

PreView
(2020)

American Still Life
Caesars of Madison Avenue

The Novel

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ForeWord

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

CHAPTER 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. Spreading his arms to steady himself, he and stood motionless, eyes wide-open, trying to regain his bearings in the midnight 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 one 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 stopped and slowly panned the room, looking for 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.

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Stepping closer to the wall, he continued around the room, dragging the tips of his fingers over the rough stone blocks as a guide. He passed-up one familiar painting after another. He ignored the gilt-framed photographs arranged in regimented order atop a long wooden credenza. About to give up and finish what he agreed to do, and had already started, he hesitated when he noticed a pair of small 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. One of the 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, 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 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. 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 now meting out.

With a subtle '*what difference does it make*' shrug of his shoulders, he spun around and sauntered back to the center of the Oriental rug smothering the oak planked floor. Kneeling, he gently set his purloined prize beside a stainless steel pan the size and shape of an over-sized tool box. Spread out on the rug beside the pan was a

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large white rectangular cloth the size of a table napkin, topped with an assortment of shiny surgical instruments and a half-full hypodermic needle.

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 frigid 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, unblinking. His arms were at his sides; elbows bent; his hands 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 black patent leather shoes was neatly set beneath a nearby antique mahogany table.

Moving slowly, mechanically, he twisted around, peeled off a 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. He then slowly slid his finger down the man's hairless chest until it sank into the soft tissue of his gut at 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 sheath of skin and muscle covering the man's abdomen.

The man flinched and shuddered.

"Shit!"

Dropping the scalpel, he spun around, snatched-up a 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

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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 slowing beat of the man's heart.

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 press too deep and risk severing a major artery or vein, before he could harvest what he came for.

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.

Slipping his hand into the open cavity, he gently felt around, nodded, and slowly withdrew his first prize. Grabbing the 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, he hesitated when he saw that tears had

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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 one of man's eyes.

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 write something in blood on the Oriental carpet beside the man's head. He repeated the process for each letter until he had written

LEX SACRATA!

#

CHAPTER 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 tapped the bottom right corner of the gilded period frame, leveling the painting. When he stepped back and off to one side 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, David picked up

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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 Dean Anders that he changed his mind and would

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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 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?"

"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 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."

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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. He also asked me to apologize for not delivering it himself, but he had to get to an auction in Boston."

Susan elbowed David. "Which is why he woke me up at five this morning!"

Checking his watch, David asked, "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?"

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."

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David thought, *I bet you did*, recalling 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 finds 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, damning 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 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 asked, a covetous look on her face.

David signaled time out.

"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, "Why did you come back, David? You're done with this part of your life." She gestured around the office with a sweep of

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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 Leslie, 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 looking out, but not at anything in particular.

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

After a moment, David admitted, "The truth is, I cannot forget what I saw."

David found himself trapped in a web of sorrow, bitterness and vengeance, 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 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 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'."

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?"

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

Spinning away, Susan 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 as he impatiently turned it upside down and sideways, then flipped it over.

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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 from 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 outlines of block numbers: one; zero; zero. These images were also out of focus, as if layered one atop the other and misaligned.

David began laughing to himself. "They look like hundred ..."

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

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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 Roman numeral MCMXCIII.

David muttered, "Nineteen ninety-three? Doesn't make sense?" He 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 neat calligraphic handwriting. Finely drawn portraits, miniature caricatures, appeared every few pages. Itemized schedules were at the end of each month, looking 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 knocking on the door derailed his question.

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

"So," 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 sheer 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 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 dear friend, would touch another woman. Speaking in 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.

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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, 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. 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 he told himself. 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."

David watched in silence, trying to think of a gracious way of getting rid of this woman 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?"

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

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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."

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.

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. Before he could ask Colleen who that man was, she surprised him by taking his hand and leading him out into the hall.

"Leslie mentioned you have quite a passion for paintings. 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....."

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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 shrugged, 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 did. "Albany? A chauffeur, who looks, speaks and acts like a body guard?"

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

#

CHAPTER 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.

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

"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.

"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 do 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 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 had 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

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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 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 grew steadily more demanding of his time. Curiously, almost over-night, Leslie's media presence dried-up. At the same time entries in his personal journal increased in frequency and 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 David 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 Leslie 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 Leslie's 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 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

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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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As David slipped 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 hundred dollar bills laminated between the original canvases and the re-lining canvases of every one of the paintings, and if my simple arithmetic is equally right, that number is the total cash amount of what's hidden inside the forty paintings."

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

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

"No. I measured this twenty. All dollar bills are the same size. I figured out how many would fit on each painting, taking into consideration each painting's respective size. 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.

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"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. Five layers gives you a hundred grand in that painting alone. Allowing for the different sizes of the forty paintings, you get a million dollars, give or take a hundred grand."

Susan still appeared skeptical.

"Where the hell could Leslie have gotten that kind of money? Presuming he was the one who had the cash 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. "The real money began to come ..." David hesitated, unable or perhaps unwilling to say what he knew, at least what he thought he knew. "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. There's the endowment I get of seventy-five grand a year. And thanks to the conditions of the grant, no one except Leslie's 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.

"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.

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"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?'"

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?"

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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."

Susan asked, "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, David 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 mused, *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!*

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*

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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.

Barter with Roan. Got conservation of my sunset scene of Katterskill Falls in exchange for 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. 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 in his lap, wondering, *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!" Laughing, she added, "You've got a fortune in paintings!"

David asked, "Where's Scott?"

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

"I have to talk to him. Now."

"He's at an auction in Boston. Skinner's. Why do you have to see him?"

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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."

"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 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 deep steadying breath.

"The big deal is we could be next."

"Why?" Susan asked, sounding somewhat confused.

David gestured around his office.

"Because of what I now own and what we both now know."

Susan raised her hand.

"Correction. What three of us now know."

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

Susan replied with a sigh "Scott."

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