

PreView

(2019)

American Still Life
Caesars of Madison Avenue

Book I - The Novel
[Book II - Screenplay]

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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 fell backwards, lightheaded, dizzy. He spread his arms to steady himself and stood motionless, eyes wide-open, trying to regain his bearings in the pitch black dark of the room.

With a confident nod, he 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 open the window, sweeping the new-fallen snow off the stony ledge. The wind blew the snow back into the room, dusting him with a delicate lace that melted into his clothes.

As if he were immune to the cold flooding into the room, he stood squarely in front of the open window. The traitorous light of the full Wolf moon exposed his thinning shoulder-length hair, now more white than blond, and the pallid cast of his wrinkled face: testimony to the hideous disease ravaging his once beautiful body.

With a shiver and reluctant sigh, he turned and started slowly walking around the room, playfully stepping in and out of the kaleidoscope of fractured shadows cast by the moonlight falling through the stained-glass windows onto the Oriental area rug. He appeared to be playing a childhood game of hopscotch, but in slow motion.

He abruptly stood still and slowly panned the room, looking for a memento, something special to remember this night above all of the others; even though he had already been paid, and in time, a currency now far more precious to him than gold.

Stepping closer to the wall, he slowly continued around the room, dragging the tips of his fingers over the rough stone blocks as a guide. He passed-up one familiar

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painting after another. He ignored the gilt-framed photographs arranged in regimented order atop a long wooden credenza. He didn't trust them to tell the truth either.

About to give up and finish what he had agreed to do, and had already started, he hesitated when he noticed a pair of small shadowy figurines, partially hidden by the clutter atop a massive oak partner's desk, pushed up against the wall.

Whispering, "Yes!" he scurried over to the desk, snatched-up the pair of bronze sculptures, hurried back to the open window and held them up to the candelous light of the moon. Barely ten inches high, one of the bronze sculptures portrayed a pair of bespectacled monkeys, standing erect, books, papers and quills in hand, gesturing pompously, as if aping man. The other bronze depicted two bears: the portly bear was seated in a sturdy wooden armchair, his head tipped back, mouth agape, an oversized bib tied around his neck. Clutching the arms of the chair, he was staring up wide-eyed at a pair of pliers held above his head by his equally animated, but scrawny, companion standing beside him, a devilish grin masterfully sculpted into his half-human, half-Ursidian face.

With a satisfied smile and confident nod, he set the would-be dentist and his anxious patient onto the window sill and focused his attention on the pair of monkeys. He ever-so gently, almost affectionately, traced the delicate features of the simian scholars with the soft flesh of his fingertips: he imagined Fratin, working the clay, then reworking the wax, giving it life, a soul, the talented sculptor's creative touch forever cast in time. It always aroused him when he did this, for sculptures sparked a passion in him no painting had ever been able to evoke. Paintings were no more than a cruel trick, a deliberate deception of color, light and line, and most often meant to be seen at a distance. Respected, admired and analyzed ad infinitum. But never touched, never his to feel, to have, to hold, and to love. He tenderly 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 did, and if he were caught, he, too, would suffer the same fate that he was meting out.

With a subtle 'what difference does it make' shrug of his shoulders, he nodded, spun around, and sauntered back to the center of the Oriental rug smothering the oak-

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planked floor. Kneeling, he gently set his purloined prize beside a stainless steel pan the size and shape of a shoe box. The pan was covered with a handled top secured on all four sides with wiry spring clips. Spread out on the rug beside the pan was a large white rectangular cloth the size of a table napkin, topped with a half-full hypodermic needle and an assortment of shiny surgical instruments.

Frowning, as if he were unhappy with the composition he inadvertently created, he rearranged each of the shiny stainless-steel implements, meticulously spacing and centering everything left-to-right and top-to-bottom.

"Perfect," he muttered and slumped onto his heels, admiring his handiwork.

A gust of wind blowing in through the open window called him to account.

Shivering, he affectionately tapped his new bronze friends, then turned around to face the man lying on the floor behind him: naked, his eyes wide open, alive, but unblinking; his arms were at his sides; his elbows bent; his hands, placed palms down, were wedged beneath his bare buttocks. Littering the floor around his feet, as if shed in haste, were a tuxedo, a white shirt, bow tie, cummerbund, briefs, and long black socks.

In contrast, a pair of shiny black patent leather shoes was neatly set and centered beneath a nearby antique drop-leaf mahogany table.

Moving slowly, mechanically, he twisted around, peeled off the pair of surgical gloves pressed into the cloth napkin and stretched them onto his hands. Selecting one of the scalpels from the surgical instruments spread out before him, he turned back and paused, motionless, as if another coin were needed for an imaginary slot in his back. He was held prisoner by the thought of what he had done: the deceit; the never-to-be-kept promises; the counterfeit pleasure; and the feigned sleep that followed, wrapped in a shroud of regret. A suffocating blanket of remorse he never learned to throw off.

"Fuck it!" he growled and placed his right index finger on the base of the man's throat, then slowly slid his finger down the man's hairless chest until it sank into the soft tissue of his gut, just beneath the base of his sternum. Following the curved line of the rib cage to the man's far side, he positioning the blade of the scalpel beside his finger and jabbed, hard, piercing the leathery sheath of skin and muscle covering the man's abdomen. The man flinched and shuddered.

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"Shit!"

Dropping the scalpel, he spun around, snatched-up the syringe, turned back, and plunged the needle into the man's chest, over his heart, between his ribs. With a slow steady squeeze of his thumb, he emptied the half-full reservoir of milky-white fluid. He then shut his eyes, gently placed his finger on the man's neck, over his carotid artery, and began nodding in metered time with the beat of the man's heart as it pumped the needles soothing gift through his arteries, into every muscle, then back to his heart; leaving him paralyzed, but still able to see everything yet unable to move or shut his eyes, forced to watch what was being done to him.

Withdrawing the needle, he discarded it without placing it on the napkin.

Flipping open each of the four wiry spring clips securing the top to the stainless steel pan, he set the top upside-down on the napkin. The pan was half-filled with melted wax, a mist of condensing water vapor covering the surface. The edges of the wax were white, telling him he had precious little time left to claim what he came for.

Turning back, he plucked the scalpel from the hollow of the man's gut and placed the blade into the open incision. Pressing firmly, he followed the arched line of the rib cage from far side to near side. Returning to the base of the sternum, he scored a line down the stomach, through the navel, to the pubic bone. He opened another incision across the waist, side-to-side. He then methodically and firmly retraced all of the lines, taking care to cleanly sever the connecting tissue and not to press too deep and risk severing a vein or artery.

As if it were a quill, he jabbed the scalpel into the man's chest and stood up. Placing one foot on either side of the man's hips, he knelt down, straddling him, and slipped the fingers of each hand into the vertical incision in the man's abdomen, but in reverse, the knuckles of each hand butting against each other. Tightening his grasp, he pulled, gently, slowly, but firmly, and laid open the man's gut like a giant leather-bound book. Vaporous shadowy tendrils rose up to dance in the moonlight with the bittersweet smell of warm moist flesh.

He didn't need to look, not with his experience, as he slid his hand into the open cavity, ever-so-gently felt around, nodded, and withdrew his first prize. Grabbing the

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scalpel, he freed the tiny engorged organ from its sinewy bonds and set it into the thickening wax. The gall bladder was next, complete with its tuberous tendril. When he reached out to place it into the pan, it slipped out of his grasp: dollops of wax splashed out onto the napkin and the Oriental rug, waxy hemispheres marbled red and white like glass cats' eyes in the dark.

His work was almost done. Crawling around on his knuckles and knees, he knelt upright behind the top of the man's head. When he raised his hands, as if ready to pinch or pluck something out, he hesitated, when he saw that tears had welling up in the man's eyes. He wanted to say something, to apologize to a dear friend, but there were no feelings to support the words, only those three-dimensional images of the mind, life en grisaille but in red not gray, illusions of reality.

