

American Still Life
The Caesars of Madison Avenue

ForeWord

American Still Life - Caesars of Madison Avenue is based on my first-hand experience as a fledgling collector of 19th and early 20th century American paintings, a modestly successful retail dealer for 10 years, and my conversations with David Gale Ashton and Scott Grace, art dealers who are no longer with us.

As a retail dealer, my partner and I handled reasonably-priced 19th and early 20th century American paintings. We also represented a constantly changing 'stable' of both proven and promising contemporary artists. We often joked that I handled the 'Quick' and my scholarly partner spoke for the 'Dead', a Biblical distinction that was often blurred as you will soon learn.

In the early 1980s a modestly-priced 19th century American landscape painting of any quality, and bearing an authentic signature by a listed artist, might have been priced starting at approximately \$5,000.00. A figure that seemed to grow with every auction of American paintings. This meant that to be competitive, we needed at a minimum a \$250,000.00 'floating' inventory to compete with the New York art dealers, I often referred to as *The Caesars of Madison*.

Based on my experience the rapidly rising demand for 'Brand Name Artists' in the 1980s, fueled by ignorance and inflated stock broker margin accounts, created a new wave of wannabe dealers I dubbed *Gypsies, Beggars and Thieves*.

Most, but not all, of the characters depicted in *American Still Life* ... individuals I either dealt with personally or regularly observed in the marketplace ... appear to have disappeared from the contemporary art scene. Therefore, I have unofficially declared them dead and fair game as fictional characters. A few others have been officially reported dead in trade publications such as *The Newtown Bee*, arguably the New Testament version of the contemporary art world.

Sadly, far too many of the players have suffered a cruel death at the hands of the most feared serial killer ever to stalk the art world: AIDS.....*Dominus vobiscum*.

In my effort to write *American Still Life*, I heeded the advice tendered by my distant Celtic cousin, Oscar Wilde, in *The Decay of Lying : An Observation* (1889), to wit: "People have a careless way of talking about a 'born liar', just as they talk about a 'born poet'. But in both cases they are wrong. Lying and poetry are arts arts, as Plato saw, not unconnected with each other and they require the most careful study, the most disinterested devotion."

Donald Knight Beman
2021

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I

Lex Sacrata

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

'Caligula'

Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus
Emperor of Rome
(AD 37 - AD 41)

The figure kneeling beside an eviscerated naked body of a man lying on a large Oriental rug suddenly stood up in the midnight dark of the office and stumbled backwards, arms spread wide, dizzy, and waited to regain their balance.

With a deep breath and slow steady exhale, they turned and walked across the stone-walled office to one of the matching pair of waist-to-ceiling height leaded stained-glass windows. Unlatching the sash, they pushed open the window, sweeping the new-fallen snow off the stony ledge outside. The swirling wind blew the snow into the room, dusting everything with a delicate white lace that quickly melted.

With an all-over shiver, they started slowly walking around the room, arms spread, skipping now and then, while slipping in and out of the patches of moonlight falling through the open and shut stained-glass windows onto the Oriental rug.

It was as if they were playing a game of hopscotch, but in slow-motion.

Moving close to the wall, they continued around the room, dragging the fingertips of one hand over the rough stone blocks as a guide. They passed-up one painting after another on the wall. They ignored the gilt-framed photographs arranged in regimented order atop a long wooden low-boy credenza.

They paused, when they noticed a pair of foot-tall bronze figurines partially hidden by the books and clutter atop a massive oak desk pushed up against the wall on the other side of the room. Scurrying over to the desk, they snatched-up the sculptures, returned to the open window, and held them up in 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: a portly bear was seated in a wooden armchair, head tipped back, mouth agape, an oversized bib tied around it's neck. Clutching the arms of the chair,

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the bear was staring up at a pair of pliers held above it's head by it's simian companion, a devilish human-like grin masterfully sculpted into it's face.

