

Art of the *Chase*



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Chapter 1

“I HATE PEOPLE WHO STEAL art. Even if it’s a Gerhard Richter.”

Fleur paused for effect as the seven agents around the briefing room table chuckled.

It was true. She’d never been much of a fan of the German modern artist. She was, however, a fan of catching black market art dealers, and Europol had been struggling with this one. He’d already slipped out of their grasp once.

She stood in the dark, framed by the glow of the Smart Board, looking around the sterile briefing room that still smelled of lemon-scented cleaning products. Fleur struck a fine figure: a tall, fit blonde in her forties wearing a tailored suit, an air of competence and authority, and a near-permanent cool, detached half smile. When she spoke, people listened.

She clicked to advance the slide, bringing up a map of the location the team was going to be staking out. The scratching of pens on paper followed as a few of the agents began taking notes.

“This is the hotel where you’ll be meeting your man.” She gestured to the agent nearest the head of the table. “Meijer, this is your op, but here’s what I’m suggesting.” She gestured to various points on the map. “The obvious means of egress should be covered, but you can see this bathroom here. The hotel concierge informs me that this window is large enough for a person to slip out of, provided they are feeling motivated, so I would suggest someone in the alley behind. We don’t want a repeat of Berlin, right?”

They all nodded. They were all in their thirties, all men save for one plucky brunette. Most only knew Fleur as their brilliant advisor with the dry

wit who had, it was said, come back after being injured while on a bust. She was in no hurry to cloud the mythology with details.

She looked at Meijer. "What did the contact say he'd be wearing?"

"Black clothes, red scarf."

"Fancy. Odds are four to one he's gay, then." A little wave of polite laughter went around the table. Fleur smirked. "You're not above flirting with him to throw him off his game, are you, Mr. Meijer?"

Meijer wore a sheepish grin. "Well..."

"I won't tell." She winked and then looked around at them. "All joking aside, apart from deviating from the code of conduct, you can and should feel free to be creative in dealing with this man. That Richter painting equals about four million euro in Russian drug money. The money trails tell us he's funneling the cash from his sales back to the Lebedev organization. So let's cut off the tap, yes?"

The young agents all nodded. Fleur gestured to Meijer, who loosened his tie a bit. "All right, Meijer, let's hear what you've got in mind."

The fluorescent overhead lights flicked on.

The stocky junior agent got up and spoke to the room, outlining where he wanted the agents in the group and who was to be positioned where. His ruddy face and chubby cheeks made him look about fourteen, but he was competent and getting better all the time. He was a sweet kid, Fleur thought. A sweet kid who was probably going to end up rendering her job unnecessary.

When they wrapped the briefing, the agents filed out, but Meijer stayed behind. "Thanks for your help with this."

"It's my job." She didn't mean to be brusque, but it still rankled whenever they went out on ops that she couldn't join.

"I wish you could come with us."

She gave him a tight smile. "Well, I have every confidence in you. You're an excellent agent."

He shrugged. "I learned everything I know from you."

She nodded, not knowing how to respond. "Well, good luck to you. I've got a date tonight." She gave the words an air of finality. Their conversation was over. She tucked a folder under her arm and strode back to her desk, sincere in her faith that Meijer would be effective.

"Hope you get lucky!" he called after her.

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La Follette was a modern French bistro that played soft jazz in the background. It was the best of the French restaurants in Amsterdam, the sort of place one takes a woman to impress her. So far Fleur had proposed ordering a bottle of wine and learned that this reasonably attractive redhead, Anouk, didn't drink. It was not an auspicious start.

Fleur was well-practiced at appearing cool. Beneath the table, however, her foot tapped away furiously.

"Art thieves tend not to be like what people picture," Fleur was saying. "The gentleman thief, Thomas Crown, the Night Fox, that sort of thing. People always picture these nimble, debonair men, heirs to some fortune stealing famous paintings to amuse themselves. The truth is most art crimes fund the drug trade, the Russian mafia—anyone sleazy and dangerous is probably funding some of what they do with art theft."

Anouk seemed surprised. "But they must be clever, no? Like *Ocean's Eleven*?"

"No, most are just smash-and-grab affairs. For example, a version of Munch's *The Scream* was stolen from the museum in Stockholm some years ago by a group of four men with guns who burst in in broad daylight and yanked the painting right off the wall. And dumber still, they were afraid the frame might contain a tracking device, so they tore it off in pieces...leaving a trail of frame fragments all the way to their getaway boat. There are few brilliant thefts. And almost no gentleman thieves."

Art detective had a certain cachet to it that women liked to hear about; they always wanted to know what pieces Fleur had recovered, whether she'd shot anyone, and what kind of criminals she'd caught. She tended not to want to disabuse them of the notion that her work was sexy, even though much of it involved staring at catalogues and reviewing mind-numbing stacks of case files.

"But what about that...Amazing Gustave fellow?"

Fleur couldn't help souring at the mention of his name. "*Fabulous* Gustave."

Anouk fidgeted in her seat for an awkward moment. "I'm sorry. Is he a sore subject?"

“Well, we recovered the art at least. He slipped away, though. Jumped into a canal in a scuba suit and was never seen again.”

He had sent her and Renata on a scavenger hunt through Amsterdam pursuing Vermeer’s *Lacemaker* and had gone so far as to place a forgery of it into a room at Katja’s—a brothel in the red-light district—with a little note saying *You missed me! Love, G.* slipped into the frame on the back. It was a damn good forgery too.

“I think I remember that! That was your case?”

“Unfortunately. It was a disappointment. Renata never did get over it.”

That was only the first of a number of occasions where she mentioned her ex-wife’s name.

Fleur continued trying to keep the conversation going to make the evening worth the trouble of leaving the house. They tried sports, politics, and literature, which all sustained for a little bit, then petered out. By the time they got around to movies, Fleur surrendered, picking at her plate of vol-au-vent and letting Anouk ramble about her favorites.

She tuned back in when Anouk started talking about *Pulp Fiction*.

“...but I don’t think it matters what’s in the briefcase, you know? What do they call that? A Mc...McMuffin?”

“MacGuffin,” Fleur supplied.

“Right! A MacGuffin. You’re not supposed to know what’s in the case because it doesn’t matter. The story is really about what happens between the people involved in the chase.”

Fleur had tried to keep Renata’s name out of her mouth, but it slipped out again. “Renata was always convinced it was Marcellus Wallace’s soul.”

After that, Fleur felt obliged to pick up the check. The evening ended with them standing on the sidewalk, facing each other with a depressing finality. Fleur wasn’t ready to be out with anyone else, and she knew it.

And unfortunately, Anouk was clear on that point as well. The last thing she said to Fleur was “If you ever get over her, give me a call.”

* * *

Fleur flicked the lights on in her apartment, which was as modern and tasteful as she was. She hung her keys on the hook by the door, placed her shoes in the shelves beneath the coatrack. She padded in her stocking feet to the bathroom and began disassembling herself. Delicate little earrings

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removed and placed in the ceramic cloche on the sink. Makeup off, layer by layer. White Chanel blazer back on its hanger in the closet, protected by its plastic zip case. Like most of her excellent suits and jackets, it had come from a discount rack, and she would not be able to replace it if misfortune befell it. She protected it like a Fabergé egg.

Some would find the level of order in Fleur's home oppressive, but she found it calming. It was reassuring to know that the neutral-toned Swedish rya rug was always in the same place on her hardwood floors, that her bathroom soaps and moisturizers were so reliable in their placements atop the frosted glass shelves that she could enter the room blindfolded and find the one she wanted.

It had never been so tidy when Renata lived here. Fleur would find shoes just...wherever. Pots and pans would sit beside the sink for days sometimes as Fleur lost every game of chicken when it came to who would end up washing them. That little trail of chaos might be the only thing she didn't miss.