He snarled to himself, "Just do it, damnit!" and plucked out the man's left eye.

After severing the optic nerve and connecting tissue, he tucked the spongy-white orb into the warm wax. He did the same with the right eye. He then reclaimed the scalpel and flayed the man's face with the skill of a plastic surgeon, leaving behind a Mardi Gras mask of raw muscle oozing blood. There was barely enough room in the pan for this all-important trophy.

He then dipped the tip of his left index finger into the man's gut and began to slowly write something in blood on the Oriental rug beside the man's head.

He 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 onto a private gravel 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 blue, falling somewhere between midnight and morning.

Scott sneered, "Atypical light," poking fun at what scholars and curators, the reigning kings and queens of fine art labeled landscape paintings by well-known artists that fell between the cracks of what their royal court ruled an artist's style; 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 a collector like Peter Goodyear, with his preferences and practiced eye, it proved to be both, forcing Scott to walk a tightrope of carefully chosen words, guarded gestures and to stay at least an arms length away.

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, will you deliver the painting to me at five, tomorrow morning?" Peter had asked politely, revealing a previously hidden drawl. Though faint, it rang of the Deep South, but Gone with the Wind not Deliverance.

Scott smiled at the thought of his own unguarded response, when he squeaked in reply, In the morning? Are you serious? His amusement was short-lived, however,

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when he recalled Peter's somber reply, which was delivered with a subtle, but all-too-clear hint of a warning in his deep resonant voice: *Noblesse oblige*, Mr. Grace.

That was Peter's first buy, after spending a year visiting Scott's gallery in Nyack. 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, and 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: making sure that he could trust Scott to know if a painting were right, not a pastiche. And if he knew whether or not it was burdened with a checkered past: provenance, that curious need collectors have, and for some reason more so with men than women, to know who owned her, when, and how long, as if that somehow changed her beauty.

But the most important thing to Peter was whether or not Scott could keep his mouth shut, which was something he was continuously being tested for by the minions Peter surreptitiously dispatched to the gallery, trying to trick him into blowing smoke and giving up Peter. He never did and was determined to never be tricked into doing it.

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 two 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 is 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 faux Jerry cans. They were always in a rush, never time to talk, not even haggle. Breezing through their bone-white marble kitchen, they paused only long enough to look and say, *Nope*, take it back, or, *Leave it*, we'll send you a check at the end of the month. He did, 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 left foot on the brake, 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 brick columns attached to 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 Dr. Lance Picco yet. Although their phone conversations, which rarely lasted longer than sixty seconds, told Scott all he needed to know about the elusive Dr. Lance Picco, former Associate Curator of American Paintings at the Met now live-in curator for one of the wealthiest collectors and private dealers.

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 iron 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 tired old weeping willows, Snedens Landing was one of the many aging Hudson River villas lining the shores of the river that isn't a river from New York to Albany like squares on a board game no longer played. The white clapboard skin of Peter's falling-down 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, its doors and windows thrown open, was bursting with a rainbow of flowery colors. Another was locked up, its glassed-over skin whitewashed on the inside.

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

Scott now knew the inside of Peter's old mansion so well he could find his way around in the dark. Which he often did, since Peter decried electricity and running water, claiming they were out of character for my "grand old lady." Scott could name every painting hanging on the twelve-foot-high cracked plaster first floor walls. The still life paintings, every imaginable size and subject, were all hung downstairs. Peter's collection of American portraits, including the famous and infamous from America's past, graced the stairway walls and darkened hallways on the second floor. Bedrooms 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 told himself, "Don't even think....."

"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, Mr. 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 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.

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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.

"My painting, Mr. 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 coughing again as he eased the gate open a foot or so and turned back, a playful gleam in his eye. "Well?"

Shit! Scott knew all too well what he was in for, but he was quick to remind himself, It goes with the territory. So, shut up and suck up. Gritting his teeth, trying his best not to let his disgust show, Scott began to squeeze through the gate.

With lightning-fast speed, Peter pinned Scott to a stop. He then stepped closer, so close that Scott could taste the smell of coffee on Peter's breath. He waited for Peter to lean up against him as he often did. This time, much to Scott's surprise and relief, Peter simply let out a bawdy laugh and shoved Scott through the gate.

Stumbling to his van, Scott slid open the side door and lifted a painting out: a portrait of a young man, with long silky chestnut-brown hair and olive skin, standing 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, her head tilted to one side as if in sad repose. On the opposite end of the ledge, lying perfectly still beside a cracked clay pot bursting with orange geraniums, was the cause for her sorrow: her dead mate.

When Scott turned back, Peter was staring wide-eyed and expectant, like a little kid 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 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. Maybe next time."

Masking his relief, Scott edged closer.

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

Peter hesitated, his face flush. He then said with obvious apprehension, "Dr, Picco wants me to pay you by check this time."

That fucking son-of-a-bitch!

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."

"No! Wait. Please?"

Scott held the painting even closer to him in a deliberate effort to make it clear to Peter it was still his.

"Why should I?"

Peter slipped his long fingers into the pocket of his white shirt and pulled out a neatly folded-up check, then gestured for Scott to come closer. Bracing the gate with his hip, Peter tucked the check into Scott's open shirt and affectionately patted it flat.

"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 him 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 might 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."

"Be nice, Mr. Grace. Like it or not, you need him."

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

Peter appeared to suppress an amused smile as he stepped back shut the gate with a swing of his hip and began to turn away, but stopped and appeared to be toying with what looked like a curious frown.

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

Scott stiffened. "We're not married anymore."

Peter grinned and asked sweetly, "Vagina dentata?"

"No! I like women."

Peter playfully quipped, "Pity, you have such a lovely ass, Mr. Grace."

Afraid Peter might see 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 later today, to pick-up a few paintings she asked me to appraise for a former colleague of hers. Some guy named Ashton. I think he was bounced out of the college for screwing around with one of his students. It seems Leslie left Ashton a collection of period American paintings no one knew he owned. And a shit-house full of books."

Peter's gaze narrowed. "When was this?"

"Susan said something about a court-appointed trustee releasing everything to Ashton a week ago."

Peter scowled and nodded as if he were deep in thought.

Anticipating the question he was sure was next, Scott patted the air and said reassuringly, "I'll keep you in mind. I always do. But don't get your hopes up. From what Susan told me the paintings have all been extensively restored."

Peter asked in a quiet voice, "Are there many?"

Come to Papa. "Forty or fifty." He shrugged. "Maybe more?"

Peter asked with a solicitous smile, "Even if you think they're not for me, may I please have a look at them?"

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 paintings to show you, without my having to go through her dealer. When ... and if ... I have anything, I'll call you."

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

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Without comment, his curt nod tacitly conveying acknowledgement and acceptance, 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. And he had every reason not to, given the fact the man had never once kept his word. Scott was pleased with the extra five grand, a salve for the lack of cash. Yet concerned about the repercussions when Lance finds out; and he knew he would.

Telling himself, It's not your problem ... at least not yet, Scott pocketed the check and stepped up to the gate, watching Peter walk down the carriage path, holding the painting out in front of him. Peter was in another world, oblivious.....

Scott's train of thought was broken by the faint sound of a door creaking open and slapping shut. Peering through the gates, he saw the shadow of a figure gracefully hurrying down the well-worn path snaking its way over the threadbare lawn to the river, before disappearing into the fog.

Picco's not that tall. Must be another one of Peter's catamites, which means Picco isn't here. Scott laughed and shook his head. "Are you cheating on him already?"

