked in reply, *Are you serious!* However, Scott's amusement was short-lived, when Peter

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replied with a subtle, but all-too-clear hint of a warning in his deep resonant voice, *Noblesse oblige, Mister Grace.*

That was Peter's first buy from Scott, after spending a year visiting Scott's gallery in Nyack-on-Hudson. Peter would glide into the showroom, completely ignore Scott, and proceed to check-out what was new. He even rummaged through the racks in the back room without asking. They talked, schmoozed, traded lies about other dealers, and whispered warnings to each other about the fake of the month being passed around the trade like the Queen in a game of Old Maid.

Scott knew exactly what Peter was doing: he was making sure that he could trust Scott to know if a painting were right, not a pastiche, and if it was burdened with a checkered past: provenance, that curious need collectors have to know who owned it, when, and for how long, as if that somehow changed its beauty.

But the most important thing to Peter was whether or not Scott could be trusted to keep his mouth shut, which he was continuously tested for by the minions Peter surreptitiously dispatched to Scott's gallery, trying to trick him into blowing smoke and giving up Peter.

Scott muttered to himself, "Maybe you are Madison Avenue material after all, Mister Grace," as he crept past a palace-sized wannabe English Tudor set back easily fifty yards from the road. Built during the Depression with nickel and dime labor, its gray stucco face was covered with ivy, its leaded glass eyes shuttered against the dark.

#

The house was decorated with a dozen of the hundred or so paintings Scott had schlepped back and forth from his gallery for the one-minute audiences granted each one by the young couple living there. The wife was a big-deal lawyer driving a lemon-yellow Porsche. The husband an investment banker with a hunter-green Land Rover, complete with gnarly tires and real Jerry cans. They were always in a rush, never time to talk. Breezing through their bone-white marble kitchen, they paused only long enough to look and say, *Nope, take it back, or, Leave it, we will send you a check.* He did and they did, and always on time. Until the walls on the first floor were covered.

#

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A familiar bump shook the steering wheel. Scott tightened his grip and sat up as the van suddenly nosed down to reveal that Snedens Landing had been swallowed up by a summer fog rolling in off the Hudson. Holding his foot on the brake pedal, Scott inched down the steep winding road, bumping in and out of the washed-out ruts. Halfway down, he hit the wipers, clearing off the mist condensing on the windshield. The road leveled off with a thump, took a sharp left, and came to a dead-end in front of a pair of imposing wrought iron gates held up by weathered red brick columns attached to matching brick walls hiding behind dense rows of giant overgrown rhododendron.

Hopping out, Scott reached through the gates for the key Peter said he would leave in the lock. It wasn't there. Even though he knew no one could hear him, Scott grabbed the gates, shook them, and yelled, "You little shit, Picco! I know you took it!"

It wasn't the first time Lance Picco had done this and Scott knew it wouldn't be the last. And he hadn't even met the elusive Doctor Lance Picco yet. Although their phone conversations, which rarely lasted longer than two minutes, told Scott all he needed to know about the former Associate Curator of American Paintings at the Met and was now the live-in curator for one of the wealthiest private collectors.

Scott snarled, "You fucking asshole!" and rattled the gates again for good measure. He then scaled the brick column, using the mortarless joints for finger holds and the hinges on the gate as a brace for his foot, and stood up atop the eight-foot high column, eyeing Peter's sprawling overgrown river-front estate.

Lying at the foot of the towering Palisades, wrapped in a veil of fog and guarded by an army of weeping willows, Snedens Landing was one of the many aging Hudson River villas that once lined the shores of the river, that isn't a river but a tidal estuary, from New York to Albany like squares on a board game no longer played.

The white clapboard skin of Peter's aging Greek Revival mansion was blistered and peeling, exposing patches of raw wood. The pebbled carriage path leading up to the once stately porte-cochere was crawling with weeds. In a clearing off to the right stood a trio of 19th-century greenhouses, their corroding bronze skeletons glazed with squares of thick wavy glass.

One greenhouse, doors and windows thrown open, was bursting with a rainbow of colors and fragrances. Another was locked up, its glassed-over skin whitewashed on

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the inside. A third, walls and ceiling dripping with condensation, housed a swimming pool lined with bawdy Delft tiles, the pool kept bathtub hot, summer and winter.

Scott could name every painting hanging on the cracked plaster walls on the first floor. The portraits, including the famous and infamous from America's past, and the still life paintings, were all hung downstairs. The hallway and bedrooms on the second floor were decorated with delicate pencil sketches and charcoal drawings of boys and smooth-skinned young men, naked, swimming, lounging about, their languid eyes cast aside. The attic was off limits, the door double-locked, leaving Scott to wonder what treasures Peter was hiding up there. And how long it would be before Peter invited him up to see. Or worse, what price Scott would have to pay for that viewing privilege.

Scott whispered to himself, "Don't even think about....."

