

## CONSTRAINED STEELE

By Peg Daniels

### INTRODUCTORY NOTES:

1) Lest you think my spelling becomes atrocious in certain sections, let me point out that I have my spell checker set to U.K. English. I want the non-dialogue part of sections that are in Steele's point of view, and also any words that come out of Steele's mouth, to be written in U.K. English. Similarly, non-dialogue parts of sections in an American's point of view and any words that come out of an American's mouth should be written with American English spellings. Any slip-ups would probably be in the American spellings, since I may have automatically used the U.K. English spell checker. I would appreciate knowing of any such slip-ups – just be sure you're right (there are acceptable alternate spellings of words). :-)

2) In my browser, at least, footnotes in the HTML version show up as boxes. Click on them for definitions of terms, further explanations, or citing of sources. Sorry, I don't know how to make them look much better. In the PDF version, they look like "regular" footnotes.

For those of you who wish to print the story out, thereby not getting the footnotes, I have put an alphabetized glossary at the end.

3) Rating: PG-13

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This is a work of fiction. Admiral Erich Raeder was a real person, and the facts I obtained about him can be found at <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/GERraeder.htm> . All other characters are fictional and any resemblance to anyone else living or dead is mostly coincidental. I do incorporate real data, real facts and events – in unobtrusive ways, I hope. More details can be found in the endnotes and acknowledgements.

And now to the story!

## CONSTRAINED STEELE

by Peg Daniels

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“Rubies are hot. Rubies are fire, blood, passion. Rubies live, pulse, throb. Rubies can corrupt you, twist your soul, make you lose your way. A ruby is always the possessor, never the possessed. It either loves you or hates you. If it hates you, it will destroy you. But a ruby is treacherous – you never know how a ruby truly feels about you until it’s too late.”

A jeweller had told Steele this, and he believed it. “A ruby,” his old friend had added, “is like a woman.”

Steele eyed the ruby, now dangling so tantalizingly close. It was a deep, clear, ‘pigeon blood’ red, the most valuable. Over six carats. Of extremely rare quality, commanding a price approaching \$225,000 per carat. Few people realized that on a per-carat basis the rarest, most valuable gemstones were these hot-blooded rubies, not the cold-as-ice diamonds.

Well, except for royal lavulite, of course.

This was the most exquisite ruby to which Steele had ever had the chance to be up close – and personal. It was hard, deciding whether he’d rather be examining the ruby more closely or its wearer, this evening’s companion. Lora Raeder was in her early twenties, a statuesque beauty, looking simply ravishing in a deceptively simple black dress with a 24-karat gold clasp just below her right shoulder. Her fine blonde hair was swept up atop her head, tendrils escaping fetchingly. Around her neck was a delicate gold necklace, also 24-karat, supporting the magnificent gem. She lightly fingered the ruby with one hand while her other hand trailed languidly up and down the front of Steele’s white dinner jacket, heightening his dilemma. Steele didn’t mind.

It did make paying attention to their conversation difficult, though. They were discussing the Raeder Unicorn Tapestries, which hung in the Trophy Room of the Raeder mansion: seven magnificent pieces, woven of threads of wool and silk, silver and gold, replicating the series, ‘The Hunt of the Unicorn.’ Unlike the originals, which hung in The Cloisters at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and were woven about 1600, these had been commissioned by Erich Raeder not quite a year ago. As each piece was approximately twelve feet by twelve feet, the artisans must

have worked feverishly to complete them in time for the Raeders' move here.

"You remind me of a unicorn," she said to him. Her voice was low, sexy.

And she reminded him of a lioness on the prowl, with her catlike grace and her half-closed eyes of gold-flecked brown. "I hope you mean the embodiment of courtly purity and perfection – and not the poor fellow portrayed in the tapestries," he replied, giving her an amused grin.

She swept her hand across his chest and shook her head slowly. "I mean that mythical blue-eyed beast, too swift to be captured, too fierce to be tamed, too beautiful to be forgotten, too mysterious to be understood."

He laughed quietly. What would Laura think of this characterization? He was afraid he knew.

As another guest came to join them and claimed Ms. Raeder's attention, he stole a glance to the south. Earlier in the evening the view had been impressive – the expanse of emerald green grass; the lush gardens awash in colour, butterflies flitting from bloom to bloom; and in the background, across the basin, the hills above Culver City. Now, it was too dark to make out much of anything, despite the illumination provided on this side of the mansion by the floodlights on top of the roof.

No matter. He had in mind a far lovelier view, another precious gem, someone who shared many qualities of the ruby – definitely fire and passion – but kept them hidden inside an exterior hard as diamond to penetrate. At least for him.

Ah, there she was, on the other side of the pool, engaged in conversation with Ms. Raeder's husband and Murphy. Murphy looked ill at ease, of course, in his tuxedo. Laura was attractively attired in a three-quarter length black satin sheath with straps, a black gauze overlay, and an asymmetrical bottom hemline. It clung to her in all the right places, emphasizing her small, lithe body, but hiding her dancer's legs a little too much for his taste.

Reluctantly, Steele tore his gaze from her and turned it to Erich Raeder. Sixty-five years old, the man looked closer to fifty. He was tall, trim, powerfully-built, and resplendently attired in a beautifully-tailored white dinner jacket. Steele felt a brief stab of envy at the tailoring job, though he had no cause to complain about his own finely cut suit.

Erich Raeder was a curious man. He was the nephew of Admiral Erich Raeder, grand admiral of the German fleet under Hitler until Hitler, disillusioned with the performance of the German navy, accused the admiral of incompetence and forced his resignation. The younger Raeder, however, was interested in a different arena of conquest, and no one would accuse him of incompetence. Considered ruthless and brilliant, this Raeder was said to gobble up corporations – and men – for breakfast. There wasn't a shadow of emotion on Raeder's thin, aristocratic face as he talked with Miss Holt. Then again, in the weeks he'd been working with Raeder, Steele had come to feel emotion was foreign to the man.

Now Miss Holt's facial expression, that was a different story. Though he couldn't imagine Raeder could be saying anything of the slightest interest to her, Steele would never know it. Even at this distance her dimpled smile lit up the place in a way that –

Steele started, and his attention snapped back to Ms. Raeder. Her hand had wandered a bit low.

He realized they were alone again. He tried to pick up her thread of conversation.

“ – so fortunate for us Erich’s latest acquisition was Dillon Electronics. And we have *you* to thank for that, in a way. If you hadn’t exposed Mrs. Dillon, the company would’ve been run into the ground, and that galoot Meecham would’ve turned it into an industrial park. An electronics company is so much more useful to Erich. He does love his toys.” Her hand brushed his thigh. “And we got the added bonus of discovering you, of engaging your . . . services.”

“The Remington Steele Detective Agency does aim to please.”

“Oh . . . he does.” She ran her tongue over moist, sensuous, ruby-red lips.

Steele returned her seductive smile with one of his own. Though he’d only met Ms. Raeder yesterday, he suspected she also gobbled up men for breakfast. Lord knows, he had a weakness for beautiful, glamorous women – Ms. Raeder was simply the most stunning woman he had ever encountered, and he had encountered quite a few – but he was not naive. She was playing a game, had been playing one from the moment they’d been introduced, with the looks, the touching, the innuendo. He willingly played along. For now. Had this been another time, another place, another life, he might have been tempted to carry it further.

“I understand some tragedy occurred during your work on that case, though. . . . An employee was murdered?”

Steele’s throat tightened. His first real involvement in a case had led to tragedy. Wallace. Murdered when he discovered Mrs. Dillon’s deceit. Wallace. . . . He clenched his hands, trying to suppress the anger he still felt whenever those memories surfaced. Memories of that callous morgue attendant assuming Wallace was just a junkie who’d OD’d. Memories of the attendant telling Laura if she wanted an autopsy, get the stiff to her own pathologist.

He’d grabbed the man, made a pathetic attempt to summarize Wallace’s life in a few short sentences: ‘That *stiff* once made twenty-seven straight passes in a crap game, he had a daughter he put through college, he liked to fish off King’s Point, and he read the “Wizard of Id.” That *stiff* was my friend.’ How could the essence of a man be adequately described so briefly? It’d been nearly a year, and yet Steele still felt sick to his stomach at these memories of his first introduction to the deadly side of his role as Remington Steele.

He realized he hadn’t answered Ms. Raeder, who stood observing him in silence, fingering his lapel. He unclenched his fists and let out a breath. “A friend, actually.”

“Oh.” She lifted a hand to his face and stroked him, but the mood had been lost. “Still, I suppose you must get used to that in your line of work.”

“One never gets used to the loss of a friend.”

Just as she started to reply, the estate was plunged into darkness. The next moment, the murmurs of the crowd were cut off by the unmistakable sound of an alarm piercing the night.

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With each passing moment, the crowd became more restive, impeding the progress of the party of

three trying to make its way to the pavilion from the farthest side of the pool. Erich Raeder had commandeered Murphy's penlight and taken the lead, impatiently pushing at those too slow to get out of his way, occasionally muttering something in German under his breath. Murphy followed in his wake, just behind Laura, feeling like he was in a military parade march.

Finally, they were at the northwest end of the mansion, at the iron-gated entrance to the pavilion. Murphy whispered to Laura, "Looks like they won't be showing any first-run movie in here tonight after all. Bet Steele'll be mad, huh partner?" Despite the atmosphere of tension, they both snickered, Steele's obsession with movies being an endless source of amusement and exasperation.

They worked their way to the other side of the pavilion and entered the door to the house proper, passing a security guard. They then went down the narrow corridor, which ran south. The corridor opened into the Glass Room. This room opened to all sides – each room on the main floor of the mansion was, in fact, connected to all its neighbors. To the west lay the drawing room, and through its windows Murphy could see the moonlight reflecting off the pool. To the south was the Jewelry Room, seldom open to visitors, now locked tight. To the east lay their destination, the front hall.

As Raeder strode through the Glass Room, Murphy tried to keep up, but he and Laura fell back, practically clinging to each other in an effort not to damage any of the priceless works around them. Laura's penlight barely pierced the darkness. Raeder's irritation at their slowness penetrated much further.

They exited the room and went down another corridor, their shoes clicking softly on the black-and-white marble floor. Laura swept the penlight beam around the hall as they moved. They were now midway down the hall. The penlight illuminated the white marble columns that framed the grand stairwell and marked where the hall opened up on the left to the main entrance to the mansion. Murphy turned to the left, noting how Laura's beam first caught the white marble staircase and then the imposing rock crystal chandelier overhead, which split the beam into a thousand shards. Next to the staircase was a marble-topped table. The command console, the heart of the alarm system for the main floor, sat on it. But except for the panic button, the system had been turned off on this floor for the party; otherwise, guests opening and closing doors would set it off. In its stead, several guards, hand-picked from Raeders' security division, had been patrolling the main floor. As effectively as any alarm system, these muscular models of Aryan perfection had discouraged guests from exploring the house proper.

Raeder pushed a button; the alarm was silenced. "Miss Holt, see to the main floor. This alarm triggers a signal to my own monitoring agency, and they will alert my security force. More men will arrive promptly. Direct them to me, upstairs. Mr. Michaels, come."

Murphy didn't need to see her face to know his partner bristled beside him. He could take Raeder's imperiousness much more easily than Laura – she would take it as a put-down of her competence. As she stalked off, he and Raeder moved to the stairs.

"Where is Harald?" Raeder asked the guard in front of the stairway.

"Er ist oben mit Herrn Steele, Herr Raeder."

"What's that about Mr. Steele?" Murphy asked.

"He is upstairs." Raeder turned back to the guard. "Are there any other guests in the mansion?"

"Nein, Herr Raeder."

"See to the lights, Dieter."

"Jawohl, Herr Raeder."

Raeder took the guard's flashlight and handed Murphy's penlight back to him as they started climbing the stairs. On the upper landing stood a marble-topped table with the command console for the upstairs system. They were met by another guard, emerging from one of the bedrooms.

"Where is Mr. Steele?"

"Er ist im Museum, Herr Raeder."

"Go back downstairs, Harald."

"Jawohl, Herr Raeder."

The rooms on the west side, from where the guard had come, either overlooked or were fairly close to the scene of the party. Murphy and Mr. Raeder moved to the east side of the floor, entirely occupied by the Museum Room, which housed Raeder's personal art collection, and by the Trophy Room adjoining it.

They crossed the stair hall and entered the museum side by side. Shining their flashlight beams up and down the aisles, they made their way across the vast room. Halfway, Murphy was startled by a sound coming from directly ahead, from the balcony. Both he and Raeder flicked off their lights. Murphy saw a flashlight beam, and then a figure, partially illuminated, entered the balcony door. As if by silent agreement, Murphy and Raeder switched on their flashlights simultaneously, catching the figure in the beams.

"Oh!" Steele swung his torch<sup>1</sup> beam at the men. "Murphy!" He touched a hand to his chest to calm his heart.

Murphy and Raeder strode towards him.

"What were you *doing* out there?" Murphy added a belated, "Sir."

Steele flicked his eyes towards Murphy, but kept his tone professional. "The door was unlocked, Murphy. I was checking for an intruder."

"Did you see anyone, Mr. Steele?"

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<sup>1</sup>Flashlight (British)

Steele turned to Raeder. “No, but I haven’t checked out the museum proper.”

“Then let us do so and see if anything has been taken. Mr. Steele, see to the Trophy Room.”  
Raeder pivoted and clipped off to the north side of the room.

Steele hesitated. Murphy frowned at him and went to the balcony door, which overlooked a large, immaculately groomed kitchen garden. “No sign of forced entry.”

“Picked, no doubt.” Steele sighed and moved off to the south side of the room, noting that Murphy stayed by the door.

Moving down the aisles, Steele used his torch to scan the exhibits around him. This room had presented a delightful puzzle. Raeder had wanted him to vary the detection and delay technologies used for the display cases, so that if an intruder somehow managed to ferret out the secrets of one case, that knowledge couldn’t be used to breach another. Ironical that Steele’s own expertise at breaking into such places to relieve them of their riches should be applied to designing a system to prevent just that kind of assault – except from him. He grinned.

He’d gotten quite creative in his designs but had had to temper some of them at Raeder’s insistence: cost-effectiveness was not Steele’s strong point, and Raeder had quashed a few of his flights of fancy in its name. Still, his designs were *ne plus ultra*<sup>2</sup>. His and Carl’s designs, that is. Of course, as ‘Remington Steele’ he’d taken all the credit. But Carl – nearly as skilled as he in burglary and its accessory tasks such as lockpicking and safecracking – had been indispensable. The two of them had had a wicked good time on the project.

Weaving his way through the room, he passed paintings by old German masters from the time of Dürer. Cranach, whose works were favoured by the Nazis, was particularly well-represented. There was a van Gogh, a Matisse – both priceless. He passed by exquisite inlaid furniture, rich Renaissance tapestries, sculptures, glass-paintings, antique silver, arts and crafts from late Gothic to Renaissance times. Some items had little plaques proclaiming them as having been acquired from the Schäfer collection of Schloss Schweinfurt, or from the castle of the Prince and Princess Leopold of Bavaria, or from the princely houses of Löwenstein or Hohenzollern – even a few from the last Queen of Portugal, the last King of Bavaria.

Finally, he’d traversed the room and was at the entrance to the Trophy Room on the southwest side of the museum. He supposed he had to go in there. He wished he could think of a good excuse to have Murphy or Raeder go in there instead. He wished the lights were on. He wished Ms. Raeder hadn’t just compared him to a unicorn.

He shook himself, gave an uneasy laugh. Sometimes he could be so superstitious. He shined his torch into the Trophy Room. The layout of this room was bizarre. Raeder had erected a long corridor that wound clear back to the east wall of the mansion, and then to the south, to the mansion wall there, before entering into the Trophy Room proper. Along one side of the corridor hung the Unicorn Tapestries. But, although wider than normal, the corridor was not wide enough

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<sup>2</sup> the state of being without a flaw or defect, ‘no more beyond’ (Latin)

to give a proper perspective to the tapestries even in normal light.

Steele entered the corridor, and in the eerie glow of his torch, he felt the walls closing in on him. With each step he increased his pace. Tapestry dogs – greyhounds in front, chasing by sight; running hounds in back, chasing by scent – and hunters, with ugly, cruel faces, bore down on him and the unicorn. Finally, at nearly full sprint, he rounded the last corner, but not with relief.

The room he now entered repulsed him, out of place amidst the artistry of the rest of the mansion: an armoury of historical military and hunting weaponry, at three thousand artifacts one of the largest private collections in the world. Raeder boasted that a number of the weapons were spoils of war, captured by members of his own family. As Steele played his torch about the room, it picked out one of Raeder's prize possessions, an 'Honour Pattern' Naval dirk, awarded by Grand Admiral Erich Raeder to some 'deserving' U-boat captain, or naval hero, or retiring admiral. The Damascus blade had been specially hand-forged, but its pommel was literally its crowning glory. The brass pommel's design included an eagle on which was set a swastika with seventeen rose-cut, individually-set diamonds, four in each swastika leg and the last one in the centre. Quite beautiful indeed, if one could only forget the symbol on which they were mounted.

Most bizarre were the other displays in the room: the stuffed bodies of animals Raeder had hunted and slaughtered. As Steele swept his torch around the room, a grizzly bear, a leopard, a lion, a rhino, a cougar, a cape buffalo, a wild boar, each leapt at him to tear him to pieces.

He shook his head. Such blood lust displayed amidst exquisite art. This sight had given him a whole new perspective on the rest of Raeder's collection – combining this sight, the dubious provenance<sup>3</sup> of some of the art pieces, and Raeder's predilection for conquest in the business world, he couldn't help but think that each art piece must also somehow represent some sort of vanquishment.

As he turned to go, the glare of his penlight again caught the dirk. Odd. The half-metre cube display case looked different. Holding his penlight in his teeth, he felt around the under edges of the display case. Unlike the rest of his treasures, Raeder wanted the dirk easy to get at, so there was this little trick . . . . He heard the click and carefully opened the case. Taking the penlight in hand, he inspected the interior. It looked as if someone had inserted a small, thin rectangular object between the casing and the black velvet cloth that covered it – only someone as intimately familiar with this case as he would ever notice it. He reached behind the dirk, cautiously lifted the cloth – and nearly dropped the torch in surprise. Talk about dubious provenance –

“Mr. Steele. We have a problem.” The cultured voice, only betraying its Germanic origin by the pronunciation of the 'w' with a slight 'v' sound and by its stilted formality, carried through the walls even into this cavernous room.

The lights overhead came back on. Steele sighed with relief. He tucked the velvet back and closed the case, then threaded his way through the exhibits and jogged through the corridor, studiously avoiding looking at the tapestries. He entered the Museum Room and headed towards the central

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<sup>3</sup>History of ownership of a valued object or work of art or literature



aisle.

Raeder and Murphy stood midway down the northern section of the museum; a number of Raeder's security men were now scattered throughout the room. Murphy was inspecting an opened display case and the area surrounding it, making sketches and diagrams in a small notebook, not touching anything – 'securing the area and observing it carefully.' Good old standard-operating-procedure Murphy.

Steele knew which exhibit they surrounded. "The mosaic was taken."

As he joined them, Murphy eyed him. "You know the placement of every object in this room?"

"Of course not, Murphy," – just most of them – "but this . . . yes. An intricate mosaic of amber and . . . royal lavulite." He ignored Murphy's sharp look.

"A gem that intrigues you, does it not, Mr. Steele?" Steele did look up at that. "I believe the first case you ever became personally involved in concerned royal lavulite," Raeder continued.

Yes, the first 'case.' He'd come to Los Angeles to steal gems of royal lavulite and had ended up instead assuming the identity of Remington Steele. "That's true, Mr. Raeder. I'm surprised you'd know that."

"You should not be, Mr. Steele. I would not be who I am without thoroughly checking out everyone with whom I do business. Especially if it is someone I intend to employ."

"Of course."

They looked up as Harald came rushing back in. "Entschuldigen Sie bitte, Herr Raeder. Es betrifft ihre Gattin. Etwas ist geschehen."

Steele took off running, hearing Murphy's confused "What's going on?" and then footsteps pounding after him.

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A wide empty circle surrounded Laura and Ms. Raeder. On the circumference of the circle, various elegantly dressed guests were down on their hands and knees, crawling around the pool area. Laura was making sketches and diagrams of the area on some cocktail napkins. Ms. Raeder was in obvious distress, sobbing.

Laura looked up to see Steele and Murphy trying to navigate the crowd, finally succeeding and cautiously entering the circle. "Ms. Raeder, Miss Holt. What's wrong? What's happened?" Steele asked.

"Ms. Raeder's necklace. It's gone." Laura could hear the tension in her own voice and chided herself for her unprofessionalism.

"Oh, my. Are you sure the chain didn't simply break? Perhaps it's around here somewhere, on the ground." Steele gestured vaguely around him.

Laura nodded toward the other guests. "That's why all these people are crawling around, Mr.

Steele. But Ms. Raeder says she hasn't moved from this spot. I've already searched inside this circle."

"But who could've taken it? How?" Steele asked.

"That's what we're trying to determine, *sir*." Again, she couldn't keep the tension out of her voice. "Ms. Raeder says you were the one closest to her. That you caught her when she stumbled in the darkness." She saw a glint of suspicion flare in Murphy's eyes, no doubt mirroring her own. No, Murphy had more than a glint. A conflagration.

"Something struck the back of my knees, causing me to stumble," Ms. Raeder offered tearfully.

Steele turned to Ms. Raeder and touched her arm. "Yes, well, I assure you, Ms. Raeder, the Remington Steele Agency will give the matter its full attention. We will unearth the culprit responsible."

"You can count on it." Laura's words were directed to Ms. Raeder, but her pointed gaze was upon Steele.

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Myriad reasons could be given why many guests had already scattered, leaving as soon as they could after the alarm went off and before the police arrived: they thought it none of their business, or they feared the publicity, or they didn't want to be inconvenienced by the questioning, or, worse, by having to appear in court.

Or they had something to hide.

Steele's voice came clearly from inside the library, where the police were interviewing him. Laura stared at the library door. Interviewing? Who was she kidding? It was an interrogation. An interrogation of the man who would not reveal even his own name.

The library door opened. She started toward it, then stopped in disappointment as a detective came out instead of the person she'd hoped for.

"Miss Holt, I want to verify some information with you."

"Of course, Detective – ?"

"Russell. Mr. Steele was hired to design and oversee the installation of the Raeders' interior security system six weeks ago, correct?" Well, that was the official version, though Laura knew some of Wallace's crew had helped with the design. She nodded. "I have here that Mr. Steele hired a crew of men from the Lost and Found Mission to do the actual installation."

"Yes."

"Interesting."

"Detective?"

Russell looked up from his notes. "Interesting how men of such obvious expertise all flocked to the same Mission."

Laura's heart missed a beat. She'd queried Steele during the Dillon case about the competence of Wallace's crew in setting up a security system. The words he'd spoken at that time came back to her: 'Between them they've over seventy-five years of experience.' What he'd left unsaid she'd nevertheless understood – that experience was in burgling. Oh, why had she let Steele do this job unsupervised? She feigned confidence. "We've been using them for nearly a year, Detective. They've done excellent work for us."

"So, Mr. Steele spent six weeks out here –"

Six weeks going over every inch of the house and grounds –

"– and the last three of those weeks the crew was also here."

Doing God knows what. Laura wasn't sure if the insinuations were actually there or if she heard them in the detective's voice because of her own fears. At any rate, there was nothing she could refute.

"Now, tonight," – the detective flipped to the next page of his notes, and Laura steeled herself – "the power went out and the alarm went off shortly after that."

"That's correct, Detective Russell."

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Steele finished his tale of the evening's events, then responded to the questions put by Detective Kearney for clarifications and more details. When Kearney could wring nothing new from him, Kearney thanked him. As Steele turned to leave, Kearney said, "Mr. Steele, let me just go over the high points again." Steele nodded. These Beverly Hills coppers were much more polite than most of those he'd dealt with before – especially those from his 'pre-Steele' days – but beneath Kearney's veneer, Steele discerned an intelligence and street sense conceivably as keen as his own. Great. Just what he needed – a 'Lieutenant Columbo' on his tail. Kearney looked up from his notes. "You were standing next to Ms. Raeder when the power went out."

"That's right."

"Ms. Raeder stumbled, and you caught her."

"I caught her, yes."

"Do you know what caused her to stumble?"

'Did Steele hook his leg around her?' was really the question swimming below the surface of Kearney's mind, but there was no point in Steele letting show he knew this. "Ms. Raeder said something struck the back of her knees."

Kearney gave him the once-over, then continued. "After she stumbled, you took off to the Museum Room."

"To investigate the alarm."

"And you went out onto the balcony why?"

“I found the door unlocked – ”

“Your associate discovered an amber-and-royal lavulite mosaic had been stolen from the Museum Room. And Ms. Raeder discovered that the ruby necklace worth over a million dollars had been taken right off her neck.” Prosaically put, but Steele recognized the bait; he didn’t take it. After another swift look-over, Kearney continued. “Mr. Raeder and Mr. Michaels say that after the theft of the mosaic was discovered, you took off running.”

Provocative phrasing, that. He looked Kearney in the eye – always look ’em in the eye, Daniel had taught him. “The guard came in. He said something had happened to Ms. Raeder – I understand German a little. I headed towards – ”

“Mr. Steele, I’d like to ask you to submit to a search.”

Steele couldn’t help but admire Kearney. This man would keep him on his toes.

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“Perps knew their stuff.”

Laura stopped pacing in the front hall, her thoughts on the crime scene interrupted by the portly Beverly Hills police detective who bowled in from the east side of the mansion. “What do you mean?”

“Removed the electric meter to cut the electricity to the house. Safer, better, than cutting wiring. Cut the power from the garage, made the easy climb to the balcony above, bingo! Whoever planned this knew the house, knew the security set-up, knew how to break into the display case.” For the first time, the man faced her; in contrast to the little piggy eyes she’d expected, he had cold eyes, shark eyes. She could see him smelling for blood as he added, “And knew how to get close to Ms. Raeder.”

She kept her face impassive. “Have you found the necklace or the mosaic?”

“Not yet, ma’am. But we will, we will.” His flat expression belied the politeness of his voice as he left her with a “Ma’am.”

Laura glanced at Murphy, who was speaking to his police photographer friend, then turned back toward the library door as Steele walked out between two officers. He still wore a confident look, still held himself in his usual proud, stately manner. Still in full Steele mode. They stepped into the front hall, obviously heading toward the door.

Oh, no. “Where are you taking him?”

“To the hospital,” Kearney replied.

“The hospital?”

“Internal search, x-rays, the whole nine yards.”

“Are you arresting him?”

“No.”

She was about to protest further when Steele said in a firm voice, “It’s all right, Miss Holt. I’ve agreed.”

She wished he hadn’t. Not only did it limit the range of his defense in later proceedings should he be arrested, but even if he only wanted to show them he had nothing to hide, what he might consider insignificant – a piece of paper with a telephone number, a receipt – might be incriminating evidence in the hands of the police. Funny, she would’ve thought he would’ve known things like this. Maybe he did. Who knew how his mind worked?

She watched as they led him outside, her impotence making her feel caged. She wished she could inspect the premises further, or question the hosts and remaining guests, or at least leave so she could start mapping out her strategy on this case, but the police would allow none of that at this time: like any PI, she wasn’t welcome at an active crime scene, and they wanted to interview her again.

She started pacing east down the hall, her feet on automatic pilot. She stopped cold when she realized she’d gone through the Porcelain Foyer, turned into the Dining Room, and was now at the entrance to the Breakfast Room. On the opposite side of the room, the bay window gave a view of the Lunar Garden. Normally, such a sublime sight would’ve filled her with peace. But now . . . now it brought back memories that warred with her worries that she’d made a terrible mistake in allowing a man skilled in chicanery and art theft to be her frontman, let alone in putting him in charge of the security of the Raeders’ riches. She gave a hollow laugh. She’d made a mistake? She must’ve been insane.

She crossed the room and stared out the window. Was it only a few days ago that, with permission from Mr. Raeder, Steele had taken her for an evening stroll there?

They’d wandered through the garden, their fingers occasionally brushing, neither of them bold enough to take the other’s hand. Somehow, Steele had arranged for the main pathways to be lit by candles in crystal holders set atop ceramic tiles. A sensuous, romantic fragrance had filled the late-summer night.

“What’s this?” Steele reached out to touch one of the eight-foot tall shrubs filled with thousands of tiny, green-yellow flowers expressing a sweet, hypnotic perfume.

“Night-blooming jasmine – Queen of the Night.” Laura reached out to touch it herself.

Steele grinned at her. “You can almost feel the scent in the air.” He moved on to some small trees filled with flowers, yellow and peach and pink and gold and white, hanging like bells, tropical and decadent, adding their intoxicating odor to the blend. He turned to her, lifting an eyebrow.

“That’s Brugmansia – Angel’s Trumpet.”

“Aptly named.” He bent to sniff a three-foot bush. Every one of its huge flowers, double purple with white centers, their edges rolling back to form tendrils, pointed upwards. “These are fruity.”

“It’s a type of Datura. It’s called Purple Devil’s Trumpet.”

He gave her a sly grin. “Ah, angels and devils, eh? They mix surprisingly well with each other, don’t you think?” Without waiting for her answer, he strode over to a trellis filled with vines. “I know these. Moonflower – the ‘no-light flower.’” The magical, pure white blossoms with their flat faces luminescing in the dark and their leaves shaped like hearts were headily fragrant.

“I can teach you all about flowers, Mr. Steele.”

Suddenly, he was standing in front of her, hardly any distance at all between them, looking down at her. “I’m only interested in one. A rose. It’s called an ‘American Beauty.’”

“It comes with thorns, Mr. Steele.” She put her hands on his shoulders.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Her awareness of the other sensual delights surrounding them was obliterated when Steele led her off the pathway and, under the blanket of darkness, took her in his arms and kissed her –

Murphy opened the door to the Breakfast Room and noted how Laura tensed as he entered. That damn con man. How could he do this to her? She’d finally turned a corner with the guy and decided to move their relationship to a more personal one, and now it turned out that all along he’d just been waiting for his chance to pull off something big. Dammit, even he himself had finally gotten to the point where he’d looked upon the guy’s continued presence as a commitment of sorts. But this guy had waited them out, gained their trust as never before, and seized the first opportunity to pull off a heist.

Laura glanced back at him, but then resumed looking out of the window. “How could they get through his security system so easily?”

“He set it up so he could get at the mosaic – a mosaic of *royal lavulite*.”

She turned quickly toward him. “He wouldn’t do that, Murphy.” But uncertainty flickered over her features.

For her sake, Murphy tried to reign in his anger. “What’s your theory, then?”

“An accomplice cut the power, then the thief ‘stumbled’ into Ms. Raeder and snatched the necklace – the chain was thin, easily snapped. Ms. Raeder’s attention was diverted from it by her fall. The accomplice stole the mosaic.”

Murphy shook his head. She was always trying to excuse the guy. Well, this was just too long a string of coincidences. “Think about it, Laura. Why did the alarm go off? Anyone with the skill to get the mosaic out of the display case that quickly and without setting off its individual alarms has the skills to not set off the main alarm. And the thief with the ruby could’ve just slipped out in the confusion created by the power outage alone – his absence would’ve never been noticed. But not if that thief was ‘The Great Remington Steele.’ For him, the alarm *would have* to go off, so he could *investigate*, so he could slip off to the Museum Room, pick up the mosaic, and pass it and the ruby to his partner.”

“Murphy – ”

“We *know* he has a special interest in royal lavulite. It’s simply back to business as usual. *He* couldn’t resist. Especially since he failed before to steal the royal lavulite we were guarding – ”

“Murphy – ”

“It all fits, C and D.” Cut and Dried. C and D, E and F, U and D. How long had it been since he’d shared that private lingo with Laura? It’d been replaced by a stupid code consisting of movie synopses, complete with annotations. Murphy went to stand before her to drive his point home. “He sucker-punched us, Laura.”

She shivered. “Murphy – ”

The door opened, and Jenkins, the rotund detective who’d spoken to Laura earlier, poked his head through. “Soon as a door or window was unlocked or opened, alarm would go off, right?” He held a doorlock in a plastic bag, no doubt taken from the balcony door. Laura nodded. “Guess we’ll check this baby out, see if it’s been picked. Not that it matters much. Luckiest thing if it wasn’t picked. Then the thief would have to be someone who was already in the house – he swiped the necklace, then the mosaic, opened the door, and tossed ’em to his accomplice. ’Course, I don’t think the thief’s that stupid. Most likely he picked it himself, just to throw off our scent.” As a seeming afterthought, he added, “Found a pick on Mr. Steele during our little search, ya know.” He eyed them both as if trying to decide if they were food capture, then nodded and left.

Laura’s mouth tightened. “There’s something about that man that makes me want to punch him right in his fat, jowly face.”

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Murphy swung his fist, hitting the door. He saw Fred’s startled look in the rear view mirror but knew the driver was too discreet to ever make mention of what went on in this limo – Laura, and especially Steele, would make sure anyone privy to their more private goings on could keep secrets. He leaned his head from side to side, then brought it forward and back, trying to ease the tension in his neck muscles. He stared out the window. It wasn’t often he rode in the limo alone. Hell, it wasn’t often he rode in the limo at all – too pretentious. But Steele had proclaimed Laura’s Rabbit ‘most unsuitable’ for the occasion and that no employee of the agency bearing ‘his’ name should be seen coming to the party wallowing in Murphy’s Lincoln, so the three of them had come in the limo. Now with Steele being taken by the police to be searched at the hospital and Laura planning to run off after him in a taxi as soon as she’d finished up at the Raeders, Murphy was left to himself in this symbol of snobbery, so relished by Steele.

Suddenly, he had to get out of this car. “Pull over, Fred.” He refrained from slamming the door and strode down the sidewalk, not caring where he was, not seeing any passersby. Damn it, why had he ever let his guard down? Laura would never blame him, but he should’ve known better. He *did* know better. He knew how con men operated. Lord, hadn’t he had enough personal experience with them during his career?

Pivotal events during his college years had first put him on their scent. As soon as he could after graduating, he'd become a freelance PI, even traveled around the U.S. with a bounty hunter who specialized in con men. They'd dealt with block hustlers, shortchangers, pastors of persuasion, fraudulent telemarketers, door-to-door dupers, pyramid schemers, and glamour scammers. Oh, yes, Murphy knew all about con men. He'd once thought he'd devote his entire career to apprehending them.

It hadn't quite worked out that way. The realities of the life he'd been leading had worn him down. He'd gotten tired of living in motel rooms, tired of eating at roadside diners, tired of never knowing where his next paycheck was coming from, tired of the air of sleaze surrounding bounty-hunting. He'd returned to California, done a brief stint at a small detective agency run by a judge, and then hit the big time with a job at the Havenhurst Detective Agency. There he'd met the remarkable Laura Holt. When she formed Remington Steele Investigations, it'd been an honor and a privilege to be asked by her to be her partner. He'd expanded his focus, helping her bring to justice many different kinds of characters, from the dregs of society to corporation slime.

And then *he* had oozed in. It'd been like a knife twisting in Murphy's gut to see Laura, this special lady, fall under the con man's charms from the very beginning. Murphy had kept thinking she'd surely see how wrong this was professionally, and how in her personal life she certainly deserved better than this glitzy fraud. Scratch his surface, and there was just a con man.

But if anything, she'd become more and more taken with him, though she'd fought it in herself and tried to hide it. Probably the only one she'd hid it from with any success was the con man himself, which had been just fine with Murphy since he'd figured the guy would get bored and move on. And then Murphy would pick up the pieces and show Laura that his quiet, true, steadfast love for her was there for the taking –

Murphy turned and whacked the building he was walking by. Why couldn't the guy have just gotten bored and moved on? How could that damn con man have used Laura like this? Murphy could kick himself. He'd gone soft, not voiced his objections strongly enough in the beginning when he'd had his best chance. And despite his continued wariness, he'd always kept his objections toned down – he'd wanted Laura's perceptions of the man's basic decency to be correct, because of what she wanted for her agency. Most unforgivably, he'd allowed his *own* perceptions to be blunted by her continued support of the man.

He, with all his knowledge and experience of the tricks used by con men, had been had yet again. He, who should've known better, had forgotten a basic axiom: once a con man, always a con man.

Murphy pulled up short, then turned around and noticed Fred had been following him a discreet distance away. He got back in the car and stared out the window. "Home, Fred."

Murphy leaned over and put his head in his hands. He, who wanted her happiness above all else, had failed Laura.

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Jack Ritt was at the National Art Library. Several years ago, he'd made a £20,000 donation to the



N.A.L. supporting cataloguing in the archives. He'd followed that donation with an application for a reader's ticket to the archives: he'd confessed he thought of himself as an amateur art historian. He'd given a Dr. John Bunker, M.D., as a reference. When the N.A.L. wrote to Dr. Bunker for a referral, Jack wrote back, 'Professor Ritt is a man of integrity,' and signed the letter, 'Dr. John Bunker.' Since then, he'd continued making large, annual donations for cataloguing. After all, he had a vested interest.

Jack knew the most likely time that he'd be alone with the manuscripts. He was alone now. He took out from the stacks a 1955 catalogue for an exhibition at the Ohana Gallery of London, a place that had closed in the mid '70's. He placed the catalogue in a museum bag and slipped it out of the building. He then drove north out of London to his home in Golders Green.

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Steele stared out towards the ocean from the end of the Santa Monica Pier. He loved the ocean. The air was quite damp now, and he was shrouded in mist, but he didn't mind. That was the way he liked it. He closed his eyes, the better to feel the breeze and hear the slap of the water. He inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the salt air. The only thing missing was a certain beautiful woman. Well, not tonight, or rather, this morning. This wasn't the kind of meeting to which she was invited. He opened his eyes and checked his watch. Almost 2:00. He turned around and looked up at Pacific Park's nine-story-high Ferris wheel, the world's first solar-powered Ferris wheel, now motionless. He began to make his way towards the merry-go-round. He wished he'd brought Laura out here sometime when the park was open. She liked cotton candy<sup>4</sup>. Here she could've had cotton candy, popcorn, ice cream, and hot dogs. They would've been surrounded by stilt walkers, face painters, and clowns. She certainly would've wanted to try her hand at the so-called games of skill. He'd heard this park billed its games as 'authentic carnival games with prizes.' If that was true, at least a quarter of the ones on the midway were rigged and most of the prizes were trash. Well, it would've been fun to point out to her all the cons going on, as long as she took it all in stride and didn't try to have everyone busted.

No doubt she would've also wanted to drag him around to all the rides – knowing her, she probably liked roller coasters best of all, the more stomach-lurching, the better. And bumper cars. She liked to drive aggressively and probably would've enjoyed nothing more than caroming off him. Yes, Laura and her driving. He smiled, remembering how she'd careened down the roads of the wine country when Wilson was on board<sup>5</sup>. That had brought some of her devils out. His smile disappeared when he remembered her look of pain after confronting Wilson. All those years, she'd kept that pain of Wilson leaving her inside herself all those years. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop on her and Wilson when she'd laid bare her soul – he'd just been at the wrong place at the wrong time. Still, it'd seemed to be a cathartic moment; she'd seem to come to an acceptance of her past with Wilson. No, much more than that, she'd –

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<sup>4</sup>Steele Belted

<sup>5</sup>Vintage Steele

Fire ripped from his brain down to his loins at the memory of Laura devouring his mouth in that most passionate, most perilous of kisses, the kiss in the wine cellar. The precious memory was interrupted as he neared the merry-go-round; the man standing in front of it, about five metres away, said to him, “You always come this well-dressed to your clandestine rendezvous? Or am I special?”

He gave the man, who was wearing a natty black silk noile suit with a blue silk tie, an exaggerated up-and-down look. “Just keeping up with the Ortegas. Besides, behind you is the hand-carved merry-go-round featured in ‘The Sting.’ Paul Newman, Robert Redford. Universal Pictures. 1973. Proper attire is required.” He laughed softly and self-mockingly redid his bow-tie and smoothed his dinner jacket, then approached the man with hand outstretched. “Mando.”

Mando smiled, clasped his hand, and pulled him down into an *abrazo*<sup>6</sup> – Mando, built like a wrestler, was only about Laura’s height. But Mando then turned around to face the merry-go-round. “I shouldn’t be meeting you, Desco.”

“I wasn’t followed.” He liked the name Armando had given him. Mando had explained he’d made it up from the Spanish word ‘desconocido,’ which meant ‘unknown person.’

The man’s chipmunk cheeks pulled into an acknowledging smile. “Of course you weren’t followed. I’m just a little edgy. You understand.”

Desco nodded. “What did you find out?”

“Weimar got back to me a couple of days ago. He’ll know for sure soon, but he’s thinking the de Barbari painting is the real thing. Or ‘Der wahre Jakob,’ as he put it.” Mando’s teeth flashed very white in his dark face.

Desco grinned back, knowing those words were practically a guarantee. “What’s its story?”

“First it was stolen from the Schwarzburg Castle in Germany. Then, somehow, it ended up in Long Island, of all places, as a gift to a priest. He gave it as a gift to a nun who was an art teacher. The nun brought it to a furniture restorer to have the frame repaired. The restorer recognized the painting might be valuable, and when the nun came to pick up the frame, he told her all he wanted for payment was the picture – that he saw the eyes of Christ in the picture. Of course, that won the nun over. She gave it to him, having no idea of its real value.”

“Slick.”

“It’s a little unclear after that – the restorer contacted some fence who’s not revealing who he sold it to.”

“Naturally.”

“Can you believe it? Nun gave away a picture that may be worth nearly \$3 million.” Mando’s arched eyebrows threatened to crawl to the top of his balding pate.

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<sup>6</sup>Embrace (Spanish)

Desco gave a low whistle and nearly rubbed his palms together. “*Mucho dinero*. That’ll mean over half a million dollars for me.”

“If you want to go that route. If not, I could – ”

“No, no. What about the other items?”

“Still working on them. You still want me to check into that silver? I’m thinking that’s worth only about \$14 thou. That won’t mean much of a take for you.”

“And even less for you,” – Desco gave his friend a knowing smile – “assuming it pans out.”

The man shrugged and smiled in return. “Hey, with the cut you’re offering me on the de Barbari, you don’t hear me complaining.”

“I’m just curious why an old sepia photograph of a castle was so well hidden in the canteen<sup>7</sup>.”

“If it was so well hidden, how’d you find it – never mind, forgot who I was talking to.” The fence laughed softly as Desco grinned. “Well, hopefully the caption on the photo is the key. But it’ll take time – I don’t have a direct contact in Northeim – it’s only 200 miles from Weimar<sup>8</sup>, but on the other side of the Wall. And ‘Regelheim’ could be a placename or a surname. Not to mention the picture was taken in ’45. Each person I have to go through on this means there’s less in it for you. And me.” The fence grinned again.

“Well, obviously the other items have higher priority. This one would be a charity case.”

The fence snorted. “You’re the only one I deal with who’s interested in charity cases. I’ll see what I can do. But Desco, I’m not meeting you again while *la chota*<sup>9</sup> are nosing around.”

“I understand. But keep working on the rest, will you?”

“You know I will. Always a pleasure doing business with you, Desco. And when we close this, we can celebrate. We’ll sit in my backyard, drink cold cervezas<sup>10</sup>, and you can make the fajitas.”

“Your tastes are simple, my friend.”

“Simple? Ay, no. But, you make the best fajitas.” The man clapped Desco on the back. “Hey, you gonna tell me who your man is?” At Desco’s grin, the fence shrugged and grinned back. “Just in case something happens to you?”

Desco shook his head, still with a smile on his face. “Nothing’s gonna happen to me, mate.

<sup>7</sup>A box used to store silverware. (Chiefly British.)

<sup>8</sup>Weimar and Northeim are places in Germany, although ‘Weimar’ and, later, ‘Bremen,’ are also being used as names of a couple of Mando’s conatcts.

<sup>9</sup>The cops (Mexican-American slang)

<sup>10</sup>Beer

Thanks for your help. *Gracias*. I'll be in touch."

Mando gave him the Chicano handshake, short version. Desco greased the fence's palm and turned to leave. He heard the voice behind him call out, "Hey, when things cool down, I might be interested in another item or two I hear you got." He didn't turn around, but gave a backward wave, kept walking, and shed his 'Desco' persona.

He walked back out to the end of the pier to sit, to decompress, for a while. He stared into the water. Did people fish off this pier? Wallace would've known – and made sure not to invite him. He shifted his weight and laughed softly, recalling the one time he'd gone fishing with Wallace. In his own defence, he would've never accepted the invitation had he understood Wallace correctly.

He and Wallace had just finished a job at the Carnavalet Museum in Paris. Wallace had said he was going to reward himself with a trip to King's Point and had asked him, "You want to come with, John?"

"King's Point, oh yes. I could work on my tan."

Wallace looked at him a little funny. "I was thinking fishing."

"Oh, I'll be fishing, all right." For lovely, bikini-clad women. He gave scant notice of Wallace's bemused expression, figuring it was probably because Wallace was fifteen years older and married to boot.

Wallace shrugged and said, "I'll get the tickets."

The next thing John knew, he was in Newfoundland. King's Point, Newfoundland. Somehow, he didn't think he was going to need much suntan lotion here. He got out of the car and joined Wallace at the petrol pump, where Wallace was refuelling. "So, what do visitors to this fair city, uh, village, do for fun?"

"The Alexander Murray Hiking Trail's the main tourist attraction here," Wallace told him.

John consciously kept his lip from curling. He'd had in mind snorkelling, flirting, playing tennis, flirting, windsurfing, flirting, horseback riding, flirting, parasailing, flirting, nightclubbing, flirting, seeing stage shows, flirting – flirting, flirting, flirting –

"Pottery's also big here. They specialize in whale designs."

"Oh, this just gets better and better. Any fine eating establishments?"

"'Emerald Dining Room' and 'By the Sea Café.'"

No classically elegant French fare, no traditional roast beef with Yorkshire pudding, no piquant Indian curry, no authentic Tuscan pasta, no fish chowder with sherry peppers and black rum, no Calypsonians to entertain him, no Dixieland group with brunch, no pianists and harpists and classical trios to accompany his afternoon tea, no band to provide a lively beat for a dinner dance – "Don't suppose the former is encrusted with real emeralds, is it?" As Wallace started looking like he was finally cuing in on John's undertones, John made an effort to reign himself in. It

wasn't Wallace's fault, after all, that John had jumped to the wrong conclusion. However, there was one last question he needed to ask, and he wasn't looking forward to the answer. "And our accommodations?"

"We gotta a choice between Budgell's Motel and Windamere Cabins."

When Wallace continued to stare at him with a chagrined look on his face, John finally realized he was standing there with his mouth open. He closed his mouth. He refused to think any further about the lap of luxury accommodations he'd been looking forward to. "Uh, I'll leave it in your expert hands." Was he going to end up sleeping on the flea-ridden mattress or on the hard wooden floor?

Wallace tilted his head. "This ain't what you expected, right?"

"Of course it is – no, not really." John gave a little shrug.

"I should've known. I'm sorry, I'll drive you back to Port Aux Basque."

Yes, there he could catch the Super Ferry back to North Sydney, Nova Scotia, and then he could – he looked at Wallace's crestfallen face. "No. Don't be ridiculous. I'm looking forward to this." John plastered a big smile on his face. He didn't have a reputation as a consummate con artist for nothing. Besides, he didn't often avail himself of casual comradeship, and it'd been three years since he'd last seen Wallace; it could be an interesting experience.

"I'll bet you didn't pack the right clothes for the trip."

"Uh, probably not. Unless linen trousers and casually elegant cottons by day and jacket and tie in the evening are *de rigueur* here."

Wallace finally relaxed and laughed. "Where'd you think we were going?"

"King's Point in Bermuda. I thought you'd just planned some obscure route for getting there to make sure no one was on our tail for the Carnavalet job." John smiled ruefully.

Wallace laughed and clapped him on the back. "I'll drive you to Springdale so you can shop for clothes. The highest temperature here won't even reach the lowest of Bermuda."

Oh, lovely. "Any other details about this place you care to share to further elevate my gay mood?"

Wallace laughed again, shook his head, opened the passenger door of the car, and ushered John in with a sweeping gesture, finishing off with a little bow. John chuckled. He'd have to plot some appropriate way to pay Wallace back for this.

In Springdale, John settled for some denims, some cotton trousers, some plain cotton shirts, a pair of boots, sneakers, a light sweater, a jacket, and, at Wallace's insistence, a floppy cotton hat to keep the sun off his face when Wallace took him fishing. "We could've gone deep-sea fishing in Bermuda," he muttered under his breath. He gave Wallace a sweet smile when Wallace shot a look his way.

Windamere Cabins turned out to consist of four pine log cottages nestled together at the foot of some hills. The cabin had two bedrooms, double bed in each; a full bathroom, towels included; a

kitchen with stove and refrigerator, dishes and pots included; and a living area with cable TV. John wondered if they could get a movie channel.

After he resigned himself to his fate, he found King's Point and Rattling Brook, a thriving metropolis of less than one hundred and fifty souls and where the cabins were actually located, did have their good points. The cottages overlooked the deep green waters of the ocean. An eagle lookout was right behind them. They were in scenic coastal lowlands of a big valley surrounded by beautiful, high mountains.

The next day Wallace decided they should go hiking. John's protests that his scaling of museum walls in Paris had been more than enough exercise for the week fell on deaf ears.

"It's only four or five miles, John."

Two hours later, John felt compelled to point out, "You neglected to tell me these four or five miles are straight up and down."