The growl of a large engine starting, then another, prompted Scott to turn his head and hold his breath, listening. The growl of the two engines, now firing in perfect sync, slowly increased to a deep-throated rumble and started moving right to left, slowly at first, then faster and faster, heading north up the Hudson.

As he started back to his van, Scott shook his head and muttered, "Only a fool would cruise at that speed in this fog, given what's floating in the Hudson."

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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

Dr. David Ashton ... on the soft side of muscular, but still trim, his short dirty-brown hair brushed with gray ... stepped back to admire the magazine-size still-life painting he had just hung-up on the stone block wall in his new office, centered between a matching pair of leaded stained-glass windows.

The painting, 19th century, oil on canvas, was an intimate scene of a tipped-over quart-sized wicker basket, its harvest of just-picked strawberries spilling onto a sunlit bed of succulent grass glistening with drops of morning dew. The reds were warm, the greens cool, refreshing, inviting. A bumblebee, wearing a saffron-yellow coat of flower pollen dusting its underside and legs, was perched on the edge of the basket, eyeing the early-summer bounty.

David reached out and gently tapped the bottom right corner of the gilded period frame, leveling the painting. When he stepped back and off to one side for a look at a different angle, the fading afternoon sunlight streaming in through the stained-glass windows gave new life to his faded madras shirt. He couldn't help noticing its sorry state and reminded himself he had to get some new clothes now that he was back on campus.

One up and eleven to go, David thought as he turned and surveyed the assortment of paintings sitting on the floor and leaning up against the wall, circling the office, silently waiting their turn to be hung up. Their faces were masked by decades of dust and dirt, and delicate hairline cracks in the surface.

"Sort of like me," David muttered to himself as he made a half-hearted effort at smoothing away the wrinkles around his eyes. Laughing at his vanity,

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David picked up another painting, a large brooding summer landscape. Including the ornate frame, it was as wide as his outstretched arms. Beams of sunlight were punching jagged holes through the ominous clouds of an advancing storm, gilding the fields of winter wheat, a silent wind whipping them into endless waves of gold. David carried the painting over to his desk, which was still girdled in the mover's quilted blankets. Setting the painting on top of the desk and up against the wall, he turned to select the next painting from the dozen he chose for his office ... Leslie Peter's old office ... from the collection of fifty paintings Leslie had left him in his will. David zeroed in on his favorite painting of the ones he selected for his office: a young peasant girl walking out of a weathered old barn, wearing a blue gingham dress, red checked apron, and carrying a basket of fresh eggs. Her long blond hair, falling down her back, stopping short of her waist, was yellow as corn silk and straight as rain. Her cherubic face was aglow with an angelic smile. A small flute was peeking out of the pocket of her tattered dress.

David glanced around the office, looking for the right spot. Before he could catch himself, he glanced down at the bare hardwood floor and fell victim to the montage of never-to-be-forgotten memories as they tumbled pell-mell out of the past. One above all others hit the floor with a chilling thud: the Latin words *Lex Sacrata* that had been scrawled in clotted blood on the antique Oriental rug that once graced Leslie's office, but was now held prisoner in the guarded evidence vault at the New York State Police Forensic Investigation Center in Albany.

David spun away, walked to the window and cranked it open, inviting what little breeze there was to sneak into the room as he stared across the Common, beyond the Hudson, watching the Catskill Mountains swallowing-up the sun.

David muttered, "Jerk," when he realized he'd been a fool to think that coming back could somehow make a difference in what happened, and how researching and writing a book about the series of bizarre and still-unsolved murders could possibly help catch Leslie's killer. He just as quickly told himself "Get the hell out of here before it's too late," and at that moment considered returning the paintings and the books to the court appointed executor, and tell

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Dean Anders that he changed his mind and would not accept the endowment funded by Leslie's generous bequest: a \$75,000.00 annual stipend, plus expenses, and his tenure restored.

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 ... leaving behind a comet's tail suspended in the dust ... and striking the stormy landscape propped up on his desk, bursting into flames and igniting a rainbow of previously unseen colors. Curious, certain he saw more than just the remnants of fractured light, David walked over to the desk to get a closer look.

A woman asked softly, "Looking for a signature?"

Startled, David spun around to find Susan Grace, a tall, willowy wisp of a woman, no more than two feet from him, holding an over-sized manila envelope.

Embarrassed by his reaction, David laughed, "You scared the hell out me!"

Susan's sleeveless, summer-weight cotton smock was smudged with patches of oily color, most of them dry and dull. But a few were wet and shiny, offering proof she'd been upstairs in her third-floor studio loft, painting.

Susan's hands, her long fingers, thin and calloused, were smeared with cadmium orange. When she stepped closer to the painting and leaned forward, the sunlight cut through the paper-thin fabric of her summer-weight smock, carving out a sensuous silhouette of her taut and thin, but nonetheless womanly figure. David began to look away, but stopped, when he realized there was no feeling, no rush at the sight of the sunlight caressing her unbridled breasts.

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

David shook his head. "Just the twelve you see here."

Susan nodded as she stood admiring the landscape.

"Did Leslie ever say anything to you about this painting, such as who he thought might have painted it?"

"No." David folded his arms and leaned up against the desk. "All I know is that it was one of his favorite paintings, along with that little autumn sunset in the Catskills, the one he always kept over his desk." David gestured to a sheaf of

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papers spread out on the desk. "It was on the schedule with the other paintings, but the executor's affidavit claimed he never got it." David shrugged. "I think Elizabeth may have kept it. She loved that little painting."

Susan said coolly, "I don't trust her ... never did."

The biting edge on Susan's words called-up for David a blistering hot September day, not unlike today, when all hell broke loose. 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, watching in startled disbelief as Elizabeth Peters destroyed with a kitchen carving knife an almost-finished canvas as Leslie sat in naked repose, calmly watching her.

Susan began moving her hand over the face of the painting, just short of touching it, as if she were retracing brush strokes only another artist could see. 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 this dirt and what appears to be overpainting."

Susan nudged David out of the way and sat beside him on the edge of the desk. "Here," she said, handing David the envelope. "Scott asked me to give this to you. He said it was *very important* and I should find you and give it to you immediately. He also asked me to apologize for not delivering it himself, but he had to get to an auction in Boston." Susan playfully elbowed David. "Which is why he woke me up at five this morning!"

"Immediately?" David asked, checking his watch. "It's nine o'clock. Where have you been for the last four hours. Fall back asleep?"

Looking chagrined, Susan quipped, "Cerebral flatulence. I came on campus and started painting after he left and just lost track of time."

Accepting her apology with a gentle pat of her knee, David held the large inch-thick envelope in his open hand and jostled it up and down, as if trying to judge its weight. "All I wanted was a simple appraisal of each of the paintings, and estimates to have them cleaned. What did he do, write a thesis?"

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

I bet you did, David thought, recalling all too vividly what Susan had been like in faculty meetings. Sitting quietly, watching, listening, she would ruthlessly nail their colleagues 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. "He's also honest as spring rain. He won't steal a painting from someone if he find's out it's right, when they don't know it is. Which is another reason why the man 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!"

As Susan continued talking about her ex-husband, praising him in one breath, damming him in the next, she held onto the same curious expression: a thin veil of resignation that tried, but failed, to mask clearly recognizable feelings of true affection for him, bordering on love. She actually sounded proud, when she said in an upbeat tone of voice, "Although lately, I've gotten the distinct impression Scott's drifting over to the dark side. I think it's the influence from one of his clients, some eccentric old collector Scott says is quite wealthy. The man also asked Scott to bring him some of my paintings to look at. I think his name is," pausing, thinking, Susan said confidently, "Goodyear. Peter Goodyear."

With a toss of her head, as if to be done with her ex-husband, Susan gestured to the corrugated cartons sitting in front of the half-filled bookcase on the far side of the office. "Are those the books Leslie left you?" David nodded. "His art books, too?" she queried, smiling, a covetous look on her face.

