

SABRINA
BLAUM

MUSEUM

*Forged
in
Deception*



Chapter 1

Misapplied Talent

The heat clung to Lucia like a second skin as she headed toward Atlanta’s Meridian Museum of Art to listen to a presentation about art authentication and the challenges of identifying forgeries. The late afternoon sun baked the sidewalk, and the humid July air made her regret the dark jeans she’d worn.

She couldn’t believe she’d let Francesca talk her into this, yet here she was.

Inside, she headed straight for one of their lecture rooms, picking a seat in the back that offered a good view of the podium. Her bag, the portfolio binder tucked inside, went on the floor beside her.

The air smelled faintly chemical—of cleaner or floor polish, maybe—and the hall hummed with quiet conversation and the soft scrape of chairs. The room filled quickly, and ten minutes later, the lights dimmed.

A woman strode toward the podium with sure steps, smiling as the soft clack of her heels echoed on the wooden floor, and placed her hands on the lectern.

“Welcome, my fellow art enthusiasts. I’m Doctor Penelope Blackwell, and I hope you’ll enjoy tonight’s session: ‘The Fine Line: Identifying Forgeries in the Art World.’”

Lucia let out a slow breath and shifted in her seat. While she’d researched biographical information on her target, she’d never bothered with a picture. Maybe if she had, Blackwell’s face—with its near-perfect symmetry that made Lucia’s fingers itch for her paints and canvas—wouldn’t be so distracting.

“Why should we care about forgeries?” Blackwell’s gaze swept the room. “I once had a student who asked, ‘Why bother? Shouldn’t we be

happy people can create art rivaling the greats? Isn't *that* talent, too? More art for the masses,' he'd said."

Blackwell was beautiful, with striking dark eyes, long black hair swept into an elegant twist, and pale skin that seemed almost luminous under the harsh auditorium lights. She had the kind of face that didn't just photograph well but demanded to be painted. But it wasn't just her appearance—it was the way she spoke, with a calm, certain, effortless command of the room.

She held Lucia's interest from the introduction with her rare take on forgeries, even if she clearly disagreed with her erstwhile student.

"Forgeries destabilize more than collections. They undermine trust, finances, and even nations' claims to their heritage. Some of you may recall the recent scandals that pushed many museums to reauthenticate their holdings," Blackwell continued.

Lucia repositioned herself.

"Now, let us take a closer look..."

After the thirty-minute talk, followed by a fifteen-minute Q&A, the crowd loosened and thinned. Some dawdled, hovering nearby to talk to Blackwell one-on-one, much like Lucia had planned. She wanted to be last.

To pass the time, she lingered near the artwork on display, feigning casual interest.

Even the Meridian's lecture rooms featured art: an intricate Italian marble sculpture Francesca would have appreciated, and an oil painting of a raging sea, so vivid in its execution, it made Lucia shiver. She imagined the cold spray, the roar of unseen waves just beyond the canvas edge. Lucia studied them between shooting glances toward Blackwell, waiting for her moment to approach.

When it came, she found herself oddly tongue-tied, gripping her bag as she halted in front of the lectern.

"May I help you?" Blackwell asked when Lucia simply stood there, staring.

Heat bloomed in Lucia's cheeks. She cleared her throat.

"Yes, uh. I really enjoyed your lecture. It was...different."

Blackwell tilted her head.

"In a good way," Lucia added quickly. "You spoke about forgery as if it's an art in itself."

Blackwell frowned slightly. "I wouldn't go that far, but yes. There is skill involved. Misapplied, but skill nonetheless."

"Right. Yes. Anyway..." Lucia forced herself to focus. "My name is Lucia Rossi. I'm an art restorer and consultant for private collectors. A client of mine recently acquired a painting rumored to be from Benedetto Alessi's lost collection, but there's no provenance. It could be an incredible discovery, or a brilliant fake."

Blackwell's gaze sharpened with what looked like interest. "I see."

"Before they commit to a full report, I suggested it wouldn't hurt to consult an expert. Off the record, of course."

Blackwell studied her for a moment, as if assessing something beyond Lucia's words, then finally nodded. "As long as you understand this is a preliminary assessment, not an official statement."

"Of course." Lucia unzipped her bag and pulled out a leather-bound portfolio nested between protective foam sheets, carefully removing a small, aged canvas before handing it over. "There's no title," she added. "It was found without additional documentation."

Blackwell scanned the painting. "You're lucky. Alessi is one of my favorites."

Lucia held back a smile. Indeed. That *was* the point.

"At first glance, it's well made, but I'd bet it's a fake." Blackwell trailed a finger over the canvas. "The aging looks correct, though I'd need a more thorough analysis to be sure, considering forgers know how to fake that, too."

Lucia stepped closer, her thoughts faltering when she caught a whiff of Blackwell's perfume, a subtle, soft scent she couldn't place but that made her want to lean in closer. "What gives it away?"

Blackwell met her gaze.

"I mean, how do you know it's not real? It looks quite authentic to me."

Tilting the canvas toward the light, Blackwell gestured near the figure's sleeve. "Alessi's known works have a more controlled, deliberate stroke, especially in how he painted folds of fabric.