As she was unbuttoning her blouse, a text came through from Meijer:

I owe you a beer, van Beekhof.

Attached was a photo of their man in cuffs. Meijer had won the day. She tapped out a response:

Well done.

Thanks for all your help. Wish you could have been there.

No more field for me, you know that. Captain Wilt doesn't want me to get shot again haha.

The little *haha* was supposed to make it sound like it wasn't a big deal and Captain Wilt was just being overprotective.

Well, the division couldn't afford to lose a mind like yours.

Fleur's shoulders slumped. The kid really admired her. It was a bit of a drag.

You're too kind.

Hey how was your date?

It was aggressively fine, thanks for asking. I'll see you tomorrow.

Meijer responded with a sword emoji, a peach emoji, and the smiley face with sunglasses. She had no idea what that meant, so she responded with a thumbs up and then slid into the shower, hoping to wash off the day.

Renata used to slide in with her sometimes and mutter something delightfully filthy in one of the four languages they both spoke, which usually ended in lazy shower sex pushed up against one of the cool, smooth tile walls with the water running down. Fleur ached thinking about it.

Toweling off, she walked back into her bedroom and opened the dresser. It should have been laundry day several days ago; her last clean nightgown sat all by itself in the drawer. When she plucked it out, to her dismay, she found a picture of herself and Renata, arms locked around each other, surrounded by autumn leaves, grinning into the camera.

That day hadn't been any special occasion. Just a normal Saturday. They put on their thick wool sweaters and went cycling in the park. They kicked a football around with some random group of teenagers, which brought a bright red flush to Renata's cheeks in the October chill. The knocking about made a few strands of her dark brown hair pull loose from her ponytail and frame her face in a way that Fleur could sometimes still see when she closed her eyes.

They walked along the canals for a bit, bickering pleasantly about art and politics with Renata's perpetually chilly fingertips curled inside Fleur's palm. Renata picked some wildflower with curly orange petals and tucked it behind Fleur's ear. It had been a respite of perfectly gorgeous normalcy in between rounds of chasing thieves. Fleur had every moment of it etched on her heart.

She should throw the picture out. She had this conversation with herself every time she encountered it, which tended to be once every couple of months when she was too busy for laundry and was down to her last nightgown. All it did was remind her of her loss: of shared dinners, shared cases, shared kisses, museum visits where they agreed on nothing and loved every minute of it.

Fleur sighed, turned the picture face-down, and closed the drawer.

Renata's memory was thick and lingering everywhere tonight: the office, the dresser drawer, the shower, the bed—the same bed where, amid lovemak-

ing, Fleur had cuffed Renata's wrist to the bedpost and demanded "Marry me." Renata looked at the cuff with smoky eyes and a delighted grin and asked, "Is that the ring, *petalina*?"

Renata, as hard and peppery as she could be, treasured putting herself in Fleur's capable hands. And Fleur, well...being capable was a cornerstone of her identity, so woven into her it might as well be in her DNA. Their needs had always fit together, locking into place at a molecular level.

But now Fleur, weary but unable to rest, set up a mountain of pillows and leaned back into it, looking over the Gustave file again. It distracted her from thinking about missing Renata's warm weight in the bed next to her, the way Renata would nibble at her shoulder when she wanted her to shut the light off and go to sleep.

She could not possibly bear to think about the smell of Renata's lavender shampoo or the way their bodies fit when they curled together in the dark. Fleur would just read over the witness statements from the Vondelpark one more time.

She fell asleep with the Gustave folder open on her lap.

* * *

Fleur was having the dream again.

Well, it was a memory, really. Her mind was replaying the moment that everything fell apart on her last brush with Gustave. She was beating a path through a crowd at a music festival in the Vondelpark. Local Dutch cowboy rock throbbed in her ears as she elbowed through the pitching, swaying sea of people toward the tents near the canal, Renata dashing along in her wake.

They burst into one of the tents to see a confounding tableau: a painting, partially wrapped, sat in the corner of the tent. It was the Vermeer they'd been hunting, and standing beside it, a tall, slim man in full scuba gear, his face obscured by the mask.

He startled when they came swooping in, dropping the length of plastic sheeting in his hands and staring at them, frozen for a moment. Fleur and Renata found the scene peculiar enough that it stopped them in their tracks for an awkward split second. Whatever they'd been expecting, it wasn't that.

They all stared at each other. After a beat, he gave them a friendly wave and fled out the back of the tent. Fleur and Renata pursued, but before they could close the gap, he leaped into the canal with a dramatic splash.

When the phone rang at 6:00 a.m., Fleur was still propped in the same position. She startled awake, sending the folder's contents sliding all over the duvet and onto the floor. Swearing, she picked her phone up off the bedside table.

It was Captain Wilt, the grumpy paternal figure of Europol's Amsterdam Art Crimes Division.

"Sir? It's 6:00 a.m."

"I know. You're wanted at the Questura in Florence." His tone was sharp and urgent.

It cut through her early morning blariness. Her eyebrows shot up. "When?"

"Now. Or four hours ago, actually."

"Why?"

"Gustave is back."

Fleur's pulse stumbled. The tips of her fingers went cold. Her mind scrambled to catch up with itself, processing what Wilt was saying. She sat blinking into the soft early sunlight for a full three seconds. "Are...are you joking, sir?"

"I don't have a sense of humor. Anyway, you know him better than anyone; you've been obsessing over his file for the last six years. So here we are."

Her mind refused to push the piece into place. "Does this mean...I'm going back in the field?"

Wilt paused. "Yes."

"Permanently?"

She could practically picture him scratching his graying beard as he considered her question. "We'll see. Don't be reckless; don't fuck it up. That would go a long way toward reinstating you." He cleared his throat. "They think the painting was stolen four hours ago. Get there as fast as you can, please."

"Yes, of course."

She took a few breaths to steady herself. This was a real opportunity to get back some of what she had lost. To cleanse her record of the failure that

had broken her career, her marriage, and her life. She couldn't do anything for a few seconds but sit and shiver underneath her thick comforter.

Fleur recovered her wits, hauled herself out of bed, and slid into a thick, fluffy bathrobe. Then she hit a button on her phone and walked into the kitchen as it rang.

A sleepy male voice answered. "Fleur? It's early."

"Alain, I'm sorry to bother you at this hour." She put some water on the stove to heat while they spoke.

"No bother. What's wrong?"

She held the phone between her chin and shoulder and pawed through her purse, looking to make sure she had her passport. "They're sending me into the field."

"That's good, no? You're dying to get back out there."

Her fingers brushed across a large, enameled coin: her Gamblers Anonymous five-year chip. "Gustave's returned."

"Oh. *Oh*." That second *oh* was the sound of him absorbing the significance of what she had just said. "The one that got away."

"Exactly." She assembled her French press and dumped in the coffee. The smell of the ground beans alone was making her more alert by the minute. The Italian wife may have left, but she couldn't take away Italian coffee.

"Are you ready for that?"

"I've *been* ready."

A muffled groan came from Alain's end of the line. It sounded female.

Fleur tsked. "Do you have that teenager in your bed?"

Alain was a forty-year-old Frenchman living in Amsterdam with a trust fund and a very open-minded girlfriend who gamely went along with whatever nonsense he was of a mind to experiment with. Fleur could not have imagined herself being friends with someone like him a few years ago. Hitting rock bottom will change the way you think about some things.

"Her name is Viki and she's twenty-five. Don't change the subject." Alain was making some rustling noises on the other end while he spoke. "So there's a bit of pressure on this one, eh?"

"It's not just the job. When Gustave got away from me, it was the beginning of *everything* getting away from me."