With a confident nod, they set the would-be dentist and anxious patient onto the window sill, picked up the pair of monkeys and began to gently trace the delicate features of the simian scholars with the tips of their fingers. Cradling the century-old French Animalier bronze to their chest, they shuffled back to the Oriental rug, knelt down, and gently set their purloined prize on the carpet beside them.

A gust of frigid winter air blowing in through the open window called them to account. Shivering, they dipped the tip of their finger into the pool of rapidly thickening blood in the man's open abdomen and began to write something on the carpet between the man's bare thighs, repeating the process for each letter until they 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 academic 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 stay just beyond Peter's long reach.

Puckering his lips, Scott said in his fractured French, "*Oeuvre*," and started laughing at himself. He still couldn't say it right, no more than he could correctly 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 that rang of the deep south: *Gone with the Wind* not *Deliverance*.

Scott smiled at recalling his own unguarded response, when he squeaked, *Five in the morning! Are you serious?* Scott's amusement was short-lived, however, when Peter replied with a subtle, but all-too-clear hint of a warning in his deep resonant voice, "*Noblesse oblige, Mister Grace.*"

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That was Scott's first sale to Peter after Peter had spent 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 card game of Old Maid.

Scott knew exactly what Peter was doing: he was making sure 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 many 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 Scott was constantly being 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 slowly drove past a palace-sized wannabe English Tudor set back 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 inside with a dozen of the hundred or so paintings Scott had schlepped back and forth from his gallery for the one-minute audience 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, but empty, Jerry cans. They were always in a rush. 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.

#

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.

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The road leveled off with a thump, took a sharp left, and came to a dead-end in front of a pair of 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, Ph.D. 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, Picco!" and rattled the gates again. He then scaled the brick column using the mortarless joints for finger holds, 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 old and new 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 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.

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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.

Pleased with himself, Peter turned and unlocked the gate.

"My painting, Mister Grace?" Peter glanced over his shoulder. "Let's go! Hop to!"

Climbing to his feet, Scott asked, "Where's the cash?"

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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.

"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, sitting 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 walked toward the gate 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 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."

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

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, "Play 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, and also floral still lifes. 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?"

"No!" Scott shot back. "I like women. 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 some paintings Susan 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. He also left Ashton a shit-house full of art books and a few dozen personal journals."

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

"Susan said something about a court-appointed trustee releasing everything to Ashton last week. Or the week before?" Anticipating the question Scott was certain would be 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?"

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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 one or two 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. He then 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 aging side of muscular, his dusty brown hair brushed with gray.....slowly turned full-circle in his new ground floor office in Merrywood Hall on the campus of Hart College overlooking the Hudson River in upstate New York.

David pointed, whispered "You're it," and picked up one of the ten 19th century paintings set on the floor, propped up against the wall, 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 of the basket was a large bumblebee wearing a saffron-yellow coat of pollen as if defending its discovery.

David stepped forward and hung the painting on a small rusted picture hook between a pair of matching deep-set leaded stained glass windows, one of which was cranked wide 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.

David whispered, "One up, nine to go," and started slowly 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 picked up 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 as wide as his desk. Beams of sunlight were punching jagged holes through the ominous clouds of an advancing summer storm, gilding the fields of wheat, a silent wind whipping them into endless waves of gold.

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

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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 spun away, walked over to the open stained glass window and stood gazing out beyond the Hudson as the Catskill Mountains were swallowing-up the sun.

David whispered, "You jerk," when he decided it was foolish of him to think that coming back to the college 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. David told himself, "Get the hell out of here before it's too late," and at that moment considered returning all fifty paintings: the ten now in his office and the other forty currently being photo-documented for insurance and restoration purposes. He would also have to return Leslie's collection of art history books to the Executor and tell Dean Anders he would not accept the endowment funded by Leslie's bequest: a seventy-five thousand dollar annual tax-free stipend for ten years, a monthly expense account of a thousand dollars, also tax free, and his tenure rightfully restored, along with three years of improperly withheld back pay.

With a decisive nod, David turned to leave, but stopped at the sight of a sliver of sunlight knifing through one of the stained-glass windows, shooting across the room, and striking the landscape painting propped up on his desk. Certain 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 voice, "Looking for a signature?"