"Hey!" someone yelled.

Startled into losing his balance, Scott jumped off the wall into the bushes inside the estate. Tumbling head-over-heels, he came to rest lying flat on his back.

A deep melodic voice laced with a hint of amusement asked, "Good morning, Mister Grace. And how are we this fine August morning?"

Struggling to catch his breath, Scott wheezed, "You scared the shit out of me!"

Peter laughed. "Serves you right. You shouldn't be peeping on a helpless old man like me."

Peter's renewed laughter choked into a deep chest cough. He hacked and spit into the bushes. When he spoke, there wasn't an ounce of humor in his voice.

"Get up!" He kicked the bottom of Scott's foot. "C'mon, move it, Mister Grace!"

Scott propped himself up onto his elbows, looked at Peter, and shook his head.

Unusually tall, with short, thinning gray hair and huge hands, Peter Goodyear was naked from the tails of his starched white shirt, complete with a brown silk tie cinched into a full Windsor knot, to his oversized bare feet.

He was holding an antique saber in one hand, a large black iron key in the other.

Peter sneered, "What are you gawking at?" and drove the saber into the ground between Scott's legs, inches from his crotch.

Scott yelped and scrambled backward like a frightened crab on a sandy beach.

Looking pleased with himself, Peter turned and unlocked the gate.

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"My painting, Mister Grace?" Peter glanced over his shoulder. "Let's go! Hop to!"
Climbing to his feet, Scott asked, "Where's the cash?"

Peter said with a throaty laugh, "Up my ass. Want it? Come get it," and started laughing and coughing again as he eased the gate open and turned back.

"My painting ... now!"

Nodding, Scott went to his van, slid open the side door and lifted a painting out: a large waist-high portrait of a young man with silky chestnut-brown hair and olive skin in the open window of an aging country villa framed by faded green shutters. Perched on the weathered sandstone sill was a yellow-tailed swallow, head tilted to one side as if in sad repose. On the opposite end of the ledge, lying perfectly still beside a clay pot bursting with orange geraniums, was the cause for his sorrow: his dead mate.

When Scott turned back, Peter was staring wide-eyed and expectant, like a little boy on Christmas morning. Holding the face of the canvas half-exposed, half-shielded by his body, forcing Peter to twist and turn and stand on his tiptoes in a futile effort to see his latest acquisition, Scott started toward the gate, walking as slowly as he could.

"Gonna let me back in?" Scott asked and came to a stop.

Peter frowned and shook his head.

"I don't have time for coffee and kissy face this morning. Next time."

Masking his relief, Scott edged closer.

"I'll just carry it into the house for you, get the cash, and split."

Peter hesitated. "Doctor Picco wants me to pay you by check this time."

That fucking son-of-a-bitch! raced through Scott's mind.

Knowing he was taking a chance, Scott snapped, "You and I had a deal. I busted my hump to find this painting for you. It's virgin. Not a spec of restoration on it. It's on the original stretcher and it's never been on the market. It's as good as any Rembrandt Peale you've got." Scott turned to leave. "Call me when you have the cash."

Peter cried out, "No! Wait. Please?"

Turning back, Scott held the painting even closer to him in a deliberate effort to make it clear to Peter that it was still his and not yet Peters.

Peter slipped his long fingers into the pocket of his white shirt and pulled out a

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neatly folded-up check. He gestured for Scott to come closer. Scott complied, but cautiously. Peter tucked the check into Scott's open shirt, affectionately patted it flat, and said softly, "There's a little extra there for you."

Peter held out his hands. "Now may I please have my young man?"

Scott didn't want to give him the painting. Part of him wanted to make Peter beg for it, the same way Peter always made him beg for everything; not the least of which was his self-respect. But Scott realized it was Lance he wanted to strangle. He also knew he would be throwing away three years of hard work if he did something stupid.

As he gently handed the painting to Peter, Scott grinned and purred ever so sweetly, "Give my regards to the good Doctor Picco."

Peter warned, "Be nice, Mister Grace. Like it or not, you need him."

Scott was quick to snarl, "If I didn't need the little shit for three fucking years, why the hell do I need him now?"

Peter suppressed an amused smile as he stepped back and nudged the gate closed with his hip. He turned away, paused, then turned back.

"When are you going to bring that talented wife of yours here for me to meet? My sources tell me she does exquisite life-sized nude portraits. Even though they're contemporary, I could be interested if I like her work."

Scott stiffened and said with a snap to his words, "*Ex* wife."

Peter grinned and asked sweetly, "Vagina dentata, Mister Grace?"

"No! I like women." Scott half-laughed. "And I'm not afraid of their vaginas."

Peter playfully quipped, "Pity. You have such a lovely ass, Mister Grace."

Afraid Peter might see on his face what he felt, Scott flashed one of his practiced smiles and changed the subject.