"This is close, but here, see this flourish? It's looser, more instinctual. Almost like the artist wasn't copying Alessi so much as...channeling him."

"Channeling?" Lucia asked, unmoving.

"Yes. The best forgers make the worst artists, in a way."

Lucia's eyebrows rose. "Excuse me?"

Blackwell chuckled. "To replicate a painting perfectly, the artist must disappear. Nothing, no personal style, no creative instincts, can creep in. But this one?" She tapped her fingernail lightly near the painted fabric. "It's ambitious."

"Because it's not just a replica but a new painting in the artist's style?"

"Exactly. It's far easier to copy an existing piece than to create something from scratch and claim it's a long-lost discovery." Blackwell's gaze lingered on the painting, something like admiration flickering behind her scrutiny. "But the irony is, a convincing forgery has to lack something...a soul, I suppose."

Lucia's stomach tightened. What did Blackwell see? "And this one doesn't?"

"No. That's what makes it fascinating. Whoever did this, they are too talented to forge."

Lucia didn't know what to make of such a strange blend of compliment and insult, though it caused a surge of pride to shoot through her, which she immediately quashed. This was only the first test.

Next came what counted: the Bellini. Lucia needed to make Blackwell believe it was real. The Collective needed this in.

Lucia shook her head. "If I may, I have one more painting to show you. It's not new, more of a lost piece another one of my clients discovered in the estate of his late uncle."

"You've got quite the illustrious clientele, Ms. Rossi."

"I've been in the business for a while."

Blackwell laughed. "Really? When did you start, grade school?"

"Good genes," Lucia said. "Melanin helps, too."

"I'll take your word for it."

"I'm thirty-three. Not exactly a spring chicken."

"Agree to disagree. The painting?" Blackwell arched an eyebrow.

Lucia stifled a curse. "Oh, yes, of course." Why couldn't Blackwell be a boring old man?

She dug back into her portfolio and pulled out another, similar-sized canvas, this one secured in its own cloth wrap and slid into a custom sleeve.

Blackwell gasped, pulling the canvas closer.

Lucia stiffened. This was it. If Blackwell saw through this, they—

"Is this...Matteo Bellini's *Lament for the Evening Star*? It's been lost for over a hundred years! Most scholars believed it was destroyed when

Austro-Hungarian forces raided the Bellini estate during their occupation late in World War I.”

“Yes.” Lucia swallowed her sigh of relief. So far, so good.

Blackwell’s gaze locked onto the painting of a lone woman looking toward the horizon at twilight, bathed in fading light.

Lucia had fallen in love with this painting and Bellini’s work when she was a teenager, and for a while, she’d lived and breathed Bellini.

The image still moved her: the brushwork soft but precise, the light breaking around the figure’s silhouette in golden smudges, the sorrow woven into the pose so vivid, it felt personal.

While it wasn’t easy to create a painting that only existed in pictures, Lucia considered this her best work, and she’d slaved *endless* hours on it. It had to fool Blackwell, or their hill got even steeper.

After minutes ticked by without a verdict, Lucia shifted. “What do you think?”

“This could be real. Again, we’d need a closer analysis than what I can offer here, but so far, I can’t detect anything hinting at it being a forgery.”

Lucia’s pulse kicked up. She barely stopped herself from preening, but warmth curled deep inside her. “My client will be pleased to hear that.” Francesca would love this. They had expected much less cooperation.

“Any chance he wants to donate it to the Meridian?”

“Doubtful.”

“A loan perhaps?”

Lucia’s lips twitched. “I could ask and let you know.”

“I’d love that.” Blackwell smiled.

For a second, Lucia almost forgot to breathe. How she wished they’d met under different circumstances.

“Would you like me to keep the paintings for a deeper analysis?”

“Oh, yes. You never know. Maybe the Alessi is from another era and his style had changed a little. Or he’d experimented.” Lucia returned the canvases into the portfolio and handed it over.

“Thank you. Anything is possible, but I wouldn’t recommend getting your client’s hopes up.”

“I’d never.”

Blackwell rummaged in her briefcase and pulled out a business card, flipping it between her fingers, gazing at Lucia for a moment.

“This is... I don’t usually do this.” She looked around, picking up a pen from the lectern and scribbling something on the back—her script ornate, beautiful.

She handed it to Lucia. “Give me a call.” Blackwell paused. “That’s my cell on the back.”

“Oh, OK. Thank you.” Lucia grasped the card.

“It was nice meeting you, Ms. Rossi.” Blackwell smiled again, packing up her remaining belongings before giving Lucia a small wave and heading out of the room.

She was left standing there, feeling almost lightheaded, Blackwell’s card still stuck between her fingers. This had both worked better than expected and not gone according to plan at all. She’d made an impression on Blackwell, though probably not for the right reasons.

Lucia straightened. She couldn’t afford to get sidetracked.

This wasn’t flirtation. It was a mission, and it had only just begun.

Chapter 2

Traps

Penelope yawned, taking off her reading glasses and rubbing her eyes. She glanced at her computer screen: 7:10 p.m. The museum surely stood deserted, only the workaholics left, or those with no desire to return home. She wasn't sure which category she fell into. Perhaps a bit of both.