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According to Elizabeth, it's everything, and not only from his library here, but the one he had at their summer home on the Cape."

Susan asked with uncharacteristic compassion and caring, "Why did you come back, David? You're done with this part of your life. The faculty thing." She gestured around the office with a sweep of her hand. "It wasn't the paintings Leslie left you that lured you back. And it sure as hell couldn't have been the position he created with the endowment." Susan lowered her voice. "It was him, Leslie ... and his death and how he died ... wasn't it?"

Caught off guard, David turned away, avoiding Susan's accusative gaze as he drifted over to the window and stood look out, but not anything in particular.

"I'm right, aren't I?" Susan asked, making it sound more like a statement.

After a moment, David admitted, "Yes. The truth is, I haven't been able to forget what happened. What made it even worse was the way he was murdered." David found himself trapped in a web of sorrow and bitterness, woven together with anger bordering on rage, as he spun around to confront Susan. "The police here don't have a clue as to who killed him. And I don't think they care. And we both know it's because he was gay. But I care, damnit! I want to know who killed him and why. And I want to see the sick son-of-bitch pay for it. And if I had my way, they'd pay for it the same way Leslie did, with a slow and equally horrifying death." David returned to mindlessly staring outside, aware of the fact that he had unwittingly made a convincing case for him to stay at the college.

Grabbing the envelope off the desk, Susan walked over and shoved it into David's hand. "Open it. I want to know what was so damned important that my dear 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 important it couldn't wait, he told me it was confidential. The nerve of that man!" Susan hesitated, as if waiting for David to say something. When he didn't, she said without the slightest hint of remorse, "He's dead, David. Get on with your life. But if it bothers you so much, do something about it. Just stop feeling sorry for yourself."

"Any other words of wisdom, Mrs. Grace?"

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

Spinning away, Susan walked over to the boxes and began unpacking and shelving the books.

Pissed, but at himself not Susan, David ripped open the envelope and dumped the contents onto the window sill. He picked up a page-sized sheet of film and held it up to the light. "What's this?" he asked himself argumentatively as he impatiently turned it upside down and sideways, then flipped it over.

Susan looked up and said in a tone of voice matching his, "Just what it looks like, a film negative. If Scott did what he usually does, you've got two types of film there. The negatives are the x-ray exposures. The positive black and white prints are blow-ups to scale from the thirty-five millimeter slides he takes off the monitor for the infra red scanner he has. Each method reveals different elements of the painting beneath the surface. Match up the numbers on the films and overlay them and you're looking at a composite of what's underneath all of the dirt, varnish and overpainting. It can include anything from an artist's change, working sketches, the weave of the canvas, as well as any signatures that might have been obliterated by later restoration work. Or added by a forger. It'll also pick up any writing, printing or stenciling on the back of the canvas that might have been covered up by a subsequent relining."

As Sean began examining the sheets of film, Susan returned to shelving the books. One grouping, elegantly leather bound with gold leaf lettering on the covers and spines, and all in Latin, she meticulously arranged in numerical order on the top shelf. Once completed, having left spaces for a handful of missing volumes, she selected one of the books and began flipping through the pages.

"Oh, my God," David whispered as he held up one of the film positives, moving it around, trying to find better light. With the sun directly behind the film, he stood staring in disbelief at rows of small, skeleton-like oval portraits, each one slightly out-of-focus, creating the appearance there was more than one image or layers of images. On either side of the egg-sized portraits were the outlines of block numbers: one; zero; zero. These images were also out of focus,

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as if they were layered one atop the other and misaligned. "It can't be," David whispered and began laughing to himself. "They look like friggin' hundred ..."

Susan asked excitedly, "David! Did you know that Leslie kept a diary?" She glanced up at the regimented row of matching leather bound journals, the last one numbered LX. "Correction," she said quietly. "Make that sixty diaries."

Before Susan could flip another page, David dropped the film and was at her side, gingerly lifting the book out of her hand. Embossed into the leather cover was the title *The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art*. On the spine was the caption *Pliny, Volume XLVIII*. At the bottom was the numeral MCMXCIII.

David muttered, "Nineteen ninety-three? Doesn't make sense," and opened the book to find the words *Januarius - Aprilis* penned in the center of the first page, the date MCMXCIII below it. Recognizing the handwriting, David fanned the dog-eared pages. Each one was filled with Leslie Peters' neat, almost calligraphic handwriting. Small finely drawn portraits, miniature caricatures, appeared every few pages, reminding David of one of Leslie's many talents, as well as his all-too-biting wit. Itemized schedules appeared at the end of each month, looking and reading more like postings in an accounting journal than a diary. David ran his finger over one of the entries. "Twenty-five thousand dollars! What the hell...."

A firm knock on the door derailed his question. Spinning around, David found a woman standing in the doorway, lazily combing her fingers through her wind-blown shoulder-length red hair in a futile effort to tame it.

"So," she said, looking past David toward Susan. There was a tentative yet unquestionably self-assured air about her. "This is where you're hiding, Susie."

The woman was an instant enigma: wearing an expensive looking skirt and jacket of black silk, a shear pink blouse ringed with a double strand of black pearls, she was at the same time elegant yet unkempt. It was as if she didn't care about her appearance or perhaps it was intentional in an effort to mask an unquestionably shapely figure.

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

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a made-up formal voice, Susan said, "David, I want you to meet Colleen Kennedy. We've taken a number of figure study courses together at the National Academy. Colleen's a 'genius' with a brush, when it comes to the human body. Makes my work look like some first grader did it." Stepping back, Susan smiled, waved, and said, "Catch you later," and slipped out of the office before David could object.

David's immediate thought was that this was some sort of set up; one of those blind-date games high school girls play. Not knowing what to say, let alone what to do, wanting only to dive into the diaries on the shelf behind him, David did the guy thing and held out his hand.

"David Ashton," he said, making it sound like he wasn't quite sure of his own name. "I'm pleased to meet you."

Colleen briskly shook David's hand, surprising him with her grip: her touch was unquestionably that of a woman, but she had the strength of man.

Colleen asked, "Are you glad to be back?" as she gracefully slipped past David 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, not his.

Uneasy, not knowing why, David said, "Listen, I ..."

"Leslie's bequest must have been quite a surprise to you."

Leslie? David thought and instantly wanted to know how and where this woman, *Whoever the hell you are!* knew Leslie. And on a first name basis, too. And if she had, why didn't he know her, since she obviously seemed to know him, or was a damn good actress. *Relax*, he thought after scavenging around for an explanation and finding one. *Susan must have given her an earful. Great!* In an effort to buy time, to gain his bearings, David replied off-handedly, "The endowment was a surprise to everyone."

Without turning to face him, Colleen said quietly, "I was referring to the paintings." She stopped to admire the landscape on David's desk. "Everyone and his brother tried to copy the master." She leaned over the desk to get a closer look. "It sure needs a good cleaning."

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David watched in silence, trying to think of a gracious way of getting rid of this woman, short of throwing her out, which he toyed with for all of a second, as she slowly circled the office, admiring one, then another painting. She stopped in front of the peasant girl and smiled. "It's a pity it's not signed, it's really very well done." She glanced around the office. "Have you had any of these looked at?"

David switched from feeling contentious to possessive, when Colleen drifted over to the bookcase and started squaring-up the journals. Scanning the shelves, she said in a throaty purr, "Any artist worth their salt would kill for this collection of books."

She then spun around and just as quickly changed the tenor of her voice, her words 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 one. You seem to have found your voice."

Disarmed, an easy target of flattery as he knew all too well, David smiled and nodded appreciatively. "I.... "

Colleen cut him off. "You must miss him terribly."

