

**MARKED FOR REVENGE  
AN ART HEIST THRILLER**

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*Marked for Revenge: An Art Heist Thriller*  
(Zelda Richardson Mystery Series Book 3)

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*Down and Out in Kathmandu: A Backpacker Mystery*  
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## **Dedication**

To my wonderful son and husband for inspiring me daily.

# 1 Nighttime Flight

*August 11, 2018*

Marko Antic softly hummed the Dutch national anthem as he cut another watercolor from Vianden Castle's cold stone wall. As the gilded frame dropped into his free hand, he automatically looked to the life-sized portrait of William II hanging at the opposite end of the narrow room, almost sensing the Dutch king's disapproval.

"Will you stop already?" his partner-in-crime whispered.

Marko ceased mid-chorus, the last bar of 'Het Wilhelmus' hanging eerily in the air. He opened his mouth to reprimand Rikard for being such a killjoy when he realized his friend was right. Although the Turret Room was at the back of an unoccupied medieval castle—and the sole security guard had already completed his rounds—they'd do better to be prudent.

Marko slipped the painting into a padded canvas bag, careful not to put unnecessary pressure on the other two watercolors he'd already plundered from the castle's walls. He looked to his friend and saw Rikard was placing the tenth and final painting into his bag. As soon as all of the watercolors were secure, it was time to complete this job. Marko sucked in his breath, excited yet nervous about their exit, inspired by the castle's extraordinary location.

Vianden Castle seemed to grow out of a rocky promontory jutting out into the Our Valley. It was the jewel crowning the tiny village of Vianden—literally. The town's homes, businesses, and church carved into the steep ridge had a thick blanket of tall trees that covered them. A single road led up to the castle at the top.

At first, Marko and Rikard were overwhelmed by the castle's position and the seemingly insurmountably high stone wall built around it. Once inside, they were pleasantly surprised by how easily looks could deceive. The castle itself was the main tourist attraction, and that was impossible to steal. Cameras were trained on the main entrances and exits but were not hung up in each room. During their tour, Marko realized why. Only a few inexpensive pieces of art were permanently displayed, and none appeared to be hooked up to an alarm. But then, his trained eye told him they weren't worth more than a few thousand euros, thus probably not worth insuring. The only additional measure taken to secure the temporary exhibition of watercolors they'd just stolen from was a single camera pointed at the entrance to the Turret Room. One that Marko had covered with tape before entering the space.

Breaking in had been incredibly easy. Because the castle's entrance was literally at the end of the road, there was little chance of a random passerby seeing them return at two in the morning. Marko and Rikard used rappelling hooks to climb over the massive stone wall surrounding the castle and were inside in a matter of seconds. Thanks to the waning moon, they didn't have to look hard to find shadows to climb in. Getting out would entail a different route entirely.

Marko triple-checked his canvas bags before glancing over to see Rikard doing the same. The burglars locked eyes and nodded, then rose and crossed the darkened stone floor.

A door on the left side of the Turret Room led to a wide balcony extending far out over the valley below. As soon as Rikard opened it, a strong wind blew inside, chilling Marko to the bone.

Both men dragged the bags of artwork out onto the balcony then closed the door firmly

behind them. Marko knew from their previous visit that the views from here were breathtaking. Because the balcony extended a few feet out over the abyss, visitors could see for miles up and down the valley. Now, a swath of blacks and grays met their eye. The Our river was invisible. A handful of lights—presumably from homes—sparkled through the dense foliage of this sparsely populated region.

Before looting the Turret Room, they had placed two large tote bags on the balcony. Marko opened one and took out a harness shaped like a padded chair. He slipped it over his back and quickly strapped himself in. Then, using a series of bungee cords and carabiners, he secured a crate of artwork to each side. The extra-thick padding should cushion any jarring, and both Marko and Rikard were skilled enough to land softly. Their job depended on it. Once satisfied, he slipped on night-vision goggles, buckled on his helmet, then picked up a small nylon sack with two lines hanging out of it. Marko hooked them into the specially-built loops hanging from his chest. He yanked on each, ensuring they were secure before unfurling the nylon wing. The soft fabric billowed up and out above him. Marko turned on a flashing red beacon attached to his chest and stepped out onto the wide stone railing. The strong winds tugged on the nylon, pulling him forward.