He whispered, "Darling, can you untie this?"

Fleur shook her head, smirking. They'd fallen asleep while he had one or more limbs still tied to the bed. There was something comforting about the fact that her GA sponsor was not exactly a paragon of order and discipline.

"Anyway, this may feel like a big gamble, but there is a difference between gambling and taking a chance on something. You ought to know that better than most."

"Yes, I know, I know," Fleur said, rolling her eyes. Alain was fond of saying this, but it always felt like a platitude.

"You *can* do this. Chin up. Don't be an emotional cripple—"

"I thought that was part of my charm."

"—and call me if you need me."

She resolved to not need him.

Chapter 2

THE CITY OF FLORENCE DRIPPED with memories that Fleur tried not to entertain as she rode over the old cobblestone streets in a taxi past the rows of old buildings with their butter yellow plaster facings.

It was a patchwork of a city, and it had its stern fortress-like side. But then neighborhoods like this one looked as though someone had lost their restraint and needed to beautify every last inch of every doorway and cornice until they collapsed from exhaustion. It would be enough to make your heart ache even if you didn't have memories attached to them. But Fleur had made so many with Renata, and they had all turned into bruises.

The medieval streets were cramped together, and every row of tall arched windows, every piazza with fountains of naked statues slicked with water dogged her with ghosts of the past. Here was a little gelato shop that she and Renata had stumbled on by accident many years ago and discovered the best hazelnut gelato in human history. There was an awning where they'd taken shelter from a sudden thunderstorm. Renata in that moment was indelible in Fleur's memory: damp and laughing, dark hair stuck in thick strings to her broad cheekbones, her dark eyes dancing as they stood with their espressos in little takeaway cups.

The cabbie's route, thank goodness, would not be taking them past the *Fountain of Neptune* where they'd gotten married, officiated by a friend. But being in Florence was enough to make Fleur remember the moment in vivid detail: Renata's dress, a lacy Dolce & Gabbana formal gown, her dark hair swept up and dotted with little flowers. The classical guitarist playing "Ave Maria" as they stood together before the glistening statues, preparing to

commit to each other for the rest of their lives... Driving past the fountain would probably crush her spirits entirely, so she was glad to be spared.

She suddenly missed Amsterdam in her bones. Amsterdam was friendly, pretty, practical. It was not breathtaking. Fleur was not in the mood for breathtaking.

The taxi stopped with a screech of tires. Fleur nearly went hurtling into the front seat. The driver was leaning out the window, releasing a stream of colorful Italian at another driver who had cut him off.

She glanced up front at the meter. The cabbie had set it to *tariffa 3*, which meant he had looked at a tall blonde, clocked her as an obvious tourist, and thought he'd try to rip her off by charging out-of-city prices. She smacked the back of the seat and said to him in her flawless Italian, "Hey, do you think I'm an idiot? That's supposed to be *tariffa 1*. It's not my first time in Florence, my friend." She flashed her Europol credentials. "You picked the wrong one."

He smiled nervously and flicked off the meter. "Signora, please, no disrespect. I wasn't trying to rip you off. It was just an honest mistake! You can't be so coldhearted as to lock me up for something so small, can you, signora?"

She looked at him, expressionless, while his frantic chattering continued.

"I'm a family man, signora. I don't want trouble! I have three kids at home. Their mama, God rest her soul, is gone, and my poor papa stays in my house because there's no one else to care for him—"

She fixed him with a cold stare. "That'll do. Just make it right."

He threw his hands up in surrender. "Of course. The rest of the ride is free."

"The whole thing is free. You're taking me to the Questura, for God's sake. Why would you try to rob someone on the way to the police station? The question isn't whether you think I'm an idiot. The question is, are *you* an idiot?"

"Okay, okay. Whole thing is free. *Naturalmente.*"

Fleur stifled a smirk as they made the turn onto the boulevard that would bring them to the Questura. She didn't often get underestimated, but it was still amusing when it happened. Putting the screws to someone trying to fleece her was one of her cheap delights in life.

With a little dopamine warmth in her cheeks, Fleur settled back into her seat and turned her mind to the case she was walking into, ignoring the strings of creative swear words that would erupt from the driver every minute or so.

There wasn't a proper dossier on this case yet. All she knew was that the Palazzo Pitti, a royal residence turned museum gallery, had been robbed of a rather large painting on loan from the Louvre. The security cameras were dead for thirty minutes in the middle of the night when the robbery took place. Initial sweeps for fingerprints and tire tracks turned up nothing much. Unsurprising, since Gustave was known for being careful.

When Fleur had inquired as to why they were so convinced it was Gustave, Wilt had only said, "He left a note." In fairness, that was probably all he knew at that hour.

But why now? He had been inactive for the last six years, as far as anyone knew. He was clever enough that he could probably accomplish thefts without a lot of public fanfare. But he had done something that made clear to Europol that it was, in fact, his work. Just like before, he wanted to be seen.

When they pulled up to the Questura alongside the row of shiny white police cars, the driver gestured out the window. "Here you are, signora. I got you here in record time, right?"

Fleur got out and slammed the door. "Pray that I never see you again."

As the cab rolled away, she looked around. The pattering of Vespas and the honking of car horns drifted from the boulevard around the corner. She recognized the green and white awning of the small café where she'd gotten lunch a few times when she was here before; the smell of their excellent coffee and five-mushroom panini recalled memories of earlier, better times.

She looked up at the Questura for a moment. It was part of the grim imposing side of Florence with its drab brown facing and utilitarian lines, but its windows betrayed a little flair: little faux balconies along the bottom third of each one. That, and the tall curved archway above the door. Even when Florentines tried to be boring, they couldn't bring themselves to commit to it.

Fleur took a deep breath, then strode in. She hadn't worked with Agent Fabbri in a few years and rather hoped that word of her difficulties hadn't reached him. It would be nice to work without that albatross lurking in the shadow of every conversation.

She wouldn't be able to recover everything she had lost—Renata was never coming back—but if she could at least catch Gustave, revive her career, get back into Wilt's good graces, it might bring her back to life a bit. Perhaps a bit of professional confidence would improve her dating efforts as well.

In the cavernous white lobby, people milled about, queued up at the front windows, probably looking for permits and mundane things like that. In a government building in Amsterdam, this would have been a quiet, tidy little line, but the restless queues of Italians chattered into cell phones, with their neighbors in line, or argued with the clerks behind the windows. The ringing of telephones and clacking of keyboards provided a steady white noise from behind the glass.

The briefing rooms, she recalled, were down one of these hallways.

A broad-shouldered, mustachioed man with thick, bushy eyebrows approached her. He exuded masculine confidence of the variety found in stevedores and firemen. Fleur remembered his face, even though she'd only worked with him for a brief time on a minor case the last time she was in Florence.

"Agent Fabbri?"

"So you finally got here," he said as if Fleur hadn't come from a different country.

"Sorry for the delay. My Learjet ran out of gas."

He acknowledged her sarcasm with a faint smile and a nod. "I was glad to hear you would be available to us." Fabbri was a burly man who looked as if he'd been stuffed into the dark gray suit he was wearing. He had a certain street-tough energy about him. Fleur suspected one wouldn't want to be on the wrong side of one of his enormous fists. She imagined it'd be something like being smacked with a frozen pot roast. "I understand you're familiar with the man we're looking for."

"Much to my chagrin." Fleur glanced around, anxious to get out of the lobby, which was noisy and smelled vaguely of sweat and pine air freshener.

He gestured down the long antiseptic-white hallway on the far side of the lobby, and she followed. She remembered now: its universal black-and-white checkered floor tile led to several identical rectangular white briefing rooms. Their steps echoed off the high arched ceiling as she fell into stride with him. The commotion faded as they moved farther from the lobby.