"It's funny you should ask about Susan's work this morning. I'm driving up to the college after I leave here to pick-up a few paintings she asked me to scan for a colleague of hers. Doctor David Ashton. Apparently, Leslie Peters left Ashton a large collection of period American paintings, which, apparently, no one knew he owned. Peters also, a few dozen boxes of art books, and a shit-house full of art books."

Peter's gaze narrowed and he said somewhat softly, "When was this?"

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"Susan said something about a court-appointed trustee releasing everything to Ashton last week. Or the week before?" Anticipating the question Scott was certain was next, he said reassuringly, "Don't worry. I will keep you in mind. But don't get your hopes up. Apparently, the paintings are all unsigned and in rough condition."

Peter asked with a solicitous smile, "Even if you think they're not for me, Mister Grace, may I please have a look at them. Or at least see photographs?"

Gotcha. "I'll ask Susan to speak to this Ashton guy. I'll also tell her you might be interested in her work. I'm sure she'll let me have a few of her paintings to show you, without getting her dealer involved. When, and if, I have anything, I will call you."

Scott wagged his finger at Peter. "But I don't want to deal with Picco on this."

Without comment, his curt nod tacitly conveying agreement, Peter turned to leave. The moment he did, Scott peeked at the check: not because he didn't trust Peter, because he didn't trust Lance Picco. And he had every reason not to, given the fact that Lance had never once kept his word.

Scott was pleased with the extra five grand, a salve for the lack of cash and his year-long investment of time. But he was also concerned about the repercussions if Lance found out. With a *So what!* shrug, Scott pocketed the check, stepped up to the gate and watched Peter walk down the carriage path, holding the painting out in front of him, humming a tune that sounded familiar to Scott, but he couldn't name it.

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III

Fasten the Bolt!

Fasten the bolt; restrain her; but who
shall keep the keepers themselves? The
wife is cunning, and begins with them.

Juvenal
Roman Satirist

David Ashton, on the soft side of muscular, but still trim, his brown hair brushed with gray, slowly turned full-circle in his new office in Merrywood Hall on the campus of Hart College, overlooking the Hudson River in upstate New York. David whispered, "You're it," and picked up one of the ten 19th century paintings on the floor, propped up against the wall and circling the room. The small magazine-sized oil on canvas depicted a tipped-over wicker basket, its harvest of ripe strawberries spilling out onto a sunlit bed of grass glistening with morning dew. Perched on the handle was a large bumblebee, wearing a saffron-yellow coat of pollen, as if defending its discovery.

Nodding, David stepped forward and hung the painting on a small rusted picture hook between a pair of matching leaded stained glass windows, one of which was cranked open. With a subtle disapproving shake of his head, David reached out and gently tapped the bottom left corner of the aging period frame, leveling the painting. When he stepped back, the fading afternoon sunlight streaming into the room exposed the sorry state of David's faded madras shirt.

With a 'whatever' shrug, David whispered, "One up, nine to go," and started walking around his new office, which had been Leslie Peters' office, trying to decide which of the remaining nine paintings in his office to hang up next, and where.

With a quick nod, David chose another painting, a large brooding late summer landscape, gently set it on top of his desk and leaned it up against the wall. Including the ornate period frame the painting was almost as wide as his desk. Painted beams of sunlight had punched jagged holes through the ominous clouds of an advancing storm, gilding the fields of wheat, a silent wind whipping them into endless waves of gold.

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As David turned to select another painting to hang up, he glanced down and froze, unable to block the memory of the Latin words *Lex Sacrata* scrawled in clotted blood on the Oriental carpet in Leslie's office. The carpet now held prisoner in a secure evidence vault at the New York State Police Forensic Investigation Center in Albany.

David turned away, walked over to the half-open stained glass window and cranked it wide open, inviting what little breeze there was to slip into the room, and stood gazing out beyond the Hudson as the Catskill Mountains swallowed-up the sun.

David whispered, "You jerk," when he decided it was foolish of him to think that coming back to the college could somehow make a difference in what happened. And how researching and writing two books ... one fiction, one non-fiction ... about the series of bizarre unsolved murders could somehow help catch Leslie's killer or killers.

"Get the hell out of here before it's too late," he told himself and at that moment decided to return all fifty paintings - the ten in his office and the other forty currently being photo-documented for insurance and restoration purposes - and Leslie's collection of art history books to the Executor and tell Dean Anders that he changed his mind and would not accept the endowment funded by Leslie's generous bequest: a \$75,000.00 annual tax-free stipend, for ten years, a \$1,000.00 monthly expense account, also tax free, and his tenure rightfully restored along with all withheld back pay.

With a decisive nod, David turned to leave, but stopped at the sight of a sliver of fading sunlight knifing through one of the stained-glass windows, shooting across the room, and striking the landscape painting propped up on his desk. Certain that he saw more than the remnants of fractured light on the painting, David walked over to the desk, leaned closer, and gently rubbed the painting with his finger.