Wallace only laughed at him. "It's just a thousand-foot climb all total, John. Carl told me about the time you two climbed up to Isola 2000 in record time."

"Yes, well, that was a ski resort, there were ladies waiting for us at the top, we had Mediterranean sun and Alpine snow to look forward to, there was a variety of French and Italian restaurants on the mountain, there was cross country skiing, freestyle skiing, night skiing, an outdoor ice rink, a heated swimming pool, game rooms, night clubs, and a cinema," – John paused to catch a breath – "and the only reason we got out of the bus at Isola and climbed the rest of the way to Isola 2000 was because the driver was a loony old codger who took the hairpin curves at dizzying speeds, cackled ever time he made one, and would shout out in French, 'Once again, death has been defeated.'" John stopped to take in a lungful of air and looked up at the steep mountainside to North Ridge. "We must've climbed hundreds of these wooden steps."

"Eight hundred and eighty by the time we're through."

"Oh, I'm going to be a cripple tomorrow."

"By the way you moan about this, one would never know you're someone who regularly climbs mountains, fords streams – "

"You forgot 'follows every rainbow' – "

"'til you find your dream' – "

"Or the jewels, or the artwork – "

"Or whatever else you're commissioned to find."

"I live to serve."

"I think you'd rather live to be served."

"I would, but no one's applied for the position yet."

"Actually, I think you'd soon be bored with such a life, John."

“I’m willing to give it an extended trial period.”

“Lord, look at this.” Wallace set down his pack on the wooden lookout at the top of the ridge. They got the full view of Corner Brook Gorge, the steep granite walls nearly vertical. Even though it was late May, they could still see ice far below them. Wallace pointed off into the distance. “You can make out some of the landmarks of King’s Point itself. There’s Corner Brook. There’s Bulley’s Pond. There’s Bulley’s Mish.”

“‘Mish’?”

“That’s what Newfoundlanders call a marsh – it’s actually a large peat bog. There’s Moose Barrens – see that rough ground over there covered by Caribou moss and dotted with scrub spruce and juniper? Once, in the dead of night, I actually saw a young bull moose in the middle of the road around here. I just stopped and watched.” After gazing awhile longer, Wallace shouldered his pack again. “Well, we’re almost to the highest part of the trail.”

“Oh, joy.” But John grinned when Wallace turned to look at him.

Wallace snorted and shook his head. “Good thing you weren’t this smart-alecky five years ago. I’d never have taken you on.”

“Five years? Has it really been that long?”

“It was ’71, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, I believe that’s right.” When he was about eighteen, just after his ignominious return from South America, where Barney had suckered him out of his then-meagre lifesavings. Barney had come across him in a street brawl and had taught him how to box proper. They’d travelled from town to town hauling in the cash because he, ‘The Kilkenny Kid, Pride of the Pampas,’ looked more like ‘Skinny Kid, Available for Pounding,’ and the locals all bet against him. In the end, Barney had convinced him he was a good enough boxer to make it in America. ‘The Kid’ had given his every last centavos to Barney so Barney could buy them tickets, and that had been the last he’d seen of Barney. That night he’d ended up in one of Rio’s extremely violent and poor neighbourhoods, and a nightmare of being sucked back into that kind of life had scared the hell out of him. Just wanting to get away as fast as he could, he’d swallowed his pride, rung up Daniel, and asked if Daniel would spot him a ticket back to London. Daniel had never asked him what had happened, and ‘Harry,’ as he was known to Daniel, had never volunteered the information. “South America led to good things after all.”

“South America?”

“Right before I met you, I was in South America. In my travels, I heard rumours about how the Nazis who’d relocated there had brought with them looted gold, jewellery, and art work – even Monets and Picassos. When I got back to London, I started thinking about the possibility of recovering such items, but decided I first needed advanced training in, uh – ”

“Burglary. So you found me.”

“You’re the best.”

Wallace only laughed at that. “You’re the one who’s added all the ‘artistic refinements.’”

“I can only break into the systems. You know enough that you could actually build them.”

Wallace shrugged. “Hobby. Carl’s picked up on that though – he’s getting better than me at it. But, breaking into the systems is all you need in this business.”

“Why’d you never let me and Carl work together with you back then?”

“You two greenhorns? Gimme a break. Besides, I didn’t want you intimidating Carl. You pick things up so damn fast.”

John shrugged. “I’m a couple years older than him – ”

“And that was another reason. Talk about hero worship.” They both laughed. “But seriously, you have to remember, I’d just taken him into my home about then. He needed my undivided attention. He was pretty wild.” After a pause, Wallace added softly, “He’s still too volatile, too easily set off by things beyond his control. Too eager to seek revenge against anyone he thinks wronged him.”

“Well, the streets can do that to you. You certainly saved him from a nasty existence.”

Wallace threw a grin at him. “Speaking from experience, John?”

“It must’ve been hard on your daughter, having a boy only four years older than her suddenly move in with you.”

Wallace’s voice turned sombre. “Well, soon after that her mother finally decided she’d had enough of the business trips to Europe I was always taking – she never knew the line of work I’m in. She divorced me, took Noley with her. Haven’t seen my girl since ’72.”

“I’m sorry.”

“She’ll be ready for college in a few years, though. I’ve already saved enough to put her through. . . . Whew, that was a hot climb.”

“Why do they call this ‘Haypook’?”

“The locals decided this hill looked like a hay stack, also called a ‘hay pook.’” They shed their jackets and stood on Haypook Summit, taking in another breathtaking view. The land fell away steeply on all sides except in the direction they’d approached from. Taking a panoramic view, they could see the Southwest Arm of Green Bay, coastal islands, jumbles of hills, rocky barrens and peaks, boreal forests, lakes, ponds, rapids, and waterfalls. In some directions, their view was unimpeded for nearly eighty kilometres.

“Well, you can’t say this hasn’t been worth it.”

“I admit, it’s a lovely view.” John glanced over at Wallace, saw the man’s eyes shining with pleasure.

“Thank you for coming with me, John.”



“Thank you for inviting me.”

Later that night, having turned down Wallace’s invitation to teach him fly-fishing by moonlight, John filled up the bath to nearly overflowing with water as hot as he could bear while pouring in nearly a box of Epsom salts, adding some lime juice, and tossing in a small muslin bag filled with slices of ginger. He climbed into the bath and kneaded his calves, wishing he were being given an Exotic Lime and Ginger Salt Glow with Well-Being Massage by a scantily clad Bermudan masseuse. He soaked in the blissful waters until his body flamed red and his fingertips shrivelled to white, then prepared to retire for the night. He turned down the covers, crawled into bed, and –

at the ungodly hour of 5:00 the next morning, Wallace roused him from a dream in which he’d just accepted an invitation from a lovely lady to stroll down a pink beach in Bermuda. “The fish are biting, John.” ‘Bully for them’ was the first response to come to mind, but instead he dressed and gamely accompanied Wallace onto the lake in an old motorboat. His nose slathered in zinc oxide, SPF 35 sunblock covering every other possibly exposed inch of his body, and his floppy hat pulled low over his face, he promptly fell asleep. He awoke a little later to find Wallace pulling in a large trout. Wallace waved away his apology for having fallen asleep. “An eighteen-pounder,” Wallace told him. “Jigging gets them every time.” John wondered how he’d managed to sleep through a jig being done in a little boat. “Now we’re going to do a little trolling.” John nodded sagely, and as they moved through the water at about 2.5 kph, promptly fell asleep again, only to wake up to Wallace pulling in another large trout. He finally managed to stay awake for the next go round and caught some little fish that Wallace made him throw back. They eventually finished their expedition with what would’ve been a score of 5 - 0, but Wallace threw the last three of his back, saying he had no need of more now and could always catch more later. John couldn’t quite see the point of sitting on hard boat seats for hours for the brief thrill of catching a fish when one was going to turn right around and toss it back. For all he knew, the last three fish were all the same fish, conning Wallace into believing he was a man of great skill, and he told Wallace so. Wallace laughed. “You’re the one who likes telling fish stories.”

John decided to make up for his own lack of fishermen’s skills. He went grocery shopping, cleaned the fish, stuffed them with mussels, then grilled them, Potatoes Anna, and carrots. These he served with a Caesar-like salad – he had to substitute boring iceberg lettuce for the romaine – and a Newfoundland molasses pudding for dessert, recipe courtesy of the cabin owners. If he’d had his way, he would’ve started out with peach-and-brie canapes, but apparently brie was not in great demand among the locals. Wallace declared the meal superb, and John thought it did taste quite good, but then again, he’d found out while hiking on the trail that even peanut butter crackers tasted divine.

The next morning, he again woke with the sun. He thought he heard Wallace out in the living area, but no tap came at his door, so he fell back to sleep. He got up at 7:00 to find Wallace chuckling away, lying on his bed reading ‘Every Man is Innocent Until Proven Broke, a Wizard of Id Book.’ The title reminded John of the definition of British justice he’d heard as a child, ‘Every man is innocent until proven Irish.’

John made them a simple breakfast of tea, omelettes, and toast with a jam that tasted a bit like honey and apricots, but which was made from Newfoundland cloudberry. “Ready for me to take

you back to Port Aux Basque?” Wallace asked him.

Had he offended Wallace?

“Don’t look so stricken. It’s nothing you’ve said or done. In fact, I give you credit. I would’ve had to peel Carl off the ceiling by now.”

John relaxed and laughed. “You brought Carl out here?”

“I made that mistake once. It was like dragging a four-year-old child to see the dentist.” They both laughed. “Anyway, this is supposed to be fun.”

“I *have* enjoyed myself,” John said sincerely.

Wallace smiled at him. “But enough is enough. Go get your things. Don’t worry about me, I enjoy being up here by myself for a while.” John nodded and tried not to display too much alacrity in his step as he went to pack.

It was another three years until he saw Wallace again, and Wallace had gone through a lot of changes. For a while he’d simply disappeared off the face of the earth – not even Carl had known what’d happened – and they’d all assumed the worst. When Wallace returned, he told a tale of how he’d wrestled with demons and almost lost, cast into a personal hell of alcohol and drugs. He said he’d only been rescued through the grace of Jesus Christ. John was surprised – he’d never seen any signs of Wallace overdrinking, let alone using drugs – but he didn’t pry. Someone who didn’t talk about his own past was hardly in the position to ask about another’s. He’d just been glad to have his friend back alive and, apparently, happy.

It’d been another three years until he, as ‘Remington Steele,’ had seen Wallace again. The skilled fisherman had become an equally skilled fisher of men’s souls. At least he had been, until Steele had hired him for a job that had cost him his life.

Steele swallowed hard. He stood up on the pier, took one last look down into the water, then turned to go – he had other business to attend to. Just before leaving Pacific Park, he paused at a stand that read ‘Cotton Candy.’

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She watched him. He hid the ruby in the Glass Room. He glided into the Museum Room and disarmed a display case. She saw him caress that mosaic. The pieces of amber ranged from black through red and gold to green and from near translucence to milky opacity, and the pieces of royal lavulite – she watched his long, slender fingers fondle the stunning, vibrantly colored violet gems, a lover reunited with his beloved –

“Laura.”

That single word, whispered in the distinctive accent that bespoke London and . . . something else, drew her consciousness up from the depths of the dream. She sat up, startled.

“What’re you doin’ here?” Still whispering, Steele moved to turn on the lamp by the couch.

She stared at him groggily, too disoriented to remember the perfectly logical reason she'd had for coming.

After doing what she could at the Raeders' and undergoing another interview, or rather, interrogation, by the police, she'd gone to the hospital, hoping to bring Steele home. But they'd already taken him back to the police station and wouldn't let her see him; they'd told her not to bother waiting for him – he'd be there awhile. At least they hadn't found the ruby on him – or in him.

She'd returned to her house, made up her initial to-do list for this case, then finally, exhausted, climbed into bed. But she'd been too restless to sleep and had ended up getting into the Rabbit and driving to his apartment. She'd taken the sleeping bag from his closet, left his bedroom door open in case he snuck in without waking her, and fallen asleep on the couch, inhaling the faint scent of him that lingered in the bag's material. As she'd slipped from wakefulness the memory of the other time she'd been in this bag – spooning him, flanked by a circle of gold-crazed cutthroats<sup>11</sup> – had segued into a dream. The cutthroats had turned into police officers. They'd torn Steele out of her grasp, pummelled secrets out of him, led him off in chains. Headlines had flashed: 'Remington Steele Investigations Goes Down the Toilet.'

Steele had moved around the couch and now sat beside her, watching her.

"What time is it?" She tried to see her watch.

"About five."

"They've had you there all this time?"

"Yes. Thorough, our men in blue."

"But you weren't under arrest. You could've left any time."

"Remington Steele' wouldn't. Besides, if they think I'm holdin' back on 'em, they might get a little too curious and start diggin' a little too deeply into 'Remington Steele's' past. So . . ."

"The best defence is a good offense'?"

"Sun Tzu?"

"Vince Lombardi, I think." She noted his blank expression. "A football coach."

"Oh. At any rate, well spoken, Miss Holt."

She still felt uneasy that he was speaking to the police when he didn't have to, but once he got it into his mind something was 'right' or 'not right' for 'Remington Steele,' it was next to impossible to dissuade him from it. Now, if she could only be sure he had it in his mind that as the man the public identified as 'Remington Steele,' it was 'not right' for him to steal million dollar rubies. She furrowed up her brow and ran her hand over her face – there was something wrong with that last thought, but right now she was too tired to figure it out.

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<sup>11</sup>Steele's Gold

“What’s our next move?”

“What? Oh . . .” Get with the program, Laura. She got off the couch and paced the short distance to his dining room and back a few times. She always thought better when she was pacing. Finally, her head felt clearer. She turned professional, speaking as if giving a report. “I completed my initial examination of the scene. Murphy is buddies with the police photographer, so I’m sure we’ll get copies of his photos. We’ve made sketches and diagrams of the pool area and the area around the museum display case. Before I left, I was able to get some witness statements from the few remaining guests who were willing – ”

“Your night sounds worse than mine,” Steele teased with a slight smile.

She tried, unsuccessfully, to hide a small smile of her own. He’d probably prefer being tortured on the rack to doing routine investigative tasks. She turned her smile into a smirk. “Oh, I’d say we were each engaged in our favorite activities. You were dodging questions, I was finding answers.”

“Touché.”

She returned to the business at hand, ticking off the points on her fingers as she continued to pace. “We need to interview all the guests and the help, see if anyone saw anyone else close to you and Ms. Raeder, someone who could’ve caused her to stumble into you. And we need to interview Ms. Raeder ourselves.” Noticing he seemed about to speak, she went on hurriedly, “Murphy and I will handle all this, Mr. Steele.”

“And what do *I* do durin’ ‘all this’?”

She paused, trying to find the right way to put it, but he spoke before she’d found it.

“I see. I do what I do best, of course. Sit back and let you professionals handle the job, eh?” He got up, walked to the fireplace, and stood facing away from her, gazing out the sloping windows that ran from floor to ceiling, hands in his pockets.

She returned to sitting on his couch. “Mr. Steele. There are simply no other suspects at this point. It would be best, for your own sake, not to involve yourself.” She rubbed her forehead with her hand, staring at his stiff back. Then she straightened up. It was time she got to the real reason she’d come. No doubt they’d tried to put him through the wringer at the police station, but she needed to ask the questions herself – more was at stake than ever before. “Near the time of the theft, did you see anyone else close to where you and Ms. Raeder were standing, or feel anyone else close to you when the power went out?”

“I apologize, Laura. Ms. Raeder was doin’ a bang-up job at keepin’ my attention solely on her.”

The frustrations of last evening, eased in no way by the image Steele’s words conjured up, boiled over into her words. “And your security system is so poor someone broke through it this easily? And just happened to target a mosaic of royal lavulite?”

“*I* couldn’t have gotten through the safeguards that quickly.”

“You could’ve set it up so you could.” Did his shoulders just tense? “Murphy thinks you couldn’t resist. That you finally saw your chance after failing to steal the royal lavulite in the Hunter case –

”

Steele turned abruptly. “I didn’t fail.” He spoke firmly, matter-of-factly, and looked directly at her. “Somethin’ else caught m’ eye. I abandoned m’ interest in the gems.”

She couldn’t allow herself to be distracted by his meaning. “Or postponed it.”

“Laura, I didn’t take the ruby. Or the mosaic. You have m’ word.”

His gaze burned into her. She could hear the challenge in his voice. She softened, thinking back to that first time when he’d ‘given his word,’ saying he’d not steal the jewels she’d been hired to protect – and kept it. But . . . what if Murphy’s initial instincts had been right all along? What if she was being played by the con man, who’d just been waiting for his big chance to score? She tried to shove those thoughts aside.

“One of your work crew could’ve tampered with the system.” A flash in his eyes told her that her words had come a beat too late for him, that they were not the ones he’d hoped to hear.

“They wouldn’t do that, Laura.” With that, he turned and walked the few steps to the bedroom, saying, “Now, if you’ve no further questions, I’m goin’ t’ get some sleep.” He paused at the bedroom door. Without turning back to her, he said softly, “Thank you for bein’ here. You’re welcome t’ finish the night on the sofa.” The door closed behind him.

He was exhausted, she could tell – more by the way he talked than by the way he looked, though she hadn’t often seen him with a day’s growth of beard. He only started blunting his words during rare moments of informality, moments of intimacy – or moments when he was just plain too tired to expend the effort to cover up his natural accent with the purity of the Queen’s English.

She closed her eyes, fatigue hitting her again. She stood just outside his bedroom, her hand on the doorknob: she would throw caution to the wind, climb into his bed, hold him, reassure him, reassure herself . . . make love to him. She opened the door. He turned to her, naked except for the medallion he always wore, of unknown significance. He was even more beautiful out of his clothes than in them. In his hands, those elegant hands, he held the ruby and the royal lavulite –

Laura’s body jerked and her eyes snapped open. She looked down at her clenched fists, then over at Steele’s closed bedroom door. Please God, don’t let him have done this. She got up from the couch, folded the sleeping bag, and left the apartment.

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The walls of the dimly lit Unicorn Tapestry corridor closed in on him. There was a secret passageway here somewhere – he couldn’t remember where. He had to get out! He pressed, then pounded, the first tapestry, ‘The Start of the Hunt.’

The shrills of dogs eager to give chase pierced the air. He whirled and saw coarse, heartless hunters in brilliant, multicolored liveries struggling to reign in the howling beasts. A lymere signaled – he had been sighted!

He bolted. The hunters tracked him to a fountain. The hunters encircled him, closed in on him, then, unaccountably, they let him escape. No! He knew what they were doing – they were toying

with him, prolonging the game. Other creatures – birds, a stag, a lion and lioness – looked on, indifferent to his plight.

They chased him to a stream. Surrounded by hunters with spears, dogs at close quarters, he frantically foiled down the waters, trying to throw off the dogs' scent. He failed.

He savagely kicked and butted and gored the pursuing animals and people. The sound of a hunter's horn split the air, rallying the men for his capture.

He narrowly escaped the stealthy hunters, the relentless pack of hounds. He was exhausted. He saw before him a maiden. She beckoned him, urged him to come to her, offered him a safe haven. He went to her, laid his head on her lap. He looked up at her with gratitude – and saw her signal the men, signing his death warrant!

The dogs finally chased him down. The lord of the hounds flashed his hunting sword, preparing to deliver the coup de grâce. Three hunters surrounded him as he made one last attempt at escape. He screamed as they thrust their spears into his body, immobilizing him. Four dogs sank their teeth into his flesh and held him fast. He reared back his head; a spear pierced his throat, cutting off his cries. His body shook with shock and terror. His legs failed him and he started sinking to the ground. His tongue lolled. He was bleeding, dying. His last sight before his world turned to black was that of the lord and the lady of the castle standing impassively nearby, awaiting his slaying: his horn would be sliced off with a machete and given to them.

Then, somehow, miraculously alive and whole again, he lay chained to a circular wooden gate in a lush garden, a happy pet, tamed by the maiden, enjoying the Garden of Eden.

No! Impossible! He was a trapped beast; he had to escape his captors!

No! He was not the unicorn. He had to *save* the unicorn! He had to get out! He ran down the corridor pounding on each of the tapestries –

Steele scabbled in blind panic, feeling suffocated, then realized he was all twisted up in the bedsheets with the covers over his head. Trying to find his way out, he nearly fell out of bed. He sat up and put a hand to his heart, willing himself to breathe, trying to force himself out of the miasma of fear and death exhumed by his nightmare. From a smorgasbord of languages he chose the strongest invectives he could think of to curse his so-called cousins – really the children of whomever he'd been dumped with at the time. *They* were to blame for causing the torturous pursuit of the unicorn depicted in the tapestries to invade his dreams. *They* were to blame for the periodic nightmares he'd suffered throughout his life. They'd delighted in terrorizing him as a small lad with their tales of headless phantoms, pookas, banshees, ghosts, evil spirits, and witches. Or with stories that he'd be carried off by the bad faeries who'd sacrifice him to Satan in their yearly ceremonies. Or, worst of all, by telling him he was a changeling child and had to prove otherwise by letting them perform the one infallible test: they must lay him on a fire, recite the magic formula, and see if he burned. Only a true child wouldn't burn. More than once they'd dragged him, kicking and screaming, to some pyre they'd built; only when he could feel the hot flames licking his face had they loosened their grasp enough for him to escape. They'd laughed at

him as he'd wept in fear and humiliation. 'Omadhaun<sup>12</sup>!' they'd jeered. 'It was only a game.' Each night he'd stolen a little milk and put it on the windowsill, trying to appease the faeries, begging them to leave him alone. . . .

He'd faced down more dangers in his life than he cared to recall, but prime him with a tale of cruelty and turn off the lights, and he was reduced to that quivering child. He shook his head in disgust. He slithered back down under the covers and plunked a pillow over his head.

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Laura sat at her desk, holding Steele's photo in her hand. She was feeling the strong urge for a stress-relieving chocolate bar about now. She could feel her left eyebrow twitching. She hurriedly shoved the photo under some file folders as Bernice walked in wearing a knowing smile. Laura ignored it and gratefully accepted her monogrammed brown-and-black coffee mug. She took a sip and quirked an eyebrow at the receptionist. "This is tea."

Bernice shrugged, sat on the edge of Laura's desk, and started fiddling with her fingernails. "How you doing?"

Laura leaned back in her chair, staring at the papers overlapping like snowflakes, nearly hiding the black surface of her desk. She really should move some of these onto Steele's desk, whose pristine surface had never been marred by anything so vulgar since his arrival. "Well, Murphy's been spending the whole day interviewing the housekeeping staff and some of the guests and the help hired for the party. Nothing so far." She sighed. "There were two hundred people at that party. What a chain of eyes<sup>13</sup>! I interviewed Ms. Raeder again. Got nothing helpful. She expressed her sympathies for Mr. Steele, said she and her husband thought it ridiculous he's considered the prime suspect for the crime –"

"Well, from what I hear, she considers him prime something" – Bernice held her palms out as Laura shot her a look – "hey, I'm just telling you what I heard. Anyway, that's not what I asked –"

"I contacted the local pawnshops, jewelers . . . fences. But I don't think the thieves would use them."

Bernice shook her head at Laura, evidently giving up on her original question. "Why not?"

Laura nodded toward Steele's office. "He said *he* wouldn't." As Bernice opened her mouth to speak, Laura went on hurriedly, "They dusted the display case for fingerprints. Found Mr. Steele's and some of the work crew's." She grimaced.

"Well, they would, wouldn't they? That's not suspicious."

Laura sat up in her chair, an edge creeping into her voice. "What's suspicious is the doorlock is

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<sup>12</sup> Idiot, fool, stupid. (Irish)

<sup>13</sup> The list of people who saw the stolen item in the order in which it was seen.

missing. Mysteriously removed from the lockbox at the forensics lab.” She’d checked. He’d been at the police station a long time last night, but not quite as long as he’d claimed – there were several hours unaccounted for.

“Oh. . . . Do you think he did it? I mean all of it. The ruby, the mosaic.”

Laura bit her lip and dropped her eyes. “I don’t want to think so. But it’s right up his alley, isn’t it.”

“Is it?”

Laura looked up in surprise. “Have you forgotten our introduction to him?”

Bernice shrugged. “He said he was going to return the royal lavulite to the South African government.”

“After stealing it.”

“True.”

“He once stole ‘The Five Nudes of Cairo.’”

“Twice. Once with you.”

“That was different.”

“Was it? Did you ever ask him why he stole it the first time?”

“No. I doubt he’d tell me the truth, and I’m not sure I’d want to hear it. We know he was mentored by a con man. We know he hunted for gold in the Yucatan – ”

“That’s not a crime – ”

“No!” Laura slapped her hand on the desk. “But this is the sum total of what I know about him. And since when are you such a big supporter of him?”

“Just playing the *devil’s* advocate.” Bernice grinned. Then her grin faded, and her voice turned gentle. “But that’s not all you know about him. That’s just all you know about before he became a regular fixture around here.”

Laura knew what Bernice was getting at but pushed it aside, along with the memory of what had happened in the early afternoon, when he’d seemed so vulnerable, so stripped of pretense. “I know he’s not ready to play straight with me. I took him to help interview Wallace’s crew – *they* trust him.” She heaved a sigh. “I even let him lead the questioning, at first. He asked the right questions, though I had a few more of my own. Afterwards, he seemed upset that because of him these men are suspects – ”

“Well, they worked on the security system, so naturally the police are interested in them. But you were saying he’s not playing straight.”

Laura got up and walked to the front of her desk to pace. “We – or at least *I* – learned one of the crew has disappeared. A man named Carl. Why? Is he the accomplice, out fencing the goods? I



wish I'd paid more attention to this Raeder job. ”

“But you didn't. Because Mr. Steele was so enthusiastic about it. And it was like the Dillon job. So you knew he could do it. You were delighted. Said for once you could turn your attention to other cases and give him full reign – ”

“And maybe that was just the opportunity he was waiting for – ”

“Would you stop that pacing? You're driving me crazy.”

“Sorry.” Laura grinned sheepishly and sat back down at her desk.

“Maybe it was just the chance to do something he's good at, something where he didn't have to pretend to be ‘master detective.’” As Laura started to protest, Bernice held up a hand. “Oh, it's obvious he likes playing ‘Remington Steele.’ But maybe it was a relief not to pretend for a while.”

“And maybe he decided to just drop the pretense entirely and go back to his old ways.” As Bernice again opened her mouth to speak, Laura cut her off. “I know, I know, I don't know what those were.” She stared at Bernice. “I don't really know him.” Her tone dared Bernice to disagree. “And because I wasn't at the Raeders to keep an eye on things, I might've missed something about his or the crew's behavior that could clear him – or condemn him. This missing man Carl – I've done some checking on him. He was Wallace's right-hand man at the Mission. Took it over when Wallace died. He was out of town during the Dillon job, but he worked every other security job we hired Wallace's crew for. On the jobs before this one, I never saw him and Mr. Steele together at all, and according to the work rosters, he did only the most menial tasks. But on this one, according to the Raeders, Carl worked closely with Mr. Steele, hand in hand. Why this one?”

“What did Mr. Steele say?”

“That Carl was the right man for the job.” Laura shook her head in dismay. “And when we were questioning Wallace's crew, each time I'd ask one of them about Carl, his eyes would dart to Mr. Steele, and all I'd get was an unhelpful answer. Once I was quick enough to catch the warning look Mr. Steele was giving. He later denied it.

“I searched Carl's office at the Mission, hoping for credit card receipts, personal letters, telephone bills, something. . . . I told Mr. Steele to sit in the office chair while I went through Carl's stuff. His face blanked and I could tell he was offended, and then he just sat there impassively when I wouldn't let him leave. . . . ”

She looked up at Bernice. “He refused to pick the lock for me at Carl's home. Took me forever. And he wouldn't open the wall safe. . . . He just tagged along after me, silent, looking pretty irked. 'Course, I'd given him the choice of following me around not touching anything, or being locked in a closet.”

They both laughed, but without real humor.

“And of course by then, I was more than irked with him, too.” In the silence that followed, Laura could hear the ticking of the clock on the wall behind her.

“Where’s he now?”

Laura looked away from the sympathy in Bernice’s eyes. “The police are interrogating him again.”

“Can they do that?”

“Oh, legally they can’t make him go to the station and answer questions, but he agreed to. He said, ‘How would it look if Remington Steele didn’t give full cooperation with the authorities?’ When I said it’d look a lot worse if he incriminated himself, he said, ‘Nonsense. I shall simply tell them the truth.’” Laura slumped down in her seat. “That’d be a first.”

She fell silent, her exasperation with Steele temporarily falling away, picturing the scene at police headquarters. This was the 80’s, and the days of rubber hoses, protracted grilling under bright lights, and severe sleep deprivation, as portrayed in Steele’s beloved film noir, were long gone, but intimidation, even if subtle, still ruled.

The interrogation room: wooden table, uncomfortable chair, tape recorder. Harsh, dreary, grim. The table as far away from the door as possible; him seated at its far end. Far, far away from freedom.

No windows, no intercom, no phone – disconnect the interrogatee, cut him off from outside information, that was the goal. What did the police know? What had witnesses said? What evidence had been garnered against him? Bits of misinformation would be fed to him as answers.

They’d interrogate him for hours on end, hoping to break him, urging him to confess, to name his accomplice, threatening he’d take the fall alone if he didn’t.

They’d ask questions, over and over again, covering the same ground from different angles without giving him time to recover, in the hope of provoking contradictions.

They’d stand, pace, loom over him; he’d be required to sit. They’d thunder, whisper, snarl; he’d be required to answer politely.

And then, after a long while, would come little shows of concern – are the lights too bright? is the room too cold? would he like some coffee? a sandwich? They could be generous, they could be compassionate, they could be benevolent. They could offer him a lifeline, pull him out of this mess – if not quite save him. All he had to do was talk –

Laura shook her head. She shouldn’t have watched ‘Murder, My Sweet<sup>14</sup>’ on TV the other night. And anyway, for all she knew, Steele was lounging in the Chief of Police’s office, regaling the

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<sup>14</sup>An Original Philip Marlowe Mystery, adaptation of the Raymond Chandler novel ‘Farewell, My Lovely.’ RKO Radio Pictures Inc.. 1944. The movie starts at the end of the story, with Philip Marlowe’s eyes bandaged, sitting under the hot light of an interrogation room. The police grill him about what happened. Perhaps the most famous quote from the book and movie:

Philip Marlowe: "I caught the blackjack right behind my ear. A black pool opened up at my feet. I dived in. It had no bottom."

Chief with tales of real-or-imagined derring-do. No. Not likely. The scene in Steele's apartment this afternoon had quashed any fantasy that the police would treat 'The Great Remington Steele' with kid gloves.

But one thing was for sure: in any interrogation, he wouldn't talk. At least, he wouldn't say what they wanted to hear. He would stick to his story, never waver in its details. Because he was telling the truth? Or because he was just one damn good con man? She looked up at Bernice. "He's the logical culprit."

"Now you sound like Jenkins. You ask me, that guy's just got some bug up his a—" Bernice broke off, and they both unsuccessfully hid smiles. "Besides, this whole thing is too unimaginative for Mr. Steele. Remember how you got 'The Five Nudes of Cairo'? Remember his sting with Daniel? Remember spearguns and windup monster toys and elaborate charades?"

"Maybe this involves an elaborate charade, too," Laura said morosely, sinking further down in her chair. "The elaborate charade of being 'Remington Steele.'" She ran her hand through her hair. "Tonight I'm sending him out with Murphy on an all-night stakeout of Carl's home."

"Bet Murphy will love that."

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Murphy stood looking at the Raeders' pool. He wasn't sure what he hoped to find at the mansion, but his motto was, 'When your investigation leads you to a brick wall, keep pounding your head against it until you bust through.' He grimaced, knowing he was up against a man with the motto, 'When you come to a brick wall, sneak around or over it.'

Murphy turned and started to retrace his steps of last night.

He went into the pavilion. He stopped, his eye caught by the floor's mandala-like centerpiece. 'This is a marquetry floor, designed by a craftsman, with hand-scraped squares of white oak, mahogany, and satinwood,' – Steele had told him, going on and on – 'each square has been hand-selected for that perfect combination of colour, grain, and texture, each piece of wood has been individually shaped and then lain in this decorative geometric pattern.' Steele had been practically hopping up and down with delight as he'd viewed the room. 'Jesus,' Murphy had thought, 'all that money on a damn floor.'

Murphy continued through the pavilion. He brushed past the hoity-toity artcase Steinway concert grand piano with its intricate carvings and expensive wood inlay, past the fancy-dancy cabinet of copperplate works, past a huge, grotesque bronze urn, past a settee covered with a tapestry of silk and wool threads – surely no one would ever sit on that thing. Finally, he passed a monstrous sideboard of mahogany. Porcelain plaques were inserted into the wood; it was gilded in bronze and topped with marble. All these little things Murphy knew because Steele had given him and Laura a grand tour of the mansion, eager to point out everything in excruciating detail.

Murphy exited the pavilion and went into the Glass Room, filled with old glass. 'Old glass!' Steele had exclaimed. 'Why, Murphy, this room is filled with Venetian glass, baroque glass, collections of porcelain, faience, tin, and more.' Yeah, yeah, Steele. Old glass.

Murphy stared at the door to the Jewelry Room. Even Steele had been startled, the words he'd been speaking frozen on his lips, at his first glimpse of the treasures in this room. Words had been frozen on Murphy's lips, too, but he was sure they weren't the same ones. Why did the rich waste all their money on these goo-ga's? Think of all the good they could do with that money.

Murphy snorted his disgust, then headed into the front hall, with its fluted white marble ionic columns – as Steele had painstakingly enlightened him. He briefly flicked his eyes east toward the Porcelain Foyer, filled with more old glass – oh, excuse him, Bohemian engraved glass – before turning toward the alarm system's command console. Careful examination revealed nothing of interest. He then started up the stairs to that Museum Room filled with pieces that should've been available for public viewing instead of tucked away in this egotistic monument to Raeder's wealth.

Two hours later, he went back out to his car, discouraged. No startling revelations. No new clues. All he had were suspicions.

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Steele once again resisted the urge to chew on his lip. Easy, mate. If Murphy wants to sit here all night in inhospitable silence, so be it. I know what you're up to, Miss Holt. Babysittin' me. No doubt you'll take turns sittin' up with me each night. Well, you'll be the ones losin' sleep, not I.

He settled back in the car seat and closed his eyes. Murphy wouldn't expect him to stay awake, anyway. What a day.

He'd slept in until noon, only to be awakened by Miss Holt buzzing away at the doorbell like a blackfly at uncovered flesh. She'd insisted he come interview Wallace's crew with her. He'd persuaded her to first let him make a bit of lunch for them: some vegetable soup, sandwiches. He hadn't wanted to go out – his face was too well known. At any other time he'd have revelled in his celebrity, no matter how unjustly deserved, but now it'd become notoriety. Soon after he started preparing the meal, a group of policemen invaded his apartment with a warrant to search it for the stolen items. They . . . *destroyed* his apartment. His sofa and bed mattress were ripped open, his posters and paintings removed from their frames and tossed carelessly about, camera dismantled, film containers opened, curtain rods unscrewed, linings and hems of coats and trousers and suit jackets ripped open, contents of drawers and closets and cabinets searched and dumped into heaps. The plants on his balcony were knocked out of their pots, their roots explored – he doubted they'd survive the damage. They tracked in the dirt all over the carpet, all over every room.

Canisters of flour and sugar were emptied. Food from the refrigerator was smashed with forks to make sure no ruby lay inside. They even took his pot of soup from the stove, strained its contents, and poked through it.

And his videotapes. He'd just started collecting them, though he hadn't yet plucked up his courage to actually go buy one of those videocassette player gizmos and try to figure out how to set it up, or, better yet, soap someone else into doing it for him. But he'd wanted to be prepared. Well, so much for that: they ruined his entire collection. They opened up the shell of every single

one, and ‘Casablanca,’ ‘The Third Man,’ ‘The Thirty-nine Steps’ . . . all lay in ribbons, a big heap on the floor. Laura was furious, and he . . . he just stood there. “It doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter,” he said, not sure if the mantra was directed at Laura or himself. He looked again at the pile of rubbish. He might as well set a match to it. To the whole place. When had he developed this sense of ownership, this sense of attachment, that he should feel so violated?

He winced at the sound of something breaking in the kitchen, but stayed put. Let them do their worst – they wouldn’t find anything. As if he’d ever be so stupid as to hide stolen items in his apartment. Laura panicked, digging her fingernails into him as she asked him about his passports. He assured her he’d removed the passports from the premises. It wouldn’t do for the police to start checking into the backgrounds of Michael O’Leary, Paul Fabrini, John Murrell, Douglas Quintain, and Richard Blaine. Somehow he didn’t think they’d be willing to accept that Remington Steele just liked to have false passports in the names of Humphrey Bogart characters.

Finally, after some last, angry words for the police, Laura had dragged him from the chaos, and they’d taken up their interviews of the crew, the silence weighing heavily between them. . . .

Steele sighed. He didn’t feel like going back to the apartment. Well, he’d check into a hotel tomorrow – he might have to be moving on anyway. He found himself chewing on his lip and stopped himself. C’mon, mate. Quit thinkin’ these thoughts – they’re hardly relaxin’. Don’t give Murphy the satisfaction of seeing you rattled. Turn your mind to somethin’ more pleasant and drop off like the babby<sup>15</sup> he’s supposed to be mindin’. That’ll get his knickers in a twist.

He searched his mind and came up with the perfect bedtime thought. In fact, he nearly started laughing. He thought of Carl, remembering the two of them working together in Raeder’s Museum Room. They’d been able, sometimes with difficulty, to behave appropriately when others were around, restricting themselves to shooting each other furtive glances, but occasionally they were left to themselves and propriety went out the window. Sometimes, Carl would parody a ballet dancer as he’d sweep down the aisles, his hands gracefully brushing against the exhibits. Steele would follow him, preferring to just slide across the polished floor in stockinged feet, pretending to be Gene Kelly in ‘Singing in the Rain’ (Gene Kelly, Donald O’Connor, Debbie Reynolds. MGM. 1952), though he didn’t drop to his knees – he would’ve, had he thought he, too, would end up at the amazing legs of Cyd Charisse. One time, Carl persuaded him to demonstrate an Irish step dance – well, he didn’t admit to Carl he was pretty much making up the steps since he’d never been properly taught. Carl would never know: keep your upper body still, kick up your legs, look like you’ve got a poker shoved up your backside, and you’re doing an Irish dance. . . .

But most of the time when they were alone and taking a break, they’d just go around gaping in awe, pointing out to each other some piece they were particularly fond of, not trying to hide the lust it inspired. Then, someone would enter, and they’d once again fall into their assumed roles. Although, it’d been a bit awkward the time he’d ended up half a room away from his shoes . . .

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<sup>15</sup>Babby (Irish)

Murphy looked over at the sleeping figure. Jeez, was that a smile on the guy's face? Well, Murphy would give him one thing: if he'd done this, he sure had balls, sticking around like this. Murphy had expected that even if the guy were innocent, being a suspect would've been enough to send him running.

The con man sure didn't seem too concerned they were staking out this Carl guy. Not that that meant anything. The only thing you could be sure about with con men was that nothing was as it seemed. He'd learned that when he was eighteen.

Irritated not only at having to stake out a guy who Steele could probably tell them the whereabouts of, but also at having to put up with Steele, his candidate for the thefts, sound asleep next to him, Murphy reached over Steele to pull a notebook out of the glove compartment. He slammed the compartment shut.

Steele's eyes flew open. He jerked upright in the seat and looked around wildly to see where the shots were coming from, only to see Murphy pulling back from his direction, his hand still on the glove box. Their eyes met. Never hesitating to go where angels might fear to tread when it came to Murphy, Steele plunged right in as if they'd been having a casual conversation all along. "So, when did you first decide to put on the mantle of a PI?" For a moment he thought Murphy might refuse to speak to him, but then again, Murphy had never shown any signs of fearing to tread on Steele, unless Laura was around. He suppressed a sigh of relief when Murphy started talking. Always worse than being abused was being ignored.

"When I was eighteen, after I was conned." Murphy's voice was hard.

Steele couldn't help the small smile that formed on his lips. "Eighteen. That means you were still in high school? I saw your personnel records – you went to George Washington High School, named after that chap who could never tell a lie. I thought that explained a lot." He again couldn't keep a small smile of amusement off his face. Murphy shot him an irritated look before turning back to Carl's house. When Murphy remained silent, Steele raised his hand in a conciliatory gesture. "My apologies. Would you tell me the story?" He did his best to project an air of openness and interest.

Murphy shifted in the seat, then shot Steele another quick glance. After another interval of silence, Murphy spoke. "I'd recently graduated from high school. I wanted to get out of Denver, away from mom and dad, like any kid."

Well, not *any* kid. First, you needed parents. "That's when you came to California?"

"Straight to USC. First week there, I met a girl, took her to the first weekend dance. I got her to leave the party early and wander about the city with me."

"Good show!" But he knew Murphy wasn't letting all this slip out of a sense of camaraderie. From the very start of this story, Murphy's tone let Steele know there was a point to it. A very sharp point.

“We were crossing a street, and up ahead we could see a man coming down the sidewalk, slowly making his way toward us, stumbling a bit. He was older, maybe late twenties, early thirties, and he was drunk. Happy drunk. ‘I love everyone’ drunk. He stumbled coming off the curb and I rushed to help him.”

“Naturally.” Steele kept his tone neutral, but it didn’t matter. Murphy’s voice when he resumed speaking held barely suppressed anger; he seemed too involved in his story to pay attention to Steele for the moment.

“The drunk greeted me as if I were his long-lost cousin.”

“And then when you’d gotten halfway down the block, you realized your wallet had been lifted. You whirled around, only to find the drunk had magically discovered coordination and disappeared into the night.”

Murphy glanced at him, eyes blazing. “Sounds like you’re familiar with the ploy.”

“It’s one a pickpocket might use to survive on the streets,” Steele responded coolly. Just a way to keep from starving when one had no other means. “Nothing personal. To incite such passion in you, though, I take it that it didn’t have a salutary effect on your date.”

“You could say that.” Murphy bit off the words. “Some nights I’d go back to that street, hoping to run into that ‘drunk’ again.” Murphy fell into a brooding silence.

Even though – or maybe, because – his companion obviously didn’t want to elaborate, Steele wasn’t inclined to drop his line of inquiry. Surely there was more to this story, surely Murphy hadn’t yet said what he’d really wanted to let fly. He phrased his goad for maximum effect. “So. A desire to avenge yourself on the lowly pickpockets of the world for having spoiled your first date led you to become a PI.”

Murphy turned on him angrily, his voice low and intense. “Not long after that I learned firsthand that scammers usually prefer frailer victims than me. That same year, my seventy-year-old grandma was the target of a pigeon drop in a supermarket parking lot in Florida. After she’d withdrawn some money, she became suspicious and refused to give it to the cons. They beat her and took it and never were caught. They beat her for \$300. *That’s* when I decided I wanted to bring felons like that to justice. I’ve been in this business for ten years, I’ve traveled all around the U.S., and you know what? Everywhere I go, I find con men. I know all about you. Your languages vary, but what comes out of your mouths is deceit. You’re masters at manipulating your victims. You’re seldom caught, hardly ever convicted, but when you are, you manipulate the cops, the judges, the parole officers. You’ve all shown not only can crime pay, it pays very well.” Murphy threw a pointed look at Steele’s attire. “And while you’re sitting pretty, not giving a damn about right and wrong, believing yourself superior to your victims, to everyone who believes in the law – hell, to everyone who’s not a clever confellow like you – another family loses their life’s savings because they were gullible, another old man is declared incompetent and put into a nursing home because he was naive, another old lady is beaten because she caught on too late.”

Murphy’s eyes bored into his. “Every time I hear of one of you getting caught, I celebrate, and

whenever I catch one of you myself, I go out to a nice secluded beach and scream at the top of my voice, ‘That’s for you, Grandma.’” Murphy turned abruptly away from him and resumed staring at Carl’s house. “She loved the ocean.”

Steele turned his head to look out the front window. He had to consciously untense his shoulders. He glanced at Murphy’s profile, then looked down at his own lap, not really seeing anything, having to blink several times because something was blurring his vision. He could think of nothing to say.

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Steele heard Laura greet Bernice and go into her office. He massaged the back of his neck. He’d gotten a crick in it after finally falling into an uneasy sleep in Murphy’s car last night. He stared at the door connecting his office to Laura’s. He rolled down his sleeves, fastened his cuffs, put his suit jacket on, and adjusted his tie. He walked to Laura’s door, knocked, opened it, and stuck his head inside. “Miss Holt, may I speak with you a moment?”

He didn’t wait for her answer, but left the door open and returned to sit behind his desk. He heard Murphy enter Laura’s office and tell her that nothing had happened during the stakeout last night, that he was going to write up some of his notes before heading out again to interview more of the party attendees, and that no one had yet reported seeing anyone who might’ve bumped into Ms. Raeder.

Laura came into Steele’s office and proceeded to wear a hole in the carpet. Her ‘this better be good’ look definitely marred her unstudied beauty.

“Laura, I once knew this contessa who pulled a jewellery scam. I’ve been wondering if the same thing could’ve happened here.”

Laura glanced at him, looked away, then stopped pacing to look at him more fully, her features slightly less forbidding, but her arms still crossed in front of her.

“What if, what if the ruby wasn’t stolen? I mean, what if Ms. Raeder staged the theft?”

“Go on.” Laura’s tone was neutral.

“She could’ve snapped the chain herself, hidden the ruby in her, uh, dress. What if, what if they faked the theft to collect the insurance money? It’s been done. What if the Raeders have some outstanding debts and they’re unable to pay? Or rather, unwilling – they don’t want to part with their treasures.”

Laura’s shoulders relaxed. She came over to lean her arms on his desk. “A man with the resources of Mr. Raeder – he could have access to people who could break into your display case – ”

“It was one of the first ones we worked on. They had nearly three weeks to figure it out. Maybe they had little spy cameras or bugs to help them, or they just . . . solved the puzzle. Any system can be breached given sufficient time and resources.”

Laura sighed. “The ruby and mosaic could be anywhere by now.”



“I’ll wager they’re still on their premises. Raeder likes to be personally in control. I think he’d keep them in his possession. Trust me, I know the type.”

“The premises were searched.”

“By Raeder’s men.”

“And the police.”

“I’m sure they were a lot more careful with his belongings. . . . Anyway . . . they didn’t search the . . . safest places.”

She stared at him. “We couldn’t get a search warrant served based on this.”

“Then we’ll search it ourselves. And not just the safes. That place was built during Prohibition. There’s a secret bar he’s converted into a niche to hold artwork . . .” He trailed off as he saw her look, then continued bravely. “It’s in the library. I came across it during my . . . my investigation of the premises – for security purposes,” he added hastily.

“Was it empty?”

“Laura. You’re assuming I checked.” He tried to sound hurt, but under her continued stare he couldn’t help breaking into a grin. “Yes, it was empty at the time.”

“You’re suggesting we break into their mansion, into their safes, and search for the ruby and the mosaic.”

“Yes.” As she turned away, he hurried to say, “It’d be child’s play, Laura. I know the security systems, inside and out. A fact that has thus far been used against me. Let me make it work for me.”

She turned back to him. “I’ll give the matter all the consideration it deserves, Mr. Steele.”

His eyes followed the long line of her legs as she strode purposefully out of his office, then he scowled, swung his chair around, clasped his hands behind his head and stared out the window. Things were rubbing along about as smoothly as fingernails on a blackboard.

As Laura marched into Murphy’s office to collar him, Murphy swivelled his desk chair around to face her. “Murphy, we need to dig more into the background of the Raeders. *Top* priority.” Steele’s intuitions, while often out of the blue and not always correct, always led their cases forward, toward resolution. Unless, this time, he was just leading them on.

“What, specifically, are we looking for?”

“Any reason they’d report those items missing while actually keeping them for themselves – insurance fraud, business difficulties.”

Murphy grinned at her. “The Raeders pulling a scam.” His grin disappeared and he jerked his head in the direction of Steele’s office. “I bet I know who gave you that idea. After his performance during your interviews yesterday, why do you trust anything he says?”

“It’s not a matter of trust, Murphy. I know it’s not the first thing we’d normally look at, but it’s a good idea. It bears checking out.” Murphy’s look told her he thought she was clutching at straws.

Finally, Murphy shrugged and leaned back in his chair. “It’ll take time. Raeder’s had that mansion out here for a while, as well as business offices, but he hasn’t really lived here before now. His base of operation has been New York. The important stuff’s going to be back there. If we’re talking federal information, it could take weeks. And the man’s business dealings are international. We could be looking a long time.”

“I can help there.” Steele was leaning in the doorway where he’d managed to inconspicuously park himself.

“Adding eavesdropping to your list of sins?”

Steele straightened up. “That would appear to be the least of my worries, Murphy. Anyway, I can help.”

“How.” Not a question. A statement of flat-out disbelief.

“Always the skeptic, Murphy. Every source of information is vulnerable to a good ruse.”

Laura stopped Murphy from retorting with an admonishing shake of her head.

Steele was, as usual, oblivious to the exchange. “Also, Mr. Raeder is quite the art collector. I’m sure I can contact certain . . . brokers . . . to find additional information on our man. As for Ms. Raeder, well, of course I prefer the personal approach – ”

“I think we’ll let you concentrate on *Mr.* Raeder, Mr. Steele,” Laura broke in as he grinned. She paced a few steps, feeling a resurgence of energy. “Do you know when the Raeders married?”