She was relieved that Fabbri didn't seem to have heard about her tumble from favor or at least had the good taste not to broach the subject.

"So," he said, "there was an entire exhibit of Artemisia Gentileschi paintings at the Palazzo, many of them loaned from other museums throughout Europe."

Fleur's eyebrows went up. Renata had a particular attachment to Artemisia Gentileschi, a brilliant baroque painter whose work, like that of many women of her time, tended to be neglected by modern collectors. It was interesting that they'd given her an entire exhibit at someplace like the Palazzo. "I was told he only took one painting."

"Yeah, that's right. Only one. But a big one. And when I say big, I mean it's physically large. It wasn't like Vermeer's *Lacemaker* that he could just tuck into a briefcase or whatever. It was one called *Susanna and the Elders*, and apparently, she painted this scene several times?" Fabbri was a good agent but not an art guy.

"Yes, that's right." The depiction of sexual harassment required a large canvas and repeated iterations to properly convey.

"Yeah, well, this was the biggest of them."

"How much of this has the Italian press gotten hold of?"

"They know something was stolen from the Palazzo, but we've tried not to mention your man's name."

"I think that's wise, for now at least. Especially if this is Gustave's work. He craves attention. It's inevitable that it'll get out, but I'd like to try starving him for as long as possible."

Fabbri stopped and pushed a door open. "So because of the sensitive nature of this, I'll be your bureau contact for the case. I'm going to be embedded here at the Questura for the duration."

Fleur followed him into the room, which contained a Smart Board and a long table. The paint was peeling in places, and it smelled of not just the fresh coffee from the pot in the corner but about a century's worth of it having been drunk in this room while Florentine cops did their work.

A man in his early thirties with bleached blond hair sat at the table. He looked up and waved.

Fabbri gestured in his direction. "You remember Nickolas Schermer."

Fleur had previously worked with Schermer a few times too. He was a German tech ops guy. “A consummate professional. Good to be working with you again.” She took a seat at the table next to him.

The cushion of the chair was so threadbare as to almost be nonexistent. The chair creaked with its displeasure at being sat upon. *Yes, it goes both ways, chair. I'm not thrilled about sitting on you either.*

“Nice suit.” Schermer inspected its dusty pink hue and its clean, practical lines. “Tahari?”

“Good eye.”

On the Smart Board was a projection of the painting in question, the baroque-style depiction of the distressed young woman with the two old men leering over her shoulder. “An odd choice for a theft,” Fleur said.

Fabbri sat down at the head of the table. “That’s what they say. Usually thieves like to go for the big names, but Gentileschi doesn’t seem to be very well-known outside of art circles.”

“So am I the only field agent from Europol?”

Fabbri paused. His face was carefully schooled, but Fleur detected a bit of furrow in his broad brow. “Wilt didn’t discuss that with you?”

A foreboding tingle went up the back of Fleur’s neck. “No.”

“Ah. Well...”

Fleur had a sinking feeling that she wasn’t going to like what followed.

The door swung open with a bang. Everyone turned.

The small figure that stood there was aching familiar. Fleur knew every inch of it, from the hair that was windblown just right, to the curve of her hip, to the pointy shoes with the heels sharp enough to kill cockroaches. It was her ex-wife, making an entrance because she didn’t know how come into a room any other way.

Fleur sat there, stunned and numb. It was like someone had snuck up behind her and, with no warning whatsoever, ripped off a Band-Aid she’d just managed to forget she had on.

Renata swept into the room, sunglasses still on, silk scarf tossed carelessly around her neck—striking simultaneous notes of *I'm fashionable as hell* and *I don't give a fuck*. She was at once painful to look at and a sight for sore eyes. A wave of longing, of hurt, shame, and regret washed over her as her mind took a moment to accept what she was seeing.

It had been five years since they'd seen each other. Since the divorce. Since Renata packed her boxes of chaos and left Amsterdam, taking all the passion and joie de vivre with her. It was a little like a stab in the eye to be reminded without warning that, of everything she had lost, this was still what hurt the most.

It was cruel enough to be placed on a near-impossible case with immense professional and personal stakes, but now she was going to have to work it with Renata? It made sense, she supposed; they had been a formidable team and had almost caught Gustave last time. Fleur probably could have guessed that Europol would call Renata in, but she'd had other things on her mind.

Still, a hot shiver of rage ran down her back. Her hands balled up into fists underneath the table, and her knuckles turned almost white. How could they just spring this on her with no warning?

These thoughts all occurred in the space of a single heartbeat; Fleur's blood pressure spiked in the half-moment that she sat there, frozen in shock.

Renata stopped dead, pulled her sunglasses down, and locked eyes with Fleur over the tops of them. Her face registered a flicker of shock, then anger before she pushed the shades back up. She turned to Fabbri. "So? You thought I wouldn't come if you told me she'd be here?"

Without waiting for an answer, she started to turn away to storm out with as much drama as she had stormed in.

Fabbri interrupted her. "I *knew* you wouldn't come."

So he is aware of some things after all.

"But look." He pointed to the screen.

Renata stopped and stared for a moment.

Fleur's foot began tapping like a woodpecker under the table. Would Renata's affection for Artemisia Gentileschi be enough to make her stay?

Fleur had worked so hard over the last five years to push away the memory of what it was like working with Renata, how well they understood and complemented each other. Now the reminder was overwhelming. At this moment, there was nothing Fleur wanted more in heaven, hell, or earth than for Renata to sit down at the table.

"This is what Gustave took," Fabbri said.

So they hadn't told Renata much either.

We can manage this, Fleur thought, her fingers drumming a frenetic rhythm against her knee. *We can just keep it business. Do what we're good at. Leverage our skills. I'm fine. This is fine.*

It was, in fact, not fine.

Renata heaved a loud sigh and tore off her sunglasses, muttering some curses under her breath in Italian.

She sat down at the table across from Fleur, tossed a glare in her direction, and then turned her eyes back to the screen. "How do you know it was Gustave?"

"Well, while it's not as flashy as most of his previous jobs, there was this." Fabbri advanced the slide to show a photograph of the scene. A temporary wall lit with standard art lighting. "This is where the Gentileschi hung until now. He replaced it with this."

The next picture showed a canvas, blank white except for the words scrawled in blue: *Thank you for the painting. Looking forward to another game with you, cherries. Love, G.*

Fleur pursed her lips. "Cheeky bastard."

"It does smack of his style." Renata took a sip from her travel cup.

"That's not all," Schermer said. "Pull up the audio."

Fabbri did some clicking around on his laptop while he explained. "He called in to an early morning radio show."

A stock move of his. Gustave had done it in Vienna too.

Through the speakers came an Italian deejay, speaking in the universal tones of all morning-show hosts around the world. He did some nattering about traffic, local politics, and new music, and then announced that he had a caller on the line with a request. But when the caller spoke, it was in English through a voice modulator with a ridiculous, terrible fake French accent, "Ah, bonjour, *cherries!* It is me, *c'est moi*, Gustave! I have left a little present for you! I hope you don't take too long to come find me."

And then he was cut off by the deejay.

Renata's eyes flashed. "How long has it been since he's been active?"

Schermer glanced his laptop. "Six years since *The Lacemaker*. If he's been up to anything, he's kept a low profile."

Fabbri advanced the slide again, bringing up the layout of the museum, showing a big red box around the exhibit space. "From everything that the

local police have gathered since arriving on-site, this job seems to have been low on fanfare by Gustave's standards."

"So no brass bands?" Renata sank back in her chair. The wheels were already turning in her head.

Schermer shook his head. "And nobody dressed as Santa Claus."