The balcony wasn't large enough for both to jump simultaneously, but Marko could see that Rikard was almost ready. Pulling tight on the controls, Marko waited until his friend had his wing clipped in properly. As soon as Rikard gave him the thumbs up, Marco released the hand brakes and stepped off the ledge, giving in to the wind's desire. Marko's heart raced as his stomach dropped away. For a brief moment, he was plunging toward the earth. Seconds later, his chute grabbed an upward draft and raced up the ridge, jerking him high above the treetops. A smile split his face; he loved the rush. He used his hand grips and weight to control his lateral movements, slowly maneuvering himself away from the tree-covered ridge and back above the river, his night-vision goggles helping him orient.

A minute later, he heard the whooshing sound of another chute catching the wind. He turned his head back toward the castle and searched until he could see his friend's red beacon flashing. Marko's grin intensified when he noticed there were no lights visible inside the castle. The robbery probably wouldn't be detected until morning.

Marko relaxed the tension on his hand grips, allowing his wing to race down the valley, relishing the brief moment of freedom. He couldn't believe his luck. Marko had always loved his work, but since he began working for his uncle a year ago, his job satisfaction had increased significantly. Thanks to years of stealing paintings and antiques from private homes, Marko had developed a real eye for quality. The mental thrill of creating a devious plan and seeing it through was a real adrenaline kick but getting rid of these illicitly gained goods was always such a pain. There was much risk involved. More and more of his associates had been tripped up by selling them to undercover cops. And when Marko did find a trustworthy buyer, they offered minimal payout.

Marko always knew he could count on his family if he ever got into real trouble, but he had enjoyed following his own path. That is until several of his friends were arrested during a recent sting operation. When his uncle Luka offered to take care of all of that hassle, Marko couldn't refuse. And his uncle did pay top dollar, more than he'd been able to organize on his own. From time to time, Luka even supplied him with an interesting theft, to boot. There was no shortage of greedy people willing to pay anything to acquire what they wanted, especially when the object of their desire was entirely out of reach even to people of their financial stature.

He kicked his legs around, reveling in the liberating feeling of flying. Too soon, he made

out a set of headlights blinking in the distance. Marko adjusted his direction and relaxed into the harness, determined to enjoy the rest of his short flight.

He looked up to the moon and turned his face into the wind, letting it whip across his cheeks — God, how he loved his job.

## 2 A Meeting in Marmaris

*August 12, 2018*

Sunlight sparkled off the waters of Marmaris Bay, turning the ripples into fluid diamonds. In the distance, the green-tipped mountains enclosing the town were hazy purple silhouettes. From his balcony, Kadir Tekin watched Westerners on jet skis churning up the waves as Turkish families splashed in the warm water close to shore. Four-masters decorated as pirate ships sailed further out, heading toward the high peaks of Yildiz Adasi and Keci Adasi, the mountainous islands that separated Marmaris from the Mediterranean Sea.

A servant dressed in a tunic and şalvar trousers unobtrusively came up from behind, bowing slightly. "Luka Antic is here."

Kadir grunted his acknowledgment, keeping his eyes focused south. A large yacht crossed the bay, sail set for Netsel Marina. He watched until the Italian vessel moored and a group of wealthy twenty-somethings scampered off, immediately heading toward the boutique-filled streets next to the marina. He picked up his binoculars and took in their scantily-clad bodies, dark curly hair, and the expensive jewelry hanging around their necks, arms, and ankles. He was planning to lunch along the water after this meeting—he would have to look for them.

Kadir turned and crossed the pink stone marble balcony to the wide-open French doors of his study. Inside stood his Croatian guest. When Davit, a mutual business associate, told him about Luka's specialty and mentioned the Croatian was looking to expand his business interests, Kadir jumped at the chance to meet with him.

Initial contact established that Luka wanted to buy two million dollars' worth of his highest-grade heroin. The Croatian was moving into the drugs business and wanted to make a big splash. Kadir was impressed by his gumption and could easily fulfill the order, but he wanted to meet Luka first. Nothing replaced that initial impression. Besides, he wanted to see the Croatian's reaction when he told him about his rather unusual request. Only then would he know if they could do business together or not.

Luka stood next to Kadir's desk, waiting for his host to approach. Luka was shorter than Kadir's own five-foot, five-inch frame but was studier, broader. His buzz cut distracted from the fact that he was going bald. His face was clean-shaven, but his stubble was already struggling to break through his skin again.