Deciding that he must have met this woman on one of his many jaunts into Manhattan with Leslie, David asked quizzically, "Where did you meet Leslie?"

Colleen replied without a second's hesitation, "At an exhibition of my work." She appeared thoughtful. "Five years ago next month as a matter of fact. We became good friends. Leslie often talked about you." She smiled demurely, as if she knew something David didn't. "Doctor David Ashton, my shy friend."

Shy and friendly were not what David felt at this very moment.

"I....."

A tall well-dressed man ... barrel chested, shoulders back, sporting a crew cut right out of the fifties ... appeared in the doorway, nearly filling it. He looked at Colleen, nodded, and said with a brisk snap to his words, "We must be getting back to Albany, Doctor Kennedy." He then spun around and disappeared, the strike of his shoes on the polished marble hallway floor ricocheting off the walls.

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

None of this was making any sense to David. He felt like a clown in a three ring circus: the only thing missing was the laughter, and even that he thought he could hear in the distance. Before he could ask Colleen who that man was, Colleen surprised him by taking his hand and leading him out into the hall.

"Leslie mentioned you have quite a passion for paintings. Is that true?"

Not wanting to let anything get started, David simply nodded.

Colleen appeared none-the-less pleased with his response.

"Perhaps you'd like to see my work? I have an exhibition opening next month in SoHo. Pegasus Galleries, on West Broadway. It's taken me years to build up a large enough body of work for a major show. Care to come to the invitation-only reception?"

Wanting only to have this woman out of his life, though any other time he would have wanted her to stay, David said hurriedly, "Yes! I'll ask Susan to....."

Colleen was quick to say, "No need. Susie's already seen my new work."

Letting go of David's hand, Colleen smiled.

"I'll have my dealer send you a personal invitation."

Colleen nodded, turned on a dime and started down the hallway. David watched, perplexed, as she gracefully ran down the hall and slipped around the corner. Wondering, *What are you up to Susie, playing matchmaker?*

David darted back into his office and reclaimed the journal he was reading, when Colleen Kennedy had walked into his life as if Susan had orchestrated their meeting. David looked up and outside, and started talking to himself, as he often does. "No. Doctor ... whoever you really are ... Kennedy arranged this. You didn't know she was coming here, did you, Susan." David frowned, then smiled, nodded and wondered, "Albany? A chauffeur, who looks, speaks and acts like a body guard?" David shook his head. "No. A New York State trooper?" David laughed to himself. "A doctor of what, Ms. Kennedy? And who sent you here? And why?"

With a 'whatever' shrug, David resumed reading Leslie's tome-like journal.

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IV

The Carlyle Hotel

Everything he said and did was marked with equal cruelty ... besides incest with his sisters ... Caligula made advances to almost every woman of rank in Rome; after inviting a selection of them to dinner with their husbands, he would slowly and carefully examine each in turn while they passed his couch, as a purchaser might assess the value of a slave ... then, whenever he felt so inclined, he would send for whoever pleased him best and leave the banquet in her company. A little later he would return, showing obvious signs of what he had been about, and openly discuss his bed-fellow in detail, dwelling on her good and bad physical points and commenting on her sexual performance.

Suetonius
The Twelve Caesars

The green damask walls of the 'Special Guests' suite in the Carlyle Hotel, on Madison Avenue, diagonally across from Sotheby's, were hung with paintings: small square canvases filled with faceless figures bustling up and down busy Paris streets, or sunbathing nude on a beach in St. Tropez. The frames were also real, not paper prints and mounted in solid wood frames machine-carved into curlicue loops and fancy French curves, then brushed with tinted gesso and burnished with faux gold leaf. On the marble mantle over the gas-fired hearth was a tarnished ormolu clock, its lacquered hands marking Roman time on its white enameled face.

Michael Prentice, a former NFL pro-football player, retired and now soft and paunchy, dwarfed the flimsy aluminum folding chair he was sitting on and the matching card table. Turning to the man on his left, Michael snapped impatiently, "For chrissake, Ira, how many fucking cards do you want?" When Ira didn't answer, Michael gave him a poke in his side.

Tall, trim, with bisque-white skin and bushy-white eyebrows, Ira Jennings was remarkably well-preserved for a man of seventy-five. The only obvious consequences of age were his profusely wrinkled hands and an arthritic hip, which prompted him to moan and sigh whenever he stood up or sat down. Ira

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brushed aside Michael's hand and counted out twenty one-hundred dollar bills from one of the three meticulously neat piles of hundreds, fifties and twenties on the table. He then sprinkled the bills on top of the mound of cash in the center of the table; the remnants from four previous hands in which everyone folded after posting their ante but failing to open with a pair.

Floating from one dying borscht-belt hotel in the Catskills to another during the summer, the game ended every year at the Carlyle, sometime between Labor Day and the first major painting auction in September. There was now twenty-four thousand dollars in the pot, and Michael needed every last dollar of it just to break even. As usual, he was playing with someone else's money. This time a deposit on the sale of two folk art portraits that would net him a quick fifty-grand profit if the paintings cleaned up to his client's satisfaction. It wasn't that Michael was dishonest, he was an addicted compulsive gambler, which is why he was drummed out of the NFL.

Michael dealt Ira's draw. Ira meticulously fit each card into place, creating the impression they fit into some sort of playable or winning hand. With an ever-so-slight stutter, stumbling over c's and l's, Ira declared, "You can save your money, little Mike." He raised a single bushy eyebrow and glanced down at the sparse pile of cash lying on the table in front of Michael. "What little you have left."

Michael shook his head, his unkempt Irish-red hair flying out like a dirty mop. "You don't have shit, old man, and you know it. So save the acting for one of your yuppie stockbroker clients the next time you offer them one of those made-to-order America's Cup paintings and they ask you if it's 'right'."

Although Michael was talking to Ira, his gaze kept flitting back and forth between Ira and Rodrigo Perez, who was sitting directly across from Michael, his back to the window overlooking Madison Avenue. Light from the early morning sun was bouncing off the polished stone facade of the old Sotheby's building across the street and streaming into the room. The glare cast Perez's face in a

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shadow, his large head, scrawny neck and spindly shoulders a grotesque silhouette against the sunlight.

Michael palmed the deck of cards and fanned the corner with his thumb.

"How many does his royal highness want?" he asked and thumbed the deck again, then once more, openly taunting Perez.

Smart was not one of Michael Prentice's strong suits. What little success as a private painting dealer he'd achieved over the last three years came from servicing a string of wealthy women on the up- and downtown sides of Park Avenue. Each of his clients, half of them married the other half divorced or widowed, bought one or two paintings by lesser artists, then passed Michael on to a friend like a juicy rumor.

In addition to the gift of a larger than average hard-on that always stayed hard, dumb luck was also Michael's hallmark. Until two months ago, when he sold a ringer to the wife of a New York State Supreme Court Judge and got caught when they had it appraised for insurance. Given a week to buy it back, Michael approached one of his Park Avenue paramours for a loan. Anything but a fool, the wealthy widow got five points a week on the fifty thousand, four paintings worth twice the fifty as collateral, plus a roll in the hay every Saturday afternoon, when Michael delivered the juice on his loan. Cash, no checks, and no excuses. And I'm doing you a favor, she told him.

"Well?" Michael goaded Perez, repeatedly fanning the deck.

Perez calmly set his cards down and patted them with his small, almost womanly hands, a striking contrast to his wiry frame and large lollipop head. He sat in silence, his gaunt face cast in a shadow, except for the soft glow from his baby-blue Bob Dylan eyes. He started drumming his fingers on the table; slowly at first, then steadily faster.