Fabbri zoomed in a little on the floor plan. "Before you ask, we have no CCTV. There are cameras here, here, and here..." He indicated spots on the big red box. "But about a half hour of tape is corrupted, from about 2:30 to 3:00 a.m., so this would be when the robbery occurred."

"Have you run backgrounds on all the staff?" Fleur asked. Jobs like this often had someone on the inside.

Schermer pointed at his computer. "It's in progress."

"The Florentine police have been over the scene already. It's been eight hours since the piece went missing." Fabbri slid a folder over to each of them. "We need to get you two over there to have a look."

Fleur took her folder and stood up. "He's going to escalate this. He loves attention. I expect this will get stupid before it's done."

Fabbri ran a finger over his mustache. "Well, the Florence police will be at our disposal."

"That's good news. But I don't imagine he's still in Italy, much less in town." Fleur stole another glance at Renata, and another wave of prickly heat bloomed across her chest. "If you'll excuse me a moment?"

Fabbri gestured for her to go ahead.

Fleur hurried out, trying to shove her heart back into her chest.

As she exited, she could hear Schermer and Renata in a good-natured back and forth "Hurry up and catch him quick, Cellini. I want to be home in time to watch Stuttgart spanking the Azzurri."

"Mind your business. Stuttgart needs to beat Leipzig first, and their new midfielder is a beast."

Football talk. Renata and Schermer had that in common, Fleur recalled.

Taking deep breaths, Fleur walked a few steps from the door and leaned against the wall, doing her best attempt at yoga breathing.

A priceless painting. The master thief that ruined her career. A chance at mending things with Renata. What else could she hang on the outcome of this case? The enormity of it all washed over her in waves that alternated between hot and cold. She, the master planner, was woefully underprepared.

She stepped into the women's room, looked in the mirror, adjusted her collar, and tucked a few stray blonde hairs behind her ears. She looked serious, formidable. Like the kind of woman who could catch a thief. All she needed was to believe the reflection that stared back at her.

As she cracked the door to exit, Schermer and Fabbri walked by, talking in low tones to each other. Their voices echoed behind them as they passed.

"Van Beekhof still seems sharp." Fabbri sounded vaguely optimistic.

Schermer made some little noise of assent. "I think we'll get him this time. They were so close last time."

"Yeah, if she and Cellini don't kill each other first."

"My money's on van Beekhof if it comes to blows."

An unpleasant warmth rose up under Fleur's collar. She hated that there might be a pool going. But at least Schermer was betting on her.

Fabbri laughed. "You can't be serious. I know enough Italian women that I know better than to fight one. Van Beekhof's tall, but I think I could take her."

Fleur stepped out of the bathroom. "Sir, given that I *can* handle an Italian woman, you might want to rethink that."

The two men stopped in midstep. Schermer stood there smirking as Fabbri took an embarrassed moment to recover. After an uncomfortable beat of silence in which he looked as if he'd been caught pissing in the bushes, he said, "I wouldn't want to fight either of you."

"Good." She strode toward the elevator.

"I was joking." Fabbri's voice was already getting lost beneath the steady tapping of her quick footsteps as she walked away. "We don't really have a pool, okay?"

Schermer chuckled. "I recommend you stop talking, sir."

Fleur boarded an elevator and situated herself in the corner, leaning against the wall while her heart thudded a little too loudly. The car hung there for a moment.

While she waited, she pulled her phone out to look up the fastest route to the Palazzo Pitti. How in the world was she supposed to have a conversation with Renata? How were they supposed to just step into their roles without talking honestly about how things had been left between them?

The doors began to slide shut, but they were stopped by a Ferragamo shoe.

Renata. The inevitable.

She boarded the elevator, and they stood at opposite sides of the car, not looking at each other, acting as if they were complete strangers. Fleur pretended to be engrossed in her phone. She swiped around local maps without really seeing them. She was mostly trying to control her breathing because breathing too hard would betray her anxiety but not breathing at all would be a giveaway too.

This was ridiculous. Someone was going to have to break the silence.

“So they didn’t reinstate you?” Fleur asked, almost afraid to make eye contact.

“No. Consulting expert. No gun. Lucky for you.” Renata’s tone was loaded with implication—and contempt.

Fleur bit back a response. She glanced up at the elevator numbers creeping by with painful slowness. Part of her wanted to laugh at Renata for saying that. It was the kind of smart-ass remark that used to amuse Fleur when it was directed at someone else. Part of her wanted to rejoin with *I’m a better shot than you are anyway*.

But none of that would help.

She tried again. “Sergio’s gallery is lucky to have you.” Fleur had heard thirdhand that Renata, not wanting to run the risk of this exact situation, had quit the bureau and taken a job managing a prestigious art gallery in Genoa for an old friend.

“I’m not here to catch up with you. I’m not interested in what’s going on in your life, and I have no interest in sharing what’s going on in mine. Gustave belongs in jail. That’s the only reason I’m here, and that’s all we’re gonna talk about.”

Ouch. “Of course. I’m here for the same reason.” The words were hard to get out. Fleur’s throat was trying to clench itself shut and keep her from saying anything at all. This was the first time she had been alone with Renata in five years. This is not at all how she would have wanted it to go.

At last Renata turned on Fleur with a furrowed brow. A full-on fiery glare was brewing behind it. “Don’t tell me you requested—”

“Of course not! They sprang this on me, the same as they did you. It’s not as if I’d have come if I knew you were going to be here either.” This was, of course, a dirty lie. Fleur had longed for years to make amends with her ex-

wife. She had longed to be anywhere near her at all, hear the sharp staccato of her accent and the sound of her name as it tumbled from Renata's lips.

Fleur slipped her phone into her pocket. "Renata, it's been five years. I understand that we didn't part under ideal circumstances, but we are going to have to work together on this for at least a little while. Can't you even—"

She was interrupted by Renata's phone ringing.

Renata was quick to answer it.

"Yes... Well, it looks like I'm staying in Florence for a bit... I don't know yet... I left you a week's worth of dinners in the freezer, darling. You'll be fine... I'm sorry, sweetheart, it's work... You'd be bored, I promise... Yes, well, just be glad I didn't ask her to stay at the house! Yes. Okay... I love you too... Okay... *Ciao.*"

Fleur could only hear one side of the conversation, but there was an affection in her voice, a warmth that Fleur hadn't heard in so long. It nearly broke her to hear Renata speak with such sweetness.

Hungry for even the smallest scrap of information, she asked, "New girlfriend?" She tried to sound casual and knew she probably didn't.

"Mind your business."

"Sorry." Fleur jerked her gaze away from Renata back to the glowing numbers on the elevator display as it descended.

Clearly, this was all going to go brilliantly. Hopefully no one would be murdered in the process.

Chapter 3

“IT’S BEST IF YOU TAKE the Viale Filippo Strazzi at this time of day.” Fleur glared at the back of the recalcitrant cabbie’s head.

He careened around a blue Fiat that was moving too slow for his liking. “No, no, signora. Trust me, my way is faster.”

Fleur huffed. “They’re doing work on this road half the time!”

Renata shot her a pointed look. “Don’t tell the man how to do his job.”

Fleur slumped back in her seat. There was nothing for her to do the rest of the way but sit in the back of the cab while the scent of Renata’s perfume drove her half to madness. She still favored Osmanthus, and the notes of floral and green mandarin evoked reminiscence and heartache. She didn’t feel up to participating in either of those things, so she closed her eyes for the remainder of the trip.

Another dismal milestone. First time in five years she’d been in a car with Renata. They wove through the streets of Florence, sitting at opposite sides of the back seat with Renata studiously saying nothing and Fleur dejectedly taking the hint.

The last time they rode in a cab together in Florence, they sat close, legs touching, hands tangled together in one of their laps.