A woman asked in a deep, almost masculine, voice, "Looking for a signature?"

Startled, David spun around to find Susan Grace, a tall, thin, athletic woman, standing no more than two feet from him, holding an over-stuffed legal-size envelope.

Embarrassed, David laughed, "You scared the hell out me, Susie!"

Susan Grace's sleeveless summer-weight cotton smock was smudged with patches of color, offering proof she had been upstairs in her third-floor studio painting.

Susan asked David, "Did Scott get all of the paintings back to you?"

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David shook his head. "Just the ten you see here. He's still scanning and photo-documenting the other forty, which he said could take him a month. Maybe longer."

Susan turned and stood admiring the landscape propped up on David's desk.

"Did Leslie ever say anything to you about this painting?"

"No. All I know is that Leslie once told me it was one of his favorite paintings. Along with a small autumn sunset landscape." David gestured to the papers on his desk. "That little painting was on the schedule with all of the other paintings, but the Executor's affidavit claimed that Elizabeth never gave it to him."

Susan said coolly, "I think she lied and kept it. She coveted that painting."

#

The biting edge on Susan's words called-up for David a blistering hot summer day, when all hell broke loose in Merrywood Hall. Seconds after the screaming and shouting had begun spilling down from the third floor, David raced up the two flights of stairs and into Susan's sunlit studio, to find her with a paint brush in one hand, palette in the other, her back to the wall. She was watching in startled disbelief as Elizabeth Peters destroyed with a kitchen carving knife an almost finished life-size canvas of Leslie sun bathing at the beach, naked, with two other naked men. When Elizabeth turned to Susan and raised the knife, David wrestled it away from her and in the process received a deep foot-long cut on his back, the scar now thick as a rope.

#

Susan stepped to the desk and began moving her hand over the face of the painting, just short of touching it. Frowning, she said with an air of authority, "This looks like a George Inness. But it's hard to tell for sure with all of the dirt and extensive overpainting and varnishing." Susan nudged David out of the way and sat beside him on the edge of the desk. "Here," she said, handing David the bulging envelope. "Scott asked me to give you this. He said it was *very important*. He also asked me to apologize to you for not delivering it, but he had to get to an auction in Boston for a client."

Susan elbowed David. "Which is why he woke me up at four-thirty this morning, because no one knows where you're living now or your phone number, *Doctor Hermit!*"

Smiling, checking his watch, David asked playfully, "It's almost ten. What were you doing for the last six and a half hours ... sleeping?"

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Susan sighed. "I couldn't get back to sleep after Scott left, so I came on campus, staggered up to my studio and continued working on a commissioned family portrait."

Accepting her quasi-apology with a kiss on her cheek, David held the over-stuffed legal size envelope in both open hands and jostled it as if to judge its weight.

"All I wanted was a simple appraisal of each painting and estimates to have all of them conserved, which is what Leslie's will calls for and also pays for."

Susan was quick to answer, sounding a bit defensive.

"I should have told you that Scott is a fanatic when it comes to condition and authenticity. He refuses to handle anything in his gallery in Nyack that's even remotely suspicious. I thought it was naive of him and I told him so when we were married."

David laughed, "I bet you did!" recalling what Susan had been like in faculty meetings. Sitting quietly, watching, listening, she would ruthlessly nail a colleague to the wall, whenever they were self-righteous or guilty of what she viewed as an even greater sin: indecisiveness. Strange as it now seemed, David liked that quality about her, even though Susan had also raked him over the coals and more than once.

Susan shook her head. "Scott's also honest as a priest. He won't steal a painting from someone if he finds out it's authentic, when they don't know it is. Which is another reason why he will never make any serious money as a dealer: he's too honest! Which is an unforgivable virtue in the art world. Trust me, I know. Most dealers claim they can't make a living buying paintings, they have to steal them. My dealer included!"

Susan sounded proud, when she said in an upbeat tone of voice, "Although, lately, I've gotten the distinct impression Scott is drifting toward the dark side. I think it's the influence from one of his clients. An eccentric recluse collector Scott says is quite wealthy. The man also asked Scott to bring him a few of my paintings to look at."

With a whatever shrug, as if dispensing with her ex-husband, Susan gestured to the few dozen opened but not yet emptied boxes of books stacked up in front of the just-built wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling custom bookcases.

"Are those the books Leslie left you?"

David nodded.

"His art history books, too?" Susan asked in a covetous tone of voice.

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"According to Elizabeth's hand written note, it's every book Leslie owned. Not only from his library here, but his library at home and their summer home at the Cape."

Hesitating, Susan asked, "Why did you come back, David? You're done with this part of your life. You have a third top-selling novel and I'm sure you're working on another one of your scary psycho-sexual thrillers." Susan gestured around the office to the yet to be hung-up paintings on the floor and leaning up against the wall.