Her gaze drifted to the pieces Lucia Rossi had left. Potential loan inquiries always jumped the queue, and with the Alessi's oddities flagged in her preliminary notes, she could justify pulling both ahead for a quick desk review.

As talented as Alessi had been, this was...not better. Penelope wasn't sure there even *was* "better" between masters of a craft, just different perspectives, divergent visions originating in different souls.

And this particular vision? It hummed with something beyond imitation.

"Huh," she murmured into the stillness. Maybe there was more to forgery after all. But considering her own complicated background, it was difficult to see it in a more neutral light.

She traced a finger lightly along the canvas. The Bellini painting truly was stunning, almost better than it should be. What an odd thought. But there was too much emotion in the folds, too much ache in the light.

Penelope returned to her desk and put her glasses back on to finish her notes and request a series of lab tests for both pieces.

She might be confident the Alessi painting was a fake, but her role—and her nature—demanded certainty. Assumptions were dangerous. Certainty kept you employed, and out of prison.

Surprises were never welcome. She made a point to avoid them.

A flagged email from records caught her eye: *Urgent – Madonna in Red*. Her frown deepened as she read. She'd requested clarification from the Italian archives months ago, not expecting much. It was a long shot born of her obsession: cross-checking the *Madonna's* trail against obscure registries most curators would never bother with.

The reply surprised her, and a knot formed in her stomach.

Rising from her chair, Penelope crossed her office to a long side desk lined with working folders, neatly arranged by date and priority. The carpet muted her steps, the hush of the room broken only by the faint buzz of the overhead lights.

Yes, she had embraced the digital age. But there was something to be said for flipping through printed pages, pen in hand. The screen made her miss things and gave her headaches all too often.

Sometimes, she missed her days as a researcher. She didn't regret becoming Chief Curator as it was the perfect next step in her career, but the paperwork that came with it...*that* she regretted.

She opened the folder on the *Madonna* and lost herself in her notes, especially over the flagged discrepancy in the provenance papers. The name listed as broker didn't match the original registry. And the date? Weeks off from the known acquisition record.

She'd flagged a minor inconsistency in the transfer record—easy to miss, but odd for a piece of this caliber. Something about the ownership trail didn't fully track.

Her cell phone rang, tearing her out of her thoughts.

Valentina Varnelli.

The owner of the *Madonna* painting.

"Yes?"

"Hello, darling. Have you thought any more about our little arrangement?"

Penelope closed her eyes and suppressed a sigh.

Officially, Valentina was an eccentric art collector. Unofficially, she headed Eris Group—one of the largest art crime networks. A strikingly beautiful woman, as benign as a saw-scaled viper.

Every interaction was a performance: beautiful, rehearsed, and always meant to corner you.

"I've looked into your newest acquisition," Penelope said, crossing out a line on her notes. "But your so-called warning has made me a tad... paranoid."

"Oh? Did a wolf already enter your exalted premises wearing sheep's clothing?"

Penelope hummed, her gaze flicking back to the Alessi canvas. "That remains to be seen."

"Do you need more information? I could send Chester over to walk you through the finer points."

"No. I'll figure things out myself."

Valentina's chuckle grated. "People think you're just a curator. But I know better. You remind me a little of myself, you know?"

Penelope tightened her jaw. She hated how Valentina always slipped under her skin. "About the *Madonna*... I've been following its paper trail for months. The broker's name and the acquisition date don't line up. You're right to be concerned. If the wrong people put two and two together, you could lose the painting. However, I didn't need your warning to uncover that."

"And yet here you are, speaking it aloud to me. That makes you part of it, whether you like it or not. Don't mistake your obsession for independence, Dr. Blackwell—closeness breeds suspicion. If these *wrong* people uncover what you just did, you'll look less like a diligent curator and more like my accomplice."

And here it was, the leash being tugged. She should just report it and be done with it. But then where would her answers be?

Penelope pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Your father—"

"Leave him out of this!"

Silence.

"As you wish."

"I'll keep you updated." Penelope hung up, resisting the urge to hurl her phone against...something. She sometimes missed the phones of her youth; the kind you could slam onto the receiver with satisfying finality, with a dismissal she couldn't afford.



By the time Penelope made it home, it was already past ten. The silence of her home welcomed her like a familiar bruise—dull, settled, always there. She fed and petted Fuller before showering and heading to bed, once more skipping dinner. A recurring habit she needed to cull.

Saturday found her buried in her work once more, this time in her home office, with Fuller snoozing atop a stack of books at the edge of her desk, her soft purring the only sound in the room.

Stacks of papers and journals flanked her keyboard, her tailored blouse half-untucked from hours of shifting in her chair.

“You need a life, Pen,” she muttered when her ornate grandfather clock struck noon.

She reheated a slice of leftover pizza, intending to curl up on the couch with Fuller afterward and maybe watch something mindless on the TV, when her phone rang.

“Hi, Mom,” Penelope answered.

“Hi, sweetheart. How are you?”

“Good, same old.”

“Working too much?”