“About a year ago, she told me. Said it was love at first sight,” – Steele shrugged and lifted his eyebrows, conveying his opinion that he didn’t see what Ms. Raeder could’ve seen in Erich – “said they married after a whirlwind romance.”

“All right. You two see what you can find out on Mr. Raeder, and I’ll concentrate on Ms. Raeder.”

She noticed Murphy eyeing Steele with his old distrust. Also as of old, Steele was ignoring it, saying, “By the way, old boy, the best time to call to talk your way into closed information is 12:01 local time. The management is out to lunch, leaving the more malleable clerks and secretaries to run the world. Give me a shout if I can be of service.” She hoped Murphy would take him up on it. She knew Murphy hated to admit it, but at this kind of thing Steele could be very . . . Useful and Diligent. She smiled to herself at the reference<sup>16</sup>.

As Steele left the room, she turned to Murphy. Her unassuming, shoot-from-the-hip partner had contacts all over the U.S. from his freelance days, and she had need of them. “Murphy, what’s the number for your investigator friend in New York? Ed Something-or-other.”

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<sup>16</sup>You're Steele The One For Me

“Ed Hines. Sure, I’ve got the number right here.” Murphy flipped through his Rolodex. “I’ll give him a call.”

Laura shook her head and copied down the number. “I’ll get it. Thanks, Murph.” As Laura went into her office, she heard a burst of laughter come from Steele’s office. Unable to resist, she cracked open his door. There was Steele, on the phone, lounged back in his chair, feet on his desk, a hand waving expansively, smiling and laughing.

“Ah, yes, Henri. It’s been too long, too long. And how is Joelle?” Steele’s voice caressed the name. He noticed Laura and waved her in, but she declined. She had better things to do than listen to him discuss some woman while conversing long-distance with a – what had he called it? broker? – fence, more likely.

She went to her desk and picked up the phone to dial New York. She got Ed’s secretary, who said Ed was in with a client but should be finished soon. Laura told the secretary to mention Murphy was her partner, knowing that would speed Ed’s return call. As she set down her phone, she could hear Murphy’s voice come through the wall. He was probably on the phone speaking to some bureaucrat about the Raeders’ current insurance policies and past claim histories. She smiled, picturing Murphy hunched over his small, neat-as-a-pin desk, frowning in concentration at the notepad in front of him, scribbling furiously.

The office phone rang, and Bernice punched through the call from Ed. Laura explained the situation as briefly as possible and hired him to start a background check on Ms. Raeder. She grimaced at the expenditure, but this was a time for frugality to take a back seat to speed. Now, what next? Ms. Raeder was new here, so likely no close friends to pump. Laura drummed her fingers on her desk. She’d try the household staff, though they’d probably choose to face a firing squad rather than give her any dirt on the Raeders and face *their* wrath. Given the coldness Laura felt when she was around the two, she could understand that choice. But, worth a try. She picked up the phone and called Ms. Raeder. The line was busy. Well, she’d just go out there.

As she left her office, Murphy stalked past her, heading for Steele’s office. “What’s wrong, Murph?”

Murphy glowered at her. “I’ve got Ms. Raeder on the phone, trying to get some information from her. She wants to speak with *him*.” Murphy jerked his head in the direction of Steele’s office.

Laura smiled a little and shook her head. “Well, suck it up and let him speak to her. Tell him what you want. I want to see her anyway – I’ll talk to her now to set up an appointment and then turn her over to you two.”

Murphy chuffed a breath and turned to go into Steele’s office. Poor Murph. She could imagine Steele apologizing to Ms. Raeder for Murphy’s inexperience in dealing in such matters – but what could he do? – the boy had to learn sometime as part of his training to be a PI. Lord knows, it rankled her enough when Steele did that sort of thing to her. She knew Murphy found it nearly intolerable.

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Laura was escorted into the Breakfast Room of the Raeder mansion where Ms. Raeder was having a late brunch. Ms. Raeder gave her the smile of a woman who knows not only that she is beautiful, but that the woman she is greeting is no rival in that department. Laura gritted her teeth. Ms. Raeder swept her hand out, indicating Laura should join her at the table. As Laura sat, maids brought in trays with orange juice – freshly squeezed, no doubt – milk, coffee, a selection of teas, fresh baked croissants and muffins, toast, a selection of marmalades and jams, yogurt, smoked salmon on cream cheese bagels in nests of dill, and fresh fruit compote – Laura could smell the vanilla bean in the sauce. What army was the woman planning to feed? It was obvious by her figure she must live on air.

But no, evidently Ms Raeder had a voracious appetite. Laura thought caustic thoughts as to how the woman worked it off. Laura selected some of the compote, to be polite; she had no intention of staying long. “Ms. Raeder, I’ve just finished speaking with your household staff again. Thank you for instructing them to give me their full cooperation.”

Ms. Raeder nodded indulgently.

“This is everyone who’s ever worked for you, correct?”

Ms. Raeder raised a perfect eyebrow. “Yes, during the day we have five maids, a cook, and a butler. That’s everyone.”

“Now, according to my notes, your entire staff, except for the cook and a maid, came with Mr. Raeder when he made his final move here – which was two weeks before *your* arrival.”

Ms. Raeder’s bagel halted its journey to her mouth and resumed its position on her plate. “I made do with the limited staff.”

“According to your cook and maid, you cancelled your flight reservation and arrived two days later than you’d originally planned. But you sent the cook and the maid on that original flight.”

Ms. Raeder picked up the bagel and her perfect, even teeth took a healthy bite out of it before she answered. “Guilty as charged, Miss Holt. I had some things in New York to wrap up. Do you have a point?”

“I’m just wondering if you hired anyone to do the routine chores those last two days. A temp, perhaps.”

“Why is this important, Miss Holt?”

“Just dotting all my i’s and crossing all my t’s, as Mr. Steele taught me.” With the smoothness of long practice, Laura managed not to grind out that last part. If, as Bernice said, Ms. Raeder thought Steele ‘prime something,’ the mention of his name might bring greater cooperation. “You never know – maybe that temp holds a grudge against you or Mr. Raeder, has some connections you’re not aware of.”

Ms. Raeder sniffed. “I doubt that very much. But if you must know, I ‘borrowed’ the services of a girl who works for one of Erich’s attorneys – she doubled as cook and maid those last two days. Dreadful girl.”

“Could I get her name and a contact number for her, please.” Laura didn’t inflect her voice as a question. She noted the tiny wrinkle that appeared on Ms. Raeder’s otherwise perfect forehead as the woman looked at her with ill-concealed annoyance. Ms. Raeder got up from the table, swept from the room, and went through the door from the Dining Room to the Library. She soon returned with an address book in her well-manicured hand.

Laura took down the information and handed the book back. Ms. Raeder picked up one of the small brass bells on the breakfast table, rang it, then again left the room to go into the Library. While she was in there, the butler came to escort Laura out of the mansion. For Laura, evidently, brunch was over. She checked her watch. Almost noon. A client had arranged to meet her for lunch today to go over the wrap-up of his case.

Since she had to pass by the office anyway, she stopped in to check her messages to see if Ed had called with any information. Not yet. She opened the main door to Steele’s office to see what he was up to. Her first glimpse revealed Murphy pacing back and forth. Then she saw Steele at his desk, feet on the floor, posture erect, speaking into the phone to someone about the possibility of insurance fraud, the need for utmost discretion. He spoke earnestly, then cajolingly, then he melted into the chair and spoke suggestively to the obviously female recipient of his call. He finished with a soft laugh and a silky, “It’s been a pleasure speaking with you, and, yes, I’d be delighted to repay the favour and pleasure you.” He handed the phone to Murphy, evidently having been put through to the source Murphy was after. Steele saw Laura and gave her a slight smile and a wink. She gave a tight nod and closed the door, picturing him following up on his promise. ‘Why, Laura,’ she imagined him saying, ‘it was all in the line of duty. I gave my word. And Remington Steele’s word is his bond.’

Laura swished out of the suite, nearly knocking Bernice over as she came into the office with sandwiches for the men.

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Steele polished off his BLT, goat cheese, avocado, and basil on a toasted roll sandwich. As soon as he was sure Laura was safely out of the building, he grabbed his coat to leave. Murphy, on hold, called out, “Where are *you* going?”

“Off to see friends.” Steele gave Murphy a backward wave, refraining from taking in the picture of Murphy standing frustrated at the phone, wanting to pursue him yet unable to do so – Murphy would never reach the person on the other end of the line without Steele’s help again; Murphy just didn’t have enough artifice in his bones. Steele gave Bernice a beatific smile, which she returned with a less-than-beatific scowl, and slipped out the door.

Out on the Avenue of Stars, Steele spotted the tails immediately. Jenkins needed to lose some weight; the only way he’d keep up with Steele was if Steele left a trail of donuts. Steele took a taxi to the Grand Central Market, nice and crowded at this time of day. Jenkins and his partner were easily lost, probably gorging themselves on burritos. Steele got his friend Amistad to take

him to La Placita Olvera<sup>17</sup>. He slipped into the back of the Art Gallery to wait while Amistad delivered a message for him. He could only hope the message's recipient would show up.

A half hour later he decided his friend thought him way too hot for his message to make any difference. In his message, he'd called in the marker owed him concerning the fifth piece of the Marchesa Collection<sup>18</sup>. That marker alone should've been more than enough, given what'd happened in Mexico, but he'd even offered to sacrifice a larger cut in his profits from their current 'business.'

Just as he was about to give up and move on to his next source, the familiar voice greeted him. "Desco."

"Thank you for coming, Mando."

The man took his hand and clasped him in a one-armed abrazo, but there was a grim look in his normally warm, deep-brown eyes. "I knew you wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

Desco nodded, grateful Mando had come despite his former declaration he wouldn't meet with Desco while the cops were on his tail. "Tell me everything you know about Erich Raeder, his standing in the art world, both the legitimate and the not-so."

"Ah, the 'not-so.' Only rumors, *carnal*<sup>19</sup>."

Desco listened with interest as his friend continued to fill him in. These were some good rumours to pass onto Laura – they certainly made Raeder seem like a suspicious character. He then asked Mando, "Anything about the other items?"

Mando pulled at his gold earring, then ran a hand through his nearly nonexistent salt-and-pepper hair. "Maybe one of the Dürer drawings. Bremen<sup>20</sup> said it *could* be the one that was taken by the Soviets from a German castle, went through KGB hands, ended up in the Baku Museum in Azerbaijan, and then was stolen again from there. Nothing more definite. Weimar hasn't had a chance to check into Northeim about the silver, yet."

Desco nodded at the fence and followed the parting Chicano handshake with a particularly generous amount of green.

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<sup>17</sup>Olvera Street is the oldest part of the City of Los Angeles; it is also known as the birthplace of the City of Angels or as El Pueblo Historic Monument. Many Latinos often refer to it as La Placita Olvera. It contains 27 historic buildings and a traditional Mexican style plaza area where you can wander around and shop for souvenirs and handcrafted wares typical of old Mexico.

<sup>18</sup>Foreshadow of Steele Away with Me, Part II

<sup>19</sup>Car'nal' : More than a friend – one who is trusted (Spanish slang)

<sup>20</sup>In West Germany, at the time

The man asked his retreating back, “Desco, is Raeder your man?” Mando followed the expected nonreply with, “Take a care with that one, carnal. I don’t want you to see the wolf’s ears<sup>21</sup>. I don’t want to have to rename you ‘Dismas.’ Or is it ‘Gestas’? Never could keep the two of those straight.<sup>22</sup>”

He gave a backward wave to Mando, then cut over towards Union Station, whose platforms served more pigeons than passengers. He caught a taxicab on Alameda to his next destination, in West Hollywood. Afterwards, he’d try to check with some of his other local sources about Raeder’s standing in the art world, but he doubted he’d learn anything more. Mando was his most reliable source on these matters, and Mando hadn’t told him anything he hadn’t already suspected. Still, it was good to have confirmation.

He wished the fence had had some more definite information on the items, though. Steele couldn’t lose the feeling Mando was holding back on his pursuit of the matter until he saw how things shook loose with the current situation. Not that Steele could blame Mando – if the current situation wasn’t resolved in Steele’s favour, all the treasures of ‘his man’ would remain buried.

Steele shook his head in amazement. To think, he owed his discovery of these treasures to a fluke. He’d taken the silver out of the oak canteen and, out of habit, had checked under the royal blue velvet lining for a false bottom. He couldn’t have been more startled when, after some careful probing, he’d actually found one. All that had lain inside it was an old photograph with the inscription ‘Regelheim, Northeim.’ Funny thing was, it’d stirred a memory.

He’d still been living on Brixton’s streets, then. He’d just lifted a wallet when a mate of his – whom he called ‘Amish,’ which meant ‘honest’ in Hindi, and who called him ‘Nevan,’ which meant ‘little saint,’ in Irish – came up to him.

“I am going home to my mummy and father, Nevan.”

“Your ‘mummy’? G’way from me<sup>23</sup>.”

“You will come with me, yes? You can pinch a few items from the art gallery,” – Amish grinned at him – “and mummy will feed you curry until it comes out your ears.”

Nevan knew something else must be up, but the offer of mountains of food was not one to take lightly. He kicked at the sidewalk and pretended to give it some thought. “Okay, I guess.” He had no other pressing business, after all.

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<sup>21</sup>To find oneself in great danger (Spanish)

<sup>22</sup>‘Dismas’: ‘The Good Thief,’ crucified with Jesus, who heeded the call of grace.

‘Gestas’: ‘The Bad Thief,’ crucified with Jesus, unrepentant to the end.

<sup>23</sup> You’re kidding (Irish slang)

That evening, Nevan broke them into a local thrift shop. He occasionally trawled such places and had a knack for hooking just what he needed. They got clothes, shoes – even a duffel bag in which they could pack their few possessions. They also took the opportunity while there to wash up in a sink in the employees’ loo.

In the early morning they started to hitch to Coventry, Amish’s hometown. On the way, Amish once again insisted on telling him about John Hewitt, the Director of the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in Coventry. Amish had the mistaken belief Nevan should be interested in Hewitt because Hewitt was Irish. A famous Irish poet. Nevan couldn’t get it through Amish’s thick skull he had no interest in a Protestant from the North.

“Let me read to you some of his poetry, yes?” Amish pulled a book and a few papers out of the duffel while Nevan groaned. Actually, Nevan didn’t mind that much. Amish was educated; he could read – even write English in those curly letters. And Nevan liked to hear Amish’s soft voice, which came from deep in his throat. Amish’s voice sounded so musical anyway, but especially when he spoke poetry. Amish planned on being a poet himself one day. Nevan planned on staying alive.

Nevan lay in the back of the lorry with his head on the duffel bag. He looked up at the sky and tried to see animals and faces in the fluffy white clouds. He tuned in and out as Amish’s voice flowed on.

“. . . and years spent walking through an alien place / among bland strangers kinder than his kin . . .<sup>24</sup>”

A little later, in another lorry, “. . . and I am left with these alternatives, / to find a new mask for what I wish to be, / or try to be a man without a mask, / resolved not to grow neutral, growing old.<sup>25</sup>”

And still later, in another lorry, Amish told him about how in a trilogy of Hewitt’s poems<sup>26</sup>, the speaker of the poem lamented that he couldn’t feel at home in either the countryside of his ancestors, or in the city where he resided. . . .

Nevan awoke to Amish poking him in the ribs. “We are here, Nevan.”

“Good. If I don’t get some curry in my belly soon, I’m not goin’ t’be able to stand up in my shoes.”

It was early evening now, and Nevan could smell delicious smells wafting from the open windows of the houses on the street where Amish lived: smells of dal, smells of naan, and, of course, smells of curry, all mixed with the perfume of incense. Nevan hoped with all his heart Amish’s family was ready to eat.

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<sup>24</sup>‘The City and its Creators,’ John Hewitt

<sup>25</sup>‘Ireland,’ John Hewitt

<sup>26</sup>‘Conacre,’ ‘Freehold,’ and ‘Homestead.’



A tiny, dark, plump woman with a red dot in the middle of her forehead answered the door. She was wrapped in yards and yards of purple silky material – yes, that must really be silk. Nevan wanted to touch the sari, but he didn't dare.

“Saeed!” the woman exclaimed.

Nevan looked sideways at Amish and mouthed, “Saeed?”

“It means ‘priestly,’” his friend said out of the side of his mouth.

Nevan almost burst out laughing: that was about as fitting as ‘honest’ had been.

They pulled off their shoes and went into the house. Saeed was immediately surrounded by a gaggle of bodies, their excited voices filling the air. Nevan felt a bit envious. Saeed finally explained to him that these were his two little brothers, his little sister, his mother, and his grandmother.

A man appeared. All the sing-songy voices stilled. Saeed looked a bit nervous. Nevan tensed, prepared to run.

“Father,” Saeed said deferentially.

The man looked at Saeed sternly. Nevan couldn't see anger in the man's face, but neither could he see affection. Disappointment, he guessed.

Saeed approached his father and pressed his palms together as if he were going to pray. His father flicked his eyes towards his mother, then turned to go into another room. Saeed hesitated, but then his mother came up to him, softly said some words in Hindi, and gave him a little push. Saeed turned towards Nevan. “Come, Nevan.”

Nevan edged forward. All the little children started chattering and laughing and pushed their way past him and then past Saeed. They went into the same room as their father. Saeed and Nevan went in, too, but more slowly.

They entered a dining room. A spotless white carpet covered the floor. The children and their father sat around a rectangular table of gleaming wood. There was a little carving on each corner of the table's apron. The legs of the table were tapered and formed with ridges like a reed. The chairs were all a match to the table. The backs of the chairs were artistically shaped; their tops were arched and had roses carved into them. Nevan had never before been in such a grand home. Well, at least not for any purpose other than a smash-and-grab.

Saeed's father said something to the little children, and with lots of giggling, they rearranged themselves so Saeed and Nevan were seated next to each other. Nevan decided the best thing about the chairs were their comfy cushions. He stopped himself from bouncing up and down on them. Saeed's grandmother brought in place settings for them, and then the feast began.

Nevan ate silky dal, rice that smelled like perfume, spicy-sweet date chutney, crisp curried potatoes with peas, crunchy cucumbers in yogurt, mouth-puckering lime pickle, and soft chappati. Everyone scooped up their food on their chappatis, which was a relief since it'd been awhile since Nevan had used knife and fork. Throughout the meal, Saeed's mother and grandmother would

appear with fresh chappati.

“More, yes, Nevan?” Saeed’s mother urged him. Nevan nodded his head vigorously, wondering why the women didn’t eat with the rest of the family.

For dessert, there was a sweet with paper-thin foil pressed onto it. “It is real silver,” Saeed whispered to him. Nevan looked at him open-mouthed and thought his eyes would pop out of his head when he saw Saeed eat the silver.

Finally, when Nevan really *was* afraid the food would soon be coming out of his ears, they were served a small cup of liquid. “Digestive lassi,” Saeed told him.

Nevan looked at the thinned, beaten yogurt with cumin, ginger, salt, and coriander leaves. He put a hand to his belly. “I hope it works.”

Several hours later he dropped to his knees in front of the toilet in the loo off Saeed’s bedroom. He should’ve known a belly so unused to this quantity and variety of food would rebel against it. But it’d tasted so good. . . .

“Good Morning, Nevan,” Saeed sang.

Nevan groaned and sat up. “D’you have t’be so bloody cheerful in the mornin’?” They were in a huge bed, with a line of pillows down the centre. Saeed’s family had lots of pillows.

“Up, up! We must eat a little breakfast, and then we are going to temple.”

Nevan made a face. “That’s a piss-take<sup>27</sup>, right?”

“There will be five hours of chanting, and afterwards there will be a big feast.”

Nevan flopped back onto the bed and pulled the covers over his head. “Wake me up for the ‘feast’ part.”

Saeed laughed and pulled the covers back down. “I was only teasing you, my friend. I must go to temple with my family, but you should go to the art gallery, yes?”

That was more like it. Their pillow fight was interrupted when Saeed’s mother tapped on the door and called them to breakfast.

Breakfast was a relatively simple affair – something that resembled puffed rice mixed with raisins and nuts, some fruit, some griddle-baked bread with cashew butter, and a yogurt drink with mint. Nevan was hungry, having lost most of last night’s food, but restrained himself, not wanting a repeat performance. He watched as Saeed dug into his food. How could Saeed give all this up to stand with him outside of chippers<sup>28</sup> at closing time and beg for burnt chips and bits of fish

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<sup>27</sup> Piss-take: Joke (British slang)

<sup>28</sup> fish-and-chip shops (Irish slang)

floating around in the grease?

After repeatedly turning down Saeed's mother's invitation to join the family at temple, Nevan made his way to the art gallery, hoping to find some easily snitchable treasures. He should've known, though, what with it being run by a Protestant from the North. The blue buttoned uniforms of security were everywhere he looked, and breaking into a place like this at night was beyond him. Maybe some day.

He stared at the exhibit of Chinese art and kicked at the floor. He should've known Saeed was just coddling<sup>29</sup> him about all the treasures ripe for picking here by his nimble fingers. Having nothing else to do, he wandered about and came upon an exhibit the likes of which he'd never imagined. "Venezuelan kinetic art," he heard someone say. People were not only looking at it, but touching it, and when they walked by or through the pieces, the works would vibrate and whisper out sounds. For a while, he imitated what the other people were doing, then he walked into another room.

There he viewed a collection of pictures of landscapes, pictures of city life, pictures of heroic-looking working class people. Typical of the quality<sup>30</sup> to cheer clap the working class while grinding them under their heel. He overheard a man talking about "the unresolved tension between the international pull of the Marxism of Hewitt's politics and the unionist inflection of his regionalism . . ."

Nevan moved away. Not only hadn't he understood a word the man was saying, but he cared about only one 'ism,' 'Robin Hoodism' – steal from the rich to give to the poor, himself. 'Robin Hood.' Douglas Fairbanks, Wallace Beery, Sam de Grasse. Douglas Fairbanks Pictures. 1922.

As consolation for Nevan's inability to stroke<sup>31</sup> a prize, Saeed took him to a Bollywood<sup>32</sup> film that evening at the Kabhi Palladium. Everyone was all dressed up, the cinema was packed, the atmosphere exciting, special. They watched the film 'Barsaat.' Nargis, Raj Kapoor, Premnath, Nimmi. R.K. Films Ltd. 1949. His friend occasionally translated the Hindi, but it wasn't really necessary. It was impossible to miss the passion braided with sadness, as a couple, Raj and Nargis, madly in love with each other, underwent tragedy after tragedy until they were finally united as they were meant to be. Nevan's favourite line was, 'Love, which comes like rain, brings with it hope, life, and the promise of new beginnings.'

The film should've been rivetting, but his friend insisted on interrupting the flow of the film by telling him about valuables hidden in an attic in Coventry. "It is real silver. The man took it when he was a soldier in Germany at the end of World War Two. I overheard his son bragging about it

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<sup>29</sup>Cod: having someone on (Irish/British slang)

<sup>30</sup>Superior social class (Irish slang)

<sup>31</sup>Steal (Irish slang)

<sup>32</sup>Indian film industry

to his mates.”

“Are you coddin’ me?”

“No, no, my friend. I have a photograph.” Saeed surreptitiously showed him a picture.

Nevan wrinkled his face. “That’s a picture of a British soldier in front of a castle. I don’t see any silver.”

“I broke into the attic of Mr. Barclay months ago, the last time I was here. I found the canteen full of silver. There were two identical photographs in it. I took this one and left the other. The soldier is Mr. Barclay. His son bragged that his father took the silver from the castle.”

Nevan’s fingers itched, but then he eyed Saeed suspiciously. “Why didn’t you nick the silver yourself?”

“I did not have the means to dispose of it. But now – your new friend Daniel could help us, yes?”

It’d seemed a fair deal: Saeed could try to make use of Nevan’s connection to Daniel in exchange for having given Nevan a few days with a full belly and a warm place to stay.

But before they’d been able to come up with a plan to liberate the silver, fate had intervened. He’d never been sure what had happened – all he knew was he’d awakened that night to hear a lot of yelling and screaming. Finding himself alone in Saeed’s bedroom, he’d pulled on his trousers, shrugged into his shirt without buttoning it, and crept out to see what was going on, only to see Saeed being beaten by his father. Saeed had scrambled out of the house. Nevan had flown back into the bedroom, flung open the window, swung himself out of it, and, after briefly hanging onto the ledge by his fingertips, dropped down a floor to the ground. He’d knocked into a dustbin<sup>33</sup> in the dark and the back lights had snapped on. He’d scurried away and searched for Saeed for a while. When first light had threatened, he’d given up, and barefoot – his shoes had still been in the foyer of Saeed’s family’s house – he’d started the journey back to Brixton.

He’d never seen his friend again. He hoped his friend was somewhere writing poetry. And what of that antique silver? Had Saeed nicked it after all, and it’d somehow ended up in L.A.? After all these years, to have opened a canteen of silver and seen a photograph of what Steele was almost sure was the same castle with the same British soldier in front of it seemed nothing short of fantastic. He couldn’t say for sure whether the script on the picture Saeed had shown him had also said ‘Regelheim,’ since he’d been barely able to read at the time, but Saeed *had* said that there were two pictures in the canteen and that he’d taken only one. If the picture Saeed had shown him and the one Steele had found in the oak canteen were indeed identical, ironic the silver that had once eluded his grasp in Coventry had ended up here in L.A., back once again within the reach of Nevan. Or Desco. Or whatever he chose to call himself when the time came.

He shook his head and stared out the window as the cab turned onto the tree-lined residential

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<sup>33</sup>Garbage can

cul-de-sac. Seeing that photo had piqued his curiosity, and he'd kept a sharp eye out for other questionable items among the display objects. He'd come across a few possibilities – and one definite reality, though it hadn't been on display. He'd also learned that the nearby Greystone Mansion, built during Prohibition, had secret bars, and that it was likely many mansions in the area had them. So he'd expanded his search and had found some, as well as a labyrinth of secret passages. The passages had led to tunnels and rooms – cells, really. Each such chamber had had sterile, climate-controlled air and had been empty of everything except what his imagination had filled it with.

The taxi stopped. He got out and kicked at the sidewalk in discontent. All further hunt for treasure was on hold now. He sighed. Well, maybe he could find some more dirt on the Raeders to dish to Laura and Murphy. He went into the three-story, Mediterranean-styled Sunset Marquis Hotel, where the rich and famous recharged after a debauch in the nearby Sunset Strip clubs. But the area had its further enticements. There was the nearby Hollywood Bowl, where in the film, 'Olly Olly Oxen Free' – Katharine Hepburn, Kevin McKenzie, Dennis Dimster, Peter Kilman, Sanrio Communications, 1978 – Kate had landed a hot-air balloon by herself in front of the stage during a performance of the 1812 Overture. And of course other legendary stars had appeared there – Frank Sinatra, Barbra Streisand, Mickey Rooney, Edward G. Robinson, Al Jolson, Judy Garland, Fred Astaire. Also close-by was the Tiffany Theatre, a wonderful cinema, which, like the NuArt and the Fox Venice, ran classic films. Universal Studios was nearby. And there was the Hollywood Walk of Fame and Mann's Chinese Theatre with its giant, red pagoda, a huge dragon writhing up the façade, two lion-dogs guarding the main entrance, and tiny dragons offering their protection from evil spirits from the ridges of the theatre's ornate, copper roof. The Chinese Theatre, with its footprints of the stars, was the site of more gala Hollywood movie premieres than any other theatre.

But, this hadn't been the time to indulge in such diversions.

He went to his hotel room and, after a brief freshening up, went back down to the lobby. After checking for possible tails, he went out into the courtyard to the poolside alfresco Patio Café and nodded at Huela, a big-boned German girl. Huey had the manner of the sweetest creature on God's green earth, but she looked like she could flatten a man.

As she handed him a menu, her pale china-blue eyes crinkling into a smile of greeting, he slipped her a piece of paper with the Raeders' names and the social security numbers he had for them, along with a G-note – a big one, a large, a thou – wasn't American slang wonderful? Huey was slick: everything disappeared nicely into her ham-sized hand. "Huey, I need advice about banking matters. If I recall, you told me you have a relative in the business." Translation: 'I need an information broker<sup>34</sup>.'

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<sup>34</sup>This term is being used to indicate a person who sells bank information. According to a PI I talked with, these guys ("spooks") used to work in the Department of Treasury and have access to this information. This is illegal, of course. That hasn't stopped PI's from using them, I hear. No one I know, of course.

Huey tossed back a fat blonde braid. “He’s an excellent advisor, but you’d need two grand for his advice.” Translation obvious.

“I may have friends who are also interested in his services.” Translation: ‘The people on that list may have aliases and other social security numbers and would your man please look into that as well.’ He handed Huey the menu, which now contained another three grand. “Just a club soda, please.”

Huey nodded. “Hmm. Well, I think my uncle may be all booked up for a while. I’m not sure if he could take on new clients right now. I’ll find out and leave a message for you at your office.”

Translation – mostly meaningless chatter to give them a way to end the conversation, but the last sentence was asking him who should get the information.

“Leave the message for Murphy Michaels. He’s overseeing my financial matters. He’s very perceptive and can be counted on for his discretion.” Translation: ‘Get the information to Murphy in some obscure way and for God’s sake, don’t give away anything that directly implicates I had a hand in this, though I’m sure he’ll figure it out.’ Huey moved away to serve another customer. She eventually made her way back to him and handed him the club soda. He sipped at the drink, then left money to cover it and a generous tip. He caught another taxi, again checking that he wasn’t being tailed.

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After the lunch meeting, which had lasted longer than expected, Laura returned to the office. She poked her head into Steele’s office. Empty. She whirled on Bernice. “Where’d he go?”

Bernice shrugged. “Search me. Murphy was on the phone. You didn’t expect *me* to tail him, did you?”

“Things were so much easier when I didn’t have to worry if my ‘boss’ is the one committing the crimes I’m investigating,” Laura muttered as she entered her office. She picked up the phone and dialed a New York number. “Mrs. Richthofen? My name is Laura Holt. I’m a private investigator in Los Angeles, and I’m working on a case involving some thefts at the Raeder mansion out here –”

Laura’s self-introduction to the Raeders’ former neighbor was interrupted by honks of laughter. “Oh my, yes. I heard about that. Lora lost her ruby.” More mirthful laughter followed; Laura couldn’t help her own smile. No love lost here.

Mrs. Richthofen finally quieted down. “I’m sorry, Ms. Holt. Erich is the perfect gentleman, and I *am* sorry about his difficulties. But what he sees in that little tramp, I’ll never know.”

“I understand your maid worked for Ms. Raeder the two days before she came to L.A.”

“Is she somehow trying to pin this on my Melisenda? Listen, Melisenda never stole that money from that slut. My poor girl’s been so upset I had to give her the week off –”

“Money?” Laura could hear Mrs. Richthofen take a deep breath, evidently trying to calm herself.

“Lora Raeder accused my Melisenda of taking money from her that last day. Melisenda has

worked for me for fifteen years. She is not a thief.”

“I believe you, Mrs. Richthofen – ”

“The nerve of that little gold digger. I swear, I don’t understand why Erich puts up with her. She just spends all his money and coquets with anything in pants. If it weren’t for that prenup, I doubt she’d stop at undressing every man she sees with her eyes – she’d use her teeth! Erich should just dump her.”

Meeooww. “Tough prenup, huh?”

“I probably shouldn’t say this, but,” – more hoots of laughter erupted from Mrs. Richthofen – “my husband drew up the agreement. They signed it right here in the library. And I sort of sneaked a peek at it. I tell you, I thought I was going to going to split a gut – oh, excuse my language.”

“That’s quite all right, Mrs. Richthofen – ”

“At the end there, I thought Erich would wise up and exercise his rights. Did you know that little floozy was after the tail of some competitor of Erich’s? At least, that’s what my husband let slip. And what does Erich do? Whisks her off to California, as if that would solve the problem – ”

“Any name for this competitor?”

“Mmm. I couldn’t pry that out of Frederick – that’s my husband. I’ve just returned from a three-month stay in Europe, so I haven’t caught up on all the local gossip.” She laughed. “But I certainly have friends who are in the know. Would you like me to ask around? Don’t worry. I shall be the soul” – Mrs. Richthofen’s voice sang out the word – “of discretion.”

Laura doubted it, but she wasn’t trolling for such souls at the moment. “I’d appreciate that, Mrs. Richthofen – ”

“You ask me, Erich should’ve just stepped back and caught her *in flagrante*. Put that prenup to good use. But, I suppose he’d view that as a defeat. And he’s not the type to admit defeat. He’d rather try to control her behavior. Well, I think he’s in store for a nasty surprise. I think he’d have to move her to an island staffed only by women and eunuchs. Hmm. Maybe just eunuchs. Hmm, come to think of it, that probably wouldn’t stop her either – ”

“What did the prenup say?”

“Wellll . . . oh, what the hey.”

Laura readied her pen to take down the details.

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After spending the rest of the afternoon at the library scanning microfiche of newspapers for the Raeder name, Laura returned to the office in the early evening. She checked her messages and returned a call to Ed Hines. Next, she paged through her notes, looking for the insurance information on the ruby necklace. She checked the date of purchase and nodded to herself. Finally, she went to rally the troops. She found all of them already in Steele’s spacious office.

Steele was to himself at his desk, Murphy and Bernice were in the conference area. Battle lines drawn?

The low table in front of the couch was littered with empty coffee cups and take-out trays. Bernice offered her a chocolate brownie. Laura shot her a dirty look. Bernice *knew* she shouldn't have chocolate – like liquor to an alcoholic. Bernice shrugged, gathered up the mess they'd made, and left the room.

Laura walked over to Steele's desk and addressed the men. "Well, let's hear what you've got." She could hardly keep from blurting out her findings, but decided to hold off until last.

Steele leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "I regret to say I've come up with nothing of much use to us about Raeder. There's the interesting rumour his family's involvement in the Nazi plundering of artwork is partially responsible for his vast wealth. But he's not in debt to any . . . intermediaries or in trouble with any of the organized criminal elements that have turned their attention to the art world."

Murphy walked over to the desk. "Well, *I've* got something interesting. Raeder has a \$4 million bank loan that the Chase Manhattan Bank has asked him to either pay off or put up more collateral. The deadline's fast approaching."

"Good work, Murph!"

"Yes, splendid, old boy – got you to the right source, did I?"

At Steele's cocky look, Murphy glowered, "I'm not sure how ethical that was –"

"Nonsense. PI's do it in the movies all the time –"

Laura cut in before the ethics – or lack thereof – debate could continue. "Ms. Raeder is a con artist." She decorously refrained from grinning like an idiot at their dropped jaws. Thank God for Murphy: Ed had proved invaluable, ferreting out some very interesting information from a county clerk in NY and from an NYPD buddy in the fraud detail who'd been relentless in his pursuit of the woman. "She's a sweetheart scammer. Before meeting Erich Raeder, she was married to a lovesick, ninety-two-year-old gentleman. She cashed in his \$10,000 monthly stipends, ran all his credit cards to the limit, depleted one \$800,000 trust fund and was in the process of doing the same with another when he died. Before that, it was a rich old eighty-five-year-old. There's probably a whole string of them, according to a New York detective. And all the while, she was carrying on with one rich playboy or another, men who could care less about throwing their money away on her."

She leaned her hands on Steele's desk. "Unfortunately, though, no one can prove she committed a crime. Her 'husbands' were men without family, who evidently thought they were in love with her. They ignored their lawyers' advice that, at the least, she was a 'not-nice' person and they needed to protect their financial interests. They'd say they saw no need, she'd always been good to them."

"Oh, my!" Whether Steele's exclamation and grin of admiration were for the scammer's exploits or for her own uncovering of these facts, Laura was unsure. "But Erich Raeder doesn't fit the



pattern,” Steele continued. “He’s not some doddering old pigeon. What’s her game? A pity if she just fell in love and decided to change. No motive there.”

Murphy sat on the edge of Steele’s desk. “Don’t worry, *old boy*, people like that never change. When con artists aren’t pulling a con, they study at the feet of their masters or hone their techniques for luring in their next victim. They don’t ‘change.’”

Steele put a hand to his heart. “Murphy. I’m sore wounded. *Anyone* can change given sufficient motivation.” He looked at Laura and gave a conspiratorial smile and wink.

Murphy narrowed his eyes. “I’ve yet to be convinced. And she’s the worst kind of con artist, the kind who uses sexual attractiveness to manipulate the victim.” He stared hard at Steele, who merely raised an eyebrow in return.

Laura reached out and touched Murphy’s arm. Easy, friend.

She straightened. “Let’s get back on track. Apparently Ms. Raeder, or rather, as she was known then, Lorelei – ”

“How appropriate,” Steele interjected.

“What?”

“‘Lorelei.’ It’s a German name. It means ‘she whose singing lures men to destruction.’ There’s a famous German folksong, ‘Die Lorelei,’ whose words were written by the exceptional German poet Heinrich Heine.”

Where did he get this stuff? Laura sat on the front corner edge of the desk and looked at Steele. “Yes, well, anyway, the story I’m getting from all quarters – you, the New York paper gossip sections, Murphy’s friend Ed Hines, and a New York detective friend of Ed’s – is that Lorelei met Erich Raeder at a party in New York about a year ago. They married just a few weeks later. There’s an odd clause in the prenuptial agreement: if there’s an act of infidelity on her part, she’s to be cut off without a penny.”

“That must put a crimp in her style,” Steele observed.

Murphy flicked his eyes at Steele. “Not so’s you’d notice, if that party the night of the theft was any indication.”

“Yes.” Steele cleared his throat and shifted in his chair.

Laura folded her arms. “According to the New York rumor mill, Ms. Raeder became attracted to a business rival of her husband’s in New York, and that’s what sparked their move out here. The ruby necklace was bought for her at the same time.”

She watched as Steele smiled, got up out of his chair, went to the front of his desk, and leaned his hands on it. What was it about him? Why couldn’t she keep her eyes off him whenever he was in the room? Everything about him was so distinctive – the way he talked, the way he gestured, the way he moved. ‘Élan,’ Daniel had called it – the street kid had picked up élan. The pauper had become a prince.

Steele looked at Laura. “So the necklace was a bribe.”

“Maybe.”

Steele tugged an earlobe. “It seems to me we now have many motives for one or the other or both of the Raeders. It could be a scam on Lorelei’s part – ”

“If she and this other guy were lovers, he may be blackmailing her – ”

Steele nodded at Murphy. “Yes, she’d lose every cent of Raeder’s if this were to come out, and I’ll wager his wealth far surpasses anything she’s come across yet. A rival of Raeder’s . . . .”

Steele straightened up. “What better way to vanquish Raeder than to cuckold him. Perhaps Raeder even knows his wife was unfaithful but doesn’t want to open himself to public humiliation after all – he’d rather pay the blackmail. And what better price for the blackmailer to demand than the symbol of her supposed acquiescence, the ruby. Or, or, or, – ” he emphasized each syllable with his hand – “no blackmail – Raeder arranged for the theft, humiliated by his wife’s betrayal and her subsequent demand for the bauble in return for her public commitment to him. This is his way of taking it back from her without appearing to do so.”

“There’s still the insurance angle – ”

Steele clapped his hands together. “Oh-ho, yes! Glad to see you’re getting in the spirit of things, Murphy.” He slapped Murphy on the shoulder.

Murphy rolled his eyes. “Not so fast, Steele. There’s still a little matter of proof. The evidence still points to you. We don’t even have a candidate for this blackmailer/lover.”

“Ah, Laura will smoke ’im out, Murphy.”

Murphy shook his head and left the room. As Laura went into her office to collect her things before leaving for the night, Murphy popped back into her office. “The Raeders are worth investigating, but I’m still going to keep a very, very, close eye on this guy,” – he jerked his head toward Steele’s office – “I’m still going to investigate *his* possible role in these thefts. I’m not going to let us be conned, Laura.”

Laura patted Murphy’s arm and started to speak, but turned abruptly as the door to her office opened and Steele came in.

“Oh. Am I interrupting something?”

“No,” Laura told him. She turned back to Murphy. “Follow up on *all* your leads, Murphy.” Murphy nodded, flicked a glance at Steele, and left the room.

Steele came to stand in front of her. “There’s a movie on at LACMA<sup>35</sup> tonight. ‘Dark Victory.’ Bette Davis, George Brent, Humphrey Bogart. Warner Brothers. 1939 – Hollywood’s most famous and competitive year. It’s an electrifying, compelling, tour de force performance from Bette Davis – ”

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<sup>35</sup>the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

“Mr. Steele – ”

“It’s a real tear-jerker – ”

“Mr. Steele – ” She hesitated. She *loved* tear-jerkers. She looked up at him. How had he managed to stand this close to her without her noticing he’d moved?

“We need a break,” he said softly. “Nothing else can be done now. We should spend a relaxing evening, start fresh in the morning.”

“I – ” It was several long moments before she realized she was just standing there gazing into his eyes. What was this, had he been a damn hypnotist in his obscure past? ‘Look into my eyes. Nothing else can be done now. You should spend a relaxing evening. You will go to a movie with me. And afterwards, you will – ’ She shook herself. “I want to stake out the Raeders tonight. It’s been a long day, and I need to take a short nap first.”

“Oh.” Steele’s face fell slightly, but then he brightened. “What if someone else does it for you?”

“Takes my nap?”

A chuckle escaped Steele. “The stakeout.”

“I want you with Murphy at Carl’s – ”

“I have someone else in mind.”

“And just who might that be?”

He grinned. “Officer McCarthy. Hollywood Community Police Station.”

“And just why would he do this for us?”

He gave a little shrug. “I did him a favour.”

Oh, no. Now what? Laura paced away from him and then turned back. “What kind of favor?”

“A small favour.” As her exasperation built, he lifted his hand and formed a half-inch of space between thumb and index finger. “A very, very small favour.”

God help her, she was going to wring his neck. “A small enough favor that he’s going to sit up all night for us at the Raeder mansion where probably nothing will happen.”

“Yes. At the very least.”

Laura huffed out her exasperation, stalked toward him, and backed him up against the desk. Would those fine, delicate cervical bones of his snap easily? She was mere seconds from finding out. “Are you telling me you’ve got this guy in your pocket?”

Evidently reading her murderous intentions, Steele leaned away from her. “Laura. It’s not what your thinking. It’s, well, it’s – you remember Veronica Kirk<sup>36</sup>?”

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<sup>36</sup>Steeling the Show

“The Queen of the B’s’ who got her buzz from rum and tequila.”

“Laura. That was most unkind.” He smiled. “Although fairly accurate. Well, as you might recall, as a result of all the publicity surrounding her being charged with murder – ”

Laura tapped Steele’s chest. “If memory serves, you proved that charge bogus by accidentally walking into the wrong bedroom and finding the evidence we needed – ”

“Accidentally? Why, Laura, as you yourself said, I was just following my infallible instincts – ”

“Mr. Steele, can we please get back to how Officer McCarthy fits into all this?”

“Ah, yes. Well, as you recall, after we’d cleared her, she got a guest spot on 'The Love Boat' to fall down a funnel and die – ”

“I remember you waltzing in here in sunglasses, scarf, and camel hair coat, looking like Cecil B. De Mille, carrying a script, spouting some line of guff about running lines with her on the set.”

“Yes, well, I *did* manage to obtain that position with her – the production people couldn’t refuse her anything with all the publicity she was generating, and she was, uh – ”

“You wheedled her into getting you onto the set.”

Steele glared at her while she smirked. “She was open to the suggestion. Anyway, Officer McCarthy was one of the people investigating the murder, and he’s a real 'Love Boat' fan – there’s no accounting for some people’s taste – and he asked me if I could, well, you know, if I could – ”

“Let me guess. You got him onto the set. And then the two of you snuck around and you got him introduced to Gavin MacLeod – ”

“Fred Grandy, Bernie Kopell, Ted Lange, Lauren Tewes, Jill Whelan – McCarthy was in heaven. And we did not sneak. I merely presented him as a special agent, there to see to Miss Kirk’s safety – ”

“A *special agent*? You had him impersonating an *FBI agent*?”

“No, Laura, no. We never said he was FBI. I just had a little card printed up for him, all official-looking. It said ‘Special Agent McCarthy.’ It didn’t say who he was special to.”

Laura could feel it building in her, more and more. She balled her fists, tried to hold it back, but she couldn’t stop it. She threw back her head and started to laugh. After all the horrible things she’d been imagining, this childish prank was a relief.

Steele grinned. “So, shall I call him?”

She shrugged and smiled. “Why not?”

“Splendid.”

After Steele arranged things with McCarthy, Laura called out to Murphy. “Hey, Murph, you want to go to a movie with us tonight?” She ignored the lugubrious look on Steele’s face.

“No, I’m going home to catch forty winks. *One* of us actually intends to go to and stay awake through a stakeout tonight.”

Laura hid her smile at Steele’s not-too-well-hidden look of relief. Of course, she’d known Murphy wouldn’t come.

Steele extended his elbow. “Shall we, Miss Holt?”

Laura took his arm and smiled up at him as they exited the suite. “We shall, Mr. Steele.”

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Using special software, Jack Ritt perfectly matched the typeset of the original title page of the Ohana catalogue. He reset that page. Instead of reading, ‘Exhibition of Paintings and Sculptures by Members of the Entertainment World,’ it now read, ‘Exhibition of Paintings and Sculptures with Contributions from Members of the Entertainment World.’ Other pages now held photographs of paintings that hadn’t been in the original catalogue: Giacomettis, Chagalls, Dubuffets, de Stals, and Nicholsons. Or at least, that was who the paintings were attributed to. Once the catalogue was seeded with the new pages, Jack restitched the binding.

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Loralei punctured the gel cap and squeezed a single drop into a small glass of water. She swirled the liquid. She went back into the bedroom and lifted the old, gray head. “Drink this,” she said in a honeyed voice.

“Thanks, Marta.” Officer Mac McCarthy returned the mike to its cradle in his surveillance car and scratched down another note. ‘Residence belongs to Lionel Ackerman, age 93. His grandson, Pierre-Yves, age 33, also lives here.’

He looked again at the home in Palos Verdes Estates to which he had tailed Ms. Raeder. God Almighty, there had to be eight bedrooms in the place. Bet the master bedroom was huge. Bet there was a tennis court. Bet there was an Olympic swimming pool. Bet there was an *indoor/outdoor* pool. Great view of the ocean, Catalina. This place was a ‘ten.’ Bet it was worth \$4 million. Bet Steele had been born in a place like this.

What was in this for Ms. Raeder? More dough? Surely that old guy couldn’t be a good lay. Mac lifted his binoculars to once again sweep the property.

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She watched him, there in the dark. At first Laura suspected Steele had chosen this movie purely as some sort of expression of twisted humor: Humphrey Bogart – one of Steele’s favorite actors – played a minor, forgettable role as ‘Michael O’Leary,’ forgettable except that ‘Michael O’Leary’ was the name Steele had used when stealing ‘The Five Nudes of Cairo.’ The first time he’d stolen it, that is.

And the leading male character of the movie was named ‘Steele.’

But something else was going on, something she couldn't quite fathom. He was absorbed in the movie, captured by it, oblivious to his surroundings, oblivious even to her. His body twitched in empathetic reaction to the action on the screen.

She wished they'd gone someplace she could get popcorn, or better yet, Milkduds. Something with chocolate . . . . What were the people at LACMA thinking, showing movies without having a concession stand?

After a while, she started watching him more than the movie. She should've gone to more movies with him. Maybe then she could've deciphered him better. She began noting the lines and scenes where he'd clear his throat or shift around in his seat; she also noted the lines where she did the same:

I almost envy you – it must be nice to believe in what you're doing. . . . . I'm young, I have no particular responsibilities, I don't intend to cultivate any, either. One is freer without. . . . . For the first time I wake up in the morning with something to live for . . . . You're in love. . . .Yes! . . . . What about him? Has he given you any encouragement? . . . but if he hasn't given you any signs, how do you know? . . . . Well, that's it. I don't know. But he didn't go away. That's one sign. It must mean something. . . . . before, women have never meant anything to me. I'd never met anyone like her. I was all set – I had plans, made arrangements . . . . . when you say, 'Be gay today and live'/ My heart answers cautiously, 'Today will soon be gone'/ . . . . . The nights I've laid awake thinking of you. The things I've wanted to say to you ever since I first laid eyes on you. (He takes her in his arms and ardently kisses her). . . .

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“Oh. . . .” Steele groaned. “Laura, must I? Sleepin’ in a hotel bed is so much more comfortable than sleepin’ in Murphy’s car.” He nodded toward the car down the block.

“Mr. Steele. If Carl shows up, you’re the best one to talk to him.”

“And you’re the best one to help me talk to him.” Steele slid over to her across the seat of the Rabbit. Facing her, he said softly, “Just think. You and I. Side-by-side. Shoulder-to-shoulder. Cheek-to-cheek. Face-to-face.”

Laura was picturing them corps-a-corps.

As Steele’s eyes made a silent request, she started to lift her face to meet his, but as he bent down his head, she stopped him, putting her hands on his chest. “If *we’re* face-to-face, I think Carl would be out of the conversation.”

“Yes, well, three *is* a crowd in such a situation. Perhaps we could talk to him afterwards . . . .” He searched her eyes and again leaned toward her.

She felt the warmth of his body under her hands.

She again pressed on his chest to stop him.

He pulled back. “Ah. No ‘sleeping with the enemy,’ eh?”

Was he her enemy?

After a few moments, he turned away and got out of the car. He gave her a polite smile. “Good night, Miss Holt. Thank you for attending the movie with me.”