"Was it the fifty paintings Leslie left you that lured you back? Or was it the tax-free seventy-five thousand dollar annual income for ten years? And the fact that you don't have any instructional obligations, except for mentoring graduate students?"

David turned away, avoiding Susan's accusative gaze, and drifted over to the open window, gazing outside. "As much as I tried, I couldn't forget what I saw!"

David abruptly spun around.

"The local police, and the state police, don't have a clue as to who killed Leslie and why. And it has nothing to do with their leaked belief it had something to do with Leslie 'coming out of the closet'. That's bull shit! I want to see the sick son-of-bitch who murdered him pay for it. And if I had my way, they would pay the same way Leslie did.

Grabbing the large envelope off the desk, Susan shoved it into David's hands.

"Open it. I want to know what was so important that my ex-husband had to drag me out of bed in the middle of the night. And on top of it, when I asked him what was so damned important that it couldn't wait, he told me it was 'confidential'."

David stifled a laugh.

Susan hesitated, waiting for David to say something more. When he didn't, she said without the slightest hint of compassion, "Leslie is dead, David. Get on with your life. And stop feeling sorry for yourself."

David snapped, "Any other words of wisdom, Doctor Grace?"

"Yes. You can be a real prick sometimes. But I'm sure you already know that."

Spinning away, Susan began unpacking and shelving Leslie's art books.

David ripped open the envelope and slid the contents out onto the deep inset window sill. He picked up an over-sized film negative and held it up to the sunlight.

"What's this?" he wondered as he turned it upside down, then flipped it over.

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Susan looked up. "It's a film negative of a section of a painting. If Scott did what he usually does, you've got two types of film negatives for every painting he examined. Plus matching black and white prints. The larger x-ray negatives are sectional blow-ups from the thirty-five millimeter slides he takes off the monitor from the hi-tech infra red scanner he has. Each method reveals different elements of the painting, both on and beneath the surface, including all restoration. Not to be confused with conservation."

David asked somewhat sheepishly, "So how do I interpret what I see?"

Susan smiled. "You match up the cross-marks on a print with the matching film negative and you're looking at composite sections of each painting and what may or may not be underneath all of the dirt, varnish, overpainting and repairs. For example an artist's changes, working sketches, the weave of the canvas, as well as signatures that might have been painted over, both by the artist and a possible forger. Scans can also reveal writing, printing or stenciling on the back of the original canvas that a relining may have covered up, either to hide something or to strengthen the older canvas."

Nodding, David began examining the sheets of film as Susan returned to shelving the books. One grouping of elegant over-sized leather bound books with gold leaf lettering on the covers and spines, Susan meticulously arranged in Roman numerical order, leaving spaces for the missing volumes. Susan then selected one of the books and began slowly, curiously, flipping through the pages.

David whispered to himself, "What the hell?" as he held up one of the large negatives, trying to find better light. With remnants of the fading sunlight behind the film, David stared in disbelief at rows of small oval portraits out-of-alignment, creating the appearance there was more than one image or layers of images. On both sides of the vertical egg-shaped portraits were stylized block numbers: one; zero; zero.

David began laughing. "They look like one hundred dollar bills!"

A firm knock on the open office door stole David's attention.

Spinning around, he found a woman standing in the doorway, combing her fingers through her wind-blown shoulder-length red hair in a futile effort to tame it.

"So this is where you're hiding, Susie," she said, looking past David toward Susan. There was a commanding self-assured air about her as she walked into the

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room. Tall, easily six feet, perhaps taller, she was wearing an expensive looking skirt and jacket of black silk and matching blouse ringed with a double strand of black pearls.

Susan pushed her way past David and took hold of the woman's arm in a way that only one woman, and a friend, would touch another woman. Speaking in a made-up formal voice, Susan said, "David, I want you to meet Colleen Kennedy. We took a number of figure study workshops at the National Academy. Colleen is a genius when it comes to the human body. She makes my work look like some first grader did it."

Susan smiled, waved, and said, "Catch you later," and slipped out of the office.

Not knowing what to say, David did the guy thing and held out his hand.

"David Ashton," he said, making it sound like he wasn't quite sure who he was.

Colleen stepped forward and shook David's hand, surprising him with her grip.

"Are you glad to be back?" Colleen asked as she slipped her hand free, and started drifting about the office, admiring the paintings. She appeared completely at ease, as if it was her office and the paintings were hers.

Colleen gestured to the large landscape painting propped up on David's desk.

"Everyone and his brother tried copying the master." She stepped closer and leaned over the desk to get a closer look. "It needs some serious conservation work to address all of the amateur restoration work." Without waiting for a comment or question from David, Colleen turned and drifted over to the bookcase. Gesturing to the open cartons and the books on the shelves, Colleen said in a throaty purr, "Any art historian worth their salt would kill for this collection of period books."

She then spun around and just as quickly changed the tenor of her voice, now soft, almost solicitous, bolstered by a warm smile that revised her entire bearing.