Michael had all he could do to keep from smashing Perez in the face. It was something he'd wanted to do from the moment they met, two years ago, the memory of Perez making a fool of him forever stuck in Michael's craw. Just starting out, Michael had brought a painting to Perez by an artist that word on

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the street said Perez was actively buying. And paying strong prices for, too. "It's a no-name piece of shit, kid," Perez had told him in front of everyone in his Madison Avenue gallery.

Humiliated, Michael turned to leave. "Stop!" Perez ordered. He then reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. Peeling off two-dozen hundreds, he stuffed them into Michael's open shirt and told him, "Here, I'll save you the embarrassment of getting shot down by everyone else on the street."

New at the game of picking and running paintings, Michael took the money, though reluctantly, since his efforts only netted him a two-hundred dollar profit. Two months later, punched up, varnished and re-framed, that same painting appeared at auction and fetched Perez fourteen thousand.

Furious and acting against everyone's advice, Michael confronted Perez in the back of the auction room at Sotheby's. Perez simply laughed and told him, "You gotta pay your dues, before you can run with wolves, little Mike. Now get the fuck outta my face," he snarled, then kneed Mike in the crotch and laughed when he doubled over.

Ira stood up, spread his long arms into a lazy stretch, and asked through a yawn, "Anyone hungry?" Grinning, he affectionately patted his flat stomach as if to rub in the fact that he was in far better shape than Michael, though forty years his senior.

Michael folded his cards and took a healthy sip from the glass of scotch on the table beside him. Another sip, more of a gulp, netted him an ice cube. Smirking, he began chewing it with his mouth open, which he knew all too well Perez couldn't stand. Ira bent over, braced his hands on the edge of the table, and zeroed in on the man sitting across from him and to Michael's right.

"What about you, Marty. Want anything to eat? They've got the best Nova here I've ever tasted. Better than Ratner's!"

Easily six-foot seven or eight, with dark-brown eyes and a thinning crown of brown hair, Martin Johnson was powerfully built and it showed. The only one at the table who was still wearing a tie, Martin looked as fresh now as he did

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when he first joined the game in progress, shortly after midnight and smelling like fresh pussy.

Fussing with his cards, Martin said without looking up, "Toasted bagel with lox and sliced onion. No cream cheese. And a cup, no, make that a pot of hot coffee. I've got a hell of a morning ahead of me," he added and finally glanced up, a wary look in his eye. "Thanks to you, Jennings, and that cockamamie Hasidic group from Brooklyn you referred to us with that warehouse full of shit Judaica. Don't do me any more favors like that. okay?"

Clearly amused, Ira was about to say something, when Perez grumbled under his breath, "You fucking kikes are all alike."

Martin sat up, his jaw square, his gaze dead cold. He gave Perez a sharp back-handed swat on the arm.

"Watch your mouth."

"Who the fuck do you think you're smacking, asshole!"

Martin snapped, "You!" and stuck his finger in Perez's face. "And if I ever hear you say something like that about Jews again, I'll rip your fucking tongue out of your mouth and shove it up your bony Puerto Rican ass so you can taste your own shit."

Ira gracefully stepped away away from the table. Michael slid his chair back. He fully expected Perez to slap Martin across the face, which was his trademark response whenever someone crossed him, man or woman, and regardless of who they were, or where they were. But slapping Martin would be the closest thing to suicide for Perez, which is exactly why Michael wanted him to do it. He had all he could do to keep from egging the two men on in the hope of watching Perez get his ass handed to him.

With a shake of his head, Ira turned and limped over to the end table between the sofa and the bedroom door, which was pulled shut. He picked-up the house phone and said in a conciliatory tone of voice, "C'mon, you guys, why don't we all have something to eat. Coffee? Hard roll? Danish? Scones for little Mike?"

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When Michael turned and shook his head, Ira's thin-lipped smirk reappeared, as he whined, "What about your lady friend in the bedroom, should I get the princess a croissant? Or should I order something for the hangover she's going to have, when she wakes up? A virgin Mary with a couple of raw eggs and a few dashes of bitters?"

Laughing, Ira cracked open the bedroom door and made a half-hearted show of peeking into the room. Michael was in Ira's face before he could pull the door shut. With a sweep of his arm, he knocked Ira away from the door and gently closed it. Stumbling backward into the wall, Ira struck his head on one of the paintings. It teetered and fell to the floor, splitting the corners of the frame open. His face flushed red with anger, but only for as long as it took him to glance over at Perez, who gave him a subtle shake of his head. Nodding, Ira limped back to the table.

Michael followed close behind, poking Ira with his finger like a schoolyard bully. Failing to get a rise out of him, Michael gave up and sat down. Turning to Martin, Michael asked in a surprisingly respectful manner, "How many cards, Marty?"

Martin shut his eyes and sat motionless, as if in trance. After a moment, he said slowly, as if he were unsure of himself, "I'll ... I'll take three."

Such tentativeness seemed strange for a man who wielded an auctioneer's gavel with the skill and finality of an executioner's axe. Slowly, almost reluctantly, Martin counted out three thousand in fifties and set the cash on the pile.

Michael slipped Martin's cards off the deck and set them in front of him.

Martin just sat there, staring at the cards, biting his lower lip. After a moment, he sighed and picked them up.

Michael made a cocky show of dealing himself a solitary card.

Perez leaned forward out of the shadow, exposing the expanding bald spot on the top of his head. It was a position he rarely put himself in, even to the point of stepping away from anyone taller than he was, when they got too close to him. He glanced at his watch, a wafer-thin Piaget with diamonds set into each

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hour and smaller ones set into the bezel circling the crystal. It had been Michael's, until he lost it to Perez at a game in the Catskills over the summer.

Perez taunted, "If you boys are finished playing with yourselves, can we please get this fucking game over with? I've got an early luncheon with that new girl in the paintings department at Christie's, and I want to shave and take a shower first." He grinned, revealing teeth too perfect for his face.

"They finally hired a bitch with real tits and not baby boobs."

Ira lowered his gaze and shook his head, a look of tacit disapproval on his face. But not envy, not Ira Jennings. For him, women were good for two things: motherhood and writing checks drawn on their husband's equity or trust accounts.

Ira suddenly announced confidently, "I'll get things started with five grand."

He sprinkled the cash onto the pot.

Martin threw his cards down. "Fuck!"

Ira mimed pulling the cash to him as he turned to Michael.

"Does the boy still think the old man's bluffing?" Proud as a peacock, Ira jeered, "Time to put up or shut up, little Mike."

Michael checked his draw card. Finding a king of clubs, struggling to stifle his excitement, he mentally totaled the pot. Including Perez's five grand and one more pass around the table, Michael figured he would have enough cash to get out of hock and no longer have to service his lady banker on Saturday, and have something left for himself.

Michael calmly doled-out the last of his cash and said in a studied, matter-of-fact monotone, "I owe the kitty two grand."

Perez reached out, methodically picked up each of the bills, and threw them into Michael's face.

"You're out of turn. But it doesn't matter. If you can't cover your bet you're out."

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Fighting the urge to grab Perez's scrawny neck and strangle him, Michael asked with a choirboy innocence, "Since when?"

Perez slammed his hand on the table. "Since right this fucking minute, asshole. For starters, you owe me twenty thousand for that Gifford you begged me to give you last month, to show to that very important client of yours, that has-been opera singer, who lives over by Lincoln Center. The one you fuck whenever her decrepit husband goes out of town on business."

"How the hell...?"

"Stuff it," Perez snapped. He then reached across the table and grabbed a fistful of Michael's silk shirt. "And you still have those portraits you took from me on memo, which is another twenty grand."

Letting go of Michael, Perez rapped his knuckles on the table.

"You promised to have those paintings back by Friday or settle up. As usual, you didn't keep your word." Perez brandished the watch. "Got any more collateral?"

Unable to speak, not without saying something he knew he'd regret, Michael just shook his head.