Penelope rolled her eyes, resisting the dry “Look who’s talking,” from spilling from her lips. Her mother worked as a sought-after ethics and moral philosophy professor at Columbia University, and leisure had never taken up a significant space in her life.

“There’s a lot to do at work.”

“There’s more to life than work.”

“Maybe I need to get a bit older to embrace that notion.”

“I’d say forty-three is plenty old for a shift in perspective.”

Penelope sighed. “Did you call just to criticize me?”

“No, sweetheart. Of course not. I do apologize.” Her mother’s voice faltered.

“What is it? Are you all right?”

“Yes, yes. I just... I spoke to your father.”

Penelope straightened. “How is he?”

“Oh, you know him. Still too proud to allow a visit.”

A pause. Penelope’s gaze drifted to Fuller, who seemed to be stalking a spider.

“I told him about your plans.”

Penelope's knuckles whitened as she gripped the phone. She probably shouldn't have shared that, but there were files she needed, and she'd only get them through her father.

"It's not worth it, sweetheart. Your dad agrees. He made his choice. You shouldn't take such risks. Think of your life, your career."

"I thought life was more than work?"

"That's not what I meant."

Penelope rolled her lips. "I'll be careful. I've got to go, Mom. Talk later." She ended the call, unable to stomach the conversation any longer.

She hated the loop she and her mother seemed to be stuck in, and how they both circled around her father, a situation neither could stand nor escape.

Penelope stepped back into the kitchen, opened her air fryer, and grabbed the pizza slice. She sat at her kitchen table and listlessly picked at her food.

Fuller snuck around her legs before jumping on the chair next to Penelope; her yellow eyes locked on the plate.

"You don't eat pizza. We've tried that already."

She nibbled at her slice, her mother's words ringing in her ears, joined by a memory of sitting in the gallery's courtyard as a girl, her father explaining how every brushstroke carried intent, how good art breathed, lived, and could make a home in your soul. He'd smiled that day, and she tried to use such memories to drown out the look of sorrow etched across his features at the end of the trial that stole him from her.

Yes, life was more than work, and it wasn't that Penelope had no interest in other avenues, but for the last two years, she'd just been...stewing—in sadness, in despair, in rage—until she hit the books and went down one rabbit hole after another. All in the quest to prove her father innocent.

For the longest time, her digging turned up little more than mismatched dates, altered names, trails that started but led nowhere.

Still, she could feel a pattern just out of reach.

Along the way, she learned more about the city's art underbelly than she ever wanted to know, including its most infamous player, Valentina Varnelli.

Her research didn't go unnoticed. Before long, one of Valentina's men had delivered a threat wrapped in an invitation, insisting she meet the woman herself. Penelope still recalled the knock at her door late at night,

an envelope heavy with implication, and the shiver of anticipation when she'd opened the letter.

She'd said yes. Because wasn't that the next logical step? But these things always came with a price.

Now, positioned as a consultant of sorts for Eris Group, Penelope was tolerated more than trusted. The arrangement was never formal, never written down, but Valentina had made sure it felt like an obligation, requesting assessments and evaluations, off the books, naturally.

For Valentina, having the curator of the Meridian in her pocket—or believing she did—offered a veneer of legitimacy too useful to pass up. For Penelope, the arrangement meant proximity, and proximity would lead to answers.

If she could trace the forged papers that had landed her father in prison back to Valentina, maybe she could restore his name. Maybe she could finally prove he wasn't the villain they'd made him out to be.

She also knew Valentina likely only kept her close *because* of her father. Whether it was suspicion, curiosity, or the sheer pleasure of bending another Blackwell to her will, Penelope couldn't yet tell.

But she could handle herself.

Much like Penelope could read art, noticing incongruities others missed. Like how the artist of the supposed Alessi painting had also created the Bellini piece. Oh, she had no tangible proof—the story of her life, of her father's life—but she felt it in her bones. The same energy went into each brushstroke, the same meticulous eye for detail, and most of all, the same essence, the same longing for something just out of reach.

She shook her head.

People always called her insane when she told them that art spoke to her, unable to grasp what she meant. To be fair, she struggled to explain it.

She heard of people with synesthesia, and maybe that was the case for her, too, because colors had flavors and moods. Each artist left behind a unique bouquet of flavors. They were like fingerprints or snowflakes, unique, mesmerizing.

Penelope might not know *who* painted Lucia Rossi's "discoveries," but she knew it was the same person. What she didn't know: Lucia's role in it. Was she the person Valentina had warned her about? She might be an unwitting pawn in someone else's scheme—or fully complicit.

Penelope needed to know.

For now, she would let it play out. She'd watch and take notes. People told on themselves one way or another. Humans were funny like that. Most of the time, you didn't even need to set a trap—they'd walk right into one of their own making.

Time would tell, and in the meantime, Penelope would continue her work and watch. She'd keep her distance.

As such, she should be able to erase the image of Lucia's soft smile from her mind, ignore the anticipation coiling inside at the notion of the woman contacting her again.

Some roads needed to be blocked off, lest she fall into a snare of her own making. Between Valentina's schemes and Lucia's smile, she wasn't sure which was the more dangerous.