"Speaking of books, I read your last novel. I liked it. Much more than the first two. You seem to have found your voice." She laughed, softly. "A very scary voice!"

David blushed, smiled and nodded. "Thank you."

A tall well-dressed man ... barrel chested, shoulders back, sporting a crew cut out of the fifties ... appeared in the doorway. He surveyed the entire room, nodded, then looked at Colleen and said with a snap to his words, "We must be getting back to Albany, Doctor Kennedy." He then spun around and disappeared down the hallway.

Colleen started across the office. "I'm afraid I must go."

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None of this was making any sense. David felt like a clown in a three ring circus. Before he could ask Colleen who that man was, she surprised him by taking his hand and leading him out into the hall.

Colleen smiled. "Since I know your creative efforts, perhaps you'd like to see my work? I have an exhibition next month. Care to come to the reception as my guest?"

David said hurriedly, "I'll ask Susan if she....."

"No need. Susie's already seen my new work in my studio. I'll have my dealer send you a personal invitation."

Colleen started down the hallway, leaving David to wonder, *Doctor? Albany? A chauffeur who looks, speaks and acts like a body guard? What are you up to, Susan?*

#

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V

History's First Law

Who does not know history's first law to be, that an author must not dare tell anything but the truth? And its second, that he must make bold to tell the whole truth? That there must be no suggestions of partiality anywhere in his writings? Nor of malice?

Marcus Tullius Cicero
Roman Statesman and Orator

Susan glided into David's office carrying two giant-size coffee mugs. Yesterday's paint-smearred smock had been replaced with khaki short-shorts, a thread-bare see-through tie-dyed Woodstock T-shirt, sans bra, revealing a boyish flat chest, and leather sandals. Fitting attire for a hot and muggy September morning.

Long an advocate that summer began with Memorial Day and ended with the Labor Day weekend, Susan had painted her fingernails and toenails with a splash of bright autumn colors as if to celebrate her own changing of the season.

When Susan saw David sitting on the floor, head bowed, slumped up against the recently installed floor-to-ceiling book cases. On the floor beside him were orderly piles of film negatives and black and white prints from Scott's examination of all fifty paintings. Included in the imaginary game of solitaire were sheets of legal-size yellow ruled papers filled with columns of numbers. A twenty-dollar bill was paper-clipped to the top of the yellow ruled papers.

Susan whispered, "You silly man" and tiptoed her way through the maze of papers, books and cartons on the floor. Kneeling, she quietly set her coffee-filled mug on the floor, then reached out and gently brushed the hair off David's forehead.

"David, it's....." David grabbed Susan's wrist and growled, "Gotcha!"

Susan squealed and pitched backward into a stack of boxes, knocking them over. Dozens of old auction catalogues spilled out onto the floor.

David said with a playful laugh, "We're even," and stood up.

Susan snarled, "You bastard."

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David laughed. "And good morning to you, too," as he helped Susan to her feet, then picked-up the coffee mug and noisily chugged the coffee.

Susan reclaimed her mug. "That was not nice. You frightened me."

David leaned forward and gave her a peck on the cheek.

"I'm sorry. I'm a guy. We guys do stupid things sometimes."

Surprised by what David said, and how he said it, Susan asked, "Is this what you're like, when you wake up in the morning ... playful, naughty, affectionate?"

"Who knows?" David said with a shrug of his shoulders. "Maybe you should..."

Thinking better of what he was about to say, David caught himself, reached out, and mimicked Oliver Twist when he asked, "More caffeine please, ma'am?"

"Maybe I should what?" Susan asked with a smile and handed David the mug. She then announced, "I'll go get another mug," slipped back out into the hallway.

The slapping of her leather-soled sandals faded with her hurried steps.

#

Left alone, David was instantly set upon by dozens of questions, their demands for answers having grown almost exponentially with each journal he paged through, randomly stopping to read this or that snapshot discovery about Leslie Fanning, who quickly morphed into a dozen or so different people David realized he did not know.

Spanning eighteen years, the journals started out as Leslie's personal diary of sorts. The first two books were missing, along with a later one. The third journal, bearing the Roman numeral III, Leslie had begun during his first year at the college, the same year David was hired. The opening entries in journal III recounted Leslie meeting David. The two men could not have been more different than if they'd been cast opposite each other in a Shavian play. Leslie was thin as a rail, well on his way to losing his wispy-thin blond hair, and rarely seen without a warm winning smile. In spite of their differences, or perhaps because of them, David and Leslie become fast friends.

Their friendship had grown even stronger as Leslie became well-known for his art history expertise on nineteenth and early twentieth century American paintings. With each published article, both by him and about him, and the newspaper, magazine and television interviews, Leslie's involvement beyond the halls of academe had grown

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steadily more demanding of his time. Curiously, almost over-night, Leslie's media presence dried-up. And by his choosing, not for a lack of interest by the media.