Perez glanced past Michael. A smutty grin slowly spread across his face as he asked coyly, "How about sleeping beauty?"

Confused, Michael asked, "What are you talking about?"

Perez gestured toward the bedroom door with a casual back-handed flip of his hand. "Your little princess from Greenwich."

Michael choked in disbelief. "She's my fiancée, not some auction-house bimbo with big tits."

Perez shrugged and grinned. "I don't see where you have much choice. You're broke. You owe me and everyone else at this table money. As I see it, it's as clear as dog shit on the sidewalk. Kiss your money goodbye or put sleeping beauty into the pot and defend your hand like a man. She's good for whatever bets you make. If you've got the cards, the money's yours, along with your lady friend." Perez grinned ear to ear. "All you have to do to get her out of hock is pay

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me for my Gifford." Perez pawed at the cash on the table. "I figure there's more than enough here to take care of me and a little something on account against the portraits, since I happen to know that you already made a deal on them and they won't be coming back."

Michael threw down his cards. "This is a fucking set-up." He turned to Ira, his eyes burning with accusation. "Is this why you wanted Holly to stay for dinner last night, after I told her to go back to my apartment?" Ira's vacuous gaze remained riveted to the cards in his hand. "You son-of-bitch!"

Michael spun around to confront Martin, who just as quickly got up and walked over to the window, where he stood staring down at the early rush hour traffic snaking its way up Madison Avenue. Michael exploded, his words reverberating off the walls, "You fucking bastards! I can't believe you're doing this to me!"

Ira said quietly, "You did it to yourself. You don't know when to say no."

Martin turned away from the window to accept Michael's heated gaze.

"He's right." Martin pointed at the table. "Where did you get that money? Whose was it this time, some blind and toothless old broad you fucked silly, then cleaned out her bank account? Or did you sell another painting you don't own?" Martin shook his head in obvious disgust. "It wouldn't be the first time, now would it?"

Michael turned to Perez to plead his case, his hands, his whole body, quivering.

"What happens to Holly if I lose?"

Perez rocked back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head.

"You've got a week to bail her out. After that, the vig is a grand a day, plus the cost of this room." He glanced up at the ceiling. "Knowing how you are about covering your debts, I'd send over some of that expensive faggoty-smelling cologne of yours. It might help the little lady forget if she wakes up and finds someone porking her in the dark." Perez tipped back a little further and grabbed

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the obvious bulge in his crotch, a gesture he was known for. "But that won't help if I win. She will never forget me."

Michael exploded out of his chair, knocking the table over and sending the cards and cash and glasses and ice cubes flying about the room. Martin was at Perez's side in a heartbeat, grabbing Michael's arm before his fist could find its intended mark.

"You really don't want to do that."

Perez glanced at the mess. He appeared angry for a moment, then smiled as he turned to face Michael and said ever so sweetly and slowly, "I won't need the cologne. You can save it for that leathery bag of bones you fuck every Saturday afternoon."

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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 a giant-sized coffee mug. Yesterday's paint-smearred smock and old moccasins had been replaced with khaki shorts, a tie-dyed T-shirt, sans bra, and a pair of well-worn leather sandals: fitting attire for a hot and muggy Saturday morning in September that felt more like the middle of July.

Long an advocate that summer really 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.

Susan whispered, "You silly man," the moment she saw David sitting on the floor, leaning up against the bookcase, head bowed, having fallen asleep. Lying open in his lap beneath his folded hands was one of Leslie's journals. On the floor beside him, arranged in neat orderly piles, one overlapping another, were the papers and films from Scott's examination reports for all forty paintings. Included in the make-believe game of solitaire were a half-dozen sheets of yellow ruled paper filled with columns of numbers and topped with a twenty-dollar bill that appeared to have been ironed flat.

Susan tiptoed her way through the maze of papers and cartons. Most were empty, some open, half gutted, a few still tapped shut. She knelt down, quietly set the mug on the floor, then reached out and gently brushed the hair off David's forehead.

"David, it's ..."

"Gotcha!: David barked and grabbed Susan's wrist.

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

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"We're even," he said with a devilish smile. He then snatched up the coffee mug and buried his face in the wisps of steam, chugging the coffee.

Susan growled, "You bastard," and drove her foot into his thigh, causing him to spill coffee down his threadbare madras shirt.

"And good morning to you, too," David laughed and climbed to his feet.

Susan jumped up and reclaimed her coffee. Fighting back a smile, she feigned a scowl. "That was not nice. You frightened me."

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

"You're right. I'm sorry. I'm a guy. Guys stupid little-boy things."

Clearly surprised by what he said, and how he said it, Susan asked, "Is this what you're like when you first wake up in the morning?"

"Who knows?" he said with a casual shrug of his shoulders. "Maybe you should ..." Thinking better of what he was about to say, David caught himself, reached out with both hands, and mimicked Oliver Twist. "More caffeine, please, sir?"

"Maybe I should what?" Susan asked with a wry smile as she handed David the mug. "I'll go get another cup, be back in a mo." Turning, Susan slipped out into the hall. The soft slapping of her leather-soled sandals faded with her hurried steps.

Left alone, David was instantly set upon by the questions that steadily filled his thoughts, their demands for answers growing louder with each journal read.

Spanning eighteen years, the journals started out as Leslie's personal diary of sorts. Although the first two books were missing, along with a later one, the third journal, bearing the Roman number III, began with Leslie's first year at the college.

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The opening entries recounted his meeting with David. The two men could not have been more different than if they'd been cast opposite each other in Shavian play. Leslie was thin as a rail, well on his way to losing his wispy-thin blond hair, perky, 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 had become well-known for his scholarly art history expertise on

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nineteenth and early twentieth century American paintings, with an emphasis on still life paintings and portraits.

With each published article, both by him and about him, and the newspaper, magazine and television interviews, Leslie's involvement beyond the walls of academe grew steadily more demanding of his time. Curiously, almost over-night, Leslie's media presence dried-up; but not due to a decline in demand. At the same time, entries in his personal journal significantly increased in frequency content, along with expanded and more detailed notations as to what he was doing and with whom. However, no one was identified by name. Instead, Leslie created Punch-like personas for each of his contacts and clients. Equally perplexing for David was the fact that it was at this same time that Leslie invited him to begin tagging along with him on many of his frequent trips into Manhattan for previews, auctions, exhibitions and lavish gallery openings.

Curiously, it was also at this same time that Leslie's journal entries became more business-like. 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 preferred means of payment, which Leslie made no effort to hide: he meticulously noted who paid him, how much he was paid and for what. And with all cash payments, he even noted where the payment had taken place.

The most recent diaries proved the most difficult for David to read. Not only for the change he saw taking place in Leslie, but for what he had somehow been forced to do against his will. With each passing month, the names, given and surname, were replaced with initials. While the caricatures Leslie sketched increased in frequency, along with the cruelty of the characterizations. And names were no longer attached to the sketches of faces: Leslie's artistic talents and biting wit said all there was to say about this or that person's true personality in Leslie's eyes. And in some instances names had been replaced with the names or nicknames of certain Roman emperors. Curiously, the increasing use of Latin was matched by an increase in the frequency and amount of payments Leslie recorded having received: an unexplained mix of cash, checks and credit card payments, as if he were doing it for income tax purposes.

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David ambled over to the open window and sat on the deep-set ledge of the stone block alcove, which was ablaze with sunlight from the early morning sun hovering above the horizon like a fat orange balloon. Its radiant touch caressed the mountains beyond the Hudson: sensuous mounds of earthen flesh cradling the ancient river in history's irresistible embrace, unlike their rude upward-thrusting cousins ten thousand millennia to the west.