Chapter 3

A Crumpled Past

A week after attending the Meridian's lecture, Lucia sat in her art studio, staring at the blank canvas. Blackwell's words replayed in her mind: forgeries lacked soul, but her take on a "new" Alessi painting hadn't.

The thought gnawed at her. It also made her almost wary of her own art. What did she reveal, and could people actually see it?

At least she'd already finished the *Madonna*. If Blackwell were to consider her *Madonna* authentic, too, would that mean it lacked soul as well?

Lucia refused to contemplate why this notion settled so heavily in her stomach.

Then there was the Bellini, which Blackwell had bought as real, with caution.

If she'd ever bled her soul into something, it was the Bellini piece—days had blurred into nights until she could see the brushstrokes in her sleep. But that didn't mean she wanted anyone, least of all Blackwell, to see what it revealed.

Maybe that was why Francesca always came back to her for forgeries. She was talented enough to draw the masters, yet also original to the point where her forgeries breathed.

Lucia had done her first real forgery at seventeen, hands shaking so badly she nearly dropped the brush. Francesca had watched in silence, then simply nodded. Her approval had been more terrifying than any scolding could have been.

But she'd been enamored. Not just with art and being wanted, *needed*, for her art, but also with the mission of the Collective: replacing stolen or hoarded works with flawless fakes so the originals could be reclaimed. It seemed so noble.

Maybe it still was, if she didn't think too hard about the rest.

While Lucia had accepted that it was impossible to create art without imbuing it with a part of herself (no matter what Blackwell said about forgeries only being good if they lacked precisely that), the notion of being seen or recognized in some way still left her feeling untethered.

Recognition had always been a double-edged brushstroke.

A message from Francesca pulled her from her thoughts.

Stop by. We need to talk.

Sighing, Lucia packed away her art supplies and headed for Francesca's estate.



She rolled her shoulders before ringing the doorbell of Francesca's art deco villa. The carved glass reflected her in fragmented pieces—like the rest of her life.

"Hello, Lucy," Francesca said. "Skye is on her way over, too, but you beat her to it."

Lucia grimaced. "Fantastic."

Francesca rolled her eyes. "I don't know what it is with you two again. I don't trust anyone else on this, so I need you to get along." She ushered Lucia inside and busied herself at the coffee machine.

The interior was as carefully curated as Francesca herself: sleek lines, muted colors, and striking modern art, offset by antique furniture that hinted at old money and older tastes. Nothing felt random. Everything had intent.

"The usual?"

"Thanks. And I'm not the one with issues."

Francesca only hummed, preparing two espressos and bringing one to Lucia before settling onto the couch, dressed in a muted wrap dress—flattering, refined, and clearly tailored—her natural curls pulled back from her face today, accentuating the elegance of her deep brown skin.

"It usually takes two, dear. Trust me. I know." A shadow fell over Francesca's face.

"Not this time. I don't know what her problem is these days." She paused. "Are you OK?"

"Yes, of course."

Lucia nodded, swirling the liquid in her cup before taking a sip. She generally preferred tea, but Francesca's espresso was impossible to resist.

Skye, as Francesca's right hand, would naturally be included in whatever this was about, but that didn't mean Lucia had to like it. Their past, if you could call it that, was complicated. And for a while now, Lucia seemed to be the only one willing to leave it there.

"Your report on Blackwell was a bit vague, but we should wait for Skye to—"

The doorbell rang.

"There she is." Francesca rose to open the door, and moments later, she returned with Skye at her side.

Lucia barely glanced up. "Hey."

Skye grunted in response before dropping into the seat across from her, one hand running through her unruly blonde hair.

Charming as ever. Still couldn't be bothered to use a brush.

Francesca didn't waste time. "All right. Now that we're all here, let's discuss our little enterprise. Lucia, tell us more about Blackwell. How is that avenue shaping up?"

"She's sharp, like I said. But she seemed to concede the Bellini could be real. She's got both pieces now. Maybe she's easier to fool with an old copy than a 'new discovery,' but..."

Francesca arched a brow. "But?"

"She asked if I could convince the 'owner' of the Bellini to loan it to the Meridian."

Francesca leaned forward, her dark eyes gleaming. "That's perfect. What did you say?"

"That I'd ask him. It shouldn't be too easy or too quick, but she gave me her number, so I thought we could—"

"Did she now?" Skye cut in, an almost goading smile on her lips.

Lucia ignored her, turning fully toward Francesca. "It could be a test. They authenticate the Bellini, and we see how it holds up. I could ask to observe the process firsthand."

"Yes." Francesca's expression sharpened. "That's more than I'd hoped for. Contact her before the end of the week. We'll prepare the paperwork for your client. Let me know if you need help with that." She paused. "And remember, this stays between us."

Lucia hesitated. "What about Jules?"

“Yes, yes. She’s a part of it, but she couldn’t make it today. Aside from her, the full story doesn’t leave this room.” Francesca gazed between Lucia and Skye until they both nodded.

“There’s something I want to show you.” Francesca pulled out a folder and handed each one a stapled collection of pages.

“What am I looking at?” Skye asked.

“Reading helps,” Lucia muttered, not looking at Skye but knowing she’d heard her and was likely glowering in her direction.