At that same time the entries in Leslie's journals increased in frequency, and with detailed notations as to what he was doing and with whom. It was also at that time Leslie created detailed Punch-like personas, miniature portraits, with nicknames, for all of his contacts in the trade. And for selected personal contacts, including David.

The amounts of the transactions rose from a hundred dollars for a letter of authentication or appraisal, to three and four and sometimes five hundred dollars. And cash had become the exclusive means of payment, which Leslie made no effort to hide: he meticulously noted who paid him, using their pseudonymous sketched identity, how much he was paid, and for what. Leslie even noted where the payments took place.

The most recent diaries proved the most difficult for David to flip through. Not only for the abrupt change he saw taking place in Leslie, but for what Leslie had somehow been forced to do against his will. At that same time new contacts were given the names of various Roman emperors, nobility and noted scholars.

#

Kneeling, Susan gathered up off the floor the sheets of yellow legal size paper, along with the twenty-dollar bill, and walked over to join David at the window.

Waving the twenty dollar bill, Susan asked, "What' does this mean?"

David shrugged. "If what your husband....."

"*Ex!* husband," Susan interjected.

David acknowledged her correction with submissive nod.

"If what Scott wrote in his report is correct and there really are between five and seven layers of one hundred dollar bills laminated between the original canvases and the re-lining canvases of all fifty paintings. And if my simple-minded arithmetic is correct, taking into consideration the size of every painting, without the frame, the number you see at the bottom of my summary on the last page is the estimated total amount of cash hidden inside the paintings."

Susan's voice cracked, when she exclaimed, "This is a joke, right?"

David gestured to the papers in Susan's hand.

"My calculations are all there. I did it three times just to be sure."

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Susan whispered in disbelief, "That could be thousands of dollars!"

Nodding, David pointed to the painting propped up on his desk.

"For example, that painting may have between fifty and seventy five thousand dollars inside the relining. Allowing for the different sizes of all fifty paintings, my guess is there could be well over a million dollars in all of the paintings."

Susan was still skeptical.

"Where could Leslie have gotten that kind of money. And in cash?"

David shrugged. "A few appraisals a month here. A little bit of consulting there. A lucky find he flipped into a profit at auction. It all adds up over eighteen or so years."

David glanced outside and drew quiet. When he spoke, his words were carefully chosen. "I stopped running a total as I read Leslie's later journals. However, if my guess is right, Leslie pulled in far more than what we may find in the paintings. For example, where does the money come from to fund my annual stipend of seventy-five grand, which is guaranteed for ten years. All tax free! Plus my monthly expense account of a thousand dollars. Those items alone total eighty-seven thousand dollars annually and eight hundred and seventy thousand dollars over ten years. And no one except Leslie's lawyer knows what the capital asset is funding my income and expenses."

David shook his head. "Add the cash that could be in the paintings, which may or may not be taxable, we could be looking at another half-million or a million dollars!"

Before Susan could say anything, David wagged a menacing finger at her.

"Speaking of money, who was that woman who popped in and out of my office?"

Susan shrugged. "I thought you and Colleen might hit it off. She's super smart. A truly gifted artist. And she's single. Well, not single-single. She's a widow. I don't know how her husband died. I only know that her husband was an up-and-coming dealer making quite a name for himself. Colleen was devastated. And she was also broke, having put all she owned into his business. Ever since then, she's lived like a hermit, losing herself in her work and her painting. I felt sorry for her. So when she asked about you, because she read your novels, I offered to introduce her to you."

David asked, "Does she paint for a living or a hobby?"

"If you mean does she make any money selling her paintings, the answer is yes. And lots of it from what my dealer has told me. But that's not what she does for a

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living. Colleen is a forensic pathologist. A very well-known and respected pathologist. She's in the newspapers all the time, testifying at this or that murder trial."

Susan hopped off the window sill and started toward the bookcase.

"I take it you two didn't hit it off."

David shrugged. "We didn't hit it on or off. In spite of the bum's rush I gave her, she invited me to a reception for a showing of her work. I think she said it opens in a few weeks. Or maybe it was a few months. I'm not sure. I wasn't paying attention."

Susan said matter-of-factly, "I think you misread her, David. But it's your life."

Susan bent down and picked up a neat pile of papers off the floor.

"Did you read all of these appraisal reports last night. And did you take a peek at any of the the diaries?"

"I read the appraisal reports. And I flipped through a few diaries. Considering that I read at a snail's pace, it could take me a few months to read all of the diaries."

Susan asked, "Mind if I look at the appraisals to see what Scott had to say?"

"Go ahead. But no husband-wife nit-picking comments."

Answering David with a scowl, Susan collected all of the reports, took possession of the chair at David's desk, and started reading and nursing her coffee.