Kadir extended a hand. "Davit speaks highly of you."

"That's good to know. We go way back," Luka replied. The Croatian's raspy voice made Kadir have to strain his ears to understand him.

Kadir sat in one of the chairs across from his desk and signaled for Luka to sit next to him. "Davit told me you are active in the art world."

"That's one way of putting it," Luka responded, his face remaining a mask of indifference.

Kadir leaned over his desk and picked up a newspaper resting atop a stack of coffee table books. He threw it onto Luka's lap. The headline on the English-language paper's front page read 'Brazen Art Theft in Luxembourg.' Photos of Vianden Castle and two painted landscapes were visible above the fold. "This is your work, isn't it?"

The Croatian's jaw tightened as he glanced over the article. "Yes, I organized this," he said, his tone defiant.

Kadir could imagine Luka was not pleased with their friend Davit right now. All successful criminal organizations relied on discretion, and Davit had broken the implied vow of silence by telling Kadir about Luka's line of business. "Frankly, if Davit had not told me about your work, you would not be here."

Luka glared at him then nodded slowly, his irritation dissipating as he accepted his friend's slip of the tongue.

Kadir gazed into his eyes, trying to decide what kind of soul this man possessed and if it was an honorable one. "I am a rich man with prestige, wealth, and a healthy family, yet my hunger for more is sometimes insatiable. I have no interest in working with new clients, but when Davit told me about your current line of business, I realized it was a sign. I can get you the product you desire if you help me realize my legacy. I want to create something wonderful for my children, something that will ensure my family name lives on."

The Croatian looked at him, fighting to keep his face neutral as his mind raced through the possibilities.

Kadir knew his heroin was top quality and available for a lower price than most of his competition. All Luka had to do was say yes. This desire to lay the foundation for his final legacy was gnawing at his soul. Kadir looked away from his guest, almost afraid Luka could sense his desperation.

For far too long, the Croatian remained silent, his eyes studying his host's face. Finally, to Kadir's immense relief, Luka said, "I am listening."

### 3 Balkan Bandits Strike Again!

*August 13, 2018*

'Balkan Bandits Strike Again!' screamed the headline of the *NRC Handelsblad*'s front page, now open on Zelda's computer screen. Ten minutes ago, she had finished fact-checking the biographies of Jackson Pollock, Jasper Johns, Franz Kline, and several more American modernists included on the Amstel Modern's website. It was her third read-through, but she wanted to make sure it was perfect before sending the updated texts to her boss. Even though she had always treated her unpaid internships as real jobs, being a paid employee did make her feel even more responsible for getting everything right—the first time. And her work as a collection assistant was both fulfilling and fun. Her coworkers were a blast, and the research, copywriting, and editing work was varied and interesting. She almost hoped the woman whose job she had temporarily taken over would decide not to return to work after her six-month sabbatical ended.

A glance at the clock reminded Zelda that her next meeting was about to start. She skimmed the newspaper open on her screen in the hope of learning more about the audacious robbery that had taken place in Luxembourg two nights earlier. So far, this lengthy article was a summary of what her coworkers had told her during this morning's coffee break.

"Once again, art thieves from the Balkans have pulled off a brazen heist. Late Saturday night, ten landscapes from the Dutch Royal collection were stolen from Vianden Castle in Luxembourg. The watercolors, painted by revered Belgium master Jean-Baptiste van der Hulst, were on display as part of a special exposition celebrating the castle's historic connection to the current Dutch royal family, members of the House of Orange-Nassau..."

Hoping to find new details to share during lunch, Zelda clicked on a television news report posted five minutes earlier. A Dutch news anchor for the *NOS Journaal* recounted the same details as the newspaper, adding, "Two eyewitnesses' statements were originally rejected by police based on the men's high blood-alcohol level. However, camera footage from the castle and local businesses confirm two paragliders jumped off the castle's uppermost balcony and glided to an awaiting getaway car further down the valley."

*Geez, last month it was a speed boat and now hand gliders. It seems as if they are trying to score points for ingenuity,* Zelda thought. Despite the horror she felt knowing that they were stealing irreplaceable cultural treasures, Zelda couldn't help but admire their audacity.