She watched him walk down the street as if he owned it.

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Laura sat at her dressing table, brushing her hair, thinking of the movie. She put the brush down and fingered the daisies in the vase in front of her. They were wilting. Steele had picked them up on a whim the week before when he and Laura were at the Grand Central Market and had presented them to her with a flourish. That had been the first time she’d done anything with him so casual as shopping. He’d made it fun, rubbing elbows with the Westside chefs, Valley socialites, Mexican housewives, and the rest of L.A.’s polyglot population, searching with them for the ripest tomatillos and the plumpest grapes, the smell of coffee beans and herbs and spices lingering in the air, the old-fashioned neon signs above them proclaiming that things hadn’t changed here much in the last sixty years. They’d wandered among the bustling crowd through the European-style open stalls filled with produce, past display cases of meats and seafood and cheeses. One vendor sold nothing but beans – there must’ve been at least fifty varieties: reddish brown, glossy black, creamy white, pale green, buff, and orange, and yellow . . . .

She’d been in awe of the enormous tortilla machine – dough was fed in one side and out the other popped the finished tortillas. She’d been disappointed when he’d insisted she not indulge herself in what was reputed to be the biggest burrito in town nor sample a pastry, but she’d been glad she hadn’t when she’d dined on the repast he’d put together from the fruits of their labor. . . .

She sighed and cast another glance at the daisies. Daisies, the symbol of loyal love and innocence. . . .

Tender – his kisses were tender. That’s what she knew about him. He brought to her life romance and sensuality, pleasures she’d denied herself in recent years in her quest for professional success. What else did she know? He had compassion – not worn on his sleeve, but revealed in case after case over the past year. Compassion for ‘the little guy.’ What else? He displayed a streak of opportunism. He had the expert ability to breach buildings and people by exploiting their vulnerabilities – an ability that could be used for either good or for ill, by the detective or by the con artist/thief. An ability that could be used against her.

She stared hard into the mirror. An ‘All-American Girl,’ not an ‘American Beauty,’ stared back: hers was not the glamorous face and figure of a Felicia, or a Lora Raeder, or of one of the women seen on Steele’s arm his first few months here, as any enquiring mind who perused the photos in the gossip section of the Trib could verify. Funny, he hadn’t been linked by the tabloids to anyone in quite some time now – not since their trip to Devil’s Island<sup>37</sup>, not since she’d told him she

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<sup>37</sup>Steele Trap

wouldn't sleep with him without knowing it wasn't just for the moment, without a commitment of sorts. She'd secretly hoped the two facts were connected, but she'd needed more evidence.

Besides, it didn't really make any sense he'd be attracted to her – she was nothing like those other women, either in looks, temperament, or brain power, of which they had none. This was just more evidence he'd been priming her while waiting for an opportunity like this to come along, so he could use her heart against her – No! He was never more honest than when he was kissing her, she was sure of that. . . . Wasn't she?

She angrily swiped at her eyes. If that sonovabitch had used her, he was going to pay dearly for it. She shoved herself away from the dressing table and snatched at the daisies to throw them in the trash. As she touched the stems, some of the petals fell off. She froze.

He loves me, he loves me not –

Stop it. Get some sleep. There's a lot of work to be done in the morning.

She turned off the light and climbed into bed, leaving the wilted daisies in the vase on the table, clutching her pillow to her stomach, wondering what was really going on behind those eyes when he looked at her with such desire.

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Loralei ran a fingernail down the arm of the thoroughly sated – thoroughly exhausted – beautiful man lying asleep next to her in the bed. She smiled. Men had often told her her smile was predatory. She padded over to the bureau naked and from her purse took out lipstick, a compact, and a comb. They were a matching set, continental gilt silver, decorated with enamel, set with cabochon carnelian stones; they dated from the early 1900s. She combed out the tangles from her fine hair; then using the compact's mirror, she carefully applied the lipstick. She ran her tongue slowly over her lips. The color of the lipstick pleased her. Red. Ruby red. Pigeon blood red.

Mac leaned back in the seat of the surveillance car to stretch. He cut his eyes toward the single dim light coming from the mansion, coming from one of the rooms on the upper floor. What the hell was Steele onto here? He looked again at his notes – he was going to have to clean them up a bit before showing them to Steele or that babe, Holt:

7:45 p.m. Tail subject, Lora Raeder.

8:23 p.m. Arrive in Palos Verde Estates at residence of Lionel Ackerman. Subject – wow, babe-and-a-half – goes to front door. Door opened by oldest man still vertical. Bitchin' babe sucks his face off. Yech. Old man survives, but boy, what a body to die for. Christie Brinkley, move over. Door closes. Light in downstairs room comes on, subject and geezer enter room, drapes close. There is a God.

9:00 p.m. Dude drives up in BMW, enters house with a key. License # 3PBV931. Registered to Pierre-Yves Ackerman.



9:05 p.m. Light downstairs goes off, light upstairs comes on. Subject enters room. Bare-nekked! I need cold shower. Wish brought video recorder instead of binoculars. Stud enters, also in the buff. Good times start rolling, but then drapes close.

Mac sat up straight, popped the bubble of gum he'd been blowing, checked the time, and hastily scrawled on his notepad, '10:15 p.m. Goddess is a quick screw – leaves house.' He tailed her back to the Raeder mansion and noted down that another fancy car – must be what Steele called a Horch – entered five minutes later.

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Erich Raeder carefully unwrapped his latest acquisition. He was pleased. He made a mental note to funnel a particularly large commission to his representative in Rio. It would be well spent, after all.

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Laura groped for the phone. "Hullo?"

"Ms. Holt?" the voice chirped in nasal New Yorkese. "Emma Richthofen. I'm so sorry. I forgot about the time difference. Were you asleep? I bet you were. Anyway, my Melisenda decided she was up to coming to work today, and when she brought me my OJ, she overheard me talking on the phone to my friend Muriel Theiss –"

Oh, would this woman ever get to the point?

"– about your investigation of the thefts at the Raeders. I was asking Muriel if she had any inkling who the man was whose tail that whore was after, you see –"

Augh!

"– and anyway, my Melisenda misunderstood. She thought I was talking about the theft Lora Raeder accused *her* of, and now I can't calm her down – she wants to speak to you and I won't get a moment's peace until she does, so would you mind –"

"I'll be happy to speak to Melisenda." Anything to get a moment's peace herself.

Laura heard Mrs. Richthofen call Melisenda to the phone and explain to her who Laura was. She finished with, "Now you tell Ms. Holt everything, dear. Don't be afraid. You're in no trouble. No one believes Ms. Raeder's word against yours. I'll be in the library if you feel you need to ask me any questions before you say something, all right?"

Laura heard the exchange of the phone. "Hello, Melisenda? My name is Laura Holt –"

"I not take anything from that lady –"

"Yes, Melisenda, yes. I understand that."

"I think *that* what she say to make me go because I hear something."

"I'm sorry, Melisenda, I don't understand."

Melisenda expelled a breath of frustration. “Mrs. Richthofen on phone with Mrs. Theiss this morning. You know what I say?”

“Yes.”

“Mrs. Richthofen say to Mrs. Theiss if she know some man so Mr. Raeder make Mrs. Raeder go to California. You know what I say?”

“Yes, I believe I understand. Do *you* know of such a man?”

“Mrs. Richthofen right. That lady mistress of the devil. She always make with the eyes at Mr. Richthofen, you know what I say? But Mr. Richthofen, he good man. He not make the eyes back, you know what I say?”

Laura’s hope of a lead dwindled. “Yes, I understand.”

Melisenda fell silent, but just as Laura was going to say her goodbyes, Melisenda piped up again. “The last day, when I come, I walk by bedroom, get linens from closet. The bedroom door open little. I hear her say, ‘Oh, Sammy,’ then she say something in German I not know, then she say, ‘You bad boy,’ in way woman say when she be . . .”

“Flirtatious?”

“I sorry, I not know – like she make with the eyes, you know what I say?”

“I understand you perfectly, Melisenda.”

“I not try to hear, you know what I say?”

“No, of course you didn’t. Anything else?”

“He say something I not make out. Voice quiet. She get . . .” – Melisenda’s voice dropped to an uncertain whisper – “enojado . . .”

“Angry!” Mrs. Richthofen’s voice rang out from the background.

“She get angry and say ‘I will not, Mr. Gold,’ and she come to door and see me and she angry at me and say, ‘Get your things, Melisenda,’ and she make me go.”

“Did you see what the man looked like?”

“No. I see nothing.”

“Melisenda, you’ve been very helpful. Could I speak with Mrs. Richthofen again?” When Mrs. Richthofen came back on the line, Laura asked her, “Do you know this Sammy Gold?”

“She must mean Samuel Goldschmidt. Oh, my heavens. Now that *would* be playing with fire. I will continue to press the grapevine about this. And don’t worry, I shall be the soul” – Mrs. Richthofen’s voice again sang out the word – “of discretion.”

Laura smiled. “I’d appreciate your grapevine’s input, Mrs. Richthofen. Now, what did you mean, playing with fire?”

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Laura hummed to herself as she came into the suite of Remington Steele Investigations and sat at her desk to go over the information she'd just gathered. The entire day had gone well, considering. Murphy was working on the insurance angle; she'd filled in that important missing piece; Ed Hines had gone down to the Clerk of Court, Civil Files to check for any lawsuits involving the Raeders; she'd continued making the rounds of City Clerk, Clerk of Court, Tax Assessor, and whoever else had popped into mind as she pursued the Raeders and the other players in this case –

Her humming stopped. The 'considering' part concerned Steele. She wasn't sure *what* he'd been up to. She'd spoken with Steele's sweet-faced friend, Officer Mac McCarthy – he hadn't seen Steele. She'd checked with Bernice – Steele hadn't put in an appearance all day, nor had anyone been able to reach him at his hotel room.

His *hotel* room. Instead of putting his apartment back into its usual apple-pie order, he'd apparently abandoned it. Not a very good sign. She wished she could've had Murphy bring him straight from the stakeout to the office. She wished she could keep a twenty-four-hour watch on him. She wished she could just keep him tied up in a chair until all this was over.

She cleared her mind of that rather satisfying image, as well as of the remarks he'd likely come back with if she were to suggest it to him, and took out her legal pad from one of the desk drawers, intending to outline the possible scenarios. She drew two tangent circles in the center of the page. In the left circle she wrote 'Lora Raeder' on the top and 'con game' and 'blackmail victim' on the bottom. Boy, that woman was sure up to her old tricks – Laura gave a mental wince at the wordplay – if what McCarthy saw was any indication. Was Erich aware of her shenanigans? In the top of the right circle she wrote down his name as the next player in this drama. In the bottom of his circle she wrote a list indicating the possible roles *he* might've played in the thefts: 'insurance fraud' and 'blackmail victim.' She drew a circle in the upper right corner and just wrote 'Carl' since she had no justification for assigning any role to him. Similarly, in a circle in the lower right corner she wrote only 'the person who bumped into Ms. Raeder.' In the lower left corner she drew a circle for her latest information. She wrote 'Goldschmidt' and 'blackmailer.'

On the upper left of the page, she made one final circle. She chewed on her pencil. She decided to first draw dotted lines connecting various circles, with relationships between the players written above them. She chewed on her pencil again, finally returning to the last circle. She decided to leave the upper semicircle blank – she was certainly not going to identify this man as 'Remington Steele.' She heaved a sigh, and in the lower semicircle she wrote 'professional thief – challenge, financial gain.' She tapped her pencil on her desk. Felicia had tried to blackmail him into stealing 'The Five Nudes of Cairo.' Could Carl have blackmailed him into these thefts? Was that why he'd thwarted her attempts to find out more about Carl?

She started to put pencil to pad to write 'blackmail victim' in his circle but stopped when she heard his cheery greeting from out in the reception room.

"Good evening, Miss Wolfe. Here rather late, aren't you?"

Laura suspected that by now Bernice would actually miss it if Steele started using her correct name and that her automatic irritated response, “For the last time, it’s ‘Fuxe,’” was just part of a game the two played.

“And where have *you* been?”

“Just seeing to some contingency plans, Miss Wolfe.”

Laura heard Bernice huff and then call out, “Laura, I’m leaving.” She heard Bernice exit the suite and Steele enter his office. She grabbed her pad and went in through the connecting door, unable to stop herself from smiling in return as he looked up at her from behind his desk and grinned.

“His name is Samuel Goldschmidt.” Somewhere in the back of her mind it registered that Steele’s grin had faltered – disappeared entirely, in fact – at her words. But she was too excited by her discovery to really take note. “He’s a fierce competitor of Raeder’s, just as successful. They tend to stay out of each other’s way, at least directly. Otherwise, they’d probably annihilate one other. So they settle for side skirmishes. Evidently Lora was one of those battles.

“In the blackmail scenario you’re the convenient scapegoat, set up by Raeder or Goldschmidt to take the fall. Raeder, it would have to be Raeder. He’s the one familiar with how you operate. A man like that – I’ll bet he knows more about you than I do.” She was pacing as she spoke, tapping her pen on her legal pad and frowning at it in concentration. She hadn’t been aware he’d come up to her. He snatched the pad from her fingers and held it over his head as she made futile grabs for it.

“Uh, uh, uh . . . More lists, Miss Holt?” He reminded her of those schoolyard bullies who’d grab her schoolwork and hold it out of her reach, infuriating her. She gave up, growled, and whacked him on the arm. It was his own fault if he didn’t like what he saw on the pad. Steele’s face was unreadable as he looked it over. “Well. This certainly appears to summarize all the information we have at hand.”

Before she could reply, Murphy burst into the office. “I have some bad news for at least one of us.”

Laura quickly turned to him. “What is it, Murphy?”

Murphy’s green-brown eyes crackled with anger. “The burglary unit got a hot tip. An anonymous patron of LACMA has loaned his recently acquired painting by” – Murphy consulted his notes – “Georges Braque for display.” He jerked his head toward Steele. “Turns out that patron is none other than *him*, and the police are having a tough time discovering just how he came into possession of this painting in the past few days. Turns out it’s worth \$2.8 million.”

Murphy’s voice turned hard. “You’ve been well-paid for that ruby and mosaic, haven’t you, *Steele*.”

Steele made no reply. He stood there, eyes fixed on Murphy, lips slightly parted.

Murphy regarded Steele bitterly. “And there’s more. I talked to Mr. Goldschmidt. He was pleased to hear of the thefts, though he denied any involvement in them. And said he’s heard of

‘Remington Steele.’ Said he looks remarkably like a fellow he once tried to do business with – a ‘Michael O’Leary.’ Evidently this O’Leary promised a painting to him – something by a, a . . . Francis Hale?” Murphy started paging through his notes.

“Frans Hals,” Steele softly corrected.

“You would know,” Murphy retorted. His voice rose. “This O’Leary failed to deliver. Made off with the money Mr. Goldschmidt advanced him, in fact. Mr. Goldschmidt was very disappointed. Said one day O’Leary would get what’s coming to him. Know anything about it, *Steele*?”

Damn him. Damn herself for ever getting involved with him. Laura’s hands convulsed into fists as she awaited his explanation.

Steele looked from Murphy to Laura, then down at the pad in his hand. His face turned to stone. He took out his pen and drew two circles, one under the circle without a name in it – *his* circle – the other at bottom center. In the bottom one he wrote ‘Michael O’Leary’ and ‘professional thief, etc.’ He drew a line from it to Goldschmidt’s circle but didn’t write anything on it. In the other circle he wrote ‘Steele’ and ‘painting by Braque.’ He handed the pad back to her and moved toward the door. “I’ll leave it to you to connect the dots.”

Laura took a step after him and yanked him around to face her. “Oh, no. You’re not just walking out of here. Murphy, give us a minute.”

Murphy obviously would’ve preferred to stay for the kill, but with a grim ‘I told you so’ look, he nodded at Laura. His eyes raked over Steele and his jaw worked, but he left without another word.

Steele remained where he was, in her grip, a cold and remote look on his face that she’d never seen before. It obliterated any trace of ‘Remington Steele’; who did that leave? She let go of him and demanded, “What do you know of the Braque painting?”

“Braque is a cubist master. Not my style.” His tone was indifferent.

Laura felt like smacking him. “What do you know of it?” She glared at him. Icy eyes looked back. She didn’t waver, determined to stare him down if it took all night. Interminable seconds crawled by.

Steele bit his lip, bowed his head, and shook it. “Nothing, Laura. Really.” His voice was once again soft.

“And Goldschmidt?”

He inhaled and let out a long breath. “I was hired to recover a painting for him.”

“You mean steal it.”

“Let’s not quibble over terminology.” He turned and went to the desk and sat on its edge. “It was a painting taken from his father’s collection, first by the French, then by the Nazis. Before I could get my hands on it, it was stolen again. I couldn’t trace it. Mr. Goldschmidt wanted me to repay the advanced fees, but . . . I’d already spent them getting the information to locate the painting

and the supplies needed for its . . . liberation. He wasn't very understanding."

She scrutinized him closely. He was looking at her squarely. A good liar would. She kept her eyes on his face but noticed his hands were lightly clasped in front of him, the thumb of one hand rubbing the other. He was hiding something. She'd seen him do that only a few times before, when he couldn't quite suppress some agitation. In fact, the last time she'd seen that was when she'd been asking a member of Wallace's crew about – "Does Carl know Goldschmidt?"

His eyes widened, and he licked his lip. He said nothing for a moment, and then with obvious reluctance he admitted, "Carl recruited me for that job. He'd worked for Goldschmidt a long time, recovering pieces of his collection. He was 'hot on the trail' of another piece, however, and asked me to do this job for him."

"Have you done 'recoveries' *with* Carl?"

A few seconds passed. "Yes."

"How much? How often?"

A flash of resentment crossed his face, and the words came out sharp. "Now and again." He held up his hand. "I'm sorry. . . . Let me rephrase that. . . . I did some recovery work with him at various times in the past, but the last time was over a year ago."

"When was the Goldschmidt job?"

"Before that."

She gave up on trying to pin him down further. "I take it Carl was good at these jobs."

"Oh, yes. The two of us together were unstoppable." She pressed her lips together. "Bad choice of words, eh?"

"You know how this looks, don't you? Carl's your ideal accomplice. You could be working for Goldschmidt, ripping off his rival while paying off your debt. Or . . ." – she paced for a moment and whirled on him – "Carl worked closely with you on this. He could've changed your design at some point so he could break into the display case the night of the party, couldn't he?"

Steele just looked at her.

"Where were the designs kept? You told me you had them. Was that true?"

Steele broke his gaze, then looked her full in the face. "No," he said softly. "Carl kept them."

"Carl set you up for Goldschmidt – out of loyalty to him, or debt. Carl knows how you operate. Goldschmidt strikes a double blow – against you and against Raeder."

Steele stood up abruptly. "No." His voice was emphatic. "Carl wouldn't set me up. He's my friend."

"'Honor among thieves,' Mr. Steele?"

"Something like that. And besides, Carl is devoted to Wallace's cause. He moved from the shady

side of the street nearly a year ago.”

“People have been known to slip back into the shadows.” She held his eyes.

The phone rang.

“Steele here.” He listened, glanced quickly at Laura and away again. “Thank you.” He turned to Laura. “That was . . . a friend. The ruby’s been found. In the men’s room at LACMA, near the theatre. The police had been waiting for someone to pick up the drop, but decided they’d been made. They’re on their way now to arrest me.”

Laura felt like she’d been kicked in the stomach.

Steele moved toward the door.

She grabbed him. “Where are you going?”

“To do what I suggested to you before.”

She gripped his arm tighter.

“Look, Laura, I can do it alone. Keep you out of it. I realize ‘Remington Steele’ shouldn’t evade arrest, but I’ll not willingly be the Judas goat leading this agency to the slaughter. Laura, I’m going to spend a last few hours of freedom looking for your proof. At least it will narrow down the possibilities for you to explore after I’m arrested. You can go with me, leave me to do it alone, or tell the police where to find me when they get here. It’s up to you.” He pried her hand from his arm and strode out the door.

She knew what she should do. She couldn’t do it. Dear God, what was wrong with her? A liar and a thief. Why did she listen to this liar and thief? Well, she’d make sure of one thing: he’d be no Judas goat – a Judas goat always escaped unscathed.

She tore off after him. How would they get past the Raeders’ perimeter security, installed before Steele had been hired? ‘Child’s play,’ he’d told her yesterday when suggesting a break-in. Of course it would be: he’d had six weeks to ponder the problem, and she had no doubts that he had. He could no more stop himself from working out how to breach security systems than she could stop herself from puzzling out a case. How would they do it? What new tricks would Steele teach her tonight? ‘Barriers are only psychological,’ he’d once told her. ‘Every barrier has its cracks, and every crack can be widened enough to let me through.’

And once they’d breached the perimeter and gotten onto the Raeders’ grounds, they’d be home-free. He’d know how to bypass the alarm system he’d put in, how to pick the lock – piece of cake, for him – how to break into the safes – again, piece of cake.

What would they find in the safes?

She caught up to him and grabbed his arm, but even before he could turn around, she’d wiped the grin of anticipation off her face. What was wrong with her? This was no game. Her agency was on the line. Because of him.

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“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” Murphy groused in a whisper as the three of them, dressed in black, crouched outside the electrified security fence surrounding the Raeder estate. “This is never going to work. We’re going to get caught. We’re going to go to jail. The Remington Steele Agency is going to come crashing down upon our heads.”

“Don’t worry, old boy, I know this place in and out as if I’d laid every stone myself.”

“That’s what’s gotten us in trouble in the first place. . . . Isn’t there any other way to get around their fence?”

“Oh, there are a number of ways. For instance, these posts are probably too far away from each other to maintain an even current, so there may be ‘dead spots’ in the middle areas we could use to our advantage. I prefer not to risk that, though. We’ll just exploit Mother Nature.” And besides, this way would be a hell of a lot more fun.

Steele moved off, Laura right behind him. He smiled to himself as he finally heard Murphy’s reluctant footsteps as well.

It was so peaceful here. The stillness of the air. The clean smell of the trees. A fine night for a moonlight requisition. He swore he could even smell ‘Cymbeline,’ a heavily scented English rose found in the nearby English-style rose garden. It put him in mind of an English rose of a woman who – ah, yes, this was the tree he wanted.

A coastal live oak stood on the outside of the estate, on its north side. He’d have preferred a tree less full, but it had nice large branches and a broad wide-spreading crown, offering many potential targets. And it was situated perfectly. He could work around the problems it presented. At least it wasn’t a eucalyptus – he had no desire to end up smelling like Vicks. The area was sheltered by trees from any view of the street, of any neighbours, and of the mansion itself. Across from the oak, on the estate grounds and some thirty feet away, stood a similar tree. Steele turned and grinned slyly at his companions as Murphy straggled up. “Another flaw in the system.”

He removed his knapsack and took out a coil of high-tensile rope with a three-pronged hook at its end. He hadn’t been lying when he’d told Bernice he’d been spending the day preparing for contingencies. Murphy had been a little miffed when he learned Steele had anticipated his help and broken into his place to find suitable clothing. It hadn’t been easy. All those plaids. Laura had merely rolled her eyes at him when he’d presented her with the outfit taken from her home. He’d first had to shake the coppers that had been tailing him, but that hadn’t been hard – he had plenty of experience with that. His other supplies he’d gotten with the help of a friend, a friend whose personal loyalty to him still transcended both his former apparent conversion to Truth, Justice, and the American Way as Remington Steele and his current apparent abandonment of those ideals.

He put the knapsack back on and tossed the hook over the lowest branch. He shinnied up the rope, then continued on up the tree, reaching for the thickest branches. About thirty feet up, the foliage thinned out. He took another larger coil of rope from the knapsack and moved out onto one of the branches as far as he dared. After getting the feel of balancing himself on the branch swaying below his feet as he swung his arm, he let go and watched the hook with its coil arc



through the starlit night and find the other tree. Tugging hard, he made sure it was secure, then tied the part he held around the trunk.

He reached into his pack and pulled out a body harness. What had Carl called it? ‘A giant jockstrap.’ Americans. He fastened himself into it and attached a retention lanyard to both it and the rope. There wasn’t enough angle in the rope to use a travelling block, so he’d have to use upper body strength to get himself across. Should his grip slip, the harness would prevent him from plunging to the ground. If he’d been alone, he might have forgone it. His gloves, his second skin, provided the padding he’d need. He’d leave the knapsack containing the harnesses for the others. Last one over would bring it along.

He eyed his cohorts. He couldn’t resist. He reached for an acorn and aimed for Murphy’s head. A most gratifying “Ouch!” came in response. “Eyes sharp, Chicken Little!” He laughed quietly. He couldn’t quite make out Murphy’s response, but it seemed to involve a request that he perform some anatomically impossible act. He grinned again. Just another small act of revenge against a man he’d been unlikely to ever completely win over anyway. So petty. So . . . satisfying.

He started hand-over-hand across the rope. It was fun. It reminded him of the exercises he’d done in his carny days, when he’d done some catching for the trapeze act. He’d also been ‘The Great Savini,’ the fire-breathing dragon. He’d helped put up the tents, rigged circus equipment, and performed whatever other duties had been assigned to him during the church call<sup>38</sup>: shill, inside man, talker, grifter. Especially the latter two. Talker, using slick sucker-words to seduce the live ones, making them believe that yes, you can get something for nothing. . . . Grifter, running one of the gaffed games – the alibi stores, the G- joints, the razzle games. No one had ever won as much as a jelly baby at one of his joints. They’d never let him run the games aimed at the little ones, though: fish pond, coin toss, and so on. He’d cheat there too, but in favour of the customer. Couldn’t have that – they weren’t running a Sunday School Show<sup>39</sup>, after all.

Once he’d arrived at the other tree, he sloughed off his harness and reeled in the rope that Laura, now up in the other tree, was paying out to him. At last, a firm resistance told him the other end had been tied to the tree. Keeping the line taut, he wound the middle part of the rope around the tree a few times so that it angled down gently from the first tree.

He swung the end of the rope with its hook back at the first tree, trusting that Laura had climbed back down to safety. Now Laura would knot the rope so that it would give a gentle angle for their ride back. Both she and Murphy could ride on travelling blocks with attached hand-straps to get them across, instead of the method he’d used, and the three of them could use the blocks on the way back.

When the job was done, all they’d have to do was untie one end of the rope on the outside tree, flip it over the fence, and pull on the other end. The rope would slip free of this tree and could be reeled in. He could snap the last part over the fence if he timed it just right – and he always had in

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<sup>38</sup>Pre-opening briefing where jobs are assigned (Carny lingo)

<sup>39</sup>I’ll bet you can guess this refers to an honest carnival.

the past. But even if it touched the fence, it wouldn't set off an alarm. Fence sensors weren't *that* sensitive, since otherwise nuisance alarms would be sounding all the time: fence sensors were designed to protect from cutting, climbing, and other methods of breaching the fence itself.

He tugged on the rope, a signal that he was ready.

Laura glided into view. Truth be told, this was the reason he'd chosen this method. He loved watching her slim form cut through the night. It reminded him of the time they'd . . . borrowed . . . 'The Five Nudes of Cairo,' and she'd coasted down his makeshift aerial ropeway into his arms.

He caught her at the end here, too, but her grin of exhilaration had disappeared as soon as she'd spied him looking at her. He let her slide down his body and tried to get her to recapture the moment. "A rousing experience, eh?" He wished she'd smile up at him and let her hands linger on his shoulders a moment longer, as she'd done that other time; instead, she avoided his eyes. With a sigh, he helped her out of her harness. He looked back at the other tree and turned his thoughts to the job at hand. "Come on," he said to Laura. Murphy could catch himself.

After climbing down the tree, Steele followed Murphy's path with his eyes. An adequate performance, but Steele didn't give him any style points. After Murphy joined them on the ground and gave him the knapsack, Steele led them south to the front of the house.

They reached the driveway, which ran parallel to the mansion, and then continued east to a point directly opposite the mansion's main entrance. Steele nodded to Murphy, then turned to lead Laura to the garage at the northeast corner of the house. But Laura didn't follow him. He turned around to see Murphy's hand on her arm. Laura waved Steele on. He hesitated, then nodded and headed to the garage by himself.

Murphy and Laura crouched among the trees, talking in whispers.

"I don't get it, Laura. We should've just continued as we've been doing, going step-by-step. If Steele's innocent, he should just let himself be arrested and trust us to figure this out." Murphy really wanted to say: 'How did you let that con man talk you into this? Why can't you see through him? Here more and more evidence is piling up against the guy and you're *still* going along with his schemes.' But he didn't. Such an attack on Steele would only drive her to defend him, because of what she *wanted* to believe. The only way to get her to see reason was to use reason against her.

"Murphy, now we've uncovered motives for the Raeders to have staged the thefts. This is the most direct way to learn if they're involved. And we certainly couldn't do it this way ourselves if Mr. Steele were in jail."

"You say that like it's a bad thing. Can't you see, even if this is all on the level – or as much as anything is with this guy – once again he's seducing you, subverting you, drawing you to his side of the street? B&E's <sup>40</sup>, safecracking – you think nothing of them now. You've stolen artwork

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<sup>40</sup>Breaking and Entering

and broken into a Federal Reserve Bank – you even suggested that yourself, for God’s sakes. And that’s not the half of the shady activities we’ve been drawn into under this guy’s influence. The line we’ve been walking in the name of justice has grown thinner and thinner, and this is the thinnest line yet. It’s not worth the risk to the agency’s reputation – Laura, ” – he tried to catch her arm as she stalked off – “at least let me be the one to go inside with him.”

She didn’t give him a backwards glance. Well, that had gone well. So much for trying to stay calm and reasonable and not attacking Steele. But Laura needed to wake up, to take full command of her agency again. No matter if this guy was perfectly innocent, he was still way beyond control, not worth his help, not worth the splash he made as their front man. They needed to get back to calmer, saner days. The days when black was black and white was white.

Murphy forced himself to breathe, to relax his jaw, his fists, all the muscles he’d been subconsciously clenching. He glanced toward Steele’s position, though he knew he wouldn’t see him. After all that guy was putting Laura through, if he was the thief, it was going to be the greatest pleasure to take him down, put him away for a long, long time. Hopefully, Laura wouldn’t get hurt in the process . . .

. . . or if she did, she’d finally know who it was she could turn to.

Steele noted Laura’s expression was even chillier as she joined him in the shadows near the garage – he hadn’t thought that possible. How much of her shutting him out was due to anger at the revelations of his past with Carl and his current choice of action? How much was due to her need to distance herself from him in case he was the thief? How much was due to her overall regret for ever having met him? He didn’t know and he didn’t dare to ask. His standing in her eyes certainly hadn’t been helped by whatever Murphy had just said to her.

Murphy. He peered towards Murphy’s position, trying to see movement. Nothing. Since Laura didn’t indicate otherwise, Murphy must still be with them. Steele’s view of the entrance to the mansion was obscured by the portico and landscaped bushes and trees. He needed Murphy, hidden by the trees that lined the driveway, to signal Laura when Raeder had entered the house. Then the break-in would begin.

“From Ms. Raeder, I gathered Erich is the epitome of regimentation, which I’m sure comes as no surprise,” Steele whispered. “She joked she can set her watch by when he gets up, eats his meals, performs certain daily activities, leaves for work, returns home, and goes to bed.”

Laura shook her head. “How did *you* ever get along with him so well? Anyone trying to set their watch by *your* activities would have to change time zones from day to day.”

“Why, Laura. Mr. Raeder appreciates quality. He makes allowances for an artistic temperament. A trait some others would do well to emulate.” Steele smiled and waggled his eyebrows at her, trying to get her to smile back.

Laura rolled her eyes at him.

He gave up and stared out into the night. He prayed Raeder would stick to his daily routine. If so,

they could count on him arriving from his office at 11 p.m. in his 1939 Horch 855 Special Roadster – one of only seven such cars ever built and one of only three such cars still in existence. Perhaps even the one rumoured to have been given to Eva Braun by Hitler. At any rate, worth over a million dollars. It was a beauty.

Steele again bent his head down to whisper in Laura's ear. "He'll have to disarm the security system at the front entrance. No doubt he'll reactivate it once he's entered the house. Of course, there'll be a delay before the alarm system is rearmed – two minutes." A tiny lie about the time there. "When he goes upstairs," – and that should be immediately, since at the party Ms. Raeder had confided with a wink that she was on his schedule as soon as he came home from work – "he'll activate the motion sensors in the front hall. There'll be a three minute power-up delay." Another tiny time lie.

They continued the wait in silence. Steele took a small slug of cognac from his flask and offered it to Laura. Unlike the first time he'd offered her such<sup>41</sup>, she accepted it without hesitation, taking a healthy swallow. Soon, a car entered the drive and started to make its way up the long, serpentine driveway, its headlights flickering through the clumps of Italian cypresses. That bit of landscaping, at least, should please Raeder. The narrow trees, twenty to sixty feet high, stood like sentinels along the driveway – striking, strictly vertical, columnar forms of perfect symmetry.

The garage door slid upwards, and Steele and Laura ducked through as soon as they could. They took up positions to the side, where they could remain in the dark. The driver had to be taken care of, there was no help for it. Steele heard the car stop to let Raeder out, then continue the remaining short distance to the garage. The driver never knew what hit him as he exited the car. Steele caught him, laid him down gently, and secured him.

Laura called out quietly, "Now!" She ran to join him. He checked his watch. Laura held her penlight on the door while he worked on the lock.

Ah, life had been so much simpler when he was a child, when a large rock through the back window had been his method of choice. But that was so crude. Early on, by trial and error and lots of practice, he'd taught himself the rudiments of picking. He'd learned how to visualize all the pieces inside the lock, how to feel the slight movements of the plug and pins, how to judge the amount of pressure to apply, how to feel or hear – sometimes it was hard to tell which sense he was using – the pins falling into position. A few paperclips, a screwdriver – and his youthful imagination – had transformed him into a spy, working in Her Majesty's service. Or for La Résistance Française. Or American Intelligence. It depended upon what movie he'd sneaked into recently. No matter that his take was geared towards his own survival and not that of the Free World.

Most locks he could still breach with those same simple implements he'd used in his youth, but with the right tools – tension wrench, several different picks with different heads, each suitable for a particular kind of lock and picking technique – it was easier and he could break into almost anything.

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<sup>41</sup>Thou Shalt Not Steele ('The Five Nudes of Cairo' caper)

Of course, to pick any kind of lock one had to be completely familiar with its design.

Even if he hadn't been in charge of the mansion's security, if he'd merely been a guest at the party, he'd have made himself familiar with this lock. Automatic habit: if he came across a lock with which he wasn't familiar – and there were few – he'd go out and get one of the same design and practice on it until he'd mastered it. He found the exercise stimulating, like solving a puzzle.

He'd practised on this particular type a great deal. Still, it was a highly complex one. . . .

The door opened. He quickly pulled Laura inside, closed the door, and checked his watch. Fifty seconds. His best time yet on this particular type of lock. They'd made it with ten seconds to spare – the little lie to Laura so she wouldn't panic as the minute mark approached. He led her inside, into the darkened kitchen.

He briefly shined his torch towards her and hid a smile of wistful amusement. She looked slightly flushed, eyes dilated, breathing elevated. . . . The woman was definitely . . . excited. He'd seen this before, when he'd taken her for a walk on the wild side. Those other times, at least part of that excitement had been directed at him – he'd caught her looking him up and down in his form-fitting black 'working clothes.' A heightened air of danger had seemed to be an aphrodisiac for her. Unfortunately, it'd been just at those times he hadn't been able to take advantage of her willingness. He'd had thoughts it might be worth it to stage such a situation, to see how far he could go. His eyes fell towards the rapid rise and fall of her small breasts –

He tore his gaze away. This was hardly the time to fantasize, and a fantasy it would now always remain. He moved off, Laura following. They went through the kitchen, through the long, narrow pantry, through the small Porcelain Foyer, past the Dining Room, and into the narrow corridor that opened up into the front hall. The Library, their goal, lay almost directly across from the front entrance. A motion detector was placed to monitor the activity in the hallway.

Routine had triumphed. Raeder had gone upstairs, and the motion detectors had been activated. Steele checked his watch. Two minutes. They still had thirty seconds to spare before the motion detectors powered up, not the sixty Laura would think – another harmless lie to prevent undue tension. All was quiet in the house. He started into the hall, but Laura stopped him.

"Don't we need masks?"

"No. No security cameras."

"That seems strange."

"Not if you want to make sure that . . . certain items don't get recorded." Steele went to the command console and disarmed the motion detectors and the alarm system. He joined Laura at the library door, and they slipped inside. After closing the door, he turned on a small lamp on a stand to his immediate right. He also flicked a switch that turned on two electric candelabra, one mounted on each side of the oversized marble fireplace to his right, along the west wall. The candelabra bathed the room in a soft glow and highlighted the huge portrait of Raeder hanging over the mantel. Up until the day before the party, the portrait had been of Admiral Raeder, and the one mounted above a short bookcase standing against the north wall of the library had been

that of the admiral's wife. Now, Erich and Lora's portraits, newly completed, brought by Lora from New York when she'd come, replaced them. Steele moved to the left and turned on the small lamp atop the bookcase.

"Why didn't you just turn on the chandelier? The light would be blocked by those curtains, and you could see what you're doing better."

"Mmm. Some activities are best conducted in the shadows." He went to the antique mahogany roll-top desk. With its intricate, richly detailed gilt bronze mounts, the desk was a striking contrast to the austere pieces usually crafted by Conrad Mauter. He pressed a button Herr Mauter would've been surprised to find in his desk. A most satisfying click told him he was now free to swing Raeder's portrait out to reveal the safe behind it.

A lady's writing table, crafted by Öben, made of oak and covered with delicate floral marquetry of various woods, contained a similar button. A press and a click told him her ladyship's safe, behind her portrait, was now also accessible. He moved to it, shrugging the knapsack off. He placed the pack on the floor by the safe, then absently ran the fingers of his right hand over some of the books in the bookcase while he swung the portrait out with his left.

The safes each rated a 'thirty' – they could resist drill hammers, screw drivers, even acetylene torches for thirty minutes of concentrated assault from a skilled UL tester, who usually had more knowledge, better tools, and more freedom than a burglar. Under realistic conditions and properly installed, such a safe could withstand hours of assault by a typical burglar. Steele smiled. He was not a typical burglar. His knowledge of safecracking more than equalled that of a UL tester. As for equipment, well, there were safecrackers who specialized in blow-up jobs, carry outs, chopping, punch jobs, and rip jobs. He, however, specialized in the more refined and artistic click job. Moreover, he was one of the few so skilled at this that, normally, to hear/feel the tumblers click into place, he only needed to press his ear to the safe as he turned the combination lock – no stethoscope required.

Besides, he'd already been at these safes. On those practice runs, his fingers had itched terribly as he'd gazed at the fortune in jewellery lying inside.

Even though the combination had no doubt been changed since he'd worked on the safe, he knew its sounds intimately. The safe opened.

An alarm went off.

"What happened?" Laura wailed. She nearly shook Steele, who appeared to be in shock.

An expression flickered across his face, too quick for her to read. He collected himself and replied, "A miscalculation on my part." He reached into the safe. After an eternity of a few seconds, the alarm switched off. The damage, however, was already done.

"We've got to get out of here!" This time, she did grab his arm.

His eyes held a hunted look. He straightened and swallowed. "You go, Miss Holt. I'll be right

behind you.” He shoved the knapsack into her hands and turned back to the safe. “If I find proof the Raeders are involved, you’ll get it.”

She hesitated. He was as good as caught. She knew it, and she knew he knew it. All events pointed to him, even if he now made good his escape. *She* couldn’t afford to get caught: it was up to her now to salvage what she could of the reputation of her agency – and to save his hide, if he was innocent. She turned to run, but turned back, spun him around, pulled his head down, and kissed him savagely, trying in that instant to imprint herself so thoroughly on his psyche that he’d never be free of her, fearing that she’d leave no deeper impression than a line drawn on water.

Steele laid gentle hands on her and looked shaken as they quickly broke apart. “And here was I, beginning to think you didn’t like me.” The words echoed those he’d spoken before, when they’d temporarily taken ‘The Five Nudes of Cairo,’ but the nakedly sincere tone of his hoarse whisper was nothing like the bantering one he’d used then.

She, too, repeated the words she’d spoken then. “I do. Some.” Too much. Too much for her own good. She ran out of the room, out of the mansion, retracing the path they’d taken on their way in. She collected Murphy, who followed without question. They ran back to the tree, climbed it, and swung back to the tree on the other side. The entire time the rest of that long-ago conversation with Steele rang in her ears:

‘I do. Some.’

‘But not all?’

‘Only the parts I know.’

‘And the parts you don’t?’

‘They frighten me a little.’

‘Fear can be a most intoxicating brew.’

But she wasn’t intoxicated by this. He’d just spun her world out of her control. She wanted to scream, ‘Who are you that you have done this to me? Who are you that I *let* you do this to me?’

“Why isn’t Steele with you? What happened?”

She peered at Murphy through the branches, trying to catch her breath. “The alarm went off when he opened one of the safes. He stayed to search it.”

“Oh, this is just great, Laura. This is just part of his plan. Now he’s alone in the safes, taking who knows what. Things he can convert to cash. He’ll be gone before we can say ‘goodbye Remington Steele Investigations.’”

Anxiety twisted Laura’s guts.

Murphy blew out a breath in disgust and started to climb down.

Laura glanced down at Murphy, then had all she could do to hold back a yell. “Murphy! You took the pack! How’s he supposed to get back?”

He stopped and looked up at her. “You really think he’s coming back?”

She did not know.

Murphy’s tone became more conciliatory. “He doesn’t need it, Laura. You saw him go over. I couldn’t leave it in that tree. What if we have to remove the rope? If they discover the pack, they’ll know he had help. And they’ll be pretty damn sure it was us.” Murphy climbed back up to her.

Suddenly, the floodlights on top of the mansion’s roof lit up, turning night into day.

“Give me the pack!” Using her penlight, she fumbled in it, hunting for binoculars. Steele had packed several types. She found the right ones – they made objects appear about fifteen times closer than they actually were. She handed an identical pair to Murphy and then climbed up higher in the tree. She had to see. She trained the binoculars on the mansion, sweeping from the front entrance to the garage door and back again. Where *was* he? What was taking so long?

She saw Steele tear straight out the front door, hurtle the perfectly manicured hedge of Japanese boxwood at the front of the portico, splash straight through the large fountain pool in the middle of the circular driveway turnabout, and leap its side. It suddenly occurred to her that the shape of the fountain was the same as the one in the unicorn tapestry. The fountain – the place where the unicorn was found but not taken, so that the hunt could continue.

Steele had passed the thin clump of trees lining the driveway and now had a relatively clear path to them – about fourteen hundred feet of parkland and gardens. Though he liked to project an air of indolence, she knew he could run like hell when the need arose. He was practically smoking.

She froze. The bark of a dog. It came into sight. An unknown addition to the security system, another unwelcome surprise for the night. A dog of a breed thought to be descended from the old Roman dogs that fought against lions in the arenas. A mere human didn’t stand a chance.

“A rotten weiler,” Laura whispered. She’d thought that’s what the adults had called such a dog when the three-year-old brother of a childhood best friend had been horribly disfigured during an unprovoked attack. Through her binoculars she watched the blocky body of the one hundred-and-twenty pound powerhouse bound along the grounds, muscles rippling under the shiny black coat with rust markings, slavering foam from its jaws spraying back onto its muzzle and head, its inky shadow looming larger and larger.

Steele would never outrun it.

“Where’s that crazy bastard going?”

Murphy’s words caused her to tear her gaze from the dog and seek out Steele. He’d altered his path, running to the west, cutting back toward the driveway. Closing the distance to the dog. Oh, God. “Away from us. He knows he can’t make it. He’s drawing attention away from us.” Oh, God.

She heard him cry out, saw him twist his body away from the dog just before impact. She echoed that cry as she saw him go down under its weight. She saw him struggle with the dog.



She scrambled down the tree, fighting Murphy as she tried to grab hold of the ropes to return to the estate.

“Laura, Laura, are you crazy? You can’t help him now. It won’t do him any good if we’re caught too.”

“That dog will rip him to shreds!”

The estate was preternaturally silent.

Murphy unpinned her arms and looked through his binoculars. “No. Look.”

She sought Steele out with her own binoculars. He lay splayed out, motionless, the dog draped across his thighs.

She looked at Murphy. “We can’t just leave him. He’s injured.”

“Laura, be reasonable.” Murphy reeled in the rope. No trace would be left of their having been there.

Laura glued her eyes to the binoculars. Raeder appeared. She saw him reach Steele’s position. He must’ve said something because the dog got up and started back to the house. She watched Steele struggle to his feet. She gasped in horror as he unexpectedly, desperately, savagely lunged at Raeder. Something flashed in the night – a knife. Steele had it at Raeder’s throat, yelling out words that must’ve been German. The dog flung itself at him again, nearly knocking both him and Raeder to the ground. She heard Raeder spit out commands to the dog, which ceased its attack, growled menacingly, but headed back to the house – the perfect German dog under Raeder’s perfect control.

She stood frozen, watching while Steele, staggering, forced Raeder back toward the mansion, then past the front entrance to the garage.

She heard the moans of sirens; the police were rallying for the capture. How long had that sound been there at the edge of her consciousness? She heard the sounds of a car starting inside the Raeders’ garage, then saw one recklessly careen down the driveway. The car clipped the gate as it went through; Steele hadn’t waited for it to fully open.

Murphy grabbed her arm. “Come on, Laura!”

They made their way unnoticed to Murphy’s car, parked some distance away, and drove off as a police cruiser slued into Raeder’s driveway, tires squealing.

They drove for a while in stunned silence.

“Crazy bastard. . . .”

Laura stirred at the whisper and stared at Murphy. He had a choke-hold on the steering wheel.

He glanced at her. “All right. For the sake of argument, say the alarm going off wasn’t intentional. How could *that* happen? *He* put the damned thing in.”

“He said it was a miscalculation on his part.”

Murphy shook his head. “I don’t buy it. He wouldn’t make a mistake on his own system.”

Laura thought for a moment. She turned toward him. “You’re right. . . . Someone else. Someone else made alterations.”

“Raeder. Or someone who works for him.”

Another moment’s thought. “No. . . . I don’t think so. . . . He would’ve said so, said Raeder’s name, at least. He said ‘miscalculation.’ He knows who it is.” Pain. That’s what had flashed across his face when the alarm went off. Pain at betrayal.

“Carl.”

She nodded.

“So Carl was in on it with him from the beginning and set him up for the fall.”

“Or Mr. Steele was set up from the beginning and was never involved.”

“Then why wouldn’t he just tell you he thinks it’s Carl?”

She drummed her fingers on the dashboard. “Because he’s not sure. Carl is his friend, or he thought he was. He’ll protect him until he’s sure.”

“Even if he didn’t steal the stuff, he’ll just run now. No one’s going to believe he was burgling Raeder’s safe to prove he’s not guilty – ”

“We *have* to find Carl. And go back and interview Wallace’s crew. What was Mr. Steele preventing them from telling me about Carl?”

“That they’d pulled jobs together – ”

“Obviously Carl knows his stuff. Up to now he’s only been doing manual labor. Why? And we were there enough on the other security work, Murphy. Why didn’t we see any indication the two of them even knew each other? What changed?”

“They saw they could pull this job if they worked together, so they renewed their friendship.”

“What caused them to break it off before? And is it the reason for the betrayal?”

“Goldschmidt.”

She shook her head. “He seemed certain Carl wouldn’t set him up over Goldschmidt. Even after you told him Goldschmidt said, ‘O’Leary will get his.’”

Murphy threw a hand up. “Laura, these guys are thieves! Do you really buy into them having ‘codes of honor’? What movies has Steele been taking you to? They’ve obviously warped *his* brain. Maybe *he* wouldn’t betray *Carl* if they pulled the job together. I can even see if Carl pulled the job alone, Steele wouldn’t turn him in because he’s his friend. But thinking that Carl, therefore, wouldn’t betray or set up Steele? It’s a little farfetched – ”

“They worked recoveries together after Goldschmidt – ”

“You’re even talking like him. They *stole* stuff together – ”

“If they had a falling out, it wasn’t until sometime after that. And whatever it was about, Mr. Steele still trusted him – up until that alarm went off. We’re missing something here. I know it.”

“Maybe. And maybe this falling out among thieves isn’t important to the case – ”

“And maybe it is.”

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It didn’t take long – within the hour, bulletins filled the news with the story of the break-in at the Raeders, of how Erich Raeder had caught Remington Steele fleeing from the scene, of how Steele had managed to escape. Later bulletins described how Raeder’s car had been found, abandoned, blood in its interior. It was also announced that the million-dollar ruby necklace had been found, hidden in a men’s restroom at LACMA, near the theater where Steele had been attending a movie with his secretary the previous night; the police had been waiting for an accomplice to pick up the drop, but figured the man had decided not to show. An unidentified member of the police department was quoted as saying: “We don’t need the accomplice. We’re after the mastermind. We’ll get him.”

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Why, why, why?

Unable to sleep, Laura lay on the couch, tracing the golds and pinks and browns and greens of its flower pattern with a finger. Every so often she’d pad into the other room and turn on the TV, compelled to check if some bulletin announced Steele’s capture.

She heard a faint knock at her door. For one wild, irrational moment she thought it might be Steele, and she raced to answer it. “Oh, hello, Bernice.” Bernice, white-faced, gave her a tight smile of understanding as Laura listlessly gestured her inside.

“I heard it on the news. I thought maybe you could use someone to talk to, and I was afraid our phones might be tapped.”