David picked up the journal he was flipping through, made himself comfortable on the window sill, then opened the journal to the spot he marked with a folded-over corner of the page and smiled anew at the caricature sketched on the page as he reread the entry beneath the portrait.

Tall. Pudgy. Big head. Small shoulders. Sloppy dresser. Little hands. Expert on floral paintings, but couldn't tell a good painting from a bad painting if his life depended on it. Married but prefers older men.

As hard as David tried to match the description with the face and name of someone Leslie had introduced him to, he couldn't: it had simply been too long ago.

Or maybe you never met this one, he thought.

Giving up with a shrug, David began reading the last entry of a schedule summarizing one months list of transactions, *Knock-out: Perez, Neale, Peterman and me. Christie's twenty-three. Great Durand. My reward was five.* David mused, *Must be Asher B. Durand.* He then read the next few lines. *Pool: Peterman, Prentice, Anderson,*

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Perez and me. Fantastic McEntee of an autumn scene in the Catskills for fifteen big ones. Perez sold it to Anogian for fifty-five. We split forty four ways. Gave mine to the AIDS research fund. David shook his head in disbelief as he read on. Perez shot-down a Sanford Gifford scene of the marshes along the Hudson River at Piermont. He later purchased it from the consignor (poor bastard) after the sale for the low-side estimate. Saw him give Jeremy Steele cash (unknown amount) for a fast gavel.

David turned to the next page in the journal.

Barter with Roan. Got conservation of my sunset scene of Katterskill Falls in exchange for a letter of authentication on a lovely still life bearing the partially effaced signature (P)eale. Looks apocryphal to me, but the colors are too good not to be right. While I was at Roan's, Peter showed up. The randy old bastard looks pretty good considering his health. His new live-in curator was with him. Where does he find them! How does he keep up with them! Roan also agreed to take care of my Inness. He told me since it will take a lot more work than the others, he wants five big ones. Claims it's nothing compared to what I can sell it for. Why don't I trust him?

David put his finger on his place and glanced over at the painting sitting on his desk, partially blocked by Susan. Suddenly unable to control himself, he slammed the journal shut, shattering the cathedral quiet of his office with the sharp report.

Susan jumped, but didn't stop reading. David found himself fighting back the anger that had been simmering inside him all yesterday and long into the night. The bitter taste in his mouth made him want to spit. After a few moments, he returned to staring at the painting on his desk as he absentmindedly patted the journal in his lap, wondering, *Why did you want me to have these paintings and your diaries?*

Susan bolted up out of the chair.

"The painting on your desk is signed! And it's by George Inness!"

Frantically gathering up the other reports off the floor, Susan set them on the desk and began sorting through them, checking for something in each one.

"They're all signed!" Laughing, she added, "You've got a fortune in paintings!"

David asked softly, almost in a whisper, "Where is Scott?"

The somber tone of his voice tempered Susan's euphoria.

"Why do you want to know that?"

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"I have to talk to him. Now."

"He's at an auction in Boston. Skinner's. What's the problem?"

"I've got to tell him not to say anything to anyone about these paintings."

"David! Scott's not like that."

"We find what might prove to be a million dollars hidden inside fifty paintings that were punched-up and the signatures masked so they appear to be unsigned and essentially decorative ... but are, in fact, signed, authentic and possibly worth a small fortune ... and I have a few dozen hand-written diaries written in coded language, filled with everything the police would love to know. For example four brutal unsolved murders, including Leslie, and you ask me 'what's the big deal?'" David took a deep steadying breath. "The big deal is that one of us, or both of us, could be next."

"Why?" Susan asked, sounding confused.

David gestured around his office.

"Because of what the two of us now know, the cash in the paintings and, most importantly, the potentially incriminating diaries."

Susan noted, "Correction what the three of us now know."

Trying to make light of the moment, David asked, "Who's the third stooge?"

Susan replied with a sigh, "Scott."

#

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VII

Secure Digital Memorandum

RE: Estate of Dr. Leslie Fanning, Ph.D.

Beneficiary: Dr. David K. Ashton, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Ashton:

Hopefully, you will find this hard-copy paper reply, sent by secure/bonded courier, responsive to your request of us. Specifically, we created (after vetting you and your request): [1] digital copies of Dr. Fanning's 24 hand-written Journals; [2] a secure dedicated Cloud with all Journals intact, which will permit you to access and read online (but not download, print or 'screen-shot' copy) any file; [3] user names and passwords for you and Dr. Colleen Kennedy, M.D., which only you can change/update at your discretion; [4] an automatic 'lock-down trigger' in the event the program detects an attempt to access, 'hack', your Cloud; [5] a secure tablet will be delivered by courier.

Please note that in accordance with the terms of Dr. Fanning's will, we debited your current annual expense account \$3,500.00 (three and one-half months).

There is no charge for routinely accessing/managing your Cloud account.

Sincerely,

John W. Bernstein
Senior Vice President
Capital Account Security

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