Startled, David spun around to find Susan Grace, a tall, thin, athletic woman, standing no more than two feet behind him and 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, "Did Scott get all of the paintings back to you?"

David shook his head. "Just the ten here in my office. He's still scanning and photo-documenting the other forty, which he said could take him a month or two."

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

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

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

Susan said coolly, "I think she kept it. Probably hid 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 across his back, the scar now thick as a rope.

#

Susan stepped to the desk and began slowly 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 re-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 personally delivering it. He had to get to an auction in Boston."

Susan elbowed David. "Which is why he woke me up at four 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, Susie. What were you doing for the last six and a half hours, sleeping?"

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 Susan's 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.

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

Susan was quick to answer David, 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 that 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 one 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 cartons of books stacked up in front of the just-built wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling, custom wood bookcases.

"Are those the books Leslie left you?"

David nodded.

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

"Yes. According to Elizabeth's hand written note, it's every art book Leslie owned. From his library here, his library at home and their summer home at the Cape."

Hesitating, frowning, 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 psycho-sexual thrillers."

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Susan gestured around the office to the yet to be hung-up paintings on the floor leaning up against the wall. "Was it the paintings he 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 your only academic obligation is mentoring a half-dozen graduate students?"

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

David abruptly spun around.

"The local and state police *apparently* do not have a clue as to who killed Leslie and why. And it has nothing to do with the newspapers 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 pay the same way Leslie did."

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

"Here. 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 important 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."

Laughing, David asked playfully, "How do you know what a prick is like?"

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.

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

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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. "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 a relining may have covered up. Either to hide something or simply to strengthen the old 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 their Roman numerical order, leaving spaces for the two missing volumes. She then selected one of the leather-bound books and began to slowly, curiously, flip through the pages.

David muttered, "What the hell?" as he held up one of the large negatives to the sunlight and stared in disbelief at rows of small oval portraits out-of-alignment, creating the appearance there was more than one layer of images. On both sides of the vertical egg-shaped portraits were the 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 tall elegant woman 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 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 hold another woman. Speaking in a made-up formal voice, Susan said, "David Ashton, I want you to meet Colleen Kennedy. We took

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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. 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 serious conservation work to address all of the amateur restoration."

Without waiting for a comment or question from David, Colleen turned and walked over to the bookcase. Gesturing to the books on the shelves and those in the open cartons, Colleen said in a throaty purr, "Any art historian worth their salt would kill for this collection of period books."

Colleen 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 one. 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, 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."

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....."

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

Colleen scurried 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?*

#

IV

The Carlyle

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 pastel green damask walls of the 'Special Guest' suite in The Carlyle hotel on Madison Avenue were decorated with miniature faux French paintings of faceless nude figures sunbathing on the beach in San Tropez.

Michael Prentice, a former NFL line-backer retired and gone soft, dwarfed the flimsy aluminum folding chair he was sitting on and the matching card table.

Turning to the man on his left, Michael snapped, "For chrissake, Ira, how many fucking cards do you want?" When Ira didn't answer, Michael gave him a poke in his ribs, earning a silent fuck-you middle finger from Ira in response.

Tall, trim, with bisque-white skin and bushy-white eyebrows, Ira Jennings was remarkably well-preserved for a man in his late seventies. The only obvious consequences of age was the wrinkled skin on his neck and the of his hands.

Ignoring Michael, Ira slowly counted out twenty one-hundred dollar bills from the meticulously neat piles of hundreds, fifties and twenties on the table in front of him. He then sprinkled the bills on top of the mound of cash in the center of the table; remnants from five 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 card game ended at The Carlyle sometime between Labor Day and the first major painting auction at Sotheby's in September. There was now twenty grand in the pot and Michael needed every bit of it just to break even.

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As usual, Michael was playing with someone else's money. This time it was a cash deposit on the sale of two important folk art portraits that would net him a quick fifty-grand profit after the paintings were restored to his client's satisfaction.