Laura ran a hand through her hair. “Well, if they’re not now, they soon will be.” She led Bernice to the couch and sagged into the armchair adjacent to it. “I was so stupid.”

“What happened?”

Laura filled Bernice in on the evening’s events, starting with Murphy’s discoveries about the Braque painting and Goldschmidt and ending with Steele’s flight from the Raeders.

Laura got up and started pacing. “Why did I listen to him? Why didn’t I insist he let himself be arrested? Why didn’t I *force* him to be arrested, if I had to, and do this the way I was taught? We have plenty of players who have motives, who could’ve orchestrated the opportunity, who had the means or the wealth to have bought the means. *All I needed to do* was connect the dots. By doing legwork, by performing surveillance, by locating records, by interviewing, by following the evidence, by going systematically from one thing to the next – by following standard operating

procedures, for God's sake. Which certainly doesn't include swooping down ropes and breaking into mansions. Why did I follow his lead?" Laura looked upward, raised her hands, and asked whoever up there was listening, "Why?"

"Because you like playing with fire," Bernice said quietly.

"What?"

"You've always liked to play with fire. Remember how you told me your mother punished you over and over again for playing with matches?"

Laura's screwed up her face. What did that have to do with anything? She plopped back down into the armchair.

"And during your third year at summer camp, you got permanently expelled for setting a fire in the middle of the night."

Figuring Bernice was trying to distract her from the pointless self-recriminations of a moment ago, Laura humored her. "I had that fire well under control, almost." Despite herself, Laura smiled at the memory. "Me and the other kids just wanted to toast some marshmallows and make s'mores to fortify ourselves during our all-night pinochle tournament."

"Which you organized. You told me the counselors couldn't figure out why all of you were dragging through your hikes and nearly drowning during your swim workouts until they caught on to your little all-night card games."

"Yeah, well, the fire was just the excuse they needed to get back at me for that."

"And what about your calc professor?"

"Calc professor?" Now Laura was *really* lost. She didn't recall using any matches on her teachers, though there were a few she would've liked to.

"The one you tried to seduce at Stanford? The one you nearly drove to distraction with your attempts to – how'd you put it? – differentiate your parts and then integrate by them?"

Ah, that kind of playing with fire. Laura gave a soft snort as she thought of the prof. Somehow, he'd managed to get her transferred out of his class by mid-quarter. She'd gone to his office to use all her persuasive powers to get him to change his mind, but he'd rejected her advances, telling her he could lose his job. He'd opened his office door and not budged until she'd left. She'd thought, at the time, that some people just didn't know how to live.

"And what about that big dance with little fans on that bar in Acapulco?"

Laura's breath caught. "Are you trying to hurt me, Bernice?" That dance in front of all the members of Wilson's bank had been the last straw for Wilson – he'd left her.

"I'm just saying that, well, you like to play with fire, Laura. And like your mom told you, when you play with fire, you risk getting burned. But that's what makes you who you are, that's what makes you come alive. You can't tell me this past year hasn't been exhilarating for you. Whatever happens now, you'll bounce back. Just look at what happened after Wilson left you."

“I decided he was right – I was too impulsive, too uninhibited, too passionate, too out-of-control – ” ‘Far worse than Steele,’ she wanted to add.

“You decided you weren’t going to become the woman your mother became after your father left, you weren’t going to become one of those women dependent on a man for either her happiness or her economic security. Unlike me.” Bernice smiled self-deprecatingly.

“I threw myself into my career – ” Laura said softly.

“And when your career stalled at Havenhurst, you blew on those embers again and formed your own agency. And it flopped. But you didn’t let that stop you. And this won’t stop you, either. Nothing can stop you, Laura.” Bernice reached over and patted Laura’s hand, then got off the couch and knelt next to her to enfold her with a hug. “Try to get some sleep. You can tackle this again in the morning. You’re not alone. You’ve got Murphy and me to help you.” She rose to her feet. “I’ll let myself out.”

Laura was barely aware of Bernice’s leaving, still thinking of their conversation, of where the failure of Laura Holt Investigations had led her, of where she was now. Her failure had only fueled her professional ambitions. She’d decided to fight fire with fire: if they wanted a man, she’d give this tinsel town the man of their fantasies, its ideal PI. He’d be suave, sophisticated, bold, a man of action. But her fiction had taken on its own life when *he’d* arrived. He’d fleshed out the myth with his disarming good looks, his eminent approachability, his skill in making the public believe he solved the most devious crime without ruffling a hair. His ‘Remington Steele’ had let her use her talents ever more fully.

He’d rocketed them to the top in a blaze of a glory.

She stirred and got up to check the TV, keeping the sound low, only to see yet another bulletin about the break-in. No capture. She turned it off and went back to lie on the couch, melancholy again overtaking her. He’d rocketed them to the top, and now they were going down in flames.

‘You can go with me, leave me to do it alone . . . ’

Some choice he’d given her. She had no proof he wasn’t the thief – she hadn’t been about to let him do it alone.

‘. . . or tell the police where to find me when they get here.’

If she had, he’d never trust her again. He’d leave. Maybe she’d be better off. She’d start over, again. Yeah, right. How could she ever top the success of the Remington Steele Agency, even approach it? But what alternative did she have? This agency was doomed. The public’s trust had been lost. Even if she could prove him innocent, people would now always associate him with the thefts. Doubt would always exist – did he really do it? – and they’d go elsewhere with their business.

Laura pushed herself off the couch and shuffled into her study. She stared at the framed copy of her agency’s license that hung on the wall above her desk, wondering if she’d have to soon consign the license to the flames. She took it down, turned it over, and pulled out a photo she’d hidden inside the frame’s backing. It was a picture she’d snapped of Steele, his perfectly sculpted

features in repose as he lay asleep on the couch in his office; behind him was the wall filled with his publicity shots. She'd thought it quite ironic at the time. She looked at the date she'd scribbled on the back: it'd been taken shortly before the Dillon case.

She turned the photo back over and traced a finger over Steele's features. Was he like that summer camp fire, something she'd thought she could control, something that had *seemed* under her control but, when her attention had been elsewhere, had revealed itself to be something that mocked those beliefs, something with the true nature of a sweeping wildfire whose only purpose was to aggrandize itself, not caring what it destroyed in the process?

She looked again at the license and then at the shot of Steele amidst the publicity photos. Suddenly, another image of him superimposed itself, the image of him running *toward* the Raeders' dog, away from her and Murphy; she heard his cry again, saw the dog take him down. She found herself gripping the frame so tightly her hand hurt.

She stared down at the publicity photos.

For once, damn the public. Damn her agency's reputation. If he was innocent, she'd prove it. And then, as always, they'd make it appear 'The Great Remington Steele' had solved the case. If anyone could manipulate the public into believing in him again, he could. And if he couldn't, it'd have to be enough for her that he'd tried. They could look each other in the eye, know they'd given it their best shot, and build their lives from there. Hopefully, he'd still want her to be a part of his life. She'd want him in hers. She looked one last time at the photo of him sleeping on the couch and again traced a finger over his features before putting the photo back in the frame.

She marched into the other room and snapped on the TV. Steele's face looked back at her; then came footage of the glowing ruby and the shimmering royal lavulite mosaic. Another bulletin. She punched the TV off and straightened. Yes, if he was innocent, she'd prove it; on the other hand, if he was guilty, she'd rip his heart out and use his bones for kindling her next fire.

But first, she had to find him. Where *was* he?

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Where *was* he? He struggled up through layers of pain. He was being restrained. . . . No. He forced his eyes open, blinking in the bright midday light filling the tiny room despite the attempts of a threadbare cotton curtain to keep it at bay. The cot he lay on, sagging with his weight, had given him the illusion it held him trapped. It was much too small and his feet hung over the end. Fortunately, he was thin; otherwise, he was sure he would've tumbled to the floor over the narrow sides. A wisp of a cotton blanket covered him.

Where was he? A spider web of cracks decorated the white plaster ceiling above him, a single naked bulb entrapped at its centre. Some of the plaster was peeling off, hanging like tiny streamers of tissue paper. A cheap metal office desk stood to his left, blocking his view of the door. It must've been pushed over to make room for his cot. He supposed he could lift his head to further inspect the room, but if he could just lie still enough for a while, maybe the pain wouldn't be so bad, and then he'd explore.

He could hear sounds not too far away. Rolling and crashing. Rolling and crashing. Sounds like ocean waves made as one lay on the beach at midnight. No. Not like that. Not with that crash at the end. And the smell in the air was not of salt and kelp. The smell was of . . . old shoes.

A bowling alley. Now he remembered. He remembered making his escape from Raeder.

He'd fished in the unconscious man's pockets, looking for the keys. He would've dearly loved to have taken the Horch and crashed it through the gate, but he was practical: that car would draw too much attention, even in L.A. He needed something inconspicuous. He took the Bimmer<sup>42</sup>, flying down the roads as fast as he dared – Doheny, Schuyler, Mountain Drive. Before hitting Sunset Boulevard he ditched the car, stole another one, a nondescript one, and made his way into the city. Just to be safe, though, he soon abandoned that one too, outside a chemist's he'd broken into for something to plaster<sup>43</sup> his arm – the adrenalin had worn off and he was starting to hurt, not to mention bleeding all over the place. He continued on foot, keeping to the shadows. He thought it safest to get to Thelma, the 'traveller's aide representative for itinerant pickpockets' he'd been directed to when he'd first come to L.A. Somehow, just before first light, he made it to the bowling alley she managed.

His route, which would have taken him seven minutes by car, had taken him nearly seven gruelling hours, hampered as he was by both his injuries and the need to remain undetected. He picked the rear door using the slim pick he always kept taped to his lower leg, gimped his way to the back office, and collapsed on the floor.

He'd been brought round a lifetime later by the searing pain of his forearm being stitched. He hadn't been able to see who was there – he'd been blinded by the morning light, full and bright, streaming through the window. He'd passed out again – there'd been no anaesthetic.

God he hurt. He gingerly felt his left forearm under the bandage. It was swollen and streaks of red extended down to his hand. His back felt like it'd been shredded by the nails of the dog as it'd leapt on him when he'd lunged at Raeder. He'd been bitten on the leg and the triceps, too, but not as deeply as on the forearm. He lifted his right hand and ran his fingers lightly under his jawline. It was slightly swollen where the dog had nipped him and was no doubt the same exotic shade of red as his arm.

He heard a key at the door.

He struggled to get off the cot but stopped when the door opened and a voice said, "Hey, hey. It's just me." The elderly woman came into his sight and moved next to the cot.

"Hello, Thelma." He was panting a bit, and his voice sounded weak in his ears.

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<sup>42</sup>BMW

<sup>43</sup>Chemist: drug store; Plaster: bandage

“Brought ya some pills. From Otto. The man who stitched ya up.” She held out the vial in her papery hand, a small diamond sparkling on her pinky.

“Is he a doctor?”

“Are you a detective?”

He gave her a look of playful annoyance. “Uh, well, no thanks, love. They’ll turn me into a zombie.” He needed a clear head. Besides, he wasn’t sure he trusted their . . . provenance.

She set the pills on the desk. “Well, you should eat something.” She turned away and went out of his view. He heard the sound of what he guessed was a small refrigerator being opened. A few moments later she returned and stiffly knelt down by his cot.

He gazed at her worn, wrinkled face, framed by greying dark hair. The kindest – and cruelest – of people were found in this part of the city.

“You’re all over the news.”

“Mmmm.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

He bit his lip, touched. “Well, some clothes would be nice.” He grinned at her.

“Had to take the old ones off you. All tore up, bloody. Don’t worry, no one’ll find ’em.”

“I wasn’t worried.”

She squeezed his shoulder, grabbed the desk to push herself up, and again went out of his sight. He sniffed the air. She was heating something on a hot plate. She returned moments later with a steaming bowl of soup and some crackers and set them on the desk.

“Ya want me to help prop ya up, so’s ya can eat? I got some jackets and things in the Lost and Found over here I can use as pillows.”

“Thank you.”

She got the clothes, put an arm under his shoulders, and, with difficulty for both of them, helped him sit up enough to get the clothes underneath his back. He almost wished he’d said ‘no,’ but how could he refuse her kind offer of food? So instead he put his energy into not letting on how much this hurt, and only one gasp escaped him.

“Sorry.”

“It’s all right,” he whispered through clenched teeth. He squeezed his eyes together and tried to calm his breathing.

She dug out more clothes from the Lost and Found box and folded them at his waist. She set the bowl on top of them, opened a pack of crackers with her teeth, then shoved the plastic wrapper into the pocket of her oversized checked smock. “Good thing ya gotta flat waistline.”

He chuckled quietly, grabbing at the bowl. “Don’t make me laugh, Thelma. I don’t want this soup



spillin’.”

“Yeah, then ya’d *really* be screaming. We had to stuff a rag in your mouth a couple hours ago. When Otto stitched ya up. I practically had to sit on ya.”

He didn’t remember. He dredged up every ounce of sincerity in his body. “Thank you. I owe you one.”

“Dozens. . . . Ya want me to feed ya?”

“No, no. I’ll be all right. You go along now.”

“Okay. I’ll be back with the clothes, leave them by your cot there if you’re asleep. Basic black, right?”

“Right, Thelma.”

“Well, I’ll do the best I can, but I don’t know any tall, skinny boys like you, and they’ll certainly not be de rigeur for ‘Remington Steele.’”

He suppressed a smile as she pronounced it ‘dee rigor.’ “Don’t worry about it.” All amusement left him. “Besides, it would appear that ‘Remington Steele’ must slip off into the night.”

She squeezed his shoulder again. “Tomorrow’s another day.”

As long as it wasn’t another day like this one. With apologies to Scarlett O’Hara. ‘Gone with the Wind.’ Clark Cable, Vivien Leigh, Olivia de Havilland. MGM 1939.

He tried to eat the soup, then poked at the carrots. Homemade vegetable. It looked good, it smelled good, but he couldn’t get it down.

With a sigh he set it on the floor under the cot. He carefully pulled the clothes out from under his back, set them in a neat pile on the floor – or as neat as he was up to at the moment – and settled back down on the cot.

What was he going to do now? He’d recognized the ring that had lain squarely in front of him, mocking him, when he’d opened the safe door. Carl’s ring. Carl had installed the internal alarm. Carl had anticipated him.

That was the problem working with a partner. If you used the same one too many times, he got to know you too well. You became vulnerable. Always better to remain obscure. Come from nowhere. No past. No plans for the future. No name. Exist for yourself. Dole out just enough bits of truth to cop the flash<sup>44</sup> and move on. No self-revelations, no attachments, no expectations. That way you didn’t get hurt.

Oh, there’d been times when he’d bent his rules just a tad, people he’d partnered with for more

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<sup>44</sup>Carny lingo. Somewhat literal translation: win/steal the expensive prizes used to attract the customers (as opposed to the ‘slum,’ the cheap prizes customers usually win, assuming they win at all!)

than just a time or two. People who didn't press him with questions. People who knew not to ask of him what he couldn't give. His partners in crime. Daniel, of course, who'd taken him off the streets and no doubt saved him from ending up just another cold, dead body in a gutter. Felicia, Monroe. People who shared his philosophy. Get it while you can. Enjoy it while it lasts. Quick! before someone takes it away from you.

Carl had also been one of those exceptions. And like Felicia, ultimately not one of his better judgement calls, apparently. Was this about Wallace? Carl had taken Wallace's death badly, but this, this revenge directed against him seemed too extreme. Still, could this be Carl's idea of meting out justice? Wallace's words on their fishing trip came back to him: 'He's still too volatile, too easily set off by things beyond his control. Too eager to seek revenge against anyone he thinks wronged him.' But those words had been spoken seven years ago. Carl was a different man now. Wasn't he? Hadn't those words they'd spoken in Starnberg<sup>45</sup> when the Goldschmidt deal had come crashing down around their ears been an unbreakable vow between them? Steele let his thoughts drift back to Starnberg.

Carl, who'd worked steadily for Goldschmidt, had contracted out Steele – or rather, 'John' – to find Goldschmidt's painting, but later decided to do the actual recovery himself, which was fine with John. John had done his job: he'd located the painting, gotten all the specifics Carl would need, and then met with Carl in Starnberg. He took Carl for a sail around the Starnberger See<sup>46</sup> to point out the essential landmarks for Carl's assault. Mixed with this business was great pleasure – the view was breathtaking, a white-and-blue splendour. Perfect white clouds fluffed out in bas relief against a perfect blue sky. To the south, Alpine peaks in shadow smoked blue, while those in the sun glistened white. The white of the sails of boats swirled around them, set off by the deep blue of the lake. Clusters of oak and beech and spruce trees in resplendent green adorning the countryside and myriad small castles and beautiful houses dotting the lake area completed this paradise. The lake area had always been a playground of Bavarian kings and aristocracy, and John felt like a royal himself to be privileged this view.

He manoeuvred among the throng of sailing boats and excursion steamships, gliding over the water to Obermühlthal. There, he and Carl sat under the ancient trees with the six hundred other visitors to the Biergarten, listening to live jazz, eating Schottisches Lachsfilet auf Keta-Kaviar-Sauce, Blattspinach und Kartoffelgratin<sup>47</sup>, and putting the final touches on Carl's 'liberation' plan. As night began to fall, John left Obermühlthal for Starnberg, taking his leave of Carl for other business.

Near the railway station in Starnberg, he found an ice cream café. It'd been a hot summer day, the

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<sup>45</sup>In Germany

<sup>46</sup>Lake Starnberg

<sup>47</sup>Scottish filet of salmon with keta (Alaska's freshest caviar) caviar sauce, leaf spinach and potato gratin

weather still hadn't cooled off, he had some time before his forty-minute train trip to Munich, so he gave in to the temptation. 'Always give in to temptation' was his motto – one never knew when the opportunity might arise again. As he was trying the Zitronenwasser – fresh lemon juice with one ball of lemon ice in it – he saw a sight that made his blood run cold. Three men, dressed in identical grey suits, with identical dark blue ties – the 'Palermo Brothers,' not from Palermo and not brothers but three of the most ruthless thieves on the Continent – were coming from the direction of the train station. And of course they would head towards the café – the Italians loved their gelato. John managed to conceal himself, and his suspicions proved correct: he overheard the leader, a baby-faced, mustachioed man with large brown eyes, mention Carl and the Hals, but not John himself, in any of his incarnations, which was a small relief. Somehow, though, Carl's plans had been uncovered. Well, it happened, even to the best. The Palermo Brothers seemed remarkably well informed, and as they wore slightly oversized jackets with suspicious bulges on this summer day, they were remarkably well equipped. These things told John someone big was financing them, bigger, perhaps, than Goldschmidt. No opportunity to take out the Brothers directly – nonfatally, of course – immediately presented itself, so he set off to intercept Carl.

He didn't know what Carl's exact route to the old castle would be, but he had no time for subtlety, anyway. His only hope was to go to the castle directly and warn Carl. Luck ran against him: as John hotwired a car, he heard the chop-chop of a helicopter – it must've come from Munich. He kept his eye on it as it clattered its way over the lake and saw it land on Rose Island, a fragrant rose paradise, now deserted of inhabitants except for one old hermit. Rose Island had been one of 'Mad King Ludwig's' favourite places, the place where he would secretly meet Empress Elisabeth for romantic walks; John doubted romance was the purpose of the current visitors. He had a feeling Carl was in serious trouble indeed. This was a trademark assault tactic of the only people John knew who ever worked with the Palermo Brothers, the Brothers Grimm – also not brothers, and whose specialities were the ghastly stuff of nightmares, not fairytales. Assuming this was them, and he was quite sure it was, they now had an insurmountable lead over him. With dread in his heart, he pushed the accelerator as close to the floor as he dared.

He barrelled down the road to the southeast of Starnberg and screeched to a halt in a little village. It was a clear night, and he had enough starlight to climb the steep shoreline without too much difficulty. He crept through what had been a royal's garden. He felt his way along the old wall of the castle. In the daylight the baroque-style little castle, modelled on an Italian mansion, had evoked sensuality, grandeur, drama. Now it spewed coldness, darkness, malignancy.

He stumbled. He had tripped over Carl's broken, battered body. He choked back his fear he'd find no pulse, stooped, and felt for the carotid artery. He exhaled a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. There was a beat, thank God. He scooped up Carl as gently as he could and began to retrace his steps. As John was descending the hill, Carl came to and began clawing at him instinctively, nearly taking John's eye out, and nearly sending the two of them tumbling.

"It's me! I've got you, I've got you!"

"Don't let me die!"

"You won't! I promise. I've got you."

“And you never break your promises.”

“Never.” John completed the descent. He laid Carl in the car.

“I couldn’t see who hit me. I thought you’d betrayed me.”

John brushed away the tears on Carl’s cheeks. “Never. I would never betray a friend.”

Carl laughed weakly, bitterly. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, John.”

“I don’t. I’ll always find a way.”

“You know what?” Carl whispered. “I believe you.”

“You should.”

Carl started to reply, and John bent over him to hear the faintest of whispers. “I want you to know something.”

“Yes?” John rested his hand lightly on Carl’s arm.

“I’d never betray a friend, either. I’ll always find a way, too. I promise.”

John had taken Carl’s hand into both of his and held it as his friend gave him a soft grin. Carl had then slipped into unconsciousness.

He’d believed Carl, but he’d known even as he’d held Carl’s hand, he still would always have a plan B.

And apparently now was the time for it. Had Carl only spoken those words in the heat of the moment? Had his promise, heartfelt at the time, become null and void at Wallace’s death? The ring in the safe seemed to indicate so.

He had to find Carl. And he knew where to start looking. If Carl wasn’t still in town, it’d be more difficult, but he’d track him down. If it was the last thing he did. First, though, he needed to get a little rest. His injuries made that difficult. He began to employ a technique he’d used since he was a small child, a technique to disconnect from the pain of this world, no matter its type, and offer him respite: he’d think of a film, immerse himself in it, become it, become every player. . . . Unfortunately, all he could think of was the movie he’d just seen with Laura.

‘I’m young, I have no particular responsibilities, I don’t intend to cultivate any, either. One is freer without,’ said Judith Traherne, early on in ‘Dark Victory.’

‘For the first time I wake up in the morning with something to live for,’ said Judith Traherne, later on in the film.

‘Before, women have never meant anything to me. I’d never met anyone like her. I was all set – I had plans, made arrangements,’ said Frederick Steele.

'The nights I've laid awake thinking of you. The things I've wanted to say to you ever since I first laid eyes on you,' said Michael O'Leary. (He takes her in his arms and ardently kisses her). . . .

But no cinematic kiss, no matter how passionately portrayed, could be a match for the kisses of a certain feisty, petite, chestnut-haired, brown-eyed, freckled beauty. Laura. Laura, for whom he'd made his biggest exception. Laura, who'd been his partner in crime-fighting, not crime. Laura, who'd probably tear his heart out if she ever saw him again.

He bounced his head back against the cot. Laura, who'd apparently stolen his rule book. He didn't want to leave this name, this place, her – what had she done to him? It'd never mattered before where he was, who he was, what he was doing, who he was with. Nothing had ever been lost when he left.

Damn her. She'd made him forget to be diligent in his practise of expecting nothing. He felt a dull, empty ache that had nothing to do with his injuries.

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. C'mon, mate. No use thinkin' like this. Can't afford it. The carnival's movin' on. Time to pull up the stakes. This place is no different from any other. There's nothin' for you here. It's a character flaw in you – never could keep yourself from lookin' for a place where you belonged at each of your stops. Isn't it clear by now? You belong nowhere, to no one. You like it like that, remember? You'll remember, in time. Now let it go. Think of somethin' pleasant. You've many a pleasant memory.

He blanked his mind for a while, focussing on his breathing, until he felt calm again, without expectation, accepting what was.

A pleasant memory.

Her scent, the taste of her mouth, how it felt to touch her and be touched by her . . . . He wrapped himself in Laura's phantom arms and drifted away, comforted.

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Laura stared at the Braque painting, idly wondering if Steele had been telling the truth last night when he'd said he didn't like the style. At any rate, if the picture contained a secret message, she was missing it completely.

She looked around and once again quelled the urge to pace. She was at LACMA. She was in the Robert O. Anderson Building, which housed the two floors of the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art. She was on the upper floor, which featured modern European and American art through about 1970. She was in the gallery devoted to Paris and early modern movements such as Cubism and Fauvism. And she was beyond restless.

For the <sup>n</sup><sup>th</sup> time she wished Steele were at her side. All he would've had to do was give one of his flashing smiles and turn his baby blues on the appropriate female, and he would've been seeing the Registrar. As it was, *she* was having to feign interest in Goncharova's 'Religious Composition: Archangel Michael (1910),' Kandinsky's 'Untitled Improvisation III (1914),' Picasso's 'Portrait

of Sebastian Junier Vidal (1903),’ Matisse’s ‘Tea (1919),’ Léger’s ‘The Discs (1918–19),’ Kirchner’s ‘Two Women (1911–12),’ Magritte’s ‘The Treachery of Images (c.1928–29).’ If someone were to hand her a brush right now, she’d cover the place in expressionistic strokes of frustration.

“Ms. Kunstler will see you now, Miss Holt.”

Finally. Laura walked with her guide to the Registrar’s office. She avoided his attempts at chitchat and attempted to push their pace. Steele would’ve done exactly the opposite, the better to cultivate a future contact – or maybe just because he had a genuine interest in people – but she simply didn’t have the patience for that now, and, not to put too fine an edge on it, people were *his* forte, not hers.

At that thought, she forced herself to slow, to smile, to respond to the man’s pleasantries. Maybe she had something to learn from Steele after all – right now her agency could use all the goodwill it could get.

A few minutes later her guide pointed out the door to the Registrar’s office, then turned back down the hall. As Laura neared the office, she heard a vaguely familiar voice. Jenkins, of the BHPD, cannonballed out the door, nearly knocking Laura down. His grin, that of a shark at feed, metamorphosed into something more appropriate to a public servant. He nodded at Laura and then spurtled down the hall.

Laura walked into the office to see a woman seated behind a desk, a man, who looked like a lawyer, seated in a chair across from her. They both rose as she entered. The woman put out her hand. “I’m Thea Kunstler, and this is one of our lawyers, Steven Carselli.”

“Laura Holt.” As they shook hands and seated themselves, Laura realized why the woman seemed so familiar. Ms. Kunstler was a trim five foot nine with wheat-blond hair and cornflower blue eyes, and she was one of the women who had in the past graced Steele’s arm. Funny, Laura had been under the impression Steele only dated ditsy airheads. No, not true. Felicia had been no ditz; her artful cunning had matched her exquisite beauty. Of course, Felicia had been no casual date. “I’d like some information on the provenance of a painting you were recently loaned. The artist is Georges Braque – ”

“The painting was loaned anonymously, Miss Holt. I can’t divulge the lender’s name to you.”

“What about the name of the previous owner?”

“I’m afraid I can’t give that out either.”

“You gave this information to Detective Jenkins?”

“He’s a public official.” Ms. Kunstler smiled, not unsympathetically, and, evidently reading Laura’s mind, added, “Miss Holt, the provenance is ironclad.”

Laura felt herself deflate, but then she took herself in hand. She’d get nowhere at LACMA with this particular line of questioning, but she’d get what information she could before moving on.

“The painting went on exhibit when?”

“Yesterday.”

After Steele had supposedly put the ruby in the washroom. So, circumstantially, it would look like a payoff. Laura grimaced, then continued. “Do you know who actually found the ruby in the washroom? Someone in the cleaning crew?”

“You know, it’s odd. No one here has made that claim. You’d think someone would – there must’ve been some kind of reward out on it, wasn’t there? Or at least, they would’ve gotten a lot of publicity!” Ms. Kunstler shook her head. “I haven’t heard anything about an employee or some good citizen finding it and calling the police.”

Laura nodded. That fit into her theory that somewhere along the line, Steele had been set up.

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After speaking with various other members of the staff and cleaning crew and getting no further information, Laura found the pay phones in the museum and called the office. “Murphy. Who in the Burglary Unit got the tip that Mr. Steele owned that Braque painting?” She groaned at his reply. “Jenkins? Oh, that’s great. That’s just great. Like he’s going to cooperate with us. Work on him, will you, Murph?” She smiled sadly at Murphy’s pledge to do what he could. “Thanks, Murph. Gotta go.”

Her next stop would be to see Mr. Coxworth, owner of Coxworth Art Gallery. He was the person who’d hired the Remington Steele Agency in the ‘The Five Nudes of Cairo’ case. She wasn’t going to take at face value Ms. Kunstler’s word about the provenance of the painting. Steele himself had told her how fraught with fraud the art world was. For the n to the n<sup>th</sup> time she wished he were around. Surely he had ways to uncover the painting’s provenance more easily than she.

She strode out to her car. She started it, gunned it, and scorched out of the parking lot.

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Mr. Coxworth wasn’t in, so Laura went to see his gallery’s curator. She handed a photo of the Braque painting to him and thought about the man who’d previously held that position, Achmed Khalil. Khalil had dropped dead in her living room, a knife in his back, while in the bedroom Laura’s mother fumed over some supposedly rude behavior of Laura’s to her and Steele. Laura’s mother chose that particular time to come out to apologize to Steele for her *own* behavior, and though Laura rushed toward her to persuade her it wasn’t necessary, she wouldn’t be stopped. They entered the living room only to find Steele ‘conversing’ with Khalil, who was propped up in a chair facing away from her mother, a lit cigarette in his fingers. Her mother had made her apology and turned in for the night, never suspecting a thing. It would’ve been funny if it hadn’t been so tragic.

As the curator looked up from examining the photo, Laura spoke to him. “Mr. Whiting, I’m certain this painting has never been exhibited before in a museum. At least, not in one where the provenance documentation is readily available.” No, that would be too easy. No, this would be tedious work.

“Provenance research from scratch is slow, Miss Holt. I’d have to look through exhibition

catalogues, sale catalogues, collection catalogues, catalogues raisonnés<sup>48</sup>. There might be clues in photo archives – or in scholarly articles about Braque or any prior owner I might turn up. Papers and business records of collectors and dealers might also be very valuable sources of information, but . . . ”

“But?”

“They’re often limited by the availability of the records and by the willingness of dealers to reveal their sources.” Laura had no doubt that willingness would be nil in this case. “I might even have to resort to looking for wills, insurance inventories, and other personal documentation,” Whiting added.

Laura pressed her lips together. If Steele were here, assuming he’d want her to know, he’d suggest the fastest way to get the information they needed would be to simply break into LACMA’s records. At this point, she’d seriously consider it. Actually, as the alleged owner of the painting, he could probably get a look at the LACMA files; he could almost certainly cajole Ms. Kunstler into letting him see them. Those files would contain the correspondence between the curator and the lender – supposedly him – the loan contract, all the research into the provenance of the painting, and the proof of the owner’s legal title to the painting. She could then check that correspondence for clues that it was or was not from Steele. She could check to see if his signature had been forged – putting aside for the moment that *his* ‘Remington Steele’ signature was a forgery of *her* ‘Remington Steele’ signature. She could take the file to other experts to check for any irregularities in the documents.

She pulled herself from those fruitless thoughts. All she could hope for now was to find the last owner before Steele in the provenance chain and hopefully break their link – and find out who had forged it. “Will you research the provenance?”

Whiting tapped his fingertips on his desk and regarded her a long moment. His thin, angular features softened. “Mr. Coxworth told me Mr. Steele saved this museum from a major embarrassment. Yes, I’ll do it. But it’ll take time.”

And time was the one thing she was running out of.

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Someday she’d have to come here when her reasons weren’t so grim.

Laura pulled up and parked in front of the Lost and Found Mission on Main Street – Wallace’s old mission. The only reason this place had remained open after Wallace’s death was because of Steele’s \$50,000 donation. ‘That was nice,’ she’d told him. ‘He was a nice man. And a hell of a burglar,’ Steele had replied.

She stared at the graffiti-marred edifice. The first time she’d been here, she’d nearly been strangled in the back office. If Steele hadn’t come along when he did . . . He’d been so sure Wallace had been set up to make it appear he’d stolen Dillon’s research material. . . . He’d been

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<sup>48</sup>Monographic books with lists of all the known works of an artist.



so angry at that morgue attendant. . . . Steele.

She took a deep breath, got out of the car, and strode up the mission steps. Determined to get some answers from Wallace's crew, she'd arranged for them all to meet here.

She entered the hall, noting with surprise and relief the roomful of men – she'd been afraid she'd be met by empty chairs. She strode up to the podium on the small stage at the front of the hall and spoke into the microphone. "I'm sure –" She stopped when no amplification came out of the mike.

"Uh, we never use that, ma'am. I'm sure we'll hear you fine."

Laura nodded at the man who'd spoken, stepped to the front of the stage, and started again. "I'm sure you've all heard on the news about Mr. Steele –"

"Ma'am, if he'd wanted them trinkets, you can be sure he'd gotten them clean from the start. There's some funny business going on here." The same middle-aged man had spoken up again.

Laura looked around at the sea of nodding heads. "I want to ask you about Carl."

This time her words were met with the sounds of the men shifting around in the cheap folding chairs. "Look," she said. "It's important. I know there's something Mr. Steele didn't want you to tell me about Carl, but I think Carl may be the one behind this 'funny business.'"

"Oh no, ma'am. Can't be."

She again looked down at the man who seemed to have taken on the job of spokesman for the group. "Why not, Mr. –?"

"Call me 'Steve.' Carl is a 'True Believer,' Miss Holt." That seemed to be all the man thought necessary to say.

"But there was some trouble between him and Mr. Steele. I know there was. Carl didn't associate with Mr. Steele on your earlier jobs with us. Why not?"

Steve leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees and interlocking long bony fingers. "Well, ma'am –"

"Steve –" a voice called out in warning. Laura looked around but couldn't place its source.

Steve held up his hand. "This lady is only looking for the truth. I think it's time we honor that."

Laura noticed some of the other men looking extremely uncomfortable. A number of them got up and left. Steve took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Finally, he replaced his glasses and peered up at her through their thick lenses. "Ma'am, Carl took Wallace's death hard. Wallace turned his life around, brought him into the Light. Wallace showed him the way to our Heavenly Father. . . . When Wallace was killed, Carl . . . well, I guess he blamed Remington for it. It just took him awhile to let go of that. He's only a man. . . . I see that look in your eye, Miss Holt. You're thinking revenge. "Vengeance is Mine," saith the Lord."

"Sometimes humans take it upon themselves."

Steve sat back and shook his head emphatically. “Not Carl. He just wouldn’t do something like this. It’d go against everything Wallace taught, everything he stood for. If Carl’d done this to Remington, it’d be like he’d done it to Wallace himself.” The remaining men murmured agreement.

Steve seemed so sure. Was this what Steele hadn’t wanted her to find out about Carl, knowing it would elevate Carl to the top of her list of suspects? Had Steele merely been trying to protect his friend? She let out a breath. “Carl and Wallace must’ve been very close.”

“Like father and son.”

Father and son. An image of Steele at the morgue, grabbing the attendant who’d slandered Wallace, popped into her head. ‘. . . He had a daughter . . . .’

Run with it, Holt. “Wallace’s daughter. Where’s she? Anyone know?”

Steve shrugged.

Laura looked around the room. The men were of all ages, dressed in faded jeans or work pants and simple cotton shirts, some frayed at the collar or sleeves. They got by. Had Carl been here, he’d have seemed out of place. Though he’d dressed simply on the other security jobs, jeans and work shirt, she’d noticed they’d been designer jeans and a quality cloth shirt, like something she imagined Steele might wear if he ever deigned to dress down.

The men were all shaking their heads.

“Never seen her. Didn’t even come to the funeral,” Steve supplied.

Laura ran a hand through her hair. “Okay, one last question. Can any of you tell me where to find Carl? I know I’ve asked you before, but please, it’s important. I understand you don’t think he’s involved. But he worked closely with Mr. Steele on this job, and he’s been missing ever since the thefts occurred. He must – he may know something. Please. Help me help Mr. Steele.”

But all she got were shrugs and murmurs of apology. Chairs creaked as all the men got up to go about their business – except for one young man who had started to rise, but now sat in his chair at the end of the third row, one leg bouncing up and down, eyes cast down, fingering the cap in his hands. As she moved toward him, he got up and started to skitter off. “Wait! Please.”

He paused, bouncing up and down a bit, then turned back toward her; he started to bite his thumb but then quickly lowered his hand and played with his cap. About seventeen, she guessed. Very thin. All arms and legs. Long, dark hair and a growth of beard, or what passed for a beard at that age. “What’s your name?” she asked softly.

“J-Jim.”

“Jim. Do you know where I can find Carl?” She kept her voice gentle.

The boy swallowed and wouldn’t meet her eyes.

“Jim, if you know where he is, you’ve got to tell me. Help me.”

“I don’t w-want Carl to get in trouble – ”

“And what about Mr. Steele? You heard on the news. He’s out there somewhere,” – she gestured toward the street – “injured. The police are after him. If they find him, and he tries to run, he could be killed. For nothing. Because you held back some information that could prove he’s innocent.”

The boy’s eyes darted around, and he twisted his cap. Finally, he looked at her, eyes blinking rapidly. “Carl’s my ‘Big Brother.’ O-on the program Wallace set up. Me, me and him spend a lot of time together. Carl called me. Said he’d, he’d been out of town. B-but he’d be here tonight. He wanted to see me, see how I was doing. Di-didn’t want me to think he run out on me like m-my old man. Like his old man. We’re supposed to, supposed to meet here tonight.”

“What time?”

The boy ran the back of his hand over his mouth. “N-nine. In the b-back office.”

She touched his arm. “Thanks, Jim. You’ve done the right thing.”

“I h-hope so.”

“Jim, don’t tell Carl you’ve told me where he’ll be. I want to see him tonight. And stay home.”

He bit his lip and looked at her with fear still in his eyes. “To be honest, if I knew h-how to get in touch with him, I don’t know wh-what I’d do. But I don’t, so I’ll just have to, have to trust you. Funny,” – he laughed in a way that showed he didn’t think it funny at all – “until today I’d of trusted them both with my life. Remington’s a real, a real nice guy, and Carl . . . Now you make it s-sound like they’re against each other, and I-I don’t know who’s right.”

She squeezed his arm sympathetically. “All I’m saying is, maybe Carl can help me.” She gave him an encouraging smile, took one last look at the ‘Where there is Love there is God’ poster that hung over the stage, and left the mission.

As she went down the front steps, she heard a voice call, “Miss Holt.”

She turned and saw a man slip into the alley next to the mission. She hesitated, then walked over. One of the men from the crew stood leaning against the wall just a few feet into the alley’s shadow. He was tall and broad and she was glad it was daylight. She shifted her purse under her arm and strode in. She stopped in front of him and looked him square in the eye.

He put his hands in his pockets, gave her a knowing smile, and said gently, “You’ve nothing to fear from me, Miss Holt. I’m Tom, by the way. Thomas Coburn. I wanted to tell you Carl knows Wallace’s daughter, and I think it was more than casual.”

Laura felt a chill up her spine. It could mean nothing, but . . . “How do you know?”

“We – Carl and I – were cleaning out Wallace’s stuff from the office after the funeral and everything. I came across an old picture in one of the drawers. I showed it to Carl and he said it was Noley. The way he stared at it . . . So I said, ‘You know her?’ and, well, I don’t remember exactly what he said. Something on the order of, ‘Oh, yeah. I know her all right.’ He sounded, I

dunno, like she was special to him. Anyway, I just think there was something there.” He shrugged.

“Do you still have the picture?”

“Nah. Tossed everything out. No one to give it to.”

Laura nodded, disappointed.

“Miss Holt. I don’t have Steve’s faith in human nature. . . . I’m not saying Carl did anything. I just thought you should know about him and Noley, and I didn’t want to say it in front of the other guys.”

“I understand. Thanks. Thanks a lot, Mr. Coburn.”

“Well, if it’ll help Steele. He’s always been all right in my book.”

She wanted to ask him to read her that chapter, but he straightened abruptly and walked out of the alley.

She walked back to her car. So. Some good may have come out of their break-in attempt at Raeder’s after all. Carl and Wallace’s daughter. This might still be a dead end, of course, but if Steele had been more forthcoming, she could’ve gotten to this point a heck of a lot sooner with a great deal less pain all around. Steele. Highly regarded by thieves, cons, and the down-and-out everywhere –

She whirled and ran after Coburn’s departing figure, catching up to him. “Mr. Coburn. I recognize you. You were one of the men who tried to break into Dillon’s after Wallace set up the security system there. To test it and show how well it worked.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“How far are you willing to go to help Mr. Steele?”

Coburn raised an eyebrow.

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As she watched Coburn break into Carl’s safe, Laura had a greater appreciation for Steele’s ‘talents.’ It was all she could do to keep herself from hovering over Coburn’s shoulder and urging him to hurry. What if Carl came home before going to the Mission?

To distract herself, she mulled over her private conversation with Steve. After arranging to meet Coburn here at Carl’s, she’d gone back into the Mission and sought out Steve – he had a forthrightness she’d never before encountered in an acquaintance of Steele’s. They’d sat in Wallace’s – or rather, Carl’s – office, their chairs facing each other in the cramped space between the desk and the filing cabinets.

“Steve, as part of my investigation I’ve had to run background checks on you and the rest of Wallace’s crew – sorry,” – Laura smiled apologetically – “I don’t know how I should refer to all

of you. That's what Mr. Steele calls you."

"I'm sure we'd all be proud to be known as 'Wallace's crew.'"

"Yes, well, to be blunt, up until this incident, I've been willing to trust all of you because of the word of Mr. Steele. Now his word isn't good enough for me."

Steve gave a small smile, showing no resentment. "I'm not sure how I can help you, Miss Holt. What is it you want to know?"

"A significant number of you, including Wallace himself, Carl – and you – have huge gaps in your histories."

Steve smiled and leaned forward, once again resting his elbows on his knees. His hands pressed together in the prayer position. "Ma'am, the only gaps I would, or even could, fill in for you are those in my own history. We don't discuss our pasts with each other – we've been washed clean by the Lord. I assume – but don't know – that the others are like me. Skilled enough – or lucky enough – not to be caught with our pants down. And by whatever route, we all received God's Word and decided to devote ourselves to spreading that Word and helping others."

It was hard not to believe the sincerity of Steve's words, much as she would've preferred to unearth an enclave of thieves involved in a Byzantine plot to rob an upstanding citizen and pin it on Steele. Still, she could always hope someone in this den of Thieves Anonymous had fallen off the wagon. She just hoped that 'someone' wasn't Steele. "How'd you end up here? Did you know Wallace from your, uh, past life?"

Steve sat back, shaking his head. "No, not personally. Heard of what he was doing here through the grapevine, you could say. And I wanted to be a part of it. Don't know about the others. Probably the same story for those of us who aren't local." Steve gave an ironic smile. "Most of us, I suspect, were loners in our 'past lives.' You probably won't find too many connections between us."

Laura nodded and gave a tight-lipped smile in return. She started to rise from her seat but was stopped by Steve's words, "Do you know the story of Saul's conversion?"

Was she now going to have to listen to a sermon? She settled back warily and replied, "A light from heaven blazed around him while he was on the road to Damascus. God spoke to him and he became 'Paul.'"

Steve smiled at her kindly. "If only it was as simple as a change of name. Saul was literally blinded by that light. He had to first go through a journey of darkness and uncertainty, of wrestling with his past, before the scales fell from his eyes and he became the man he was meant to be, Paul.

"When a man wants to change, it doesn't happen in a flash of light. It takes courage and persistence. I've found in my work here, the best way to lend a hand in helping someone change is to be patient, give him room, walk the path of change with him, show him another way of being by your example and by sharing how you see the world differently, but not in a self-righteous way –"

“Nothing will help if the man has jumped the path.” Laura got up abruptly. “Thank you for your time, Steve.”

Laura was yanked into the present as the safe clicked open. She sprang up from her perch on the desk, pulled out the contents of the safe, and scanned them. Money, a few pieces of jewelry, financial documents, stock and bond certificates, insurance policies, titles and deeds. Nothing caught her eye until she got to the last items. Passports – plural, just like Steele. The key to a safe deposit box – she slipped that into her purse. A list of numbers: bank accounts, investment accounts, social security numbers. She hadn’t uncovered any of these accounts during her background check. The list went into her purse.

She looked at the last items. Several thick tomes. Journals. She kept them out, too, but everything else went back into the safe, as neatly arranged as she’d found them.

“Thank you, Mr. Coburn.”

He shrugged. “I owe Steele. Big. ’Course, I may’ve just lost myself a lot of friends.”

Laura placed her hand on his arm. “I’ll do my best to make sure no one finds out you opened the safe.”

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“Oh, my.”

Bernice came sprinting into the office and skidded to a stop in front of Laura’s desk. “What is it?”

“What were you doing? Hovering at my door?” Laura smiled at Bernice’s sheepish look, then snapped upright in her office chair, pushed her reading glasses back up her nose, and picked up one of the journals lying on her desk. “Carl,” she said, answering Bernice’s question. “He may be a ‘Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde’ – ”

“Fredric March, Miriam Hopkins. Paramount Pictures. 1931.”

“Bernice.” Laura frowned. She couldn’t afford to be distracted by thoughts of Steele right now.

“Sorry. Guess he’s kinda rubbed off on me.”

Laura gave her a sad smile. “Well, anyway, as I was saying, Carl’s public record this past year is exemplary. He’s not only continued the substance abuse program Wallace started, but he’s greatly expanded the youth program. Depending on their needs, the boys are provided with food and clothing and taught everything from the 3 R’s to the skills needed for getting jobs. They’re mentored by volunteers, all men who converted.”

Laura thumbed through one of the journals she’d obtained just a short time ago. “Listen to this. It’s dated a couple of weeks after he joined the Mission last year, before Wallace’s death. It’s the rough draft of a speech he evidently gave to a group of boys. ‘There is no hope on the streets. I know that from personal experience. Wallace took me off the streets when I was a boy. He gave me hope. And years later when my hope again faltered, he was there to show me The Way, to

show me the way to Our Savior, Jesus Christ, the source of Infinite Hope. I owe Wallace. I owe God. With the help of Jesus Christ I want to repay my debts in kind by offering *you* hope. You can be free of drugs and alcohol. You can be free of the gangs. Jesus will set you free. I look forward to working with you, with this community we've formed here. I want to give back to this community what I took from communities like it.”

“That’s beautiful.”

Laura nodded. “But there’s more in these journals. He didn’t keep regular entries, but when he did write, he was very open” – she gave Bernice an ironic smile – “except about any criminal activities. Steve was right about his relationship with Wallace. Wallace essentially raised him during his teen years, and there was a very deep bond between them.” She pointed to one of the journals. “Wallace disappeared about six years ago. As you can imagine, Carl was grief-stricken, thinking Wallace dead. Then Wallace reappeared about four years ago. Evidently he’d gone through a period of being a hard-core alcohol-and-drug abuser and had overcome his addictions after embracing religion. From then, up until about a year ago, the entries in Carl’s journals reflect a lot of pain – what comes through is his deep love for Wallace mixed with feelings of guilt about his own life. He speaks of how Wallace never turned away from him, continued to love him like a son. And he credits Wallace’s love and support with finally enabling him to surrender to God and turn his life around.”

Laura met Bernice’s intent gaze. “But he didn’t make that conversion until about a month before Wallace’s murder. He was devastated by Wallace’s death.”

Bernice sat on the corner of the desk. “He was finally making something of his life when the man responsible for that, a man he idolized, a man he thought he’d lost before, was murdered.”

Laura leaned back and steepled her fingers. “And he laid the blame for that squarely at Mr. Steele’s feet. After the murder, the entries are filled with bitterness against Mr. Steele. How ‘that con man should be taken at his own game.’”

She sat back up again and clapped the books shut. “And Carl knows Wallace’s daughter *quite* well.”

Bernice leaned forward as if she were about to impart a juicy piece of gossip. “The two of them – the daughter could’ve taken the ruby and slipped off, while Carl stole the mosaic.”

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It was dark now. Laura sat with Murphy in the Rabbit about a half-block down from the Lost and Found Mission, shining her penlight on the five photographs in her hand, studying them one after the other while munching on trail-mix. They’d caught another possible break in the case in the afternoon. Mrs. Coxworth, whose husband owned the Coxworth Art Gallery, had come forth with some information. She was terribly sorry she hadn’t told them before, but she hadn’t wanted to get involved. Now, though, with that nice man Mr. Steele being accused of such horrible things, and him being such a patron of the arts and such an invaluable help to her husband in ‘The Five Nudes of Cairo’ case, well, she just couldn’t hold back any longer.

Laura felt like wringing the woman's neck. Mrs. Coxworth had been fairly close to where Steele and Ms. Raeder were standing at the party. She recalled seeing a woman serving drinks heading toward them when the power went out. Bernice showed her the pictures of the help, and though she couldn't be sure, Mrs. Coxworth narrowed the field to five.

But background checks on the five hadn't turned up anything. Nor could they find any information on Noley. Laura hoped that one of these women was Noley and that she could get Carl to confirm it. She also intended to show the pictures to Mr. Coburn the next day and ask if he saw any resemblance to the person in the old picture he'd seen.

She taped up copies of the five photos to the window visor, in case Murphy needed them later. "I have a good feeling about this, Murph."

"I still think you're reaching."

"I'm exploring alternatives. Pursuing leads."

"And ignoring the obvious."

She smiled at him with affection. "I'm not ignoring it. You won't let me. But you know as well as I do what's obvious isn't always true."

"Especially where he's concerned." Murphy reached over and took her hand. "Laura, don't mistake his relationship with you for something it never was. You can't trust him."