“All the information I gathered about my painting and the security of the Meridian, courtesy of Jules. You need to keep your eye on Blackwell. Try to befriend her. If she signs off on your Bellini, we’ll be set to exchange the *Madonna* during the Luminary Ball.”

“Right.”

The *Madonna in Red*. Not the Bellini or the Alessi trial piece, but the real target. The one Francesca had been chasing for decades.

“It really is the perfect trifecta: the new director’s reevaluation plan, the security update, and the ball.” Francesca leaned back in her seat. “It’s like a sign from the heavens. My *Madonna* is returning home.” Her face hardened. “After all she did...”

Francesca didn’t need to say the name for Lucia to feel the gravity that existed between them. Some sort of betrayal Francesca couldn’t recover from. She had once caught Francesca staring at an old photograph of the *Madonna* hanging above a bed, Francesca younger, radiant, and unguarded beside it. She’d snapped the album shut when she noticed Lucia watching, but the image had stayed with her.

The painting wasn’t just art—it was a relic of a life Francesca had lost, one that still seemed to haunt her, even if she buried the details behind her teeth.

She hoped she’d never contract such a heavy obsession, one that might not loosen its grip even if they managed to get the *Madonna* back.

Lucia sighed.

“Getting cold feet?” Skye asked before turning to Francesca. “I still don’t think it’s a good idea to send her in. She might be a decent forger, but the exchange requires finesse and—”

“*She* is right here,” Lucia ground out.

“That’s enough,” Francesca’s tone hard, brokering no disagreement. “Lucia is an excellent forger, but her talents don’t end there. And Skye, I appreciate your protectiveness, but let this one go.”

"Fine. What about Blackwell, though? Don't you think it's odd she handed out her cell like that?"

"I'm charming."

Skye snorted.

"We will keep an eye on her, but our research indicates Blackwell to be a strait-laced, hard-working career-focused woman," Francesca said.

"Nothing in her past that could give us trouble? No secret lover stalking her?" Skye caught Lucia's gaze. "No drowning in debt to fund a secret gambling addiction?"

"She seems solid," Lucia said.

"Is she pretty?"

Lucia's cheeks heated. "That's irrelevant."

"Right," Skye drawled.

"You guys are impossible," Francesca said. "We will be prepared. We have three months before the ball, so both of you better get to the listed tasks on the last sheet." She rose. "I'll be right back."

Lucia longed to just get up and return home, but she couldn't. She turned another page, blueprints, then a staff roster, reading for a moment before Skye spoke.

"This is important. Just...watch yourself."

"You think I don't know that?" She'd heard the woes of the lost *Madonna* from the moment Francesca took her in. Back then, she'd been a half-feral teenager on the street, ready to give up on ever belonging anywhere until Francesca offered solace and a sanctuary.

"Perhaps, but you have the tendency to get in over your pretty little head, Gracie."

Lucia narrowed her eyes. "Better than getting stuck in yours."

Skye smirked, and as much as she exasperated Lucia, that expression still got to her, drawing her back a decade when she thought Skye intriguing and charming. She must've been high on paint fumes and espresso. Francesca returned, and so both women fell quiet.

"Uh, I think I'm heading back home," Lucia said. "Lots left to do."

"Oh, OK. I thought we could order food and just...spend some time together."

Francesca's hopeful lilt tore at Lucia, and even though she had zero interest in spending more time with Skye, she shrugged and stuffed her hands into her pants pockets. "Sure. Why not? I could eat."

“Great. Let me grab the take-out menus.” And with that, she disappeared back into the kitchen, leaving Lucia once more alone with Skye and the loaded silence that liked to spread between them when they weren’t bickering.



The next evening, Lucia sat curled sideways on her worn couch, hoodie sleeves pushed to her elbows, one leg tucked under her. A blank spiral sketchpad lay open on her lap, pencil already in hand. Her fingers kept twitching to move, but her brain wasn’t cooperating.

With a sigh, she grabbed her phone and tapped the screen. Blackwell answered on the third ring.

“Yes?”

“Hi, this is Lucia Rossi. We met at your lecture the other day, at the Meridian. You gave me your number, and I left two paintings with you.”

“Yes, of course. Hello, Lucia. How are you?”

“Good, good. I spoke with my client, and he’s willing to loan the Meridian the Bellini—that is, if you’re still interested.”

“Yes, most definitely. Although we’ve only started the authentication. Our processes have changed with our new director.”

“Right. That’s actually another reason I’m calling. I was wondering if I might be able to observe part of the process. Just as a learning experience. It’s not often I get to see that side of things.” Lucia shifted the phone to her other hand, suddenly too aware of her breathing.

Blackwell laughed. “I suppose that can be arranged. You’d have to sign in and follow our protocols, of course.”

“No problem. When should I stop by?”

“Well, I’m sure I’m not the only busy person. I take lunch every day at half past noon. So, you could drop by right after any day this coming week. Maybe at one?”

Lucia fumbled the pencil, nearly dropping it. “You only have half an hour for lunch?”

“You sound so scandalized.”

“Yes! That’s not long enough! It’ll give you indigestion.”

“I’ll take that into consideration.”