It's here, guarded by the ghosts of Thomas Cole, Frederick Church and George Inness, where the river widens and slows after a long and treacherous journey down from its modest origin high in the brooding Adirondacks: a place native Americans called *Lake Tear of The Clouds*, the mystical source of their stolen river. After a well-earned rest, its face captured on a thousand canvases, its spirit untouched, this misnamed estuary passes through the majestic Highlands on its voyage to the sea.

As he felt himself sinking deeper into the morass of Leslie's diaries, his head swimming with dates and names and numbers and confusing Latin phrases, David heard Susan say with a note of sincere concern in her voice, "You look like hell. What did you do, pull an all-nighter?" Kneeling, she gathered up the yellow sheets of paper, along with the twenty-dollar bill, and walked over to join David at the window.

"What's this?" she asked, waving the twenty.

"You really don't want to know."

"Try me," Susan replied, sounding irritated by David's answer. "And what does this long number at the bottom of this yellow sheet mean, the one with a half-dozen exclamation marks after it?"

David laughed, "If what your husband ..."

"'Ex' husband," Susan interjected.

David acknowledged her request with a respectful nod.

"If what Scott wrote in his report is correct, and there really are one-hundred dollar bills laminated between the original canvases and the lining canvases of every one of the paintings, and if my simple arithmetic is equally right, that number is the total of what's hidden inside the forty paintings."

Susan voice cracked, when she exclaimed, "What! This is a joke, right?"

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David tapped the twenty-dollar bill pinned beneath her thumb.

"I measured this ... all bills are the same size ... and figured out how many would fit on each painting, taking into consideration their respective sizes. I multiplied that by five, which is how many layers Scott thinks are laminated inside each painting."

David tapped the papers in Susan's hand. "My calculations are all there. I even did it three times, just to be sure."

Susan hesitated, her eyes blinking, head nodding, then whispered in disbelief, "A million dollars!" Her gaze began tracking something on the wall above David's head. "That's ten-thousand bills!"

David gestured toward his desk with a wave of the mug.

"Take that landscape for example. It's roughly fifty-four inches by sixty-six inches." He motioned to the bill Susan was holding. "You can lay out two-hundred bills. I know, I did it with the twenty just to be sure, even though I had calculated it on paper. Two hundred bills equal twenty thousand dollars. And five layers gives you a hundred grand in that painting alone. Allowing for the different sizes of the forty paintings, you get a million bucks, give or take a hundred grand."

Susan still appeared skeptical.

"Where the hell did Leslie get that kind of money? Presuming, of course, he was the one who had it put inside the paintings. Maybe he didn't know about it?"

David gestured toward the bookcase. "A few appraisals here, a little bit of consulting there, a lucky find he turned into a tidy profit at auction, it all adds up over eighteen or so years." David glanced outside and drew quiet. When he finally spoke, his words were forced. "But the *real* money began to come ..." David hesitated, unable, or perhaps unwilling, to say what he knew, at least what he thought he knew.

"Although I stopped running a mental total as I read his journals, my guess is that Leslie pulled in a good deal more than what we may find in the paintings. And there's the endowment I get of seventy-five grand a year. And thanks to the conditions of the grant, no one except his lawyer knows what the amount of the capital asset is funding my annual income."

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

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"And speaking of money, just who is that friend of yours you're trying to fix me up with? She said that she was a good friend of Leslie's, but he never said anything to me about her. And I haven't found any references to her in his journals. At least not yet."

Susan waved the papers at David.

"It appears Leslie didn't tell you, or any of us, a lot of things!" Softening her demeanor, Susan squeezed into what little space there was in the window alcove beside David. "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. Her husband, for all of two months, was murdered some years back and his killer, or killers, were never found. He was an up-and-coming dealer and 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 own painting. In a way, I guess I felt sorry for her. So, when she asked about you ... and apparently somehow knew about you and Leslie ... I offered to introduce her to you."

Playfully snatching the twenty from Susan, David asked as he headed for his desk, "Does she paint for a living or teach somewhere and paint for 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! She paints under a pseudonym. But that's not what she does for a living. She's a forensic pathologist, And, apparently, very well-known and respected. You see her name in the papers all the time, testifying at this or that murder trial." Susan hopped off the window sill and started toward the bookcase. "I take it that 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 still 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 next week. I don't remember. I wasn't paying attention." David gestured to Susan. "She didn't seem any too pleased, when I suggested you go with us to the reception. Besides, I think she was just being polite. You know, like saying 'let's do lunch sometime?'"

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

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

"Did you read all of these appraisal reports last night and the diaries?"

David replied with a lazy shake of his head. "Yes and no. I read the appraisal reports, but I skimmed through the diaries. I'll get around to continue reading them later today ... or maybe sometime tomorrow ... after I get some sleep."

"Mind if I read the appraisals to see what Scott had to say?"

"Nope. But no husband-wife nit-picking comments.. Okay?"

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

The moment her attention was diverted, David zeroed in on the journal he was reading, when he fell asleep. Stepping around the auction catalogues splayed out on the floor, he grabbed the diary and made himself comfortable on the window sill. With Susan ensconced in his chair, feet on the desk, reading, and him sitting in the alcove, it created the appearance of two fighters who had gone to their respective corners.

David opened the journal to the spot he marked with a folded-over corner of the page and smiled anew at the caricature as he reread the entry beneath the small 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. *Or maybe you never met this one*, he thought. Giving up with a shrug, he read the last entry of a schedule summarizing one month's list of transactions, "Knock-out. Perez, Neale, Peterman and me. Christie's twenty-three. Great Durand. My cut five grand."

David thought, *Must be Asher B. Durand*. He then read the next few lines: *Pool. Peterman, Prentice, Anderson, Perez and me. Stole a fantastic McEntee of an autumn scene in the Catskills for fifteen grand, half the low side estimate. Perez sold it to Anogian for fifty-five. We split forty grand four ways. Love it!*

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David shook his head in disbelief as he read on, "Perez shot-down a Sanford Gifford, a scene of the marshes along the Hudson River at Piermont. He later purchased it from the consignor ... poor bastard ... after the sale for half the low-side estimate. Saw him give Jeremy Steele five grand cash for a fast gavel."

David turned to the next and last page in the journal and it to himself. *Barter with Roan. Got the conservation of my sunset scene of Katterskill Falls in exchange for my letter of authentication on a lovely still life bearing the partially effaced signature (P)eale, which looks apocryphal to me but the colors are too good not to be right. The fruit looks almost alive. While I was there, 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? He's a baby! 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 ten thousand. He claims it's nothing compared to what he's doing for me. 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 as he absentmindedly patted the journal lying in his lap, asking himself yet again, "Why did you want me to have these?"

Before he could even try to answer that question, Susan bolted up out of the chair and blurted out, "The painting on your desk is signed! And it's by George Inness!"

Gathering up the other reports off the floor, Susan dumped them onto the desk and began frantically sorting through them, checking for something in each one.

"They're all signed!" She started laughing. "You've got a fortune in paintings!"

David asked, "Where's Scott," the somber tone of his voice tempering Susan's euphoria. "I have to talk to him. Now."

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Confused, Susan replied, "He's at an auction in Boston. Skinner's, I think. But why do you have to see him? And why right this minute?"

David tossed the diary onto the window sill.

"I've got to tell him to keep his mouth shut and not say a word to anyone."

Susan replied angrily, as if she were defending her ex-husband

"Scott is not like that. Anyway, what's the big deal?"

David walked over, took hold of Susan's shoulders, and forced her to look at him.

"We find what might be a million dollars hidden inside forty 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. Dozens of hand-written diaries, some written in coded Latin, filled with everything the police and IRS would love to know. Four cruel and brutal unsolved murders, including a dear friend of ours. And you ask me what's the big deal?" David took a steadying breath.

"The big deal is we could be next, because of what we know and now have!"

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