*Could* she trust him?

"You can't let your feelings get in the way of the truth."

*Could* she trust what her feelings told her? "No. I won't. I *can* trust my ability to find the truth."

"That's my Laura. Keeps it all in perspective. Objective, thorough, accurate."

She couldn't help but recall Steele's more poetic analysis of her skills, stated during the Dillon case. "I'm a skilled, resourceful, often brilliant investigator. I'm practical, yet intuitive. I can see the large canvas without missing the small detail –"

"What?"

"Never mind, Murph." She removed her hand from his and checked her watch. Carl wasn't supposed to meet Jim for nearly another hour and a half, but she wanted to be here in case he came early. "Time for you to blend in with the scenery."

Murphy groaned.

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He was at the party, mesmerized by Lora Raeder in that slinky black dress, watching her finger that luscious ruby, the colour of a pomegranate seed – or of a fresh drop of blood. He focussed in on the ruby. It was so beautiful, sparkling with life. A woman was like a ruby. His vision pulled back, and he took in the surrounding guests in a way that hadn't registered in his conscious awareness. He could see all the faces: a gallery owner and his wife, a woman coming towards him



with drinks . . . . Then the faces changed, the bodies changed. Odd. They looked like people he'd known in the past, long ago. Who was this little girl? Before the name came to him, the scene switched, and he was in the morgue with Wallace's body, grabbing that insensitive attendant. ' . . . he had a daughter he put through college . . . . That *stiff* was my friend.' He moaned, tossed his head, and the scene changed again. A dog. He was terrified. It was going to rend him limb from limb. But – mustn't let them find Laura. He turned towards the dog, kicked at it with his hooves, and leapt over it. He was a unicorn, magical and free – but no! he'd been betrayed by a lady, and dogs still pursued him. They leapt on his back, tearing his flesh with their teeth. A spear was plunged into his throat. More were driven into his body, on all sides, impaling him. He could not move. He could not scream. He was drowning in his own blood. The little girl with the face from the past came towards him and smiled at him, a smile of triumph. She turned into the lioness that had been observing him at the fountain. She sprang at him, tore his face with her claws, ripped his throat and chest open, and drank of his blood.

“Lona!” he gasped. “Lona.”

A talker appeared. . . . ‘Step right up, folks, step right up. See the amazin’ unicorn – one of its kind! A small prize, not worth your effort, to the one who can ease its only-ness. What? You there! Did I hear you say he’s not real? Oh, ye of little faith. Well, tell ya what I’m gonna do, friend, tell ya what I’m gonna do – ’

“Hey, you all right?”

Steele shot bolt upright on the cot. He was shaking, but whether from his dream or from the cool air hitting his sweat-drenched body, he couldn't tell. The small lamp on the desk was on. Outside the window it was completely dark.

Thelma pointed to the desktop. “I got you some clothes.”

“Bless you, Thelma.”

“Well, I'll let you get dressed. Take care of yourself, okay?”

“Always. . . . Thanks, love.”

She nodded at him and left the room.

He dried himself with the blanket and then pushed painfully off the cot. Wrapping the blanket around himself, he went to the door and cautiously peered out of it. He hitched his way to the small loo just down the hall to wash up in the sink, then returned to the office. Leaning against the desk to support himself, he started to dress.

Briefs. T-shirt. Carefully, he pulled the long-sleeved tee over his head and inched it up over the bandage on his forearm. It didn't fit too bad.

Trousers. The trousers were another matter. Too short and too wide. Too short and too wide – how many years had he put up with that? He'd taught himself to mend and make alterations, but a kid could do only so much. Even after he'd run away, lived on the streets, he'd had to watch what he nicked. He'd had a helluva time avoiding the gangs as it was – he hadn't wanted to snuff-it

over a too nice shirt or a too good pair of shoes. . . .

He hiked up the trousers and cinched the belt tightly. There was something in one of the trousers' pockets. His watch. Bless Thelma. He wouldn't have blamed her if she'd taken it.

Socks. Sneakers.

He checked the watch. Time to go. He needed to break into a shop and get better clothes. He couldn't afford to be in a one-down position if he found his quarry.

He carefully rubbed his hand over his face. He needed a razor. Maybe not. It might be better to have some stubble to camouflage the bite a little, though he hated to not be clean-shaven. He breathed out a laugh. Maybe he should call and have the limo brought around – he always kept a small electric shaver in it for touch-ups before client appointments. He sighed.

In any case, he was going to need a straight razor or knife – he'd lost his somewhere.

Thank God, he could get out the back door without attracting attention. He didn't exactly want to start off the night by squeezing out that window. He was stiff from the cot and limping a bit from the dog bite. The stiffness would wear off as he got used to movement again. At least he hoped so. He had the feeling he would have plenty of opportunity for movement tonight.

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Carl deboarded Alaska Airlines Flight 1906 from Fort Lauderdale/Hollywood International and entered Terminal 3 of LAX. He bought a paper, shouldered his carry-on, and headed toward a restroom, trying to avoid the full-court press of the nubbly-scalped, saffron-robed, tambourine-shaking devotees eager to send him to Krishna Consciousness. He changed into old faded jeans and a plain cotton shirt. He reached into the inner pocket of the linen jacket he'd just taken off and pulled out his return ticket stubs. He paused before throwing them into the trash, looking at the one from the Bahamas: 'Chalk Ocean Airways Flight 502, "Your Direct Flight From Paradise."' Truer words had, perhaps, never been spoken since the devil had booked Adam and Eve on *their* direct flight from Paradise. He stowed his carry-on in a locker, exited the airport, and got into a taxi. He settled back for the seven-minute ride and unfolded the newspaper. The man currently known to the L.A. public as 'Remington Steele' stared back at him, the eyes accusing. Carl tossed the newspaper aside. What was done, was done.

He looked out the window. They passed Hollywood Park. That made Carl think of the Turf Club inside the park. That made him think of Steele. They passed the Jack Thompson Golf Course<sup>49</sup>. That made Carl think of Rembrandt's 'The Golf Player.' That made him think of Steele. Carl closed his eyes and let his thoughts drift back in time . . . .

They moved quickly, furtively, silently past the monastery herb garden, went down

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<sup>49</sup>Now the Maggie Hathaway Golf Course

Baumgartenstrasse<sup>50</sup> to Rheinuferstrasse, and crossed it, heading toward the river. They turned west to begin the three-kilometer walk along the secluded northern Wanderweg<sup>51</sup> to Neuhausen. There, they'd once again become tourists who'd come to see the Rhine Falls, Europe's largest waterfall. Their mission now accomplished, they would catch the 5 a.m. train to Winterhur.

They walked the straight, level path in the darkness; the moon – and the sun – had set at 9:15. The path was easy to feel under their feet, and they navigated with only short bursts of a penlight, as sure-footed as cats. The landscape baffled all noise except the sound of the rushing water – the Rhine ran very fast here and would soon turn into whitewater rapids.

Fifteen minutes into the walk, Carl broke the silence. "I wish we'd had time to explore the place. I hear there's a roomful of early medieval religious art and a restored Gothic chapel."

"Yes, well, we weren't exactly there for a tour."

Carl tapped the roll-tube inside his friend's knapsack. "This one was a piece of cake."

"The woman and her child will soon be back in the proper hands," Carl's companion, who called himself 'John,' agreed, referring to the painting they'd just liberated.

"It isn't worth much."

"No. But how could I resist when I heard the butler did it?" John snickered, and Carl joined in.

"How'd he do it?"

"One day he showed up at a custom lab with the painting, sans frame, had them photograph the painting, then enlarge the print to the exact size of the painting. He substituted the photo for the painting."

"And you just pulled the same switch."

John laughed quietly. "Yes."

"I can't believe it took the owners so long to notice."

"I hear the fence around their estate alone costs over a million dollars. A half-million-dollar painting is hardly the centerpiece of their collection. And the photographer did a *very* fine job."

"How'd the painting end up here?"

"It's ironic, really. The butler is Swedish and an art lover, and he thought any painting by a Swedish artist belonged back in the homeland. He brought it to Sweden, and it was auctioned off, with the butler collecting the money. When the theft was discovered, the Swedish government refused to return the painting – according to Swedish law, the auction buyer had purchased it in

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<sup>50</sup>Strasse: street (German)

<sup>51</sup>Walking trail

good faith<sup>52</sup>. But the buyer moved here and ended up giving it to Museum zu Allerheiligen.”

“What happens now?”

“You take the painting back to the States, to the owners. The owners anonymously contribute half-a-million dollars to the Museum and also pay you. You pay me. Everybody’s happy. Except maybe the butler.”

As they continued the walk in the cool and the damp, Carl could distinguish the faint murmur of the falls. Soon, it would become a deafening roar.

Thirty minutes into the walk, John broke the silence. “Are you thinking of changing occupations, mate?” he asked softly.

“What makes you say that?” Carl knew he sounded defensive.

“Well, let’s see. In Romont you insisted we see a dozen churches – ”

“They all contained glorious examples of stained glass.”

“In Zurich you spent most of your time viewing the fifteenth century religious art in the Museum of Fine Arts – ”

“Oh, and *you* would’ve preferred we tunnel down to the bank vaults of gold and silver and art works stolen by the Nazis – ”

“In Basel, a city of thirty museums, with a variety of art that takes your breath away, from Greek and Roman antiquities to the modern giants, you spent all your time looking at the religious art in the city’s historical museum – ”

“So, what’s your point?”

“Just noting a pattern. Wondering if it has something to do with Wallace. You’ve seemed . . . troubled.” In John’s tone Carl could hear the gentle offer of a listening ear.

After a long stretch of silence, Carl’s despair burst forth. “Do you think there are some things God can’t forgive you for, Sean?” He purposely used the Irish equivalent of ‘John,’ a reminder of the few times they’d shared confidences in the past.

Carl got no reply for a while. Finally, John spoke. “I’m not exactly the person t’ be askin’ this of, mate.” With relief, Carl noticed the increase of Irish in John’s voice, a sure sign he’d acquiesced to Carl’s unspoken plea, relaxing his habitual guard and loosening his tongue.

“When I was a child,” John continued, “I was told there was one Unforgivable Sin. Unfortunately, I never figured out what exactly that was – I just figured I’d probably committed it. I gave up prayin’ for forgiveness one winter when I was about eight. I would run through the streets in the mornin’, m’ breath coming out in puffs of white. In the windows I passed, I would see children

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<sup>52</sup>John’s story about the butler is true up to here, though the events happened fairly recently.

with their mothers and fathers all snug in their kitchens, the tables laid out with their breakfasts. I would smell their fried eggs and rashers<sup>53</sup>, and m' mouth would water and m' belly cry out. I would see them bow their heads and pray and the Sacred Heart of Jesus ablaze on their walls would bless them and they would scoop into their food. And I would run t' the back of a shop where the bread van was parked and the driver was inside with the owner havin' biscuits washed down with lashin's of tea, and I'd nick me a loaf of steamin' hot bread. And I would run t' a street where quality lived hopin' t' find a delivery box with butter, or cheese, or, oh God, jam. I'd nick the whole thing. And I would run into the farmers' fields and lay on m' back under their cows and steal milk. And sometimes when feelin' bold I would break into their root cellars and nick a cabbage and eat potatoes raw. I kept tellin' m'self I'd go t' a church and light a votive candle and make a confession. But I kept puttin' it off and the sins kept pilin' up and I finally figured God would have no use for a repeat offender who had no intention of reformin' and starvin' to death in the streets in a state of grace. I stopped worryin' about such things."

"But you've never killed anyone."

John's step fell out of sync with Carl's, then resumed its rhythm. "No, I've never killed anyone."

"I killed my father – "

"Carl, you don't have to tell me this – "

Carl pressed on. "In some ways I wanted to be just like him – his buddies looked up to him. And he was *so* loving toward my mom and me during the day, but at night – " Carl broke off as he felt the bile rising from his guts at the memories. He swallowed it back and continued, his voice becoming harsh as he lost the detachment he'd been striving for. "If my mother *breathed* wrong some evening, he'd beat her. When he'd come after me, my mom would try to shield me with her body. He'd pull her off me and start in on her. After he'd knocked her around until she couldn't move any more, he'd often come after me anyway. When I got old enough, I stayed out of that house as much as I could, and when I got to be about eleven, I lived as much on the streets as I did in that house. I couldn't handle it. I couldn't handle anything anymore. I felt nothing, for nobody. I started doing drugs, joined a gang, and started pulling stuff with them – petty stuff at first, but then I got into the heavy sh— " – Carl stopped himself from saying the obscenity, having adopted John's more gentlemanly language – "stuff. One night – I was almost thirteen then – I came home about midnight to crash for a while. I'd had a real close call with a cop and thought I'd be safer there.

"Maybe an hour later, I heard things starting up in my parent's bedroom – he was beating my mother again. And this time, I snapped. I charged in there, pulled him off my mother, and started beating *him* – I was already nearly six feet tall, bigger than him. My mom tried to stop it – she was trying to protect *him*, for God's sake – and he hit her so hard she fell against the dresser and was knocked out cold. I thought he'd killed her. When he went at her again, I grabbed him, threw him against the wall, pulled out my knife, and stuck him. It must have gone through his heart. I'd killed him. I ran and I never looked back. And you know what? I'm not sorry I killed him." Carl

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<sup>53</sup>Rashers: Pieces of bacon; Biscuits: Cookies; Lashings: Lots of (Irish)

palmed his eyes, then dried his hands on his pants. John walked beside him in silence. “What I’m sorry for is never going back and seeing my mother.”

Carl knew John would never ask him what had happened next, so he continued the story on his own. He had to get this out. He had to get this all out. “I spent my days getting high and gang banging<sup>54</sup>. One day a few of us decided to pull a burglary. One of the gang’s older sister was a call girl who’d gotten in with a rich dude and had a plan to burglarize his house while he was out. Well, none of us were too bright at the time, so we went for it. The night we chose for it to go down happened to be the same night this crew of professional burglars had chosen to do the same place. Not only did *we* mess up, we messed *them* up.

“The other gang bangers<sup>55</sup> split and ended up getting caught. My one bright idea was to stick with the professionals, with this one old guy – he must’ve been in his thirties. I figured if he’d lived that long, he must know what he was doing. Turned out that ‘old guy’ was Wallace. I don’t know why, but he got me away, too. And then he didn’t just dump me – said I reminded him of himself at my age, though I find that a little hard to believe. He didn’t take me into his home then – I was too screwed up to fit in with his family – but he found me places to stay, tried to help me in every way he could. He told me if I worked at straightening myself out, he’d take me in and train me. Well, that took me another couple of years, and during that time he literally saved my life a couple of times when I’d OD’d, and got me out of some other serious scrapes. I think, I think on some level I was trying to kill myself with the drugs or get myself killed with the gang just to get out of my mess of a life. But with Wallace’s help I finally straightened myself out enough that he was willing to take me into his family, and – wouldn’t you know it? – his wife up and left him and took his daughter, too. I was sure that was my fault, even though he insisted it had nothing to do with me.

“Anyway, I finally got my act together with his help. Or at least, I thought so, though it got rough those years I thought he was dead. But then he came back, and I thought everything would be as it was before . . . but it’s not. Since he turned religious, Wallace and I have grown apart.” Agony welled up in Carl. “I feel like I’m losing him all over again. Not his fault, mine. I, I want him back. I want to share everything like we used to. I, I even want to help him with his Mission and help kids who are going through things like I went through.” Carl hid his desperation in a laugh. “I’ve, I’ve even fantasized I could find the peace he’s found through God. But how can that be mine? I’d, I’d have tell him about my father – I couldn’t hold that back from him any longer. But how, how can I tell him? How could Wallace, let alone God, accept me if he knew what I really am, what I really feel?” Carl again raised his hands to dry his eyes, and he choked back a sob.

He could sense, but not see, that John had turned to him. He felt a light touch on his arm, and then John’s handkerchief was pressed into his hand. “Wallace would forgive you, mate,” came the soft voice. “And with Wallace intercedin’ for you, how could God do otherwise?”

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<sup>54</sup>Anything performed with a gang, from graffiti-writing to violent acts

<sup>55</sup>Gang members

And he, Wallace's prodigal surrogate son, had indeed been welcomed back into Wallace's life, welcomed back with an intensity of love that had nearly overwhelmed him. He and Wallace had grown even closer, as close as seemed possible for two human beings. And then Wallace had been murdered.

Carl had loved deeply only three people in his life. His mother, for one, and he'd killed the man who beat her, the man who was ultimately responsible for removing her from Carl's life. Noley, for another. And Wallace. Carl stared at the newspaper picture next to him on the seat of the taxicab, looking into the eyes of the man responsible for Wallace's death, the man responsible for removing Wallace from Carl's life forever.

The taxi pulled up at Grand and 60<sup>th</sup>. Carl got out of the taxi and handed the driver a bill. "Keep the change." He slammed the door shut and made his way to Main Street.

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There he is.

As she spied Carl approaching the Mission from down the street, Laura hunkered down a bit in the car, more as an automatic response than out of need – she was too far away for Carl to make her. He was dressed down in jeans and a work shirt, a cap pulled low over his eyes, but Laura was sure it was him. He was built a lot like Steele, tall and slight of frame. The bums at the mouth of the alley, regular fixtures here at night, standing around a fire in a barrel and handing around a bottle in a paper bag, made no acknowledgment as he passed them to use the back entrance. Then again, they'd be so sloshed even at this early hour they wouldn't recognize their own mothers.

She took one last look at the photos in her hand, put them in her purse, and closed it with a decisive snap. Time for some answers.

She got out of the car, went in the front door of the Mission, passed a few sleeping bodies lying across the metal chairs in the back, and stealthed her way to Wallace's old office. The overhead light was shining through the translucent glass. She opened the door and strode in. "Hello, Carl. Jim's not coming."

He looked up in surprise. "Miss Holt."

He was probably in his late twenties, a couple years younger than Steele, she guessed, fair-haired and brown-eyed. Like Steele, he could've graced the cover of any male fashion magazine.

She put her hands on his desk and leaned toward him. "Listen, I'll come right to the point. Mr. Steele is in trouble, and I think you're involved."

Carl laughed softly, tapping the pencil in his right hand against the other palm. He leaned back in the chair and gazed up at her with an amused smile. "He said you were direct. . . . How is Remington?"

He spoke as if they were having a polite conversation, without any real concern for Steele's well-being – not that she'd talked to him enough on the past security jobs to be certain she was

interpreting him correctly. During those casual conversations, he'd been gentle in manner, somewhat formal, courteous. Again, he'd struck her as a lot like Steele, though with an American accent to Steele's apparently British amalgam.

How to proceed? Test his sympathies, provoke him, get a reaction – for or against Steele. Risk lies. With Steele out on the streets, it was too late in the game to keep things at room temperature or simmering. It was time for full boil. Time to blow off the lid.

She stood tall. “I don't know, Carl. Last night he was trying to break into the Raeders' safes, trying to find evidence to prove he didn't commit the thefts. An alarm inside one of them went off. An alarm he hadn't installed. An alarm *you* installed.”

No reaction. No confirmation or denial. Just that amused smile and a quizzical raise of an eyebrow.

Turn up the heat. “The last I saw him, he was barreling down their driveway in one of their cars. After having just been viciously attacked by their dog. In case you haven't been watching the news, the car was found. Abandoned. Covered in his blood. I don't know how badly he's hurt. I don't know if he's dying or already dead.” She hoped to God she was exaggerating.

She saw it then. Carl drew back slightly and averted his eyes. His smile disappeared. She leaned toward him over the desk. “I don't know where he is. I can't find him. I can't find anything to clear his name and make it safe for him to show himself. Help me help him, Carl. He said you are his friend.”

Carl slowly sat up in his chair, looked down at the desk, then back up at her. “I've known Remington for several years, Miss Holt,” he said softly. “When we worked together, it was like working with my doppelgänger. I, however . . . saw the error of my ways. Wallace's message of redemption worked a change in me. I gave up that life. I've been trying to do the right thing ever since. I'm trying to right a wrong.”

Appeal to that sense of justice or goad him to admit revenge. “Carl, if you're blaming him for Wallace's death – ”

“Ohhh,” – Carl leaned forward, emphasizing his words with the pencil, his voice turning hard – “because of him, Wallace, who meant more to me than anyone, was murdered.”

“He wasn't responsible for that, Carl, he – ”

“Not responsible? *He* decided to play ‘Remington Steele.’” The pencil in his hands snapped in two.

“He would've never knowingly jeopardized Wallace's life. You might as well blame me. *I* let him play ‘Remington Steele.’”

Carl looked at her a moment, then tossed the pencil halves onto the desk. He leaned back again in the chair. “You're very good, Miss Holt. You almost convince me.” His voice was controlled again.

“Is it the ‘right thing’ to let a man pay for a crime he didn't commit? Because you want to make



him pay for another crime he also didn't commit but you hold him responsible for?"

"Are you so sure he didn't commit it?" He eyed her coolly.

She wouldn't let him see her doubt. He'd prey on it. Full steam ahead. "You set him up. Admit it."

"I admit nothing."

Laura let out a breath in frustration and straightened. Time for another tack – exploit his relationship with Wallace and tie it to Steele. "You're of the old school, aren't you?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Something Mr. Steele said. He said he knew Wallace was innocent of the burglary in the Dillon case because Wallace was of the old school – he'd never betray a friend." Actually, Steele had said Wallace would never rip off a fellow miscreant, but that wasn't quite the effect she was going for. "Surely you're of that old school, Wallace's school, too."

"I apologize, Miss Holt. I can't help you." His tone held no hint of apology – it'd returned to one of polite indifference.

All right, Holt. Light another fire. Look at your A-B-C triangle. Noley-Carl-Steele. Say something so B will get in touch with A, flush her out. "Would you at least tell me if any of these women are Wallace's daughter" – she thrust the photographs from her purse at him, then fanned the photos out on his desk – "or if they're not, if you know where Wallace's daughter is?"

She'd seen his eyebrows lift in surprise when she'd mentioned Wallace's daughter, and there had been a nearly imperceptible twitch when he'd glanced at the pictures out of reflex. So. Not as expert as Steele at controlling his body language – though Steele wasn't as good at it around *her* as he used to be. She'd poked a few chinks in that armor over the past year, just not enough of them to help her with this case. So now she had to joust with his friend. Unfortunately, she couldn't tell which photo Carl had reacted to.

Carl looked at her, his eyes steady. "I know nothing of Wallace's daughter."

Ah, you've made a mistake, Carl. Press on, Holt. "You're lying. When the time was right, you renewed your old friendship with Mr. Steele so you could set him up. And he suspected nothing, grateful that you'd finally forgiven him for what you think is his role in Wallace's death. You set him up from the start. You . . . and Wallace's daughter."

Carl stood up abruptly. "Please leave now, Miss Holt."

A little rattled again. Shake him more. "You know, Carl, for what it's worth, Wallace's death hit Mr. Steele hard, too. I know. I was there at the morgue with him when he ID'd the body. I saw his reaction. And I saw his reaction afterwards, his regret for ever having involved Wallace, his vow to find Wallace's murderer. That was the first time he ever directly involved himself in a case. And from then on, he continued to involve himself in cases." Not that she'd always welcomed it, and not that his motives were always pure. "I think, in his own way, he's also struggling to 'do the right thing' with his life. Hasn't this gone far enough? Are you really willing to see him

destroyed?” She searched his face, hoping for some sign she could break him.

But he’d composed himself again and gave no sign that her words mattered. He walked to the door and held it open for her to leave.

Could she play on his faith? “You know, Steve said you couldn’t be involved in this. He quoted the Bible. “Vengeance is Mine,” saith the Lord.””

Still nothing.

Before she left, she turned to him one last time. “If you change your mind, give me a call. Anytime, night or day. Here’s my card, with my home number. I *will* find the truth. It’d be better for you if you cooperate.”

He took the card from her and tossed it in the wastepaper basket nearby.

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Steele spotted the Rabbit. Was Laura after the same quarry? He waited in the shadows, and soon she came out of the Mission, alone. He saw her nod to one of the bums. She hailed a cab, leaving the Rabbit.

He looked back at the bum. He grinned. It had to be Murphy. Perhaps one day he’d get the chance to compliment Murphy on how well he fit into this milieu, but right now he was in the way. No time to lose – if Laura had found Carl in the Mission, he’d take off in a flash. Steele’s visit to his ‘old friend’ must be paid without delay.

Steele considered his options, fingering the case in the front pocket of his trousers, the case that became the handle for the rigid steel cutting blade of a razor. He looked again at Murphy.

Sorry, old boy. You and the alcos<sup>56</sup> will have to spend a few hours in the nick<sup>57</sup>.

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TGIF, hah!

Laura sat at the kitchen table, pouring over her case notes, wishing she could drown her sorrows in a bowl of chocolate ice cream. The file was getting thicker. She had photos and sketches and diagrams galore – not only of the crime scenes around the display case and the pool, but of the entire interior and exterior of the mansion. She had all the police reports, all the lab reports, copies of all the film that had been shot at the crime scene by the police and the media. She had the notes of all the interviews with police officers, lab folks, and the guests and hired help at the party. She had records on credit history, employment, arrests, court appearances, financial activities, business dealings, property ownership, most recent places of residence, and so on. For Erich Raeder, Samuel Goldschmidt, the five caterers, Wallace’s crew, and so forth. And now she

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<sup>56</sup> Those habitually drunk (from ‘alcoholics,’ I’m sure – Irish slang)

<sup>57</sup>Jail

could start filling in the gaps for Carl, thanks to Coburn and his safecracking abilities. Noticeably lacking was detailed information for Lora Raeder. And Steele, of course. The two con artists. Nor could she turn up any information on Noley. She wished she could ask Steele if he knew where she'd gone to college. That, at least, would give a starting point, something she could use to help identify Noley as one of the women in the photographs. She hoped that tomorrow Coburn could help her there – she hadn't been able to reach him tonight.

So much to do. . . . She had to investigate the mysteries of how the Braque painting had ended up in Steele's possession, if it had, and of how the ruby had ended up in the washroom at LACMA. Raeder, Goldschmidt, Carl, Steele – any of them could have arranged those events. . . . So much to do. . . .

She'd never realized before this case how much she'd come to rely on Steele's help – not with the paperwork, of course, but when it came to peoplework, he was invaluable. Never had she met anyone who was as nonjudgmental, who so easily fit in anywhere and could get along with anybody, if need be. Well, almost anybody. Murphy would probably always lie beyond his charms.

She rubbed her eyes. It was nearly midnight. She doubted she'd be able to sleep. Again. She prayed for Carl, wherever he was, to change his mind, to call.

That had sure been some damned rotten timing, tonight. Some 'concerned citizen' had complained about the bums on Main Street in front of the Mission, and Murphy had gotten picked up with the others. By the time she'd bailed him out, Carl had disappeared. She'd just told Murphy to go home, tomorrow was another day.

The phone behind her rang, nearly startling her out of her skin. She knocked the picture hanging next to it off the wall in her haste to answer it. "Yes?"

"The picture by your phone needs checking."

"Wha – ?"

Click.

She picked up the picture, took it out of its frame, and examined everything carefully. She had no idea what that caller was talking about. She looked at the other ones hanging on the same wall, but further away, on the other side of the recess containing the water crock. She examined them in the same way. Still nothing. She sat at the table. What was the message? She looked at the pictures again: three close-up black-and-white art photos of a rabbit, a duck, and another rabbit. A rabbit. The photo next to the phone was one of the rabbits. Her rabbit needed checking. Her VW Rabbit.

She dashed out to the garage and searched the car. After she'd checked the obvious hiding places, she turned to the unobvious. There, amidst her car service records she found it: entries she hadn't made, entries incorporating a code she'd taught Steele. But she couldn't say for sure they were in his handwriting – he could forge anybody's handwriting, who knew if he ever used his own? His 'Remington Steele' signature was identical to hers – focus, she needed to focus. She unraveled the new entries. They indicated an address and a time. She needed to leave now.

She got into the Rabbit and, after some fancy maneuvering, shook what she could only assume was a policeman tailing her. She reached a modest house at the indicated address and pulled into the garage. With her heart in her mouth, she went to the door and knocked. No one answered. She tried the doorknob. The house was unlocked. She pushed the door open and crept into the house.

She called out quietly, “Hello?”

A phone rang. She raced toward the sound and found herself in a dark bedroom. She flicked the light switch, but nothing happened. She snatched up the phone.

“Meet me,” came the soft, accented voice.

A thousand responses came to her mind and cancelled each other out.

“Laura? Are you there?”

“I’m here.” Her voice was equally quiet.

“Laura, I know who the thieves are.”

“Who?”

“Just . . . meet me. I know how to set a trap. But I can’t do it alone. Will you help me?”

She clenched the phone. “No! Not your way. Not this time. Turn yourself in. Tell me where you are. I’ll make sure the police take you safely. Tell me who the thieves are. We’ll build a case.”

Sounding apologetic, the voice said, “Laura . . . I’ve already set this plan in motion. Before my quarries escape. It’s on for tonight – ”

“If your plan fails, you’ll have ruined my life’s work!” She hit herself on the forehead. “What am I saying? You already have with your last little stunt.” She hoped he felt her words like a slap in the face. She didn’t care.

The silence stretched out.

The voice returned, still soft. “Laura, ‘Remington Steele’s’ reputation was already in tatters before that ‘last little stunt.’ I have a way to restore it. Please. Let me try. If I fail, you’re no worse off than before. If we succeed, ‘Remington Steele’ will have once again cleverly solved a most difficult case.”

You ask too much of me. “Why do you need me?”

The pause was so long she thought the phone had gone dead.

“A very good question. . . . I can find someone else to help me, or, if I must, do it alone. But it’s your agency. I thought you might like to be in on it. If my plan doesn’t work, you can easily make it appear you were just tracking me down and trapping me.”

“If it doesn’t work, or you’re lying to me, that’s exactly what I intend to do.”

“I never thought otherwise. . . . So . . . you’ll meet me?”

She closed her eyes and sighed. "I'll listen to your plan. Where and when?"

She memorized the address.

"Murphy would come in useful, too, if you think he can be persuaded." Just before hanging up, the voice added, "Oh, and Laura, bring the agency gun."

Her mouth went dry. She didn't like the sound of that – she had the distinct impression he didn't like guns. She walked back out to her car, nervously rubbing her hands along the sides of her legs.

She took a deep breath and let it out. She needed to pay a midnight call on Murphy – she was sure they were going to have a 'discussion' over whether to follow Steele's lead again or arrange for his capture. She started the car, noticing her hands were shaking.

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He hadn't bothered telling her if this didn't work, it was unlikely she'd need to do much to track him down.

If this didn't work, he'd likely be dead.

No use dwelling on that. Like a true carny, he'd calculated the risks. He still had some 'shopping' to do. And he had to work out what he'd do if Laura changed her mind and didn't meet him, or didn't go for it, or, worst of all, set a trap for him.

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Steele adjusted the straps on his knapsack as he watched the gleaming black-and-silver Horch approach the entrance gate to the mansion. So far so good. Goldschmidt had come through for him – Raeder had been lured out of the mansion and was now making his return.

As the car slowed to turn into the driveway, Steele made his move from out of the shadows. The top to the car was down, as usual. He leapt onto the car, just behind Raeder's seat, yelling "Stop!" at the driver and flashing his razor. He grabbed Raeder by the neck with his left hand, gritting his teeth against the pain. He had a feeling that dog bite had become infected – an unpleasant smell caught in his nostrils. With his right hand he held the blade of his razor at Raeder's neck. "It'd be a shame to spoil this beautiful interior with your blood."

The driver had slammed the car to a stop and fastened his eyes upon his employer, hands gripping the wheel in white-knuckled fear. Steele had been surprised Raeder never seemed to use one of his beefy security men as a driver. Maybe they wouldn't even fit in the two-seater. Or, more likely, he was afraid the hulks would damage the car with their indelicate ways. *This* little man wouldn't give him any trouble.

"Ahhhh, Mr. Steele. We meet again. What a pleasant surprise."

"Yes, well, you may not think so when I'm through." Steele had inspected the gate earlier. Changes had been made, and he'd guessed they were to prevent the type of escape he'd made before. "Tell your driver to open the gate, drive through, and stop again. And tell him not to try anything or I'll slit your throat right here and now."

“Why do you not tell him? I believe you can.”

Steele’s only response was to press the blade slightly into Raeder’s skin, just short of drawing blood.

Raeder spoke to the driver in German. Shaking, the man got out of the car and entered a combination onto the digital pad. The gate swung open.

When the driver returned to the car, Steele sat on the top of the cushion behind Raeder’s seat, his feet to each side of the powerfully-built man. He was a David straddling a Goliath, but fortunately, he had more than a slingshot. He hunched over, his left hand gripping Raeder’s throat just firmly enough to let him know he meant business, his right hand holding his now-closed razor at the man’s neck. “This flicks open easily, so if we’ll all remain calm, no one’ll get hurt.”

After they’d stopped, Steele snapped the razor open again. “Now tell him to leave the gate open just ever so slightly – so it’s not noticeable from the road.”

Steele kept a careful watch on the proceedings and was satisfied.

When the driver returned, Steele moved to the centre of the car and sat on top of both seats, his feet planted firmly on the white cushions below him. He kept one hand on the driver’s shoulder. The other, clenched in a fist holding the opened razor, was on Raeder. “Fahren Sie vorsichtig!”

The driver did as Steele asked, driving carefully towards the front entrance, which was illuminated by one small lamp.

“What are your intentions, Mr. Steele?”

“You’ll find out. Now be silent.”

They reached the circular turnabout and the point closest to the entrance.

"Halten Sie bitte hier!" Steele tightened his hand on the driver and quietly snicked the razor in his right hand closed.

The driver stopped and shut off the engine. With quick movements Steele turned and struck him on the head, turned back, and flicked the razor open. The driver had toppled over without a sound. Steele thought the poor bloke would probably decide it time for a change of occupation, since he was the same person Steele had accosted on his previous visit.

“Sit on your hands, palms up, and don’t move,” he ordered Raeder.

Steele climbed over the seat behind the driver and opened his door. Keeping the razor at ready in his right hand, he wrapped his left arm around the man, pulled him from the car, and eased him to the pavement. He went to Raeder’s side of the car and opened the door. Raeder got out and gave him the faintest of amused looks.

“You’ll tow your driver to the front door.”

Raeder shrugged, and Steele prodded him towards the driver with his blade. Raeder grabbed the man’s wrists and pulled him around towards the door. Steele followed, a pace back. When they

reached the small step-up, Steele said sharply, "Lift his head up!"

"Your concern is so touching, Mr. Steele."

Supercilious old – Steele clenched his jaw, biting back the retort. "Open the door." He stuck the razor at Raeder's ribs.

Raeder let go of his burden and turned towards the door. As Raeder reached for the keypad, Steele stopped his hand. Steele inspected the keypad; as best he could tell, no alterations had been made. He motioned for Raeder to continue. When the door opened, Steele gestured back at the driver. "Bring him in."

Once inside, keeping Raeder close, Steele disarmed the alarm system. He ripped both the telephone cord and the alarm command console cord from the wall. "Now bring him into the library."

As they entered the library, Steele flicked on the chandelier. "Pull him to the back."

Raeder's biggest concern in life at the moment seemed to be that he not wrinkle the floral motiffed antique rug that covered the entire floor.

Steele tossed the cords to Raeder. "Secure your driver. Use your handkerchief to gag him."

Raeder fixed him with a level stare.

Steele slowly tapped the razor on his palm. "You don't want to make me say it twice."

"You sound so common, Mr. Steele."

Steele didn't deign to reply. Raeder bent down to the driver and secured him. Steele tested the bindings. Keeping an eye on Raeder, Steele went to the roll-top desk, opened it, and pressed the button that would give him access to Raeder's safe. He shrugged off the knapsack, removed a few items, and placed everything on the desk. He motioned with the razor for Raeder to come towards him. Raeder complied, but he'd lost none of his arrogant demeanor and continued to regard Steele coolly.

"Turn around." Steele pushed Raeder over to the safe. He pulled over one of the tapestried chairs and placed it to the left of and facing the safe, far enough away so he'd feel free to work, yet close enough to be in easy reach should Raeder try anything. "Sit." He shoved Raeder into the chair. "How is the safe's new internal alarm hooked up to the monitoring station?"

"Why should I tell you?"

Steele lunged and gripped the man's throat, again gritting his teeth against the pain in his hand. Bringing the blade to Raeder's carotid artery, he whispered harshly, "Because if you don't, I will cut you. It will be a slow, painful death, I assure you. And I will get into your safe anyway." Steele loosened his grip slightly.

"What do you want?"

Steele let him go and stepped back. "I'm only here on a brief shopping trip. A few easily gained,

easily exchangeable baubles to finance my journey to friendlier climes.”

“Please do indulge my curiosity. Why have you not left before now?”

Steele shrugged. “I’d hoped I didn’t have to. I was wrong.”

“You are wrong again. You will be caught.”

“No.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

Steele whirled at the new voice to see Lora Raeder at the library door, the gun in her hands pointed at him – no doubt the gun shown to him in the armoury, the FN Browning with the Nazi proof mark, an eagle with a swastika in its talons.

She looked at him with superior eyes. “Drop your knife, Remington.” He dropped it. “Put your hands on top of your head, fingers interlaced.” That was surprisingly difficult. His left arm ached from armpit to hand. “Kick your knife to the side, toward Erich.” He did so.

Lora sauntered towards him, stopping about a foot away. Erich picked up the razor and slashed at Steele’s face. Steele jerked back, the blade missing by millimetres. Lora laughed, while Raeder, as usual, betrayed no emotion.

Raeder waved the blade calculatingly, then closed it and pocketed the razor. “Not yet, I do not think.”

Steele looked at Ms. Raeder. “No. After all, a cat likes to play with her prey after stalking and capturing it. Isn’t that right, Lona?”

She laughed as if truly amused.

“‘Lona’?” Raeder glanced at his wife.

“It means ‘lioness, ready for battle.’ It’s an acronym of ‘Nola,’ my given name. Something John Robie used to call me when I was a child of twelve. He didn’t take much notice of me then. He’ll notice me now.”

Ah, yes. ‘John Robie,’ the name Wallace and little Noley, his daughter, had known him by – and also the name of a character played by Cary Grant. “John Robie. ‘To Catch a Thief.’ Grace Kelly, Cary Grant. Vista Vision. 1955. The title comes from an old English proverb, ‘Set a thief to catch a thief.’ A supposedly reformed cat burglar sets out to prove himself innocent of a recent crime spree by catching the thief who’s terrifying the French Riviera. He teams up with a rich, young American woman, and as they track down the thief, they fall in love.”

“Too bad real life doesn’t play like the movies.”

“Isn’t it,” Steele agreed mildly. “I must admit, I didn’t expect to see you tonight. Carl was supposed to –”

“Suffer remorse? Come running to the aid of his old friend when things got hotter than he expected? Keep me out of the way while you pulled your little stunt with Erich and robbed us,



and then the two of you flee? We met and had a good laugh over that.”

She stepped forward and stroked his cheek with one hand, while pressing the gun firmly into his chest with the other. “Did you know your little associate went to see him, too? She must be quite fond of you. She gave quite an impassioned speech on your behalf. Carl acted it out with such flair. Pity she doesn’t know you’re not worth it. Here you are, betraying her trust. A common thief, hoping to buy his way out of the country at our expense.” She clucked her tongue at him while pursing her lips in imitation of a kiss.

He should’ve recognized those eyes long before this moment. She was no longer a child and, obvious to him now, had been under the plastic surgeon’s scalpel, but he should’ve recognized those eyes. Contact lenses had even altered their colour, but the cruel cunning that lay behind them still shone forth undisguised. He should’ve seen it.

“No, ‘Remington,’” – her voice dripped with irony – “Carl called me after you left him tonight. At first, I was quite angry with him for just not staying out of the country until we were through with you. But he wants his life back *now*.”

She traced a line back and forth on his chest with the gun. “In the end, that’s what’s important to him. And you stand in the way. He told me your plans. You’ve been set up again. We finish this tonight in a spectacular way. We deliver the killing bite.”

Raeder stepped towards him, and Lona handed the gun to her husband. They were both mere inches away, Raeder on his right, Lona on his left. Raeder held the gun unwaveringly on him. Lona slowly ran her left hand up and down his turtleneck while her right hand fingered the ruby, once again worn around her neck. Her actions brought to mind the party. This woman was like a ruby. He’d certainly found out how this one felt about him. Too late.

“Carl and I were lovers, did you know? Love will always triumph over mere friendship, ‘Remington.’”

Best not to express his doubts that she knew the meaning of either word.

She stroked his cheek, then strolled over to the lady’s writing table and from one of the compartments pulled out a pair of red plastic handcuffs. Dangling them from a hand, eyes ranging up and down his body, she swayed her way back to him.

He refrained from biting his lip. “Not standard police issue.” But not toys, either.

She laughed lasciviously, slowly licked his jawline from chin to ear, then whispered, “I like my men shackled.”

God. He hoped she didn’t mean those poor old men she’d swindled. He kept himself under tight control, directing his eyes to Raeder. “Odd. He doesn’t seem the type.”

If he’d hoped for a reaction, he didn’t get one – Raeder continued to regard him dispassionately. An old memory came to Steele’s mind. He’d glanced out the window and seen Lona, something in her little hands. She’d gently thrown up her hands, setting free a small bird she’d evidently

captured. The bird had exploded. She'd tied a banger<sup>58</sup> to its leg and lit it. She'd stood there, simply watching it explode, her expression never changing.

Evidently she'd found a like-minded companion.

She laughed. "Not Erich, my sweet. I find those diversions elsewhere."

"I thought you had this little prenuptial clause that precluded such activities."

"Oh, that. Part of the preliminaries, my pet. Just a little something to throw off the scent, lay rumors. I could never be bound by something like that. We" – she gave her husband an amused smile – "get so much more . . . satisfaction . . . from men than we ever could from mere wealth." She emphasized her words by cupping Steele's face with her left hand, running her thumb over his lips, and kissing him.

He didn't respond. She licked him again, began to slide her hand down his body –

He recoiled, started to release his hands, but stopped at the sound of the gun hammer being pulled back and the feel of the gun at his temple. He closed his eyes. He forced himself to remain impassive, though he couldn't help tensing.

A bead of cold sweat wended its way slowly down the middle of his back.

The gun was removed from his head. He breathed again.

"Before we continue our pleasantries, mein Schatz, put the handcuffs on him."

"I'd be delighted, my love." Her tongue moved slowly over her ruby-red lips. She moved behind him. "Give me your right arm and keep your left where it is. Slowly, my darling. Erich can be trigger happy, and I'm not ready to finish the fun just quite yet."

She locked the cuff on him, cinching it tightly. Too tightly.

"Now for your left arm . . . ."

He gasped as she pulled it around to his back.

"Oh, did that hurt? Wolfie got you good there, didn't he? He's such a good dog."

There was nothing he could do. The plastic cuffs looked flimsy, but they bit painfully into his wrists. Well, on the bright side, his fingers would soon go numb. Too bad he couldn't say the same for his entire left arm.

Lona moved around in front of him again and patted Raeder's arm. "Care to add this one to your collection? He's so pretty. So lean, so tall. We could even make it a threesome –"

Oh, God –

"I am afraid, my love, we might find that a little difficult to explain to the police. I am sure his associates will insist on an autopsy. You see," – he addressed Steele – "the police will come here

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<sup>58</sup>Firecracker (British slang)

to find the body of a thief. ‘The Formerly Great Remington Steele.’ We came upon him, he turned to attack us, and in our terror we shot him and, unfortunately, killed him.”

“You might have a bit of trouble convincing them of the ‘terror’ part,” Steele commented drily.

Lona stroked Steele’s face, then nuzzled his neck and nibbled his ear, finishing with a sharp bite – not enough to break the skin – causing him to wince. “We could let him run. Set Wolfie upon him. Accidentally whisper the ‘kill’ command.” She moved a step away from him.

“That would be most amusing to watch,” Raeder agreed. “But then the dog would have to be destroyed. A waste.”

Steele looked at Lona. “All this on account of your fa – ”

He staggered, ears ringing, eyes tearing, then registered the slap. He shook his head, trying to clear his vision. What a wallop. That would leave a mark. The salty, metallic taste of blood was in his mouth. He shook his head again. He felt slightly dizzy. Curiously, he was also feeling a bit hot, yet chilled at the same time.

“My father didn’t deserve to die.”

“No. He didn’t.”

“You’re responsible for his death.”

“Lona. Your father was my friend. Had I thought there was any danger involved, I would’ve never asked for his help. I’m truly sorry he died as a result.”

“You think your regret makes up for his death? No, ‘Remington.’ I want you to pay much more dearly for it.”

She walked a few steps away before turning to face him. “Actually, I would’ve preferred to see your reputation as ‘The Great Remington Steele’ destroyed and have you rot in prison. Prison would be worse for you than death, don’t you agree? You’ve a great need for freedom. But you’ve forced my hand.”

Steele turned his head towards Raeder. “How’d you get pulled into this? Corporate raiding not exciting enough? Stealing artwork got a bit dry?”

The pale grey-blue eyes regarded Steele as if he were a mildly interesting bacterium in a petri dish. “You and I have shared some common interests in paintings in the past, Mr. Steele. A Matisse, a few Monets, Renoir, Picasso, Cézanne. I could name more.”

Steele’s mouth went dry at the implication. So, unbeknownst to him, he *had* crossed paths with Raeder in the past: Raeder either owned or trafficked in some of the art plundered by the Nazis that *he* had recovered for their rightful owners. He’d probably cost Raeder millions, maybe hundreds of millions. With a fearlessness he did not feel, he told Raeder, “I’m currently interested in a Monet. A beautiful Monet I found in your collection. ‘Water Lilies, 1904.’ Part of a collection amassed for the Nazi Foreign Minister, if I’m not mistaken.”

Raeder’s eyes narrowed slightly, the tiniest of reactions. “I see I underestimated your talents, Mr.

Steele.”

“Yes.” Steele glanced at Lona, then directed his attention back to Raeder. “As have I, evidently, underestimated the wrath of . . . Die Lorelei.”

Raeder nodded in acknowledgment. “Lorelei. My kindred spirit, a predator, a conqueror. She excels in using a man’s weaknesses against him and leading him to his ruin, does she not? When she asked if I would be interested in destroying a man in a most personal way, I was intrigued, and when I found out who that man was, I decided it would be a worthy endeavour. A change from cold business. I have found it very fulfilling. A new role for me to play. An angel of retribution.” Raeder nodded towards his wife. “And an angel of vengeance for Lorelei’s father.”

Steele looked at Lona, who’d come towards him again. “I don’t think your father would feel he needs avenging. And I don’t think it’s *your* motivation at all. I think your father’s death just brought me to your doorstep, put you in mind of a whole new way to unsheathe your claws – ”

His words earned him another hard blow to the face.

Lona’s eyes narrowed in contempt. “You made it so easy. Hire the illustrious Remington Steele Agency for the security job, insist you handle it personally and know every intimate detail.” She laughed scornfully. “No arm twisting there. You were like a kid in a candy store. Or should I say, like a thief given the key to Fort Knox. As I knew you would be, of course. Part of the fun was seeing if you’d succumb – ”

“Ah, yes. You threw in all the enticements you could. And such attention to detail. Down to the promise of a movie at the party. Though I assure you, I needed no further inducement to attend.” He dipped his head, conceding she had adroitly manoeuvred him. Smiling at him in disdainful triumph, she pressed herself to him again, her right hand on his shoulder, her left running back and forth across his chest. He tried to pull back, but there was nowhere to go. “The night of the party. You put the ruby down your dress?”

“Not original, but it worked.”

“And the mosaic?”

Raeder answered that one. “Yes, that was a nice touch – was it not? – given your fondness for royal lavulite. It was removed earlier in the day. My men had a most difficult time circumventing your security around that display – I had to call in the best. It took them days – or rather, nights – to unravel its secrets. You are most ingenious. I salute you.”

“Not ingenious enough, apparently. . . . I’m surprised, though. You took great care in your preparations, yet you risked having someone climb to the balcony to open the door. Your plan could’ve been ruined before it really got started, if he’d been spotted.”

“No one climbed to the balcony.”

“But . . . the door was unlocked. The alarm went off – ” He almost groaned. “Ahhh, I see. . . . The signal from that door wasn’t originally sent to the monitoring system with the others, was it? Once we’d installed the sensors, *your* men were responsible for going around and opening and

closing all the windows and doors to send their signals to the system.”

“So many windows and doors in the mansion. I thought I would let my men relieve your most excellent crew of that menial task.”

“So they never opened that door. It was left out of the system. You merely unlocked it earlier that day. No one would be the wiser. It wasn’t until *I* opened and closed it to check for an intruder that it was added to the system. No one would know it hadn’t been connected to it before.”

“Very good, Mr. Steele.”

Steele shook his head. “Hoist by my own petard.” He couldn’t help adding the annotation.

“‘Hamlet.’ Lawrence Olivier, Jean Simmons. Two Cities Films. 1948. . . . And as for the alarm . . .” – he nodded slightly as the answer to that also became clear – “one of the guards hit the panic button on the command console after another had cut the power. The alarm was triggered by the battery back-up.”

“Ah, Mr. Steele. You make quite the detective.”

He knew Raeder was ridiculing him, but he replied sincerely, “I’ve been taught by the best. . . . What if I hadn’t gone to investigate the alarm?”

Lona drew back slightly and looked at him in mock disbelief. “‘The Great Remington Steele’?” Her lip twisted into a sneer. “Besides, fool, it was only a game. We’d have changed the rules and started a new one.”