Lucia sighed. “Don’t mind me. I likely spend too much time around Italians. Or one Italian.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I see.”

She pressed the pencil tip to the page and finally let her hand move—light, distracted lines forming without thought.

Lucia hesitated. “But maybe we could find some time to grab a cup of coffee?”

The following pause sped up Lucia’s heartbeat. Her palm started sweating, and she wiped it on her thigh.

“I’d like that.”

Lucia exhaled too fast and bit the inside of her cheek as warmth flushed up her neck. She really hadn’t expected that answer.

She imagined seeing Blackwell smile, and when she hung up, she had to shake her head. What was she even doing? Getting closer to Blackwell meant being friendly, not flirting.

This was ridiculous. She had no time for distractions, least of all one that made her hands tingle and stood in the way of her mission. Still, trust was easier to build when someone liked you. Or thought they did. But Lucia wasn’t sure she liked the idea of using Blackwell that way.

She glanced down and froze. The face she’d been sketching was unmistakable.

“Seriously?” she huffed, crumpling the page and tossing it in the trash.

The last thing she needed was her own obsession.

Chapter 4

Clouded Vision

Wednesday morning, Penelope received a notification that a visitor was waiting for her at the information center. On her way, she'd chastised herself for hoping it might be Lucia—it had been a mistake not to name a specific date. Now she had to contend with an anticipation she could neither justify nor want any part of.

When she drew closer and saw it was indeed Lucia, dressed in dark jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, her hair pulled back in a low knot, Penelope bit back a smile and greeted her with professional cordiality, ignoring the rapid thrum in her chest. Useless.

There was something casual yet composed about Lucia—unassuming, but impossible to overlook.

After the requisite paperwork, she led Lucia through the museum's quieter corridors, past the curatorial offices and storage vaults.

Lucia's gaze wandered, curious, noting every door they passed.

They reached the Conservation Lab, its bright lighting spilling through the open doorway.

"So, this is where all the magic happens?" Lucia asked.

Penelope followed Lucia's gaze as it drifted over the room's long worktables draped in clean white cloths, the high-powered magnifiers, the pigment and chemical kits arranged neatly along one counter, and the sleek, climate-controlled cabinets lining the back wall. A sharp, sterile tang hung in the air.

"Impressive," Lucia murmured.

"Does it fulfill your expectations?" Penelope stepped toward one of the tables where the Bellini lay under soft lighting, ready for the next round of testing.

“And then some, yes.” Lucia’s smile lit up her entire face—her dark eyes seemed to glow and the dimples in her cheeks were...

No.

Penelope cleared her throat. “I’m glad it meets your approval.”

“So, what’s the next step for the paintings? Are you examining both at the same time?”

“I actually have the Alessi under the microscope and could show you a few potential issues I’ve found there first, if you want.”

“Yes, of course.”

Lucia followed Penelope to the workstation. Her energy seemed slightly wired, as if she were suppressing the urge to bounce with excitement.

It almost endeared her to Penelope, who redirected her focus to the work at hand: cataloging Lucia’s reaction to her discoveries.

“All right.” She flipped on the microscope and the attached monitor. After looking through the eyepiece to find the relevant section, she pulled back.

“This is on the screen, too? Like a live feed?”

“Yes. Now look at this here.” Penelope pointed at the upper portion of the image. “The top layers of paint don’t align with traditional underpainting techniques Alessi used.”

Lucia tilted her head.

“Alessi often laid down thin glazes before building texture. This section here, see how the pigment sits flat without optical depth?” She moved the cursor across the area. “That’s...unusual.”

“OK, and that means it’s not the real deal?”

“Not necessarily, but it’s a first strike.”

“And after three, it’s out?” Lucia asked.

“Something like that. But there’s also this.” She zoomed in on another section. “The crack patterns—see them?—they don’t follow natural aging.”

“Cracks?”

“Yes. Craquelure should follow the stress lines of the canvas and the direction it was stretched over time. This looks...introduced.”

“Strike two. It’s not looking good for my client.”

“No, it isn’t.” Penelope held her gaze.

Lucia seemed so open and guileless. Without her research, or even without Valentina in her ear, Penelope might never have suspected her of anything.

She hated the masks people wore, though, to be fair, she didn't know anything yet, at least not with the degree of certainty that would satisfy her.

"Now, if we look at a digital comparison..." Penelope switched tabs, pulling up a confirmed Alessi. "Look at the drapery. Alessi's linework was disciplined. The folds here," she gestured to the screen, "are too loose, too expressive. Lovely, but not his style."

"And the painting's out." Lucia leaned in without blinking. "To be honest, I didn't have high hopes. It's rare to find genuine new art."

"I suppose. Still, your client may be disappointed. A piece like this, if real, would have generated a lot of interest."

Lucia shrugged. "They have enough money. This was more about the art itself, I think."

"I see."

Lucia's lips curved into a lazy half smile. "Do you?"

Her tone stirred something in Penelope, and for a second, she allowed herself to be drawn into this pull, before blinking rapidly. "I'm not so sure anymore."

A beat of stillness passed amid the low hum of the electronics around them.