This case was a shot at redemption. Shouldn’t Renata be her first stop? She had thought so many times about what she’d say to Renata if she ever had the chance again, but in her mind, the conversation was never in the back of an Italian cab on the way to a crime scene.

The cab dropped them off in front of a large stone courtyard still crawling with police. On the other side of the police line stood the Palazzo Pitti, just as Fleur remembered it: a Renaissance brick fortress with huge arched

windows and a massive, stern front entrance. It had been the royal residence and treasure house for the Medici dynasty and then served as Napoleon's base of operations in the eighteenth century. Now it was part of the most well-known cluster of museums in Florence.

It stood three floors high, but each level was cavernous, with enormous arched ceilings that felt as if they stretched up into the vault of heaven. As imposing as it looked from outside, the interior was lush with wall-to-wall Renaissance and baroque paintings.

Fleur and Renata strode toward the building, their shoes clacking across the stone, and for a moment, that was the only sound between them.

Then Renata grumbled under her breath, mocking Gustave's bad accent, "Zank you for zee paintings, *cherie*."

Fleur pounced on the opening. "I always imagined Gustave in a smoking jacket with a long cigarette holder."

Renata looked as if she was negotiating with herself as to whether to crack a smile or not. "It's the bad French accent."

Fleur took this as permission to keep talking. "You know you like him."

"I appreciate his panache. It's not the same thing. I despise thieves." She cast a sidelong look at Fleur. "And liars."

Fleur looked away uncomfortably. Yes, fine. Of course she deserved that, but how were they going to work if Renata was going to be full of jabs like that all the time?

She went back to scanning the activity at the scene. A few officers were milling around, now and then waving a tourist or rubbernecker away. Some were on their radios, another was coming back from a coffee run with a tray of takeaway cups. A journalist in his midthirties was arguing in Italian with one of the cops.

A journalist that, unfortunately, Fleur knew. She'd recognize that skinny frame and tiny fedora anywhere. She groaned. "Why in the hell is Valentino goddamned Vitali here?"

Renata opted for a less subtle approach, calling out to him from halfway across the courtyard. "Valentino Vitali, shouldn't you be covering a dog show somewhere?"

Vitali stopped arguing with the cop, grinned at them, and approached. He hurried over and fell into step with them, exuding oily charm. He

nodded at Fleur. “So good to see you again, signora. It’s been a little while, no? I like what you’ve done with your hair.”

She gave him a steady, expressionless look. She hadn’t done a damn thing with her hair.

He looked back at Renata. “I can be here, you know? It’s a free country, signora.”

“Yes, but it’s not an open crime scene.” Renata quickened her stride.

“We have a free press!” Vitali was not deterred and sped up to keep pace.

“That would imply that you’re a journalist.” Renata was in no mood for him. Then again, nobody was ever *really* in the mood for him.

He was jogging alongside them like a little yappy dog nipping at their ankles. “They’re saying the Fabulous Gustave has come out of retirement... and here you ladies are. Coincidence? Just off the record?” His beady eyes darted between them, looking for even the slightest change of expression.

Fleur looked askance at him. “There’s no such thing as off the record.”

Renata snorted. “Does your wife know you’re obsessed with him?”

Valentino Vitali was a singular irritant, but Renata had always had a way of feeding the worst in him.

I’m going to have to treat both of them like toddlers.

Fleur stopped walking. “All right. That’ll do, children. Knock it off, or neither of you is getting any ice cream.” She looked at Renata and jerked her head toward the building. “Come on already.”

They walked away, leaving him standing where he was, since he wasn’t allowed any farther.

In six years of marriage, they’d visited the Palazzo more times than Fleur could count. She knew these towering columns, the high walls lined top to bottom with baroque paintings in heavy, ornate gold-leafed frames. The long, long hallways were filled with the ghosts of master painters jostling for space with less welcome memories of romantic afternoons...and one particularly stupid argument about whether Titian’s nude paintings of women were erotic mythology or just slightly saucy soft porn. Fleur felt that the latter was more accurate.

She rather hoped Renata had forgotten that one.

As they cleared the main foyer, Renata pointed to a sign with an arrow on an easel: *Esposizione Gentileschi*. They followed the arrow to a room at the end of a wing.

They passed through several long rooms filled with massive paintings, fourteenth-century furniture, and enormous vases. Last time Fleur was here, it had been full of chattering tourists, but now it was disconcertingly quiet. Their footsteps echoed up into the rafters as they moved through the humidity-controlled, slightly too-chilly hallway. At the end of this expedition, they found the exhibit room, cordoned off with a few forensics people still poking about.

It was a large open space laid out like a maze with a few temporary walls in the middle of the room, all lined with various paintings and sketches belonging to Artemisia Gentileschi, all populated with dynamic, powerful women, most of them in the act of resistance, refusal, or revenge. She had painted women in ways that no one else of her time had done.

Late afternoon light spilled in through the high windows, leaving long, bright squares on the marble floors. Fleur clocked two cameras in corners near the ceiling. She knew from the briefing that a third was overhead, above the entrance.

Renata began sauntering around the space, an almost meditative respect on her face as she walked among the paintings. She was taking in every detail of the room. She made her way around to the now-empty space where the painting had been and looked at it in silence for a few long moments.

The temporary wall stood a good ten feet high, the ambient spotlight still casting its glow from above. Gone was *Susanna and the Elders* in its ornate gold-leafed frame. In its place hung a simple modern frame, containing a mostly blank canvas except for where Gustave had scrawled his taunting message across the middle in blue paint.

Fabbri entered behind them at a jog, some folders tucked under his arm. “Thought we might ride together, but you two had already left.” He glanced at Renata, who was in observation mode, and then back at Fleur. “So the art crimes guys say this note was aimed at you specifically?” he asked, gesturing up at the canvas.

Fleur waved a dismissive hand. “Perhaps, but he’s always been fond of leaving cheeky thank-you notes.”

“Is that his MO, then?”

Renata was still staring up at the canvas. “His MO is that he thinks he’s so goddamn smart, and he actually is.” Her voice had a note of irritation.

“Anything new?” Fleur eyed the folders he carried.

“They found a partial tire print out back, but the results weren’t very helpful. It matches the most common type of tire used on vans in Italy. Not much else. I’m sure they told you the CCTV looks to have been tampered with. The fire alarms went off at around that time, but when the fire service called to confirm, they were told the situation had been handled.”

“Is that all?” Fleur asked.

Fabbri cleared his throat and continued. “They have swept for prints, but—”

“They didn’t find any,” Renata said. “He’s careful.”

Fabbri’s bushy eyebrows lifted in mild surprise. “Yeah, that’s right.” He came up beside Renata in front of the blank canvas, trying to figure out what she was looking at. “So...does he work alone?”

“Usually, yes,” Fleur said. “At least as far as we’ve ever been able to tell. He’s been known to make clever use of unwitting proxies, but we’ve never seen evidence of a partner.”

“To move a piece as large as this *Susanna*, though, he had to have had at least one other person helping him.” Renata wriggled her hands into some gloves and then lifted the canvas partway off the temporary wall to get a look at what was behind it: rows of clipped wires dangling free.

Paintings in temporary exhibits like this were more bound to the wall than hung on it. They were usually secured with thick wire that crossed through the back of the temporary wall in more than one spot and attached to loops on the backs of the frames. This would likely have been the case with *Susanna*.

“This was a bit of work,” Renata said, running a gloved finger over the hanging wires. “He didn’t just yank it down; these are clean cuts with wire cutters or something. No Sheetrock or other debris underneath it. He didn’t want to chance any damage to the frame.”