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

Michael shook his head, his unkempt 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 phony America's Cup paintings."

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 windows overlooking Madison Avenue. Light from the early morning sun was beginning to bounce off the polished stone facade and windows of the old Sotheby's building across the street and stream into the room. The glare cast Perez's face in a shadow, his large round head and scrawny neck creating a grotesque Zombie-like silhouette against the reflected morning sunlight.

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

"How many does his royal highness want?" he asked Perez.

#

Smart was not one of Michael Prentice's strong suits. What little success he had as a private painting dealer 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 along 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 unknowingly 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

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buy it back, Michael approached one of his Park Avenue paramours for a loan. Anything but a fool, the wealthy widow got two points a week on the fifty grand, a painting as collateral, and a roll in the hay every Saturday afternoon, when Michael delivered the juice on his loan. Cash. No checks. And no excuses.

#

"Well?" Michael goaded Perez and started repeatedly thumbing the deck.

Perez set his cards down, patted them with his large womanly hands, and sat in silence. His gaunt face was cast in a shadow except for the soft glow from his baby-blue Bob Dylan eyes. He then started drumming his fingers on the table.

Michael had all he could do to keep from smashing Perez in the face. It was something he'd wanted to do after his first dealing with Perez two years ago, the memory of Perez making a fool of him was forever stuck in Michael's craw. Just starting out, Michael brought a painting to Perez by an artist that word on the street said Perez was actively buying. And paying strong cash prices for.

"It's a no-name piece of shit," Perez had told Michael in front of everyone in his Madison Avenue gallery showroom. Humiliated, Michael turned to leave.

"Stop! Putz!" Perez ordered. He then reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. Peeling off thirty c-notes, he stuffed the three grand 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 reluctantly accepted the money and gave Perez the painting.

Two months later, punched up, varnished and re-framed, that same painting appeared at auction and fetched Perez seven grand net. When Michael confronted Perez as he was coming out of Sotheby's, demanding Perez give him a piece of the action, Perez rammed his knee into Michael's groin, dropping him to his knees, gagging. Perez laughed and sneered, "You gotta pay your dues before you can run with the bulls, little Mike." He then spit on Michael.

#

Ira stood up, spread his long skinny arms into a lazy stretch and asked, "Anyone hungry?" He patted his flat stomach as if to rub in the fact that he was in far better shape than anyone else at the table. Ira then bent over, braced his

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hands on the edge of the table and asked the man sitting across from him and to Michael's right. "What about you, Marty. Want anything? They've got the best Nova 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 as he did when he joined the game in progress, shortly after midnight and smelling like fresh pussy.

Martin said without looking up, "Toasted bagel with lox, sliced onion, wafer thin, and cream cheese. And a fresh pot of coffee. I've got a hell of a morning ahead of me," he added and glanced up. "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. Understand?"

Perez grumbled under his breath, "You kikes are all alike."

Martin sat up, jaw square, gaze dead cold. He gave Perez a sharp back-handed swat on the arm. "Watch your mouth. If I ever hear you say something like that again, I'll rip your tongue out of your mouth and shove it up your Puerto Rican asshole so you can taste your own shit."

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. Let's get something to eat. Coffee? Hard roll? Danish? Scones for Irish Mike?"

When Michael turned and shook his head, Ira's smirk reappeared as he whined, "What about your lady friend in the bedroom? Should I get her something to eat? Or should I order something for the hangover she's going to have, when she wakes up? How about a virgin Mary with raw egg and a dash of bitters?"

Laughing, Ira cracked open the bedroom door and made a 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.

Ira's face was 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.

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Nodding, Ira limped back to the table. Michael followed close behind Ira, poking him with his finger like a schoolyard bully but failing to get a rise out of him. Sitting down, Michael turned to Martin and asked in a surprisingly respectful manner, "How many cards for you, Marty?"

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

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. He then sighed, picked up the cards one at a time, and smiled.

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.

Perez then 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 head of 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 woman with real tits and not tiny baby bumps."