He knew that jeering tone. Omadhaun. It’s only a game. But this gamester here intends to watch you burn.

“It is a pity you will not live long enough to pursue your leads and clear the name of ‘Remington Steele.’”

“My associates have a vested interest in that name, Mr. Raeder. I’m sure they’ll continue this matter. They’re very good at their jobs. They’ll uncover the truth. Eventually, someone in your employ will talk.”

“Do not count on it.”

Lona laughed and walked her fingers up Steele’s chest. “Erich’s pockets are very deep. They hold many loyal men, of many talents.”

“Yes, I can see that. Including men who can steal evidence from forensics labs, obtain Braque paintings, and plant rubies in lavatories.”

“Yes. Men who know the value of silence.” Something changed in Raeder’s eyes, and he closed the distance to Steele. “And, Mr. Steele, they dare not cross me. My reach is very long. I can make men disappear. Your friend Carl understands that very well. Even had this robbery succeeded, you never would have escaped me.”

Raeder put the gun to Steele’s temple, then traced it over his cheek, his lips, and plunged it deep into his mouth, mashing his lip to his teeth, forcing his head back. Cold words, neutral tone, hot

breath commingled as Raeder whispered in his ear, “And now, Mr. Steele, the lord and lady await the presentation of your corpse. Unlike the unicorn, however, you won’t magically return to life.”

Steele closed his eyes. Damn! His heart slammed in his chest. The gun, the taste of the metal, nearly gagged him. A wisp of despair taunted him – he needed to speak! His voice was his brush, used to paint his own designs on the canvas of others’ minds. He felt Lona’s hand trail down his chest. Lona. The little girl who’d relished telling him lurid ghost stories, zeroing in on his discomfort with that unerring ability a bully possessed. He was Lona’s captured unicorn. The unicorn had been immobilized by skewering spears. The one through its throat would have cut off its cries. He never could understand the story of those tapestries. No one really knew exactly what they meant. What had the unicorn done to be hunted down in such vicious sport? The unicorn was innocent. *He* wasn’t innocent. He was no unicorn, no embodiment of virtue, courage, righteousness, true and fine. Remington Steele was. He felt Raeder press against him and kiss him on the cheek. The old British nursery rhyme came to his mind, ‘The Lion and the Unicorn were fighting for the crown. The Lion beat the Unicorn all around the town.’ If only he could speak. Lions and Unicorns and Steele, oh my. The name is Steele, Remington Steele. He’d always gotten completely absorbed in the roles he’d played. That’s what had made him so good. Not only at the confidence game, but at the legitimate – well, more legitimate – roles he’d played in his life. That and his silver tongue. He wished he could speak. He felt Lona’s hand trail down his belly. He’d always soon moved on to the next adventure, though. He hadn’t found the role he’d wanted to live. None of those people were him. But he’d been finding more and more that he couldn’t tell where Remington Steele left off and he began. He laughed silently, hollowly. Laura could tell him. She sometimes did. Still, he was good at this. Even Laura had told him that, once. Laura. She’d held him here as much as Remington Steele had, if not more. Ah, Laura. I’m so sorry our time together wasn’t longer. Got it while I could. Enjoyed it while it lasted. Too soon! someone’s taken it away. He laughed again, silently, mirthlessly. Ironic it should be this role, his heroic role, that was proving to be his undoing. If only he could speak. White-hot fury filled him as hands on his shoulders forced him to his knees, the gun held in place the entire time. He opened his eyes, looked up into Lona’s. He expected to see hatred there, but all he saw were the cold eyes of a cat, intent on the kill. Lona stepped back. Raeder yanked the gun from his mouth and he couldn’t help the convulsive breath that escaped him. How would his world end? A whimper and a bang. He saw Raeder move back, start to crouch down to get the correct angle for the entry wound. He heard a crack like gunfire as he threw himself to the left, into the cavernous fireplace, out of Raeder’s sights, and hit the handle to the false flue with his shoulder. He rammed his body into the false wall at the back of the fireplace, which, released by the flue handle, gave way. Thank God for Prohibition and Raeder’s suspect activities. His momentum caused him to tumble down the now-revealed flight of stairs. He ended up an undignified heap on the floor. Sweet music came to his ears: he heard Laura’s voice boom out from above him, from up in the library, “Stop right there! Drop your gun! Move away from the fireplace!”

The calvary had finally come over the hill. ‘Stagecoach.’ Claire Trevor, John Wayne. United Artists. 1939.

He was surrounded by blackness. He considered the merits of getting up and going into the tunnels – he could thus leave the mansion and put in a triumphant ‘Remington Steele’ appearance

back in the library. He rolled from his stomach to his side but stopped further movement, his body voting in favour of staying put a moment longer. He rested his head back on the floor, curled up a little, let himself go limp, closed his eyes, and gave in to the moment. Sometimes the life of Remington Steele wasn't all it was cracked up to be. He was hurting, he was tired, he had a headache, he was cold, and he just might throw up –

A dim light came on overhead. He heard footsteps on the stairs that could've only been Laura's. Still not feeling much like moving, he gasped out his complaint. "Couldn't you've made your appearance a bit sooner?"

"We went in as soon as there were a few seconds of silence."

Odd. It'd seemed much longer than that. He felt her kneel beside him. He tried to twist around, wanting to look into those chocolate brown eyes, but she pushed his shoulder down, evidently to get better access to his cuffs, and he had to make do without the sight a little longer. "Might as well save the police the trouble and leave them on, eh?" he attempted to joke. He got no reply. In fact, she seemed to be a little rough back there. Not that he could really tell – he couldn't feel his hands. What was her problem? He sighed. At this point, 'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.' Rhett Butler to Scarlet O'Hara. 'Gone With the Wind.' Clark Gable, Vivien Leigh . . . oh, give it a rest, mate.

After she'd gotten the cuffs off, he sighed again, with relief. Laura went back up the stairs. He rolled over onto his back and looked at what should've been his hands. They were an interesting reddish-purple and belonged to a stranger. After he slapped some hot prickly feeling into them and they cooperated, he grabbed onto the bottom stair and hauled himself upright. He took out his handkerchief and mopped his face. He got up and unsteadily made his way to the top of the stairs. He breathed in deeply, exhaled, straightened his clothes, smoothed his hair, squared his shoulders, then crouched down and crawled out of the fireplace with as much dignity as he could muster.

Murphy was holding the agency gun on the Raeders. The sight of the gun caused Steele to replay the last few moments before he'd gone arse over kick<sup>59</sup> down the stairs; he finally registered that the shattering 'gunshot' he'd heard had actually been the sound of the dining room door being flung open as Murphy and Laura had dashed into the library.

Steele looked at Laura. She was removing the bug he'd hidden on the desk when he'd taken off his knapsack. Presumably, she'd gotten the entire conversation on tape. She went out into the hall but immediately returned, a disgusted look on her face. She addressed him: "You pulled out the phone line."

"Oh. Sorry," – Steele nodded towards the driver who still lay unconscious on the floor – "needed it for him. There's a phone in the kitchen."

She shook her head at him and strode out of the room again.

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<sup>59</sup>Head over heels (Irish slang)

Ohdeargod. “The driver!” He rushed over to free the man and see if he could pat him awake.

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Laura hung up the phone and stalked back into the library, seeking her target. The Raeders were seated in their tapestried chairs in the center of the room, Murphy guarding them. The driver was propped up in a chair in the far corner, cringing away from the group, holding his head in his hands. Steele stood leaning against the mantelpiece, head bowed, cradling his left arm. She strode over to him. He straightened up, eyeing her warily.

She poked him hard in the chest with both index fingers. “Don’t you ever do this again.”

He frowned. “Do . . . what again?”

“Don’t hold back information from me that has even the remotest bearing on a case. You knew who Goldschmidt was – ”

“I told you – ”

She poked him again. “Not when I first mentioned his name. Not until I practically forced you to. You knew all along about the Monet – don’t deny it – and you didn’t bother telling me until tonight. I shudder to think why – ”

“I – ”

“You held back about Carl. Even when I pressed you on your relationship, you never told me about what’d happened between the two of you after Wallace’s death – ”

“I didn’t think it – ”

Another poke. “You didn’t *want* to think it. It turned out to be *very* relevant to the case, didn’t it?” She didn’t wait for even a syllable. She was just warming up. “And tonight. Tonight. This was the worst! You got Carl to help you, didn’t you? You got Carl to call Lora-Lona-Nola whatever-the-hell her name is and tip her off to your coming here, so you could get her confession too. That wasn’t part of our deal. You didn’t play this out like you said you were going to. No-o-o-o-o, you decided to go for broke and leave me and Murphy in the dark. This could’ve been a disaster. She could’ve caught Murphy and me sneaking in. Or when she came in, she could’ve just shot you dead with no questions asked – ”

“I knew she’d – ”

“Don’t feed me bits and pieces! We can’t operate this way. If we’re going to be a team, let’s *be* a team. We’re a *team*, dammit.” She emphasized her last statement by poking him in the chest again, even harder. As Steele lost his balance, she grabbed his right arm to steady him.

She couldn’t let go. She stood there, transfixed. She stared at the black cotton material of his sleeve. She could feel the warmth of life coming through it – too warm? – the sinewy contours of the biceps muscle beneath it, the pulse that beat reassuringly under her thumb – too fast? They stood there like that for what seemed like a long, long time. Finally, she lifted her eyes to his.

Steele seemed to be searching her face for something. Finally, he smiled. “Raeder was wrong.



Like the unicorn, I *have* been reborn.”

What on earth was he talking about? She tried to regain her anger, but after a few moments more of gazing into those eyes, prompted by his raising his eyebrows, she shook her head and smiled in mock exasperation – she’d have to finish his chastisement another time.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Murphy turn away.

Her smile faded – in the background she could hear the wail of sirens.

She started to say something but stopped, taking a good look at Steele – she’d been too angry before. And she hadn’t gotten a look at him a couple of hours ago, either, when he was outlining his plan to expose Noley’s plot against him – well, what had been his version of his plan at the time. She’d started to raise her flashlight toward him; gently, but firmly, he’d pushed it back down. She *had* noticed he was limping slightly. Now she could see that his face, seen only in right profile and white as paper when she’d unlocked his cuffs, was flushed, with a good-sized reddish mark on the left cheek. She flushed herself, ashamed she’d left him crumpled at the bottom of the stairs. She reached her hand up but stopped as he flinched. Well, with all those pokings, what could she expect? She continued the movement and felt his forehead. “You have a fever.”

He blinked at her as if it were just registering. “Yes, I believe I do.”

She lowered her hand and gently turned his jaw slightly up and to the side. The dog bite wasn’t large, but it was inflamed, with a slight discharge. She looked up at him. He stood quietly in her grasp, eyes closed. She looked down to see he was again lightly holding his left arm in his right. He opened his eyes as she moved her hand from his jaw, wincing as she felt his forearm. She could tell it was swollen, and she caught the foul smell. “Your arm is infected.”

“Mmm. Playing doctor again, Miss Holt?”

Playing doctor. The case where she’d played a doctor at a sleep clinic and he her patient. He’d ended up with a real case of insomnia. She’d thought he’d looked weary then. It was nothing compared to how he looked now. Dead tired. A nearly accurate description. She choked back the sound that almost escaped her as her professionalism slipped, finally registering what she’d seen when she’d come through that door, how close he’d come to being executed right in front of her –

Not now, Holt.

She saw the slight smile on his face disappear, and his eyes fixed onto the library door. She heard the yowls and screeches of police cars coming up the drive. She saw Steele tense, and for a brief moment, she thought he might run, but then he directed his eyes to hers, and his posture relaxed.

Steele turned and looked straight at Raeder. He then reached behind himself to the silver candelabra on the wall and twisted the base of one of the spirally fluted branches.

Outside, sirens clamored raucously. Inside, silence reigned as a panel on the wall opposite the fireplace slid noiselessly aside, revealing a nearly three-foot by three-foot painting.

Raeder stood and turned to stare at Steele.

Murphy shifted warily, gun ready.

Laura looked at Steele. His attention was riveted on Raeder. She looked at Raeder, who was his usual expressionless self. Then, he smiled. Smiled with cold teeth.

“Auf Wiedersehen, Mr. Steele.”

Laura glanced at the Monet. She looked back at Steele. This time his was the face without emotion.

Sounds of the police rushing through the front entrance reached her ears.

“You’d best step away, Miss Holt.” Steele moved away from the wall.

“Keep your hands in full view.” She moved a protective few paces in front of him, but a bit to the side, so the police could clearly see him.

The officers barreled in, guns drawn. There must’ve been a dozen of them. They split into groups. Three of them surrounded Steele as the fourth, Jenkins, quickly patted him down. Steele yelped as Jenkins grabbed his arm to cuff him.

“Be careful! He’s injured! His arm!”

Murphy restrained her own arm and whispered warningly, “Laura!”

The officer in charge, a Lieutenant McCoun, inspected Steele while other officers kept their grip on him. “It’s not serious. Cuff him behind his back.”

Laura shook Murphy off and again started to protest.

McCoun turned toward her. “Ma’am, that’s the procedure. He’ll be taken to UCLA for treatment.”

“But he’ll have to ride sitting back against his arm!”

McCoun scowled. Sighing, he turned back to his men. “All right. Cuff him in front. Use the waist chain.”

Steele threw Laura a look of ‘Thanks, I think’ as the familiar litany began: “You have the right to remain silent. . . .” Jenkins performed a more thorough search of his person, the ‘search incident to arrest,’ looking like he was having a hard time holding back a gloat.

By this time the other officers in the room had finished the usual arrest procedure with the Raeders, and they’d been taken away. The driver was being looked after by paramedics.

When the officers had finished with Steele, he announced grandly, “The painting on that wall” – he gestured with his head – “is Monet’s ‘Water Lilies, 1904.’”

As the officers started muttering and hustling Steele out, Laura had the uncharitable thought that they probably wouldn’t know a Monet from a Mexican velvet painting.

Steele dug his heels in. “Wait! It’s stolen. It’s worth twelve million dollars.”

The officers stopped.

“And the Walter Scott novels in the bookcase. I believe they’re some of the ones stolen from the study of Tsar Alexander I.”

If the situation hadn’t been so serious, Laura would’ve snickered as she saw Steele trying to hold back his renewed dismay with their lack of appreciation for his discourse.

“They’re valuable. And I believe there’s more stolen artwork on the premises. I suggest you make sure you get it before Mr. Raeder has a chance to arrange for its removal. Of course, I can show you where it is. . . .” Steele added hopefully.

The officers were looking uncertainly at McCoun, who eyed Steele speculatively. “We’ll secure the premises, make sure nothing gets taken out. But we’ll do this right, get a search warrant. I’m sure Detective Chritz will want to talk to you.”

“Detective Chritz?”

McCoun turned to Laura. “Investigator for LAPD’s Art Theft detail, ma’am. Buddy o’ mine.” He nodded at his men. Steele, finally, offered no resistance as they hustled him to a squad car.

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Once again, John Ritt was alone in the National Art Library. He placed the forged Ohana catalogue in the stacks.

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Laura checked her watch. 5:30 p.m. “I wish he’d wake up. We only get a half-hour to see him.” Medicinal smells, disinfectant smells, assaulted her.

“Well, they’ve been questioning him since three this morning. He’s probably zonked.” Murphy slouched in the chair next to hers, going through Steele’s medical charts. “On top of that he’s got a fever of over 102.”

“I *thought* he was babbling at UCLA.” She laughed quietly, sadly, looking over at the figure in the bed. While at the UCLA Medical Center, Steele had undergone not only medical treatment for his injuries but also a prebooking inspection and interview by the police. She’d tried to hover as close as she could, and as they’d readied him for transfer to the Medical Center at the L.A. County Jail, she’d overheard him recounting seemingly every single jail movie he’d ever seen. He’d ranged from ‘Birdman of Alcatraz’ to ‘Stir Crazy.’ On the way, he’d made a stop for an oration on ‘One of the last great men-in-chains films, “Cool-Hand Luke.” A man refuses to conform to life on a prison farm, to compromise with authority . . .’ – she hadn’t thought him very circumspect, given his audience. He’d then taken a detour through ‘Of course one of Newman’s greatest films is “The Sting.” Two gentlemen set out to fleece a racketeer in 1930’s Chicago, pitting brain against brawn and pistol. . . .’

“Anything else on the chart?”

Murphy replaced the clipboard at the foot of the bed. “They took cultures. No results back yet.

He'll be on intravenous antibiotics four times a day. The wound on his arm has to be kept elevated and immobilized for five days."

She looked over at the bed's occupant. "I wish he'd wake up." Still, she spoke softly. He did need his sleep. But . . . she wished he'd wake up.

"When's the next time we can see him?"

She almost smiled: Murphy, asking when he could see Steele. "Monday. If he's still here. Visiting hours are Saturdays and Mondays, 10:30 - 3:30 and 5:30 - 6:45. But . . . inmates" – how she hated using that word for him – "only get two thirty-minute visits per week, at most two visitors at a time."

"What'd Detective Chritz have to say?"

"You're not going to believe what Mr. Steele directed him to." She showed him the notes she'd taken during her conversation with Chritz an hour ago:

1. 'Water Lilies, 1904.' Monet. Taken from French art dealer Paul Rosenberg, whose gallery represented major masters of the School of Paris. The painting was part of a collection amassed for Nazi Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop in 1941.

Estimated worth: \$11-14 million.

2. Walter Scott novels, stolen by Hitler's army from the study of Tsar Alexander I in the Yekaterinsky Palace.

Worth: ?

3. 'Portrait of Christ.' Jacopo de Barbari. Originally stolen from Schwarzburg Castle in Germany, allegedly by American soldiers who were part of a unit ordered to guard the castle. Hundreds of works of art from the Weimar city museum had been sent there for safekeeping during the Allied bombing of Germany.

Estimated worth: \$2.8 million.

4. A Dürer drawing is also suspected to be a stolen item, but this has not yet been verified. Since, however, it was well hidden, it's a good bet it is.

Estimated worth if authenticated: \$5.6 million.

5. Not yet recovered: the amber-and-royal lavulite mosaic. Mr. Steele believes it was originally stolen by Nazi troops from the famed eighteenth century "Amber Room" of Peter the Great's Yekaterinsky Palace.

Murphy gave a low whistle after reading the list.

"The recovery fees are going to be a couple million dollars." Laura shook her head in amazement.

Murphy raised his voice. “He’s not getting them, is he?” Murphy glanced around and then, straining with the effort, lowered his voice. “I mean, even if he didn’t steal the other stuff, still, he didn’t tell us about this stuff. He was probably going to steal them from Raeder and get his recovery fee. Just like he was going to do with the royal lavulite,” – his voice rose again – “if we can believe that story, that is.”

Laura shushed him and started to speak, but stopped, held her breath.

The figure on the bed was stirring. “Check out the ventilation system,” he mumbled. ““Dr. No’ . . .” His voice trailed off without completing the annotation, and he settled back down without waking.

“Great. All we need is him trying some ‘James Bond’ escape through the air ducts.”

Laura couldn’t help chuckling. “Can’t you just see it? Mr. Steele crawling through the ducts, dragging his IV tubing behind him. . . .”

She elbowed Murphy, and he finally, reluctantly, unleashed a smile, even gave in to a chuckle of his own.

“Anyway, about the fees” – she winked at him – “Remington Steele will do the right thing, believe me.”

“What’ve you got up your sleeve?”

“These beds have ears, Murph.” She returned his evil grin, then shifted in her seat. “There’s something that’s still a mystery, though. Apparently Samuel Goldschmidt offered the use of his own firm’s lawyers to Mr. Steele for his defense, and Mr. Steele accepted. Goldschmidt’s sending one of them, a Mr. Cohen, out to meet with me tomorrow. We’ll see the D.A. together on Monday, if charges are brought. No explanation of why Goldschmidt’s so eager to help a man he thought crossed him or why Mr. Steele would accept.

“Not only that, Mr. Goldschmidt said he’s sending \$36,000 along with Cohen to give to Mr. Steele for recovery, and I don’t think he meant medical recovery.” She nodded toward Steele. “He’s still got quite a bit of explaining to do.”

Murphy snorted. “Think he’ll tell you?”

“If he wants to regain the use of his arm.” She checked her watch again. “Well, I’ve got to get back. I want to go over the tape again, look over the case file, and prepare some more notes for my meeting with Cohen tomorrow.” She got up to leave, looked again at Steele and started to reach out a hand, but then turned and strode out of the ward.

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Laura rolled over and glowered at the clock. 1 A.M. and still no sleep. Twenty-six hours before the D.A. was required to make a decision. Sighing, she threw back the covers. She missed Steele.

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Laura, dressed in a purloined nursing outfit, stared down at Steele. He was asleep but shifting

about in the bed and shivering. She didn't know where the extra blankets were kept. She reached out a hand but stopped just before contact. She could feel him afire with fever. She shouldn't disturb him. She wanted to touch him. She had to do something, or she'd draw attention. She lightly grasped his wrist and pretended to take his pulse.

He stirred and woke, blinking his eyes and squinting up at her. She was afraid he'd be too tired or drugged to focus on her, but he smiled. He started to speak, but she placed gentle fingers over his lips. He started to move his right hand but was stopped – a handcuff secured him to a steel bar.

Both arms immobilized. Oh, how she hated this. He looked like a butterfly pinned to a board.

He kissed her fingers. She pretended to adjust his pillow and let her hand brush his face, avoiding the now purplish-blue bruise. The sounds that had reverberated over the earphones came back to her: Lona striking him. Suddenly overwhelmed, she put her hand to her mouth and blinked back tears. He was looking at her, his brow furrowed, his eyes questioning. She shook her head. Sweeping a silky, damp lock of hair from his forehead, she bent down to plant a kiss –

Someone entered the ward and came toward her. Curses. Foiled. Again. She wondered if Steele knew a film annotation for that one. She straightened up and strode toward the night nurse. She nodded curtly toward Steele. "He needs another blanket." She exited before the bewildered woman could utter a sound, before this crazy escapade of hers could be exposed.

Steele followed Laura's sylphlike figure with his eyes for as long as he could, then he tried to lift his head so he could continue to follow her progress, so he could make this delightful hallucination last a little longer. But his head was too heavy, and he let it drop. Maybe she *had* been real – the part where a kiss had been interrupted certainly reflected reality. He gave a tentative smile to the night nurse as she arranged another blanket over him, but apparently the staff here was immunized against charm: she performed the task efficiently, took his pulse, without warning popped a thermometer in his mouth – nurses loved to do that – read the results, recorded everything on his chart, and left, never directly looking at him. My, what an enchanting place this was. Still, he didn't expect to be here long. If plan A didn't work out, there was always plan B. He was just too muzzy from fever to recall the details right now. Something about the ventilation system. Or had that been another hallucination? Murphy had been helping him with the intravenous tubing, so it must've been.

Though he categorically hated drugs, he wished the antibiotics would work a little faster. First he was hot, then he was cold, then he was hot again, his eyelids felt like coarse sandpaper rasping across his eyes, his head was pounding, he was thirsty and he couldn't find a call button – did jail wards have those? – and he was so damned tired –

"Harry, you are the biggest baby when you're sick," Daniel said to him.

"Am not." Hold on. Now he really *was* hallucinating. Daniel couldn't possibly be here. God, he hoped he hadn't said that out loud. Next thing he'd know, they'd be carting him off to the loony bin. But Daniel was wrong. *Carl* held the distinction of being the most obnoxious person to be around when he was confined to bed. Take that time of the Goldschmidt fiasco. Those animals –

the Palermo Brothers and the Brothers Grimm – had beaten Carl within an inch of his life, just for fun. John had nursed Carl back to health with the aid of an old friend in Munich, a doctor, an old German Jew who'd survived the war. And though John could be patient when Carl was muttering his complaints while squirming with fever, it'd gotten a little trying when Carl was out of danger but still demanding John be at his beck and call. Yet, it'd been all right. 'He whinges<sup>60</sup>, therefore he is.' That was all that had mattered.

It'd probably seemed far worse than it was because he'd also had to contend with Goldschmidt. While Carl was recuperating, John had found out, as expected, that the Hals had again gone missing. He'd found out, as *not* expected, that Goldschmidt blamed him, believing he'd arranged it. Or rather, Goldschmidt blamed Michael O'Leary, since that was the name Goldschmidt had known him by. John/Michael had been insulted, believing his reputation should speak for him. He'd had an urge to tell the man, using an equivalent, rather coarse Irish idiom, that he didn't bite the hand that fed him, but Carl had intervened and had managed to at least smooth things to the point where Goldschmidt accepted that Michael would do no such thing. All John/Michael had gotten out of the whole affair was the promise that Goldschmidt wouldn't have him hunted down, a promise evidently given to Carl reluctantly, since Goldschmidt had wanted his retainer fee returned. John and all his incarnations had never seen how that could possibly be a fair request. . . .

Steele shifted uncomfortably in the bed, not entirely because of the fever. Though his holding back the full extent of Carl's role in the Goldschmidt debacle surely hadn't affected this case in any way not already covered by his other obfuscations, it reminded him that Laura had yet to have her full say on this Raeder thing. He chewed his lip. What was in store for him when she did? Perhaps he should ask the warden to revoke all his visitor privileges for the duration of his incarceration. . . .

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Laura stood staring into Steele's wall-to-wall closet, mouth open, body slack. She straightened up, shook her head, and gave a sigh. "No wonder no one can find any skeletons in his closet. They can't dig them out from underneath all these suits! What does one man need with so many suits?"

"Beats me," Murphy called from the living room. "I could think of better things to spend my money on."

"Oh, yeah? Like what?"

"Beer and pizza."

Laura laughed. "I don't think so, Murph. You'd rival the Goodyear Blimp."

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<sup>60</sup>Whinge: To complain or protest, especially in an annoying or persistent manner. (*Chiefly* British, Irish)

“Yeah, guess so. Did you really get hold of those furniture guys? Today? On a *Sunday*?”

“Yep. Money really does talk. The whole place’ll be redone by the time he gets out of the hospital.”

There was a silence for a moment. It might be out of the hospital bed into the jail cell. If charges were brought, she doubted he’d be granted bail. She sighed. Twelve more hours.

She gathered up an armful of suits and laid them on the bed – good thing it was king-size. “Anyway, I gave Bernice the job of tracking down his posters. I hope she can get them. They’re the only things in this place that say . . . um . . . ‘him.’” Well, she didn’t have a name to fill in there. That was the best she could do. Without the posters the place could’ve passed for a very elegant model apartment, as empty of him as the top of his office desk. Well, not quite true – the contents of his refrigerator still identified the place as his.

“The whole place’ll look just like new.” She took another armful of suits, pausing, a wave of wistfulness washing over her as she caught the lingering scent of his cologne. “I don’t know how long it’ll take his tailor to repair all these.”

“You think he’d actually notice if he was missing a couple?”

“He might.”

Murphy chuckled and came to the bedroom door. “Well, I’m all finished cleaning up the mess out here.” He came and helped her, each grabbing another armful of suits. “I just hope he appreciates all this.”

“He should. He’s paying for it for once.”

“And that’s not the half of it.” He kept a straight face for as long as he could, as did Laura, then they abandoned themselves to laughter. The more they tried to stop, the more it got away from them. They collapsed onto the bed with their armloads and ended up on the floor, leaning back against the bed, side-by-side, rag-doll limp.

Murphy wiped his eyes. God, it was so good to see Laura laugh again. “Too bad you couldn’t get your hands on that money from Goldschmidt. Boy, I’d love to be there when you tell Steele about the recovery fees.”

“I think I’ll make sure you are. I’ll need back-up protection.”

Murphy glanced at her, and the grin left his face.

“What is it, Murph?”

“I was going to tell you later, but . . . well, I might as well tell you now.” He puffed out his lips with a breath. “Look. I’ll stay until he’s cleared. Longer, if you need me to help nail Raeder. But . . . I’ve decided to go back to Denver. Be around my family, open my own agency . . . .”

“Oh, Murphy . . . .” Laura touched his hand, but no more words came out. Finally, she touched



his hand again. "Please don't go. How will I ever run this agency without you?"

He took her hand in his own. "I'm sorry, Laura. But I just can't stay. You'll do fine. You'll do brilliantly, as always. Other detectives will be knocking down your door to work for 'The Great Remington Steele.'" "

She pulled her hand from his. "You know I can't do that. We may be able to fool the public, but another detective working right here in the agency? They'd find him out. I can't trust anyone else."

Murphy sighed, dropped his eyes, shook his head. "I'm sorry, Laura. But I've got to leave. I broke a cardinal rule of investigating. 'Don't let your emotions affect your judgement.'" He looked into her eyes. "The one I was accusing you of breaking."

"I think we both broke it."

"No. You were willing to believe he was innocent until proven guilty. I wanted to believe he was guilty. If it hadn't been for you, I would've gone out of my way to prove he was."

She shook her head. "I don't believe that, Murphy. You're not that kind of person. You would've found the truth."

"Maybe. But I would've tossed him in the slammer and thrown away the key first." He got up, helped her to her feet, and faced her directly. "I doubt he would've stuck around after that. Good-bye 'Remington Steele.'" His voice turned soft. "And I would've hated myself for the rest of my life. Because of what it would've done to this agency. And to you."

She put her hand on his arm and rubbed it. "That didn't happen. I don't believe it would've, either. You don't need to go."

"Laura, I'm never going to trust him."

"Maybe that's good. Maybe that's what'll keep him honest." They both grimaced at the word. "Well, you know what I mean."

Murphy shook his head. "No. I have to go. There's one thing he's stolen. Something most precious. I have proof. And I can't do a damn thing about it. And I'll never forgive him for it."

Laura's eyes widened. "What? What's he stolen?"

Murphy felt a flash of jealousy at the intensity of feeling the con man – all right, Steele – aroused in Laura: the waves of apprehension that surged through her iron grip on his arm were hardly only due to her concern for her professional standing. But then he sighed at the inevitable. He'd never had a chance. He'd been as noticeable as a candle lit during a supernova.

He reached out a hand to her face, his lips forming the silent word, "You."

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Surely it was past midnight now. Laura looked up from the paperwork she'd been trying to distract herself with and scowled at the clock. The second hand was deliberately moving slower,

she knew it. And it looked like the D.A. was going to use every second of his forty-eight hours to make his decision.

The morning meeting with Goldschmidt's lawyer had gone great – what a shark! She was certain they could fight this thing successfully, but it'd be so much better for the agency if Steele wasn't charged at all. She gave a rueful smile: no doubt Steele would also think it better not to have to spend any time in a jail cell.

She turned her eyes to the phone, willing it to ring. She turned her eyes back to the clock. Move, dammit.

At 2 A.M. the phone finally rang. She leapt from the kitchen table to answer it. The picture hanging next to it clattered to the floor. The glass broke.

“Miss Holt?”

It was Goldschmidt's lawyer. “Yes, Mr. Cohen.”

“Good news. The D.A. has decided not to charge Mr. Steele with any crime at this time.” Laura felt like shrieking with joy, but let the man continue uninterrupted. “I've arranged for him to be transported back to the UCLA Medical Center.

“You'll also be pleased to hear the matter of the Braque painting has been cleared up as well, at least as far as Mr. Steele is concerned. There is a man, Jack Ritt, a forger – a quite brilliant one, as a matter of fact – who loots museum libraries and national archives for materials he can use to create seemingly ironclad provenances<sup>61</sup>. He specializes in works by Braque, Picasso, and Klee, but he has changed and fabricated the records of a wide variety of artists.”

“So this Ritt faked the entire history of ownership of ‘Mr. Steele's’ Braque painting?”

“It's up to the experts to sort that out. But the most important person in this chain, as far as Mr. Steele is concerned, is the person who supposedly transferred ownership to him, a Lionel Ackerman. Ackerman was long suspected of criminal activity involving the acquisition and disposal of stolen artwork, though nothing could ever be proved. But it made a plausible story that Mr. Steele stole the ruby and the mosaic for Ackerman, or used Ackerman's connections to fence them, and got the Braque painting as payment. *But*, we've been able to show conclusively Mr. Steele never received ownership of this painting. Those documents were forged.”

Oh, Mr. Steele. What a web they wove for you. “What put the authorities onto Ritt?”

“Ritt has crossed Mr. Goldschmidt's path before. When Mr. Goldshmidt heard the details of Mr. Steele's predicament, he suspected Ritt's involvement, not only because of the nature of the posited forgery, but because Mr. Goldschmidt has long suspected Erich Raeder is a client of Ritt's.”

“Ritt gives fake provenances to Raeder's stolen art.”

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<sup>61</sup>See the Endnotes: Re the Braque painting and faked provenance

“When he can. He certainly couldn’t have pulled it off with ‘Water Lilies, 1904.’ But you can see that, though not his usual thing, taking on the project of Mr. Steele for Raeder was well within Ritt’s field of expertise. Unfortunately, it will be difficult to prove it was Ritt who forged the documents, let alone prove a Raeder-Ritt connection.”

Another challenging project. Well, one step at a time. “Thank you, Mr. Cohen. Thank you for all you’ve done. Now we can put full focus on getting the evidence the D.A. needs to bring charges against the Raeders.” The confessions at the mansion didn’t constitute proof.

“I’ve told Mr. Steele that Mr. Goldschmidt’s resources are at his disposal. My employer has a keen interest in this case.”

And she had a keen interest in knowing the full story behind that. “Mr. Steele will give the matter his complete attention, I assure you. We’ll definitely pay a visit to this Mr. Ackerman.”

“Ackerman conveniently died Saturday.”

Laura gasped, then gasped again as she remembered where she’d heard his name before. “Foul play?”

Cohen’s voice shrugged his answer. “Many of Ritt’s forged provenances involved old men who were either dead or no longer had their full faculties by the time the forgeries were discovered. Mr. Goldschmidt is of the opinion that either Ackerman was in Erich Raeder’s pocket and died of natural causes – the man *was* terminally ill – or the documents making him the former owner were forged as well, and he was murdered to cover it up. The police are now taking a closer look at the circumstances of Ackerman’s death.”

“We’ll aid them in any way we can.”

“I’m sure you will. It’s been a pleasure to work with you, Miss Holt.” After they bade goodbye, Laura hung up the phone and made a beeline for her study. She returned to the kitchen with the case file and paged through it until she got to Officer ‘Mac’ McCarthy’s notes. ‘Tailed subject (Lora Raeder) to residence of Lionel Ackerman, age 93.’

Had ‘Loralei’ been sweetheart scamming Ackerman? Had she seduced him into being part of the plot against Steele? Had she been part of a plot to hasten Ackerman to the grave? Laura fully intended to report the visit of ‘Loralei’ to Ackerman to the police, but for now, she sank down in a kitchen chair, slid her arms along the table, and rested her forehead upon it.

Steele was free.

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Jack Ritt looked out of the aeroplane window and stretched. It was a shame he’d had to cancel his meeting. He, as Professor Ritt, was to have met with a New York dealer at the N.A.L. in order to confirm the authenticity of a Giacometti the dealer had purchased and was now trying to sell. The director of the Alberto et Annette Giacometti Association, who the dealer had first contacted, wouldn’t vouch for it. But Ritt would. He had, years ago, created a London business, Art Research Associates, through a middleman. Through this business he hired himself out as a

professional archivist. The middleman had connected the dealer with Professor Ritt, and Ritt had been planning on showing the dealer the photograph of the Giacometti, which appeared, plain as day, in the Ohana catalogue. It would then be obvious the provenance of the painting was not in question. He had plenty of documentation to back him up – a letter from its last owner before the dealer, Ackerman, now conveniently dead, correspondence from a number of previous owners, not all of whom existed, and a stack of concocted invoices tracing the path of the painting out of Giacometti's studio.

Ritt sighed, pulling at his moustache. He'd been so looking forward to regaling the dealer with a lavish lunch and tales of how he spent his time researching art lost to the Nazis in WWII, while secretly revelling in the irony. But, he'd received word that it was best he lay low for a while. Ritt wasn't worried. Things would blow over – they always did.

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“Laura, when can I get out of here? Five days. *Five days*. For five days they've not let me move my arm. For five days I've not been able to eat – those damn drugs have ruined my palate. And that insipid mess they claim is food is enough to put anyone's appetite off. Death to all the dieticians of UCLA! Long live the French chef – ”

“Mr. Steele – ”

“Five days of putting up with all the moaning and groaning about me. And that's just the nursing staff. I've been poked and prodded and positively perforated. Hospitals are no place for the sick – ”

“Mr. Steele – ”

“Five days of soap operas. If I have to watch one more episode of ‘The Search for All My Children All the Days of Our Lives,’ I'll go nutters – ”

“*Mr. Steele!*”

He stuck out his lip. “Jail couldn't be worse than this.”

Laura looked at him and humphed, popping one of his gift chocolates into her mouth. “Speaking of moaning and groaning . . . . If you'd just let me get a word in edgewise – ”

“Payback, Miss Holt.”

“That's it! I should just let you stay in here! I should just not tell you they're releasing you now! I should just tell the next nurse that walks by to get the biggest needle she can find and stick you in the butt!”

They glared at each other.

Steele registered her words. “You mean I can go now?” he asked softly.

She shook her head at him, but a small smile formed on her face. She caressed his good arm.

“We're just waiting on the paperwork.”

“Oh, that took twelve hours at the jail hospital,” he grouched, but without his former vehemence.

“It won’t be long. And then we can make up for lost time.”

“That sounds promising, Miss Holt.” As she leaned down, he closed his eyes in anticipation of a kiss.

“Ready to leave, Steele?”

He sighed in frustration at the intrusion of the voice of the bane of his current existence at this most inopportune time. “Yes, Nurse Ratched.” ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.’ Jack Nicholson, Louise Fletcher. United Artists.1975.

“It’s Rafferty, Steele.”

“Yes, of course. I apologize. I’m not good with names. Just ask my receptionist, Miss Wolfe.”

“Foxy,” Laura corrected.

“I rest my case.”

Laura brought his suit out from the closet. She patted the coat pockets. “What’s all this?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve been flat on my back.”

“And busy while there, it seems.” She pulled out stacks upon stacks of little note cards. “Emily, Samantha, Elizabeth, Jessica . . . .”

He saw her go scarlet as she read something on that last one. “Laura –”

“Well, you’ll be much too busy catching up on your caseload to bother with these. I’ll just take care of them for you, *sir*, while you get dressed.”

“Laura –” He made a grab, but the nurse deftly blocked his way, and Laura scooted out the door, defiantly scooping up a few more of his chocolates on her way.

He squeezed his eyes closed – if they were open, he’d scorch Nurse Ratched with their glare. He’d heard they needed an iron hand in the psychiatric ward down at the County Jail. Perhaps he could get her transferred. She’d be a natural.

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“Laura, I’ve been thinking. Perhaps I should move to Brentwood. Or, if ‘Remington Steele’ smells of old money, Old Pasadena, or Palos Verdes, or Malibu, or – not Beverly Hills though –”

Laura continued to tug Steele down the hall to his apartment.

“I could stay in a hotel until suitable accommodations are found –”

She pushed him through the door. At first he just stood at the entrance, agape. She followed after him, watching those long slender fingers brushing at this and that as he took a slow tour of the place. She laughed when he got to the kitchen, rushed over to the refrigerator, and threw the door open with alarm. “I tossed out everything that looked like it might spoil.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

In the bedroom he went first to the closet, full of the newly repaired suits, and stood there, giving it a long, silent survey. Finally, he went to the posters on the wall behind the couch. Bernice had found originals for them all: 'Thin Man,' 'Notorious,' 'Casablanca,' 'Hotel Imperial.' He ran his hands over the frames, imperceptibly straightening them.

During his entire circuit of the apartment, he'd never once looked at her. Finally, he turned to her, swallowed heavily, and said simply, softly, "Thank you."

She smiled and closed her eyes in anticipation as he bent his head down toward hers. She opened one eye and then the other at the unaccountable delay. He had straightened back up and was looking off into the distance, a puzzled frown on his face.

"Laura, you amaze me. First you arrange for me to have a private room at the hospital with nary a plea on my part. And to totally restore this apartment in these few days – let alone get my tailor to restore my suits to sartorial splendour – must've cost you a small fortune. Normally your pennies are practically howling from the grip you have on them."

And things had been so peaceful. "You know the stolen artwork at the Raeders you helped the police recover?"

"Yes?" His smile was one of anticipation.

"Well, the recovery fees are yours – or rather, Remington Steele's," she added hastily as his face started to light up.

The light was put out. "'Remington Steele's.' Why do I get the uncomfortable feeling you have a specific reason for making the distinction?"

"Remington Steele has decided to donate the fees, in his name, to the Beverly Hills and Los Angeles Police Departments. And especially to the Art Theft Unit."

His jaw dropped. He pushed his jacket back and put his fists on his hips. "What? Laura. You're not serious. I make the biggest score of my life – legitimately, mind you – and you expect me to, to give it all away?"

She glared right back at him, putting her own hands to her hips. She tried to keep her voice under tight control. "I'd be a lot more convinced you're entitled to use the word 'legitimate' if you'd told me about Raeder's stolen art back when you first knew of it. But that was just one more thing among many you kept from me." All her frustrations with him gathered, gained force, rose up, and exploded out of her. "Why didn't you tell me the truth?"

"The truth? The truth? I got tired of telling you the truth. I told you I didn't steal the ruby or the mosaic. What did that truth get me, eh? You didn't believe me. You wanted to keep an open mind. I was just one of the suspects to weigh your evidence against. I was just a, a, a circle on your legal pad –"

"Why should I have believed you? When your past rears its head, how am I supposed to know when you're telling the truth? You hide in evasions, half-truths, lies by omission, outright falsehoods. Truth isn't a tool to be selectively applied when you think it will 'get' you something!

You're damn right I wanted to keep an open mind. That's more than you d –" She broke off.

Hot black eyes flashed. He began to turn away, toward the door.

She reached out an arm to stop him, gently for once. "I didn't mean . . . You were never just . . . I *wanted* to believe you. I *hoped* to prove you were innocent." That's why she'd swooped down those ropes, why she'd let him proceed with his final scheme against the Raeders. Would it be enough for him?

He stood there a few moments, his face turned away from her. Finally, he turned back and searched her eyes. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, his features losing their flinty look.

She squeezed his arm lightly. "But I need some explanations, Mr. Steele. Let's back up, start this conversation over again." At his nod, she continued. "When did you know this was Wallace's daughter's plot – the Raeders' plot – against you?"

"Friday night, not too long before I called to ask for your help. Carl told me."

"Why didn't you tell me the real plan you and Carl cooked up to trap them?"

He shrugged slightly. "I thought it'd just be simpler that way. You do tend to want lengthy explanations, and we were rather short on time." He raised a hand to forestall her retort. "My doing, I know. I didn't want to have this hanging over my head any longer. I saw a way to resolve it."

She decided to let that pass for the moment. "Why didn't you follow the plan you told me? For one thing, why didn't Carl just keep Lona out of the way? True, it's a stronger case with her confession, but why'd you risk it?"

"Carl knew Lona well enough to convince me – and my experience of her backed this up – that if she was face-to-face with me, she'd certainly want to gloat over how she'd snared me. She was an easy mark." He gave her a crooked smile.

"You said you were going to use the Monet against Erich, threaten him into telling you how he'd set you up. Why didn't you just do that? Instead of you being in control of the situation, you ended up with a gun on you –"

"Raeder has a need to be the conqueror. I believe he would've preferred seeing the loss of the Monet rather than give in to a threat to report it. Even had I been able to follow up on that threat, I'm sure he would've made the case I'd set him up – the police would've been happy to add the Monet's theft to the charges against me. We would've gained nothing and stood to lose a lot more. Or if instead I'd threatened the Monet's destruction . . . Raeder is the most dispassionate man I've ever met. The most . . . amoral. I believe it likely he would've said 'go ahead.'"

Laura was stunned. "So if you'd made that threat, and he'd refused to give in –"

Steele laughed without humor. "I'd have been in quite a bind." He took a few steps away from her before turning around to face her. "Raeder's Achilles heel is his need to dominate, to control. Throughout that night, in every way I could think of, I tried to incite his desire to vanquish me. By doing that, and by being in the position where he physically controlled me, dominated me, I,

paradoxically, controlled him. Do you see?"

She did now. "He'd want to make sure you heard the full story so he could relish your total humiliation before killing you."

Steele smiled uncertainly. "Good plan, eh?" When she didn't answer, he walked back to her, looking her directly in the eyes. "There were the secret passageways, and I knew you and Murphy would be highly attuned to the proceedings. . . ." he reminded her soothingly. "In case I haven't said it before, thank you."

She pressed her lips together and nodded. "You still could have told me – "

"And would you still have agreed to let me do it? Knowing I was giving physical control of the situation over to the Raeders and relying on the art of the con?"

How could she answer that? How could she say with certainty what she would've done at a time already past? In principle, he'd done what a good PI would do – he'd found out what would motivate his suspect to confess and used that, but in application – "I would've evaluated the risks – "

"When I called, your first reaction was to have me turn myself in. So you could proceed in an orderly fashion. To my mind, that was a far greater risk if our goal was to expose the truth. Justice sometimes drags its feet – or even collapses – when weighed down by the chains of standard operating procedure, Laura. Lona would have disappeared. Raeder would've covered his tracks. Your agency would've turned up its toes to the daisies, and my good name would've been buried along with it – "

"It's not *your* good name. *You* could've left – "

"It *is* my good name. In more ways than one. Do you think me so without conscience? Do you think it wouldn't affect me to know the name 'Remington Steele' – which carries my face – had become synonymous with betrayal of the public's trust? To know you'd think I'd played you all along, or at the very least, left you to clean up the mess behind me?"

"I've no answer for that. I don't really know you – "

"What do you imagine I'd have done if I'd left then? Hooked up with Daniel? Stolen paintings with Felicia?"

"They'd take you back – "

He gave a humorless laugh. "They probably would. But other people are always involved. There are supplies to be obtained, payoffs to be made, other players, contacts, buyers and sellers and all their intermediaries. I'd have been excommunicated from that community. Word gets around. I could no longer have been in the life<sup>62</sup> with the kind of reputation I'd have left with. They wouldn't have trusted which side of the street I was working, or they would've viewed me as having stabbed my colleague in her back – not the best card to come calling with – "

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<sup>62</sup>In the life: to be involved in con games



“Unless they thought it one big, long con.”

Steele blew out a breath. “Yes, I’m sure some would be willing to believe that – though I’ve never been made in quite so spectacular a way. And maybe after a long, long time, I could’ve convinced myself of that too. . . . Then again, maybe not. . . . In time, I probably could’ve made proof again – ”

“What?”

“Proved my reliability.” He tilted his head and gave her a slight smile. “So, you believe a tarnished Steele would’ve still been accepted back into the life.” He turned and again took a few steps away from her before turning around to face her. He lifted his hand out to the side, palm up, and swept it through the air from the top of his head down toward his feet, saying, “I’m here.” He walked back to her. “I stayed. Why?”

‘Do you think it wouldn’t affect me . . . ?’ his eyes asked her again. Had ‘Remington Steele’ really seeped into his bones? Had *she* crawled under his skin? She desperately searched her mind for another explanation, there had to be a *logical* explanation – she found it. “You wouldn’t have been free of Raeder if you’d left. You would’ve had to spend the rest of your life looking over your shoulder – ”

“Yes. I would’ve had to keep a profile so low life would’ve hardly been worth living.” His eyes became distant, sad. He focused on her again, giving her an ironic smile. “Give me the luxuries, I can do without the essentials. . . . No, the only way to be free of Raeder was to walk into the lion’s den and beard him. But the flaw in *this* argument of yours, Miss Holt, is that I didn’t know until we were in the midst of our sting that I wouldn’t have been free of Raeder if I’d left. I didn’t know Raeder had a personal interest in seeing me take the fall and intended to pursue me to the ends of the earth, if necessary – ”

Not now, not now. She couldn’t deal with this right now. “We’ve digressed.”

He gave her a knowing smile. “So we have. Okay, back to my prevarication concerning my plan that night. I was confident it would succeed. The only stumbling block would’ve been if you’d vetoed it and prevented me from carrying it out. So I minimized that possibility by . . . feeding you half-truths, lies by omission, and outright falsehoods. I took it out of your hands.”

He walked around the couch, flopped down onto it, and rubbed his face with his hands. “Oh, this seemed so right at the time.” He patted the couch next to him, and she accepted the invitation to sit. She knew from the subtle slackness of his movements and posture, from the faint tremor of his hands when he’d raised them, that the ‘discussion’ was tiring him. Out of the hospital bed into her fire. Still, something drove her on.

“Promise me something.”

He stiffened and eyed her guardedly. “If I can.”

“When it’s my agency’s reputation, the name of ‘Remington Steele’ that’s at stake, don’t take it out of my hands. You have no right to do that. No matter how justified you think you are.”

He looked away. Finally, he nodded. “You’re right. My apologies. It won’t happen again. You have my word.”

“And the word of Remington Steele is his bond.”

“And so is mine.”

Laura sighed, turning to look at the filmy curtains across the room. They were drawn, obscuring the balcony and the starry night that lay beyond. White curtains. Gray walls. Gray chairs. White lamp. Black coffee table. Gray couch. Black and white and gray. The color scheme of the apartment. Shades of gray dominated. To some, gray was a neutral color. To others, a way of life. “Why didn’t you tell me about Raeder’s stolen art?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “It was mostly suspicion. I was discreetly checking into their provenance. Raeder’s a powerful man. I didn’t want to take the chance of accusing him without being sure of my facts. Detective Chritz expedited matters in that regard.” He grinned apologetically. “I’m afraid it hadn’t occurred to me to go through legitimate channels.”