She laid the canvas back the way it was and then looked down at the floor. Her gaze fixed on something—a few small bits of cardboard and a ball of plastic crumpled tight. Renata knelt and picked it up.

She picked at it with her gloved fingers, but it resisted uncrumpling. “Tape,” she grunted. She picked at it for a few minutes more until it unfolded and then held it up to the light. Along its edge ran small blue lettering.

Renata read it aloud. “Lucht Trans.”

It was an almost negligible bit of detritus, something that would have been easy for the investigators to miss. It looked like nothing at all. But Renata had seen it.

Fabbri frowned. "What?"

"Art handlers," Fleur said. "Specialists in transporting valuable paintings like these. The company is based in Amsterdam, though. It's easy enough to check, but it's not likely that they would have been used to move these pieces here. I don't think any of them were borrowed from museums in the Netherlands."

Fabbri turned to one of the forensics people and bitched at them for having missed this scrap of evidence.

"But," Renata said, "they also sell handling supplies and boxes. Gustave often brings his own packing materials."

Fleur clucked her tongue. "Leaving scraps, though. Sloppy for him. He definitely wasn't alone. He didn't drop that. Whoever was with him dropped it."

Fabbri shook his head. "He packs the paintings before he takes them out?"

Renata looked at him with an amused little smirk. "Yes. He respects the art."

Fleur pointed up at the note on the canvas. "I think we ought to be able to glean something from that, don't you think?"

Renata looked up at it again and then back at Fabbri. "Can we get a deep scan on that? We should get a synchrotron sulfur K-edge XANES. The paint may tell us something."

Fabbri took out a pad. "Synchro...what?"

Renata snatched his pad and pen and began scribbling while he watched. "I'll write it down for you. The Istituto Superiore would have what we need."

Fleur explained. "There could be partial fingerprints in the paint, for one thing, but even the composition of the pigment itself could tell us something about where it was made or purchased, how old it is, that sort of thing."

Right back into their old rhythms, the quick, sharp back and forth, knowing each other's lines of thinking.

Renata shoved the pad back into Fabbri's hands. "Can we speak to the night staff?"

He glanced at his watch. "They should be showing up in about twenty minutes. Feel free to look around some more."

Fleur made a circuit around the exhibit. Italian baroque had never been her favorite, but Renata's passion for it meant she was more than familiar with the movement.

Artemisia's work had been important to Renata ever since she was an angry teenage feminist. She found a kindred soul in the story of a young woman in a notoriously masculine field, her work far superior to that of her male peers, a survivor of rape who turned her pain into furious, incandescent art. Only in recent years had scholars begun to acknowledge her as the master she was. If Gustave's sole aim had been to bring Renata out of retirement, he couldn't have done better.

Fleur rounded a corner and found Renata contemplating one of her old favorites, the radiant but decidedly less furious *Danaë*. The sensuous young woman reclined on a couch with gold coins showering down on her from the heavens. Renata seemed captivated, as if she was drinking in each of those details: the languid way Danaë lounged, the texture of her golden hair, the lushness of the fabrics, her luminous pale skin.

"I love that one too." Fleur almost felt as if she was interrupting something private.

Renata looked at her, not quite in the eyes. "Not like I do." Indeed, she almost seemed like she'd been having some intense dialogue with the painting that Fleur had barged in on.

Fleur left her to it. She turned and walked out, following the general direction of wherever Fabbri had gone.

* * *

When Fleur and Renata entered the security booth, Fabbri was already in there with two young men in security uniforms who worked the night shift. One was a gangly youth with an unruly lock of hair that drooped over his forehead. He leaned against the wall, relaxed, smirking. He had his hat tucked under his arm. The other, serious and bespectacled, stood in the corner, hands clasped behind his back, looking watchful.

Against the wall were a few rows of television screens, three of which gave different angles on the exhibit space. Fabbri looked up as they entered.

“...and this would be Agent van Beekhof and Signora Cellini from Europol. Signoras, this is Giacomo Antucci.” He gestured to the cocky one, who couldn’t have been more than twenty-two.

Giacomo looked them up and down. “Nice,” he remarked.

Renata bristled, and Fleur muttered, “He’ll know we’re in control here soon enough.” Just softly enough for Renata to hear her.

Renata shot her a look, but then her shoulders relaxed a little.

The guard beside him, the more thoughtful looking of the two, elbowed him in the arm. “What’s wrong with you?” He offered Fleur and Renata an apologetic look. “Please forgive my idiot friend. He’s harmless.”

Antucci did not look chastened.

Fabbri sat rubbing his temples. Not five minutes alone with this kid and already Fabbri looked like he wanted to toss him out a window. “That other one is Paolo Parisi,” he said, gesturing at the polite, well-groomed youth.

Renata fixed the two lads with a glare that even made Fabbri shift uncomfortably in his seat. “You know, *gentlemen*, the majority of these kinds of thefts involves an accomplice on the inside.” The space was a bit too small for her to prowl back and forth properly, so she simply stood with her shoulders back, feet apart, hands on hips, taking up more space than a woman her size reasonably ought to be able to. “If you have anything you might be considering holding back from us, I recommend you don’t. It’s standard procedure for the museum staff to receive a great deal of attention. If we catch you lying about anything, it will only bring more scrutiny.”

Antucci seemed to sober up a little.

Fleur stepped in without needing to be told to play a slightly less scary cop. “What’s your job here at night, Signor Antucci?”

“First-floor patrol.”

“Tell us about the fire last night,” Renata said.

Giacomo shrugged. “I’ll tell you what I told the other police. It was an accident. I was on a smoke break, and I put the cigarette out on my way back in and threw the end in a trash can. And then—” He made an exploding sound and gesture with his hands.

Renata tsked. “You shouldn’t smoke.”

Fleur looked at her, incredulous. “Are you serious?”

“What? He shouldn’t.” Renata lifted an immaculate sculpted eyebrow.

Fleur cleared her throat and turned back to Giacomo. “The trash can was outside?”

“No. There’s one just inside the door when you come in.”

“Why not just leave the cigarette butt outside?” Renata asked.

“You get in trouble if you leave your cigarettes on the ground. I always toss it on the way back in.”

Fleur gave him a skeptical look. “And then what happened?”

“Paolo came and helped me put the fire out. We dragged the can outside because it was still smoking. Then he covered for me while I ran home to get a fresh shirt because I got some dirt on it.”

“And you stank of smoke,” Paolo said.

Giacomo ignored him. “I live close by.”

“With your parents?” Fleur asked.

Giacomo’s macho nonchalance faded a little. “Yes.”

Renata turned her attention to the other young man. “And you? Do you live nearby as well?”

“About thirty minutes away.” His posture was impeccable. He was open, polite, deferential.

“With your parents?” Fleur asked.

“No, signora. With a flatmate. My mother lives in Bologna.”

“And your father?” Fleur asked.

“I don’t know my father.” His tone was matter-of-fact, like he sought no sympathy for it.

Renata seemed irritated by his politeness. “And what is your job, Signor Parisi?”

He gestured around the small room. “I just sit here in the booth mostly. I lock down at night and open in the morning.”

Fleur looked at the screens. Cops continued to mill around in the exhibit space, though their purpose was growing less clear by the moment. “Any idea why the security footage was corrupted around the time of the fire?”

“No, signora. The only time I wasn’t in the booth was when I helped Giacomo with the fire. The robbery must have happened at that time. It was about two thirty.”

Renata seemed to have gotten her teeth into something, though. “Do you know how to tamper with security video?”

“No, signora. And even if I did, it’s a secured system. As far as I know, you can only get into it with a code, and Signor Ricciardi is the only one who knows it.”

“Signor Ricciardi?”

“Head of security,” Fabbri said.

“And these two are the only ones in here at night?”