Lucia's jeans and shirt were unremarkable, yet Penelope couldn't stop noticing the way the cotton clung to her back, the low, coiled bun, the sharp line of her cheek. Too much detail. Too much attention. Dangerous.

Lucia was a threat wrapped in a question mark. And Penelope had never been good at resisting puzzles.

"That makes two of us," Lucia almost whispered.

"Dr. Blackwell, may I have a word about... Oh, excuse me. I wasn't aware you had a visitor," Clara Montgomery said, folding her hands in front of her.

Penelope took a step back, straightening. When had they gotten so close?

"That's fine. How may I help you, Dr. Montgomery?"

"Just come by my office later. I was on my way there and thought I'd stop by to see if you're free. There's no hurry."

"Thank you. I'll be there." Penelope straightened as she turned back to Lucia after Montgomery left. "Where were we?"

"Beats me," Lucia said with a soft laugh. "The new director, right? You think you're in trouble?"

Penelope furrowed her brows. "Why would I be in trouble?"

"You stiffened like you'd just been called to the principal's office, and your boss reminds me a bit of a strict schoolmistress, but you tell me."

"Do I strike you as someone who gets in trouble, Ms. Rossi?"

Lucia's gaze pinned her in place. "No. You strike me as someone who could give others trouble."

Penelope's lips parted. She hoped the flush burning her neck wouldn't travel to her face.

Lucia tilted her head slightly, eyes gleaming with amusement. "No worries, I like a bit of trouble myself. I probably shouldn't keep you longer. I'm assuming you'll do the same work with the Bellini?"

Penelope could only nod.

"Good, good. Keep me updated." She smiled. "Good-bye, Dr. Blackwell. You'd better hurry to your principal."

"She's not—"

"I'm joking."

"I see."

Lucia stepped toward the door before she turned around. "About the coffee. Text me or give me a call when you're free? I'm wide open for the next few days."

At this point, Penelope must have lost the capacity to string together a coherent sentence since she could only stare after Lucia as she walked out of the lab and disappeared. What had just happened?

Penelope shook off her stupor and left the lab, still mulling her encounter with Lucia as she made her way to Montgomery's office. She had no time for personal entanglements. Could she even trust her assessment of the woman, clouded as it was by this unnerving pull? How utterly inconvenient and annoying.

She knocked on Montgomery's door.

"Come in."

Penelope stepped inside. The office was as composed as its occupant: clean lines, a polished oak desk, not a single paper out of place. A faint citrus scent from a reed diffuser hung in the air. Light from a tall window flooded the room, cold and impersonal.

Montgomery glanced up from her monitor, removing her thin-framed glasses and setting them precisely beside a stack of neatly aligned folders.

"Dr. Blackwell." She gestured to the chair opposite her.

Penelope sat. Her own desk was half this tidy, and the sight made something between admiration and irritation stir in her chest.

"Thank you for dropping by." Montgomery folded her hands atop the desk. "I wanted to discuss an idea for the Luminary Ball. The board suggested a more...immersive theme."

"Like a costume ball?"

Montgomery's lips twitched slightly. "Perhaps. They're worried the current setup might not draw enough of the audience we need."

"I'm sure the more affluent art aficionados of Atlanta won't miss the opportunity for such a festivity either way."

"Let's hope so." Montgomery reached for her glasses again, polishing the lenses with a cloth as she spoke. "I sent you an email for review. You're still more familiar with the Meridian and its guests."

Penelope nodded, resisting the urge to check her watch. The gala already ate more hours than she could afford. "I'll take a look."

"That said..." Montgomery slid the glasses back on and studied her. "The Bellini piece. That's an unusual find, and it didn't come through our usual channels, correct?"

"Yes. A bit of luck."

Montgomery regarded her for a beat, eyes unreadable behind the lenses. "How is the authentication looking so far?"

"Promising but not concluded." She wouldn't voice her suspicions. It might pass all their tests. After all, it was incredibly well-crafted. "The donor is willing to loan it to us."

"That's excellent. If it proves authentic, of course. And the source?"

"Innocuous so far. An art restorer-slash-consultant whose client discovered the piece at the estate of his late uncle."

"Some board members are nervous," Montgomery said. "There's been quite a few questionable acquisitions going around lately. I'd like you to make sure none of that smoke blows our way with the Bellini—especially since it's a loan."

"Understood."

"One more thing, Valentina Varnelli's office sent something about renegotiating the *Madonna* loan." Montgomery reached for her tablet, scrolling. "Nothing urgent, but review the correspondence, will you? I don't want any surprises."

Penelope's left hand tightened into a fist. "Yes. Just forward it to me."

“Good. Keep an eye on all this, Dr. Blackwell. Not everyone who smiles at you means well.”

Penelope stiffened. What was going on with people today? Montgomery couldn't know about her extracurricular dealings, or her thoughts about Lucia. Still...

“I will. Is there anything else?”

“No, that's it.” Montgomery's smile returned, polite but practiced. “And do let me know about the ball. We don't have much time left for significant changes.”

Penelope nodded, stood, and smoothed her skirt. “Of course.”

As she left, the door clicked shut behind her, and she exhaled slowly. Another mask, another performance. Professional cordiality was starting to feel like its own art form.

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