“But you knew of the Monet.”

“I never saw it until that night we broke in, the night when the alarm went off. I checked that panel right after you left to see if they’d hidden the mosaic in there – that was the place I’d told you about, remember?”

She nodded. “Something about it originally being built during Prohibition – ”

“Right. The Monet wasn’t there when I looked before, I swear.”

“I believe you.” She leaned against him. Sighing, they leaned back on the couch together. “But you have one more thing to explain.”

“What’s that?”

“The \$36,000 from Goldschmidt. You’ve been dodging that question long enough.”

Steele dropped his head back on the couch and stared up at the ceiling. He was silent a long moment. “I found his painting. The painting I’d been trying to recover for him years ago. ‘The Portrait of Pastor Adrianus Tegularius,’ by Frans Hals. I told him about it Friday night. Goldschmidt obliged me by calling Raeder to insist Raeder personally meet with one of Goldschmidt’s representatives. Immediately. With the painting in hand. I don’t know what Goldschmidt threatened him with, but that was what lured Raeder out of the mansion.”

“I’m surprised Goldschmidt agreed to that. Putting himself in direct conflict with Raeder – ”

“Think of the painting’s history,” Steele said softly. “It was his father’s. Stolen by the Nazis. Ending up with Raeder – not only a business rival, but the nephew of a grand admiral in the Nazi fleet. A man who keeps an armoury flaunting Nazi memorabilia, a man who, you told me, Goldschmidt suspects is funding neo-Nazis. I hoped Goldschmidt wanted his painting badly enough, or resented Raeder enough, that he’d consent to help me.”

Steele glanced at her. “To further fuel his resentment against Raeder, I also told him Friday night

about the other items I suspected were Nazi plunder. I told him we had a chance to nail Raeder for it, thinking that'd make it even more likely he'd help me. For whatever reason, he came through for me."

"Layer upon layer, Mr. Steele. When Goldschmidt called Raeder, Raeder had to have suspected *you* told Goldschmidt about the Hals – "

"Yes." He smiled slightly. "And just to make sure, I had Carl tell Lona that. That was part of my plan for the night."

"So Raeder knew it was actually *you* luring him out of the mansion so you could make your move on him when he returned, supposedly to rob him."

Steele nodded. "And he went along with it without hesitation, thinking he was the one luring me – "

"So he and Lona could . . . finish you off."

"Yes."

"Was Goldschmidt involved with Lona?"

Steele shrugged slightly. "I don't know. I rather doubt it. We've only got the word of some New York gossips and of a maid who never saw the man in question. Lona may have been setting that situation up as well. And if the two of them *were* involved, who was playing whom? I don't know the truth of that situation. It's all a bit too twisted for me."

"I thought nothing was too twisted for you." She held Steele's eyes as he looked at her uncertainly. She quirked her lips into a bit of a smile, and he gave a slight smile back. She was kidding. Half-kidding. "And the \$36,000 is your recovery fee for the painting?"

He shook his head and widened his smile to a half-grin. "Believe it or not, Miss Holt, I didn't ask for it."

She gave a soft snort. "I *do* find that hard to believe. I've always pictured you wheelin' and dealin' up until you drew your last breath." Her grin vanished and she looked away, swallowing hard, thinking of the Raeders and their plans for Steele. She turned her head to look at him and found him gazing at her intently. His smile, too, had disappeared. She touched him lightly to make sure he really was there.

Steele looked down at the spot where she had touched him, then into her eyes. "I needed his help. His help in exchange for the return of his painting seemed a more than equitable trade, given what was at stake."

For a short time, she was lost in his gaze. She straightened – she wasn't through with her questions yet. "Why have you been avoiding telling me about Goldschmidt's role in this?"

Steele shifted on the couch, hesitating before answering, looking away from her. "I found Goldschmidt's painting the night of the 'thefts.' It was the one thing I knew without a doubt was stolen. Raeder had hidden it in a display case with Admiral Raeder's dirk – so he could get to it

easily and gloat over it, I imagine. Anyway, I didn't act on that knowledge until it served my purposes. I was caught up in other matters."

She put her hand to his face and turned it toward her. "Like being suspected of a crime you didn't commit. An understandable preoccupation."

He kissed her palm, then took her hand in his and gave it a squeeze before releasing it. "So. Remington Steele is now a major donor to police departments and art theft units, eh?" He affected a Cockney accent. "I fink me card at me ol' union's bein' pulled."

They both exhaled a laugh.

"Well, there are two consolations."

"What're they, Miss Holt?"

"One is your newly redecorated apartment, your repaired suits, and a small commission for a job well done."

"Mmm. And two?"

"The mayor's having a media event for the occasion of your donations on Friday. You get to have your picture taken shaking his hand on the steps of City Hall."

"Oh?"

Laura tried to hide a smile as he perked up and sat a little straighter, adjusting his tie. There was one thing – well, maybe two, but she wasn't ready to go there yet – that could seduce Steele from thoughts of fortune, and that was fame. Curious, for a man whose previous existence was marked by total anonymity. "Yes. And you can display your inimitable charm at the reception afterwards and win back the hearts of Angelenos once more as 'The Great Remington Steele.'"

"Inimitable, eh?"

"Inimitable," she assured him. "And Bernice has been going crazy with calls and telegrams from around the world congratulating you on the art recoveries. Reporters from *Art World News*, *Art in America*, *Art Insight* – even *BBC News* – are all waiting to interview you. Nurse Ratched – I mean, Rafferty – helped us keep them at bay while you recovered in the hospital."

"Oh, my."

Laura couldn't hold back her smile any longer. He'd been puffing up as she spoke.

He turned to her, narrowing his eyes. "Actually, Miss Holt, I think you were withholding that information so you could use it to smooth over the fact you're depriving me of a couple million dollars."

"What a suspicious mind you have, Mr. Steele."

"Hmmm. With good cause, I believe."

"You still have the \$36,000 from Goldschmidt."

“Gone. Pfffffff.” He jerked his head from one side to the other.

“What? Already? What did you do with it?”

“Gave most of it to Wallace’s Mission and Th—, uh, a friend who helped me in my hour of need.” As she raised her eyebrows at him, he jutted out his chin and frowned. “I kept some of it for a new suit, made-to-measure, handmade, finest wool!” As she stifled a laugh, he muttered, “Damn thing is, I can’t have it fit until I regain some weight.”

She reached out and pretend-straightened his tie.

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Baron Leopold von Regelheim stood on the spacious grounds of his current home, an eighteenth-century mansion. Across the road from him was his former home, the abandoned Regelheim Castle. He stared at the old photo in his hand, a photo of some British soldier in front of the castle, a photo inscribed ‘Regelheim, Norheim,’ a photo that had been used to trace the antique silver back to him. He ripped away the wrapping from the silver and addressed the man who’d identified himself as ‘Weimar.’ “My mother, the refugees who had found a home with us, and my young wife had to leave Regelheim Castle when the Nazis came. Later, the British occupied the castle. This was stolen from us. It had been in our family for hundreds of years.” The baron watched his wife, now no longer young, touch the antique silver with shaky fingers. There were five plates, two water pitchers, several small pots and pans, a tray, and sixty-six pieces of cutlery. His wife lay her right hand open on her breast, just above her heart. There were tears in her eyes.

The baron turned back to Weimar. “And you say he wants no money for this?” Weimar shook his head. The baron’s voice trembled as he said, “It is astonishing he would think like this. . . . I wish I could meet him.” The baron raised a glass of sparkling Riesling<sup>63</sup>. “At least, tell me the name of who it is I drink to.”

“He said that, as poetic justice, you may call him ‘Nevan.’” Weimar shrugged.

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Steele fingered the telegram he held and read the words again.

TO FIND A NEW MASK FOR WHAT I WISH TO BE, OR TRY TO BE A MAN WITHOUT  
A MASK – JOHN HEWITT

CONGRATULATIONS LITTLE SAINT

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Laura leaned back against the counter in Steele’s kitchen, sipping her wine, reflecting on the

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<sup>63</sup>A white wine – the most noble and expressive, according to “the Riesling Report.” Its homeland is Germany, where it has been cultivated since the 1400s or earlier.

previous day's events. It'd been glorious. First had been the morning edition of the *Los Angeles Tribune* – headlines of 'Steele Gets His Man and His Monet!' and a long article about the case, the donations Steele was making, and the Art Theft Unit.

As usual, he'd made quite a splash at the media event that followed. Every last vestige of his previous negative publicity seemed to have been erased. The only slight glitch came when he was supposed to hand over the check to the mayor. For the first time that she could ever recall at such a public event, his smile looked somewhat forced. Worse, the mayor practically had to pry the check from his hand.

At the reception that followed, she saw him looking around the room, obviously searching for someone. She was touched when, his gaze alighting upon her, he broke into a huge grin and beckoned for her to join him. She'd raised her hands slightly in a palms out position. He'd tilted his head to side, gave a bit of a frown, then smiled in resignation. Seconds later he'd been whisked away by another rabble of reporters. Yes, yesterday had been glorious.

Laura took another sip of her wine. She watched Steele's hands as he stirred the pot on the stove in the center island, an artist at work. Hands were not a feature she usually noticed in a man, but his were beautiful. They looked like the hands of an aristocrat, hands that had never seen a hard day's work. She found it hard to reconcile those hands with the story Daniel had told her of finding 'Harry' on the streets. Of course, Daniel had probably only told her that story to gain her sympathy. And what was the significance of the gold pinky ring? He'd been wearing it the first time she met him, when he was 'Ben Pearson.' He'd worn it as 'Johnny Todd.' Did he wear it regardless of his identity? And if so, why? Even a little detail like that could blow his cover. More questions he'd be unlikely to ever answer.

She tore her gaze from his hands and studied Steele critically. He looked a lot better now, though still too thin. Well, he should get a good start on putting the weight back on tonight. He was preparing another one of his gourmet feasts: bay scallop and asparagus risotto layered with herbs, served with a salad with marinated tomatoes and a drizzle of sweet basil vinaigrette.

"The risotto smells good."

"Mmm. What pasta is to the south of Italy, risotto is to the north. Americans have made it elegant and upscale, but basically," – he grinned at her – "it just makes you feel good after you eat it. I got the rice in the Po Valley, from one of the mondine – women labourers from the hills. Her boyfriend turned out to belong to a band of tomb robbers." Steele launched into a saga of how they'd tried to draw him into their illicit activities. "I declined. Ghosts. I'm not good with ghosts."

Recalling Steele's behavior during the death investigation they'd undertaken at Murphy's college class reunion<sup>64</sup>, Laura wasn't sure how much of his statement was tongue-in-cheek.

Steele paused reflectively. "The mondine lead terribly hard lives. . . ." He shot another grin her way. "As immortalized in the film 'Riso Amaro' – 'Bitter Rice' – Silvana Mangano, Doris Dowling, Vittorio Gassman, Raf Vallone. Lux Film.1949. A thief, Walter, steals a precious

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<sup>64</sup>Steele Crazy After All These Years

necklace and entrusts it to his lover, Francesca, telling her to flee to the rice fields and hide with the workers until he can safely meet her. She is befriended by the voluptuous Silvana, who has discovered their secret. Not only does Silvana want the necklace, she wants the magnetic, arrogant Walter, preferring him to her good-hearted suitor, the soldier Marco. The four become involved in a plot involving betrayal, love, and murder. Oh! the sultry, tempestuous Silvana, dancing in the fields . . . . You've not seen it?"

As she admitted she hadn't, he shook his head in sorrow. "We really must expand your horizons, Miss Holt."

Only he would think expanding horizons meant watching old movies. Laura stole another look at the counter to her left, trying not to drool. For dessert he was serving a chocolate torte with chocolate ganache glaze. Chocolate. She hadn't yet managed to bring herself to tell him she really shouldn't have it. Too bad he'd finished baking it before she arrived, though. Her favorite part of watching him cook was when he bent over to open the oven. Cute butt.

She glanced over at the coffee pot, smelling the aroma of fresh-ground beans. "I thought you weren't a coffee drinker."

"That's for you. I've never gotten into the coffee-drinking habit, especially at dinner. I apologize, this may be one culinary skill that lies beyond me. I fear the essayist Sydney Smith's observation applies to me as well."

"Oh? What did he say?"

"I quote: 'We English have never mastered the art of telling the truth, discriminating good from evil, or making a good cup of coffee.'"

"Let me have a taste."

He stopped stirring the risotto and poured her a cup.

She took a few sips. "Well, you've mastered the last." She stared into her cup. "As for the middle . . . from what I've observed, your compass seems pointed in the right direction – plus or minus a few degrees of deviation." She smiled in response to his grin at her double meaning. "It's your method of travel that's a bit dubious at times. And as for the first, well, you just made a start."

"Oh, how so?"

"You were honest about your dishonesty." She shared his chuckle, shaking her head. She set down her cup, turning serious. "Let's give you more practice. Explain to me about Carl. You've never given me the full story."

"Practice makes perfect, eh?" He glanced at her as he added a bit more stock to the risotto and stirred.

"Why did Carl suddenly become chummy with you on this job?"

"Ah, another twist of the knife in both our hearts. I'm not sure if the Raeders anticipated that or not, given Lona's knowledge of us both, but it certainly played into their hands. It was I who

approached Carl. I thought we'd pair well on the project, him designing, me finding the vulnerabilities, each building on what the other could do, until we'd created a, a – ”

“A work of art?”

Steele gave the pot another stir. “Something like that.” He faced her. “And I thought it the perfect opportunity to get him to work with me again. I thought if we could just work together, we could . . . mend the rift. He's a good person.”

“Fortunately for you, in the end. How much did he know of what was going on?”

“Nothing of the set-up until the day before the party, the day Lora Raeder first put in her appearance. She knew that the media would have a feeding frenzy once the thefts had occurred, and that with all the publicity she might very well be recognized by him. She'd had quite a bit of ‘work’ done over the past year, but, well, they'd been lovers, after all – right up until the time of Carl's conversion. At least . . . Carl had been in love with *her* – she broke relations off when he converted, just as she'd done with her father, according to Carl. . . . Anyway, her voice, some mannerism, something, could've given her away to him. That's also, by the way, why they never hung Lona's portrait in the library until that day, so Carl wouldn't recognize her from that beforehand.”

“And *you* never recognized her?”

He shrugged. “I hadn't seen her for over ten years. She was a child – ”

“Wait a minute. Wallace told Murphy you met in '79.”

He snickered. “Ah, yes. ‘The Diplomatic Corps. Rats in the Seine, big as Volkswagens.’<sup>65</sup> ”

Laura rolled her eyes. They should've known any friend of Steele's would be about as likely as him to give them a straight story when it came to his past.

“Actually, I did see Wallace in '79. He didn't talk about Lona much when I asked after her. I thought there might be some trouble there, but I didn't pry. I wonder now if his story about having sent her off to college was just that. Or at least a bit of angling off from the truth – it's hard for me to imagine her completing college.”

She joined him in a laugh of disbelief.

“Given what you unearthed about her activities in recent years, I can understand why Wallace would choose not to correct my misconception when we met again on the Dillon case.” He shook his head. “She was a troubled child at twelve, but I never dreamed . . . .” His eyes unfocused as he lost himself in private thoughts.

He blinked and focused on her again. “Anyway, she couldn't count on Carl not recognizing her. And if he did recognize her, he would naturally suspect it was her set-up. She had to make sure he wouldn't give her away to me, so – ”

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<sup>65</sup>Tempered Steele



“She blackmailed him into silence,” Laura guessed.

Steele pointed the wooden spoon at her in agreement and turned back to the stove to stir the pot. “Indeed she did. She told him she could implicate him in this as easily as she could me, if she wished. And expose his past. She said she would, too, if he somehow caused me to slip from their grasp. She suggested he take a nice little trip out of the country for a while.”

“But he could’ve exposed her past, too – ”

“That she’d been married to old men and lived extravagantly at their expense, which they didn’t seem to mind?” He shook his head. “I hardly think she worried about that. No, Carl had much more to lose. He’s made a new life here. He has people he cares about here. This is his home. He’s the guiding light of the Mission, a pillar of the community. He’d lose everything he holds most dear. Raeder described Lona quite accurately in saying she excelled at using one’s vulnerabilities against one.”

Steele turned to her. “Laura, I know you were angry with me when I stopped Wallace’s crew from speaking to you about Carl. I was quite certain Carl was not the thief. I wanted to prevent you from finding out about our rift and all it entailed, since he would seem to have a strong motive for setting me up. I feared that if you knew, your desire to clear your agency, to clear the name of Remington Steele, might at some point lead you to bringing Carl to the attention of the police; whereas as it stood, they seemed quite happy to be focussing all their attention on me.” Steele hesitated a moment before continuing. “There was more than just his recovery work that could’ve been exposed. Carl grew up here, on the streets. Wallace rescued him from that. But taking a boy out of the streets is one thing. Taking the streets out of that boy is quite another. Carl made mistakes, serious mistakes, in his teens. I saw no good reason to subject Carl to the possibility of having his present ruined by whatever the police could uncover about his past. I knew you, me, one or both of us, could uncover the truth without sacrificing him in the process.”

And would one day *her* present be ruined by whatever was uncovered about *Steele’s* past or by the pasts of his friends? He clearly wasn’t inclined to give up his loyalties to them. Fire, Laura, you like playing with fire. “Why did you believe so strongly Carl hadn’t set you up? The way he turned on you after Wallace’s death . . . .”

Steele gazed at her steadily. “Sometimes you don’t know why you believe in another, when to all appearances that belief doesn’t seem warranted.” Steele put a hand to his chest. “Sometimes you just know, deep inside, that the other person is worth that belief,” – Steele smiled slightly – “although your faith in them may temporarily waver. But, if the friendship can’t survive those ripples, it’s not worth having.” They held each other’s gaze, then Steele turned back to the stove and added just above a whisper, “Besides, there’s always plan B.”

Laura shook her head slightly. How easily he spoke of falling back to a ‘plan B,’ of discarding this life and assuming another. Or was she wrong about that? She watched him as he stood at the stove, unmoving, staring at nothing. She thought back to the words he’d been trying to tell her a couple of days ago in his apartment, the words about why he hadn’t left, the words she hadn’t been quite willing to believe, the words expressed in a typically British understatement that had been belied by his tone, ‘Do you think it wouldn’t affect me . . . .’ Laura swallowed. “I, I can see

your reasoning for trying to protect him, but perhaps if you'd explained it, I would've seen it your way – ”

Steele started when she spoke. He gave another stir to the pot. “But perhaps not. I know what your agency means to you.”

“Carl should've come to you from the start, instead of leaving the country, leaving you to your fate.” Her words came out sharper than she'd intended.

He glanced at her. “He came back, told me of her plot. And once I finally knew who was behind it, I was able to do exactly as she'd feared – formulate a plan to clear myself. With your help, of course.”

Laura noticed he suddenly became very interested in stirring the risotto, clearly knowing his initial less-than-forthright outlining of his plan to her was still a sore point.

The spoon stopped its movement. “Lona was wrong. In the end what was important to Carl was his principles.”

“Then why wouldn't he help me when I went to see him?” Carl had purposely reacted to those photos to deceive her. Not so shabby a trickster, after all.

Turning to her, Steele smiled slightly. “You made him feel quite guilty, you know. But it was simply a matter of not knowing if he could trust you.” Laura grimaced, and Steele's smile widened. “He feared you'd thwart his plans. He was going to ‘right this wrong’ in his own way. He was merely misdirecting you.”

“Like any good con man.”

He gave an acknowledging nod. “Touché, Miss Holt.”

Laura took a sip of her wine. “Who rigged the safe, do you know?”

“Probably Lona. She *is* the daughter of a first-rate burglar. It was probably child's play to her, literally. She also took Carl's ring and gave it prominent display in the safe. When I opened it, I thought Carl had played me false.”

“I'm sure that was her intention.”

He nodded. “It led to her downfall, though.”

As Steele turned away and took a sip of wine from his glass by the stove, Laura had a sudden thought. “Why didn't the Raeders expose you?”

Steele choked on his drink. He grabbed a linen, dabbed at his mouth, and avoided looking at her.

Damn it. He's doing it again. She got impatient. “John Robie? Cat burglar?”

“Um. They know they've been bested by ‘The Great Remington Steele’?”

She narrowed her eyes. “You've still got something big on them, don't you? Something that makes you feel safe. And that's why Carl feels free to stick around, too – ”

“Laura. How could you think such a thing?”

She left her perch at the counter and circled around him, crowding him at the stove. “You still haven’t told the police about *all* the stolen artwork, have you? You’ve got the royal lavulite mosaic – ”

“Risotto’s almost ready. It becomes glutinous if it sits.”

“Then we’re going to have a big soggy mess.” She grabbed his arm to force him to look at her, letting go as he winced. She didn’t apologize. “Answer me.”

He sighed. Turning to her, he said quietly, “Do you remember Raeder’s parting words to me?”

Mostly she remembered the thin lips curling into a smile that still made her shiver. “Auf Wiedersehen.”

“Precisely. ‘Until we see each other again.’ The game isn’t over, in other words. I’ve made a powerful enemy, Laura. And apparently, powerful friends. Or at least, I’ve earned the protection of enemies of my enemy. Goldschmidt called just before you came tonight. He told me he and . . . others, all victims of Nazi pillaging, have . . . taken care of the situation for me and Carl, that the balance of power has been deposited into *his* account. He’s confident we’re in no danger. I didn’t press for details. Of course there’s still Lona. She’d probably not go for a direct attack, though. She’d lie in wait.”

Steele bit his lip. “I apologize. I’ve been trying to think of the best way to broach the subject tonight. Guess I was hoping I could get you plastered first.” His laugh came out strangled. He started to reach out his hand to her but let it drop. “Laura, there are no guarantees. Raeder is not a man who takes well to being bested. He – or Lona – may still come after me. Expose your Remington Steele.”

He took a deep breath and let it out. “Perhaps it’s best I – ”

She put a hand to his lips. “My Remington Steele never runs from a fight he didn’t start.”

He took her hand, kissed her fingers, and touched his lips to hers. “Then neither shall mine.”

As he turned to get an oven pad, Laura felt herself sag. Words from ‘Dark Victory’ came to her mind: ‘He didn’t go away. . . . It must mean something.’

Steele removed the copper pan from the heat and beat in butter, a little olive oil, Parmesan, and lemon zest. “Oh, the parsley.”

She watched in puzzlement as he exited the kitchen. She went out into the dining room only to see him return from the direction of the balcony, stalks of parsley in hand.

“You’re growing it?” She asked in amazement, following him back into the kitchen.

He began to strip the leaves from the stalks. “Thought I’d give it a whirl. I’ve got a little bush basil out there, too. I used it in the salad. I’ve, uh, even been thinking of trying to grow a little cherry tomato plant. Nothing like homegrown tomatoes.” He added the parsley leaves to the risotto and mixed them in.

“You’ve grown them before?”

“No. But I’ve eaten them.” He gave her a wink. He stirred vigorously, making the risotto creamy and wavy – “all’onda,” he informed her. “Would you bring the wine?” He removed his apron and carried the pan into the dining room. They made a return trip as Steele brought back heated shallow soup plates and she brought the salad.

Steele seated her along the long end of the table. Looking at the white dishes, black cups, gray walls, she sighed. Gray. The color Murphy despised. “Murphy’s still leaving.”

Steele paused in putting his jacket on and adjusting his tie. “I tried talking to him, telling him it wasn’t necessary – ”

“I know. Thank you for that.” She touched his arm as he seated himself next to her.

“He was merely protecting your interests.”

“His bark was worse than his bite, you know.” At Steele’s wince, she touched his arm again and smiled apologetically. “What I mean is, Murphy could’ve refused to take part in the break-in at the Raeders, or in the laying of that last little trap for them. He could’ve turned you in to the police either of those times. He even came to visit you at the jail hospital and helped clean up your apartment.” And despite what he’d said, Murphy had come to trust Steele’s intentions toward this agency – and her. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have left. ‘No,’ he’d protested, ‘I trust *you* to keep him in line.’ Laura cast her eyes down and picked up a fork, playing with it.

Steele leaned over and said softly, “I’m sorry. I know he was your good friend.”

She gave a small smile, putting a hand over his. “He’s still my good friend.”

Steele nodded and cleared his throat. “Well, shall we try the risotto?”

The risotto glistened with a transparent sauce and had a wonderful taste of grain – tender, with just a slight firmness at its center. The meal passed in pleasant conversation, filled with friendly laughter. Laura felt intensely aware of the man beside her, as sensitized as the sandpapered fingers of a safecracker, registering each touch of his elbow or foot as he shifted in his chair, each touch of his hand as he passed her the salad, the risotto, or her wine glass.

God, he was sexy. A man just didn’t have the right to look that good. But it wasn’t only that. He was charming, intriguing, engaging . . . heart-robbing. And for each of his virtues she could name ten of his faults. But not tonight, not tonight. Tonight, she didn’t want to work on the puzzle that was him, the most complex one she’d ever encountered, let alone the conundrum of why she was so drawn to him. Some things just are. Tonight, she wanted to celebrate. Tonight, she wanted to indulge herself, and he was an expert on indulgence. She smiled to herself.

“Ready for dessert? Coffee and torte?”

“Oh, I really shouldn’t . . . .” At his hurt look she relented – not that she’d thought she really could’ve declined. “I’d love some.”

She helped him clear their plates and brought out the coffee as he began cutting them generous

slices of torte at the table. She moaned. She was in heaven. Three layers of dark chocolate and almonds, the layers separated by a filling of milk and Gianduja chocolates. The glazing was spread evenly over the top and sides, with more piped on as a decorative edge. It was finished with a small rectangular bittersweet thin.

He pooled some red raspberry puree onto their dessert plates and set the slices on top. Edible art.

“It’s stunning.”

“Prepare yourself to be transported to the heights of ecstasy.” He sat back down next her, put her plate in front of her, and picked up her fork. Turning toward her, he smiled and rested his hand on the back of her chair, barely touching her, as he fed her the first chocolatey bite.

“Oh.” She closed her eyes. “Oh.” She should say something a little less monosyllabic. “Oh.” She was hopeless.

She opened her eyes. He didn’t seem to mind her lack of eloquence. He sat there, wearing a delighted smile, feeding her bites, absorbed in watching her chew. She ran her tongue slowly over her lips, trying to extract every last essence of chocolate. He brought his napkin to her mouth, dabbing at its corners. Surely those crumbs were imaginary? She could’ve sworn she got them all. He slowly moved his head toward hers.

She straightened. “I have a surprise.”

“You always do,” he said in a teasing voice, sitting back in his chair.

“Finish your dessert.”

“That’s what I was tryin’ to do, Miss Holt.” Picking up his fork, his eyes lit with amusement, he started in on his torte.

Thank God he never pushed. She was the aggressor, despite his occasional sexual innuendo. She was the one who at unexpected moments literally seized him and pulled him into a kiss. But much as her body screamed at her to follow through, she never could. She’d told him many months ago, and despite what she’d told him at the Federal Reserve Bank, she still worried. She’d get in too deep. He’d go. She’d be left. In too deep. And whenever she’d think, just this time, just this time, it’d be alright and it’ll all work out, her words would come back and haunt her. And she’d stop. And he wouldn’t push. Sometimes she’d wish he’d push. But not really. Sometimes she thought he purposely didn’t push because he knew that made her even . . . itchier, and he was just waiting for her to go over the edge. No, that was uncalled for. He just accepted what she gave him, honoring her body language while enjoying the communication, never complaining about her seeming ‘hit on, then run’ seduction strategy.

She gave him a sidelong glance, heat flooding her body as it insisted on making known its desires. Now *his* courting moves were like an orchestrated dance, never the same but always with a gentlemanly flow, a gentle manly flow. How well he read her moods. One time his approach would be a romantic slow waltz, the next a flirtatious rhumba. He knew when it was time for a sensuous samba, a thrilling tango, a hot salsa. And how would he be as a lover? He’d adapt to her responses, stopping when she wanted to stop, going when she wanted to go, doing less when she

wanted less, more when she wanted –

“More?”

“What?” She dropped her fork.

He pointed at her plate. “Dessert. Do you want another piece?”

“No. Thank you. It was exquisite.”

“Thank you. I’ll wrap some up for you to take home.”

Damn. She really was going to have to tell him about the chocolate. Next time. She took his hand and led him to the couch. “Sit.”

As he removed his jacket and loosened his tie and collar, she pulled out a few carefully gift-wrapped items she’d hidden underneath the couch. Handing them to him, she seated herself next to him.

His eyes widened. “Thank you. What’s this?”

“‘Welcome home’ presents.”

“Laura, you shouldn’t have.” He tore into the biggest one as if afraid she’d agree.

“Actually, that one’s not from me. I found it at your door.”

They stared down at the book, ‘The Unicorn Tapestries.’ Steele opened it to the bookmarked page, featuring the last tapestry. The caption read: “‘The Unicorn in Captivity’: the unicorn, miraculously alive and whole again, lies chained to a circular wooden gate in a lush garden, a happy pet, tamed by the maiden, enjoying the Garden of Eden.’

Laura ran a finger along the border of the page. “All I can see is a unicorn all tied up, fenced in, on public display, wounded.”

She glanced sideways at Steele and then turned her head to look at him more fully. His face was frozen into an expressionless mask, his eyes distant. What was wrong? She touched his hand. It felt like ice. As the long moment of silence continued, she put her hand on his knee. Suddenly, like a spring uncoiling, he relaxed beside her.

He touched her hand and smiled. “Oh, I don’t know. Some say the wound is really just the juice from the pomegranate tree he’s lying under, symbolizing rebirth.” He shrugged. “Even if he’s truly wounded, he survives. And see? The chain isn’t sturdy, the fence is low, and I think he rather enjoys the public attention. He could easily escape if he wanted to.”

“Why do you think he doesn’t try?”

He shrugged again. “He has the maiden for a companion, and . . . he’s in paradise.” Dropping his eyes, he cleared his throat and reached for the other gifts, setting the book on the table before them. “Now, what have we here?” Giving her an excited grin, he ripped the wrappings off the other ones as well, one after the other, like a child at Christmas.

Laura tried not to wince. She'd have sworn he'd never gotten a present before. She'd managed to re-use that wrapping paper through several occasions of gift-giving and had been planning on asking him if she could have it back. Her annoyance faded as she took a look at his face, lit with a thirty-two-teeth smile.

He fingered the videotapes in his hands. "Laura . . . thank you. 'Casablanca,' 'Gaslight,' 'The Maltese Falcon' –"

"I replaced them all. I just couldn't lug them all up, not to mention stuff them under your couch. You can carry the box up from my car, later."

"Thank you." His eyes asked a question and she answered with hers. He leaned toward her and gave her a kiss.

She broke it first, saying, "I have another one here. I thought we could rent a player and watch it tonight." She got up and retrieved it from under the couch as he set the others on the table.

He grinned at her and once again tore the wrapping off. "'To Catch a Thief.'" He chuckled. "Have you seen it?"

"No. I've been too busy trying to catch one of my own." She smiled.

He smiled in return. He put the tape with the others, turned to her, and took her hand in one of his, moving close. He reached out with the other hand, gently brushed her hair back off her shoulder, and lightly trailed his hand down her arm. "It's a wonderful film. . . . There's a scene, a classic. . . . Fireworks burstin' outside the window. . . . Frances Stevens, sittin' on the couch, tryin' to bait John Robie into revealin' his past . . . seducin' him into a kiss. Perhaps we should re-enact it," – he cupped her chin and dropped a light kiss on one cheek – "put us in the proper mood" – he kissed the other temple.

Irish. This time it was clear as a bell. That undertone to his speech was definitely Irish. She put her hands on his shoulders and closed her eyes, sighing as he continued to plant tiny kisses across her eyelids while leaning her back against the couch. The kisses slowly trailed down her cheek, across her chin and up the other side. Oh. . . . Soft, warm kisses. Chocolate kisses. She could smell the chocolate on his breath. Chocolate. So addicting. A forbidden pleasure. Oh . . . morechocolatekissesplease.

"Is this . . . is this how the scene goes?" she finally managed.

"The action's off-screen. I'm improvisin'."

She moaned as he folded about her, tangling his fingers in her hair, placing kisses above and below her lips. She encircled his lean, willowy body with her arms, feeling the beat of his heart . . . it was fast . . . not too fast . . . feeling the heat of his body . . . it was hot . . . not too hot. A different kind of fever this time. "Fireworks . . ." She lost her train of thought.

"Yes," he whispered.

She felt him reach behind the couch cushions. His lips pulled into a grin. Puzzled, she opened her eyes . . . to see him dangling a pair of purple plastic handcuffs, each wristlet embossed with 'Take

Me, I'm Yours.' His blue eyes sparked mischief.

She laughed, shifted her weight, pressed him back against the couch, and covered his mouth with her own.

\*\*\*\*

## EPILOGUE

Laura sat at her dressing table, brushing her hair, smiling. Steele certainly delighted her senses. She leaned forward and inhaled the scent of the small bouquet in the vase. He'd tried to give her the entire centerpiece of his dining room table, but she'd taken just these few stems. Red and white roses. Passion and Purity. Love and Innocence.

She stretched and yawned, then picked up the book on her dressing table, a book she'd gotten after first seeing those magnificent tapestries at the Raeders. The book was a collection of fables and poems about that mythical animal, the unicorn. She took the book to her bed to read her favorite before going to sleep.

This is the creature there has never been.  
 They never knew it, and yet, nonetheless,  
 they loved the way it moved, its suppleness,  
 its neck, its very gaze, mild and serene.  
 Not there,  
 because they loved it,  
 it behaved as though it were.  
 They always left some space,  
 And in that clear, unpeopled space they saved,  
 it lightly reared its head, with scarce a trace  
 of not being there.  
 They fed it, not with corn,  
 but only with the possibility of being.  
 And that was able to confer such strength,  
 its brow put forth a horn.  
 One horn.  
 Whitely it stole up to a maid,  
 – to be,  
 within the silver mirror and in her.

Ranier Maria Rilke, from *Possibility of Being*

Laura put the book down on the nightstand and turned off the light. A smile on her face, she wriggled under the covers.

\*\*\*\*

Steele dove into bed, burrowed under the covers, and curled up tightly, trying to get warm again after the freezing cold shower. Ah, wasn't life grand? Tomorrow he really should get one of those



potted tomato plants.

He chuckled as he thought of the telegram he'd received earlier that day from Daniel:

CONGRATULATIONS MY BOY! WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH THE MONEY? CALL ME.  
I HAVE A PROPOSITION TO MAKE.

Steele didn't think he'd show it to Laura.

\*\*\*\*

Endes Gut, Alles Gut.

\*\*\*\*

#### GLOSSARY

Abrazo	Embrace (Spanish)
Alcos	Those habitually drunk (from 'alcoholics,' I'm sure). (Irish slang)
All'onda	Creamy and wavy
Arse over kick	Head over heels (Irish slang)
B&E	Breaking and Entering
Babby	Baby (Irish)
Banger	Firecracker (British slang)
Biscuit	Cookie
Bimmer	BMW
Bollywood	Indian film industry
Bremen	In West Germany, at the time. Also, here, the name of a story character – a 'Mando operative' based in Bremen
Canteen	A box used to store silverware. (Chiefly British.)
Carnal (accent second syllable)	More than a friend – one who is trusted (Spanish slang)
Catalogues raisonnés	Monographic books with lists of all the known works of an artist.
Cervezas	Beer

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Chain of Eyes	The list of people who saw the stolen item in the order in which it was seen.
Chemist	Drug store
Chippers	Fish-and-chip shops (Irish slang)
Church call	Pre-opening briefing where jobs are assigned (Carny lingo)
Chota, la	The cops (Mexican-American slang)
Cod	Having someone on (Irish/British slang)
Cop the flash	Carny lingo. Somewhat literal translation: win/steal the expensive prizes used to attract the customers (as opposed to the 'slum,' the cheap prizes customers usually win, assuming they win at all!)
Dismas	The Good Thief, crucified with Jesus, who heeded the call of grace.
Dustbin	Garbage can
G'way from me	You're kidding (Irish slang)
Gang bangers	Gang members
Gestas	The Bad Thief, crucified with Jesus, unrepentant to the end.
In the life	To be involved in con games
Information broker	This term is being used to indicate a person who sells bank information. According to a PI I talked with, these guys ('spooks') used to work in the Department of Treasury and have access to this information. This is illegal, of course. That hasn't stopped PI's from using them, I hear. No one I know, of course.
Jack Thompson Golf Course	Now the Maggie Hathaway Golf Course
John Hewitt	'The City and its Creators'
John Hewitt	'Conacre,' 'Freehold,' and 'Homestead.'
John Hewitt	'Ireland'
La Chota	The cops (Mexican-American slang)
LACMA	The Los Angeles County Museum of Art

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Lashings	Lots of (Irish)
Murder, My Sweet	An Original Philip Marlowe Mystery, adaptation of the Raymond Chandler novel 'Farewell, My Lovely.' RKO Radio Pictures Inc. 1944. The movie starts at the end of the story, with Philip Marlowe's eyes bandaged, sitting under the hot light of an interrogation room. The police grill him about what happened.  Perhaps the most famous quote from the book and movie: Philip Marlowe: "I caught the blackjack right behind my ear. A black pool opened up at my feet. I dived in. It had no bottom."
Ne plus ultra	The state of being without a flaw or defect, 'no more beyond' (Latin)
Nick	Jail
Northeim	A place in Germany.
Olvera Street	Olvera Street is the oldest part of the City of Los Angeles; it is also known as the birthplace of the City of Angels or as El Pueblo Historic Monument. Many Latinos often refer to it as La Placita Olvera. It contains 27 historic buildings and a traditional Mexican style plaza area where you can wander around and shop for souvenirs and handcrafted Mexican wares typical of old Mexico.
Omadhaun	Idiot, fool, stupid. (Irish)
Piss-take	A joke (British slang)
Plaster	Bandage
Provenance	History of ownership of a valued object or work of art or literature
Quality	Superior social class (Irish slang)
Rashers	Pieces of bacon (Irish)
Riesling	A white wine; the most noble and expressive, according to 'The Riesling Report.' Its homeland is Germany, where it has been cultivated since the 1400s or earlier

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Schottisches Lachsfilet auf Keta-Kaviar-Sauce, Blattspinach und Kartoffelgratin	Scottish filet of salmon with keta (Alaska's freshest caviar) caviar sauce, leaf spinach and potato gratin (German)
Starnberg See	Lake Starnberg (German)
Starnberg	A place in Germany
Strasse	Street (German)
Stroke	Steal (Irish slang)
Sunday School Show	Carny lingo. An honest carnival
The Butler Did It	John's story about the butler is true up to the sentence 'When the theft was discovered, the Swedish government refused to return the painting – according to Swedish law, the auction buyer had purchased it in good faith,' but the events happened only fairly recently
To see the wolf's ears	To find oneself in great danger (Spanish)
Torch	Flashlight (British)
Wanderweg	Walking trail (German)
Weimar	A place in Germany. Also, here, the name of a story character – a 'Mando operative' based in Weimar
Whinge	To complain or protest, especially in an annoying or persistent manner. ( <i>Chiefly</i> British, Irish)

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the RS Fic readers who saw and commented on first and/or second drafts: Gary G., Jill Hargan, Debra Talley, Wendy Rigney. Thanks also to Professors Jim Elston and Jamie Marchant, my fellow members of the Robrek Steele Conspiracy Writers Group, for their critiques. I owe all of you for either gamely holding my hand through my wailings and gnashings of teeth or for causing those wailings and gnashings of teeth. Some day I'll pay you back. ;-)

Thanks also to Xenon for answers to questions on British idioms, to Phyllis for answers to questions about Mexican-American words and customs, and to Georg for verifying/correcting my German.

Thanks to Lauryn for mentioning the Horch and the Eva Braun rumor, though that rumor is denied by the source I was directed to in trying to confirm or deny it, Christina Fuchs at Audi Tradition. Thanks also to Gary for the additional information about tree-climbing, which he knows from his first-hand youthful experiences. His tales of throwing apples at cars led to Steele accosting Murphy with the acorn. I apologize to Gary, however, for not more thoroughly researching the chocolate torte by actually baking one for him. He didn't mention whether he wanted more research done on the purple plastic handcuffs . . . .

Thanks to GardenWeb's California Gardening Forum for answers to questions on what one might find in a scented nighttime garden in the L.A. area.

I got permission to use the quote about the unicorn, "too swift to be captured, too fierce to be tamed, too beautiful to be forgotten, too mysterious to be understood" from the Unicorn Lady at the Mystical Unicorn Web Site: <http://www.unicornlady.net>. I didn't think I could create anything more apt than that.

A dozen different security experts responded to my questions about installing security at a place like the Raeders. One such respondent was Harold Gillens, a security professional. You may contact him at:

Harold C. Gillens, PSP  
President  
Quintech Security Consultants, Inc.  
300 Central Avenue  
Summerville, SC 29483  
(843) 695-0170  
(843) 364-0169 (cell)  
visit him at @ [www.quintechengineering.com](http://www.quintechengineering.com)  
Board Certified: Physical Security Professional (PSP)  
Member: IAPSC, ASIS, and IOBSE  
Certified: Small Disadvantage Business (SDB)

I have talked to jewelers and police officers and private eyes and arborists and art museum

registrars and more (by phone or e-mail). I make no claim of infallibility, however, so if you are sure some 'fact,' etc., is wrong, let me know and I will look into it. Unless, of course, it's something I consciously took creative license with.

The final responsibility for the story is, of course, my own, and I don't always follow advice, so don't blame any of the above good people for anything you don't like or anything I didn't get quite right!

Feedback is welcomed and desired! E-mail:[drpeg2003@yahoo.com](mailto:drpeg2003@yahoo.com) . Group members, please feel free to post directly to the list.

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#### ENDNOTES

1) I got information about the Unicorn Tapestries from <http://www.unicornlady.net> . There are many additional sites that I visited to learn about the tapestries. <http://victorian.fortunecity.com/eliot/452/tapestry.html> has some great pictures of them.

'The Unicorn Tapestries' is a real book, but I made up the part about what the caption on the seventh tapestry is.

2) Info about Admiral Raeder's naval dirks is from <http://www.wwiidaggers.com/SPO.htm> (Note: I wrote the above in late 2003 or early 2004 and recently noticed that information is gone from that site. Apparently the dirk described there has been sold.)

3) The paintings and Walter Scott novels that Mr. Steele helped fictionally recover are all real (not the royal lavulite mosaic, of course, though see B. below) and have the histories given in that first hospital scene where Laura shows Murphy her notes. In actuality, however, they were recovered at much later dates than 1983, the time of this story. I suppose someone stole them again after Mr. Steele aided the police. He claims not to be responsible for that, however. :-)

A. "Water Lilies, 1904." Monet. Recovered in 1998:

During a 1998 visit to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Jonathan Petropoulos, the art and cultural property research director for the Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets, recognized Monet's "Water Lilies, 1904." Taken from French art dealer Paul Rosenberg, the painting was part of a collection amassed for Nazi Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop in 1941. The Monet had been registered in a French museum as an unclaimed stolen work and traveled to the U.S. as part of a special exhibition, "Monet in the 20th Century."

B. Walter Scott novels stolen by Hitler's army from the study of Tsar Alexander I in the Yekaterinsky Palace have never been recovered. Neither have the contents of the palace's famed eighteenth century "Amber Room," which was dismantled by the Germans. In a further search on that topic, I came up with the fact that amber mosaics had been stolen. Of course, none were encrusted with royal lavulite.

C. "Portrait of Christ." Jacopo de Barbari. Recovered in 1999:

The painting not only has the history mentioned in the hospital scene, but also the history told by Mando to Desco at their first meeting in this story, up until the point where it got into the hands of the furniture restorer. In actuality, the furniture restorer, Frank J. Vaccaro, was arrested and sentenced to community service after trying to sell it back to the Weimar city museum, from where it had originally been stolen, for a finder's fee.

D. Dürer drawing. Two of his drawings, as well as a drawing by Rembrandt, all recovered in 2001, have the history mentioned by Mando to Desco during their second meeting in this story. Actually, after being at the Baku Museum in Azerbaijan, they were stolen once again and ultimately wound up in the hands of a Japanese wrestler who was trying to raise money for a kidney transplant! I decided that might sound too unbelievable if I put that into the story. The drawings have been returned to the Bremen Museum in Germany from where they were originally stolen.

4) "The Portrait of Pastor Adrianus Tegularius." Frans Hals. Recovered 1990. It never belonged to anyone named Goldschmidt. Below are some facts about it.

This painting's recovery generated some controversy:

From *Art in America*, Sept, 2001, by Raphael Rubinstein:

On July 6, a French court convicted Adam Williams, former head of Newhouse Galleries in New York, for handling a stolen painting, Frans Hals's 'Portrait of Pastor Adrianus Tegularius

(1655-60),’ which was taken by the Nazis from Paris art collector Adolphe Schloss in 1943. The Hals was sold at auction in New York and London several times in the 1960s and '70s without the knowledge of the Schloss heirs. In 1989, Williams bought it at Christie's in London for \$180,000. The following year he took the painting to an art fair in Paris, where it was recognized by one of the heirs and confiscated by the police. Williams claims to have been unaware of the painting's illicit history, but French prosecutors charged that its provenance was well known. After the British-born dealer was acquitted at his first trial, the decision was appealed. Williams faced up to five years in prison, but the court gave him an eight-month suspended sentence and ordered the Hals to be turned over to Adolphe Schloss's heirs.

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5) Re the Braque painting and faked provenance (although the following story takes place after the events in my fictional one, the principle holds):

A 20th-Century Master Scam.

Source: *New York Times Magazine* (0028-7822); Volume: 148; Issue: 51587; Date: 1999

The July 18<sup>th</sup>, 1999 issue of the NY Times Magazine has an article exposing art forger John Myatt. Myatt, a local art teacher in England, discovered in 1986 that he has an amazing ability to paint in the style of numerous 20th century masters such as Braque, Picasso, and Klee. Enter a con artist named John Drewe, who began to sell Myatt's work through various major auction houses and galleries. Drewe was a brilliant forger himself, in that he looted museum libraries and national archives for material that would permit the creation of seemingly ironclad provenances. The scheme toppled when a former lover of Drewe's tipped off Scotland Yard about Drewe's activities.

Myatt apparently produced some 200 works, many of which sold for tens and even hundreds of thousands of dollars. Due in part to Drewe's clever bogus provenances, numerous art experts failed to notice that all of Myatt's works were done in ordinary acrylic housepaint mixed with KY Jelly.

The many formidable lines of defense were easily breached: art experts, museums, galleries, dealers, and archive curators were all fooled. The article notes some experts believe that anywhere from 10% to 40% of works by significant artists for sale are fakes.



Though what I put into this story as Jack Ritt's story may sound fantastic, the process of his forgeries is closely based upon what Drewe actually did. (Other things like foul play, etc., are purely a fabrication of my twisted imagination.) And wouldn't you know it, someone else thought this an interesting story, too – I understand it's going to be made into a movie. I guess they won't listen to me if I tell them they can't – I had the idea to use it in my story first!

I am not, however, implying that anything like these events involved LACMA in any way – that is pure fiction on my part.

6) You can see the Horch at <http://www.bellesdantan.com/Horch/Pages/Horch1.htm>

7) The remarks about John Hewitt that Nevan shied away from are a paraphrase of a snatch of a comment made by Barra Ó Séaghdha while reviewing 'In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland.' (Jonh Brown, ed., Salmon 2002).

I had a lot of fun doing research for this story. It's amazing what one can pick up on the web. Information about:

Rubies. Clothing. Unicorns. Irish and German Folk Tales. Nazi handguns. Mansions and castles. LACMA and its movie schedules (had to call to find they don't sell concessions, though <g>). Landscaping in L.A. The sights in L.A. Con schemes. Artwork. Nazi plundering of artwork. Provenance research (see LACMA's site, for example). Binoculars. How alarm systems and motion sensors work. How to cut power to a house, pick locks, and break into safes. Tree climbing. Aerial ropeways. What type of searches and interrogation police can do when. Handcuffing procedures. How injured arrestees are treated and where (thanks to a reply by the Beverly Hills Police Department). What real private investigators do in an investigation. The fact that a forensics lab can determine if a lock has been picked. Dogs. Symptoms of infection of dog bites and how they're treated. Road maps. How long a D.A. in CA has to bring charges. What videotapes were available when. What soap operas were on in 1983. Etc.

Anyway, I tried to go for accuracy as much as I was able, though I admit to some fudging. For example, I don't know if Steele would be awarded those recovery fees and didn't want to find out he wouldn't. In any case, he probably wouldn't have gotten them that quickly. I don't know if the mayor would have held a reception for him. I doubt "Nurse Ratched" could really keep a bunch of reporters away from Steele's bedside. I also don't know what kind of wards are at the Medical Center at the L.A. County Jail. I did find out that such facilities are generally of one of two types:

prisoners are in small locked rooms unrestrained, or they're in larger wards handcuffed to steel bars. I couldn't get through to this one in particular. I always got a voice message when I called, saying the operators were all busy, and when I wrote them, no one replied (no e-mail address). I decided it wasn't worth any more effort and so chose the one better for the story. I decided it'd be easier to get Laura onto a ward than into a locked room. Assuming, of course, she could get into either!

Again, I make no claim of infallibility, so if you are sure some 'fact' is wrong, let me know and I will look into it. Unless, of course, it's something I consciously took creative license with: there are some other things I consciously fudged but am not telling you about. :-)

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