Fabbri shook his head. “There are two guys on the second-floor patrol, and I’m happy to share the reports from their questioning, but I doubt you’ll find anything of interest in them.”

“Why’s that?” Renata asked.

“Eh, you’ll see if you look at the reports. They’re dumb as rocks.”

Someone could be dumb as a rock and still be a suspect. “Well, we should read them all the same.”

Paolo stood looking at them, hands clasped behind his back, waiting for them to continue. Fleur and Renata looked at each other for a few beats. Finally, Renata asked, “Do either of you know a gentleman who goes by the name of Gustave?”

Giacomo shrugged. “I don’t think so.”

Paolo shook his head. “I’m sorry. I don’t, Signora.”

Renata glared at Paolo. “Why are you so polite?” she demanded.

He smiled and gave her a deferential nod. He was handsome behind his glasses, pale, well-groomed, slim, and vaguely effete in a way that was probably attractive to teenage girls. “I was raised to respect strong women.”

Renata returned nothing but a sour look.

The head of security should probably come under scrutiny. But there was a bit more to do right now. “Let’s have a look at that trash can.”

* * *

A few minutes later, Fleur, Renata, and Fabbri stood in a miserable little circle around a trash can with single marks on the rim of the lid. It still sat where Paolo and Giacomo had left it, about ten feet from the side exit nearby.

Dusk was settling, accompanied by the continued crackle of police radios and the songs of thrushes. Stars began to poke out where the sky looked more purple. Yellow streetlamps would be coming on soon.

Fleur slipped on some gloves and approached the unpleasant-smelling trash can. White powder rimmed the top and dusted one of the sides. The large heavy type of public trash can was made of reinforced steel or some such thing, and it ended up taking help from Fabbri to get the top all the way off.

The smell that assaulted them was likely to singe Fleur's nose hairs off. All three of them exclaimed in disgust.

"Smells like cat hair flambé." Renata buried her face in the crook of her elbow.

"No, not that good." Fleur set the lid down on the ground with Fabbri's help.

They leaned forward and looked inside.

A watermelon-sized wad of something burned, covered in a thick layer of white powder, sat atop the pile of normal museum trash. Fleur poked at it with a gloved finger and found it to be soft, like wool. Eyes watering from the foul smell, she reached a little farther down and pinched some of the unburned part between her thumb and finger. It felt fibrous.

"Cotton batting. And a lot of it."

Peculiar thing to find in a trash can outside of a museum.

Fabbri furrowed his brow in the general direction of the large disgusting wad. "What's that smell?"

Renata took a handkerchief from her pocket and put it over her mouth. "You mean besides the burned smell?"

Fabbri grimaced and followed suit. "Yeah. Something chemical, no?"

Fleur took another cautious whiff. Her sense of smell was probably going to be petrified for the next five years. But the smell was familiar. "Nail polish remover, I think." She looked at Fabbri. "Can we get this bagged up and sent to your lab?"

Fabbri barked out someone's name, and they appeared within seconds. They started arguing back and forth. After a few moments, when it seemed like the discussion was going on longer than it should, Fleur and Renata excused themselves.

Fleur spoke first. "So we agree the trash can was a distraction, yes?"

"It has all the looks of one," Renata agreed, "but that would make the Antucci kid a suspect, and I don't think he's smart enough to be working with Gustave."

Fleur sighed. “Well, I don’t like either of these kids for a suspect. I rather think we ought to be looking into the head of security. But if we’re going to start with either of these two—”

“Then we should start with Parisi.”

Fleur balked. Renata didn’t seem to be joking. “You like him for this?”

“You don’t?”

They took a turn around the building and walked back into the courtyard area, moving toward the street. “Why on earth?”

“He’s too poised. Too polite. That’s not how guys his age act. He’s barely out of his teens; he shouldn’t be so together.”

Fleur snorted. “What do you know about boys that age?”

“More than you, clearly.”

“I’d look at Valentino Vitali before I’d look at that kid.” Fleur felt her cheeks warm, despite herself.

Renata drew herself taller—not that it helped much—and her shoulders went back the way they did when she was approaching high dudgeon. “I hope that’s a joke because I can’t even believe Vitali ties his own shoes in the morning, much less has the brains to plan the theft of a painting this large from a major—”

Fleur poked a tongue into her cheek and took a deep breath. “I’m not saying I like Vitali! My point is simply—”

“Agent van Beekhof? Signora Cellini?”

They turned around. Fabbri was approaching them, looking quizzical.

“The lab guys are going to handle the trash can, but is there anything else you wanted to look at right now?”

Renata, who was terrible at (or not particularly interested in) covering up her feelings, stood fuming at Fleur, her lips pressed together in a thin hard line.

Fleur ignored her and looked at Fabbri. “Those lads mentioned a Signor Ricciardi? The head of security? If he’s around, I’d like to have a word.”

“Of course. Whatever you want.”

“You have fun,” Renata said. And then she turned and started off toward the boulevard at a pace at which Fleur was not about to pursue her.

“Where are you going?” Fleur called after her. “You really ought to do this with me!”

Without looking back, Renata called, "You're not my wife. You can't tell me what to do anymore."

As if telling Renata what to do had ever been a thing when handcuffs weren't involved.

* * *

Clemente Ricciardi was an old soldier with a gruff voice and ramrod-straight posture. He was white-haired but knife sharp and quick to the point.

"Do you think I don't do background checks on these kids before I hire them?" He sat back in his chair behind the desk, seeming offended that Fleur was questioning him.

Fleur smiled. "Of course not. But it's clear there was a weakness somewhere along the chain, and we're trying to identify what it might have been."

Ricciardi's small office was tucked right beside the security booth. He kept a handful of family photos on his desk, and on the wall behind his desk hung a shiny frame bearing a military medal and certificate from Italian military intelligence. Fleur could see her reflection in the glass clear enough that she could adjust her hair and makeup if she wanted. "How often do you log into the system to check the video?"

He shrugged. "A few times a day."

"And no one but you knows the code?"

"Do I look like an idiot?"

"Your shiny certificate says otherwise." She kept her tone even and her smile neutral. Under the circumstances, his defensiveness was understandable. Renata's obsession with Paolo Parisi nagged at her. "How well do you know Paolo Parisi?"

"Why? Is he a person of interest, as you say?"

Fleur shook her head. "Not at this time. But he was supposed to be in the booth when the robbery occurred, so we just want to tick all our boxes."

She glanced around the room: dummy cameras up in the corners, a small closet with an automatic lock. Ricciardi was taking the steps needed to keep his office secure.

"Well, I know the young man is polite, shows up for work on time. He's reliable and has never missed a day of work in three years working here. He's mentioned once or twice that he paints a little."

"Have you seen his paintings? Is he any good?"

Ricciardi shook his head. “I haven’t seen them. And he hasn’t seen my wicked bocce throw. I keep my personal and professional life separate.”

Fleur nodded. The old man was a type she’d seen before: a part of him glad to be off the battlefield, part of him missing the action. Now that there was action, he didn’t seem thrilled about it.

But he also didn’t seem like the sort to collaborate in a theft. Fabbri had told her he’d been in the job for almost fifteen years. He wore every single one of those years like a burden he was proud of, just like the service medals on the wall behind him. Not that soldiers couldn’t also be criminals, but in his case, nothing about it added up.

She gestured to the fancy-looking but useless boxes mounted in the high corners of the room. “Why the dummy cameras?”

He seemed surprised that she’d clocked him so easily. “Keeps people from doing something stupid.”

“But why not real ones?”

“Keeps people out of my business. If it’s true that someone was able to get into the system, they’d be stupid not to hijack the feed from this office first.”

“Well, you’ve certainly thought it through.”

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BY JENNIFER GIACALONE

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