Ira announced confidently, "I will get things re-started with five grand."

He sprinkled the cash onto the pot.

Martin threw his cards down. "Fuck! I'm out."

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

"Does the boy still think this old man is bluffing?" Ira laughed. "Time to put up or shut up."

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 picked up each of the bills and threw them in Michael's face.

"If you can't cover your bet you're out. That's the rule."

Michael asked with choirboy innocence, "Since when?"

Perez slammed his hand on the table.

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"Your word is no good anymore. For starters, you owe me twenty grand 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."

Perez 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. You didn't keep your word." Perez glanced past Michael. A smutty grin spreading 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.

"Put up your princess from Greenwich as collateral."

Michael choked in disbelief. "She's my fiancée!" Michael threw down his cards. "This is a fucking set-up." He turned to Ira. "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.

Michael shouted, "You fucking bastards!"

Ira said quietly, "You don't know when to say no, Michael."

Michael turned to Perez. "What happens to Holly if I lose?"

Perez rocked back in his chair, grabbed the bulge in his crotch and grinned.

Michael exploded out of his chair and started for Perez.

Martin stepped in front of Perez. "You don't want to do that," he warned.

Perez glanced at the mess, shrugged, then looked up to face Michael and whispered, "Tick-tock.....tick-tock.....tick-tock.....tick-tock."

#

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-smeared 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, Susan had painted her fingernails and toenails with a splash of bright metallic autumn colors.

When Susan saw David sitting on the floor, head bowed, slumped up against the recently installed floor-to-ceiling book cases, she smiled. On the floor beside him were orderly piles of film negatives and black and white photo prints from Scott's preliminary examination of all fifty paintings. Sheets of yellow ruled papers were 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 the 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!"

Startled, Susan 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."

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

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

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

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

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, affectionate, naughty?"

"Who knows?" David said with a shrug of his shoulders. "I live alone. 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 coffee please, ma'am?"

"Maybe I should what?" Susan asked with a smile and handed David his coffee.

She then announced, "I'll get another mug" and 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 demand 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 what appeared to be Leslie's personal diary. 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 Book 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 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 walls of academe had grown steadily more demanding of his time. Curiously, almost over-night, his 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 more detailed notations as to what he was doing and with whom. It was also when Leslie created Punch-like

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personas, detailed miniature portraits, complete with nicknames, for all of his contacts in the trade. And for selected nameless personal contacts, which included 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 read. 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 selected important contacts were given the names of various Roman emperors, nobility and noted Roman scholars.

#

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

Waving the twenty dollar bill, she asked David, "What does this mean?"

"If what your husband....."

"*Ex!* husband," Susan interjected.

David acknowledged her correction with a shrug and continued.

"If what Scott wrote in his 'confidential' report is correct. And there are layers of one hundred dollar bills laminated between the original canvas and the re-lining canvas of all fifty paintings. And if my simple arithmetic is correct.....taking into consideration the size of every painting.....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. And I did it three times just to be sure."

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

David pointed to the painting propped up on his desk.

"More. Much more. 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's a total of over a million dollars in the fifty paintings."

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Susan asked, "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. "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 did the money come from to fund my annual stipend of seventy-five grand, guaranteed for ten years and 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."

David shook his head. "Add the cash that could be in the paintings, which may or may not be taxable, and we could be looking at another five hundred thousand 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 he 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 and saw your photo in the books, 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 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 laughed.

"She's also a fifth degree black belt."

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."

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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, always have, it could take me 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 younger men.

As hard as David tried to match the description with the face and the 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, 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) apparently for a fast gavel.*

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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 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 simmering inside him all yesterday and long into the night.

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 unsigned 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?"

"I have to talk to him. Now."

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

"We find what might prove to be a million dollars in cash 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

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language, filled with everything the authorities would love to know. For example four 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 you and I now know.

First, the paintings may all be signed and worth big bucks. Second, the cash in the paintings. And, most importantly, the potentially incriminating diaries, presuming they can be translated, so to speak."

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."

#