Still shots of Vianden Castle filled the screen as the newsreader informed viewers about its history and the exhibition currently taking place there. Zelda marveled at its location and architecture. With its turrets and high walls, it reminded her of Camelot, though this one was perched precariously on the tip of a rocky outcrop, high atop a forested ridge. The views from the balcony the thieves supposedly paraglided from made her queasy. It seemed to be suspended over the valley. When the image changed again, video footage from the exhibition's opening night showed viewers the high-profile guests in attendance—including several members of the Dutch and Luxembourgian royal families—all admiring the watercolors that were later stolen.

When the image switched to wide shots of the castle, the reporter said, "Although no suspects have been apprehended, the theft has all the characteristics of a criminal

organization based in the Balkans. While several known rings of art thieves are active, the most well-known—the Balkan Bandits—have been evading international law enforcement agencies for the last ten years. Interpol estimates they have stolen four hundred million euros in jewels, antiques, and artwork from European cultural institutions, the vast majority of which has never been recovered. The organization’s loosely associated network of freelance thieves spread across Europe makes it difficult for authorities to link members to specific criminal families. These gangs from the Balkans favor smaller, regional museums with less security...”

“Five minutes.”

Zelda jerked her head up to find one of the marketing assistants standing in front of her desk. Absorbed in the news report, she hadn’t even noticed the woman entering the room. Then again, she shared the space with three other coworkers and had learned not to be distracted every time someone walked in or out of the door. “I’ll be right there.”

The marketing assistant frowned when Zelda didn’t spring out of her chair, but the assistant moved down the hallway just the same. Zelda heard the reporter saying “...as more international law enforcement agencies are able to show a direct connection between art thefts, drug smuggling, and arms dealing, calls for improving museum security are gaining hold in the European Union parliament. However, there is a concern at the national levels about their politicians’ ability to secure the funding for such improvements or if sources in the private sector should be responsible for...”

Zelda knew that little would change despite these politicians posturing. As long as museums, orchestras, ballet companies, operas, and the like were considered elitist, gaining broad public support for increasing cultural subsidies would be almost impossible. Many museums were already reliant on private sponsors to fund exhibitions or the acquisition of new pieces for their permanent collections. How much more could they be expected to give? And even if the government coughed up a more significant percentage of the costs, how many museums could they afford to make theftproof realistically?

A few more coworkers rushed by her door, obviously on their way to the same project meeting where she was supposed to be. Zelda clicked her browser shut then gathered up her notebook and the folders containing the project timeline and exhibition plan. *Conversations with American Modernists* opens next week, and the entire museum was on edge. It was the first exhibition organized by their new director, Julie Merriweather, and Zelda knew it had to be perfect. For the past two weeks, Julie led daily project meetings to stay on top of any problems the exhibition team may come up against. Most were nothing more than a rehash of the previous day’s rehash. Zelda didn’t understand the point, but the new director insisted, and the exhibition was Julie’s baby.

Despite her irritation with the meetings, Zelda was as excited as the rest to see works by Jackson Pollock, Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, Alexander Calder, Lee Krasner, Hans Hofmann, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, and Mark Rothko here in Amsterdam. Exhibitions of American modernists were rare in the Netherlands. Back home, Zelda had been spoiled. The Seattle Art Museum had a fine collection of modern and contemporary work, and she had visited it often.

That the Amstel Modern, a provincial museum in Amstelveen, had managed to secure works by prominent American artists for this exhibition had everything to do with their new director. Thanks to Julie, this exhibition would feature the most significant number of works by postwar American modernists ever shown in the Netherlands. She was known for having incredible contacts and a way of sweet-talking private collectors into lending out works they

would typically never show to the public. She'd worked her magic again with this new exhibition. Five Jackson Pollocks, three Jasper Johns, and a Hans Hofmann were making their public debut in Amstelveen next week.

Born in London to American parents, Julie had worked on both sides of the Atlantic and was considered to be a rising star in the international art scene. As a former curator at Saatchi Gallery and Tate Modern in London, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Los Angeles Art Museum, everyone who mattered was astonished when she accepted the Amstel Modern's offer to become their new director. The museum world was abuzz with rumors—not all favorable—until the press discovered her husband had recently been named the director of the Goethe Museum in Dusseldorf. Amsterdam was a whole lot closer than Los Angeles.

The *Conversations with American Modernists* exhibition was Zelda's first project and a treat to work on. The era fascinated her as well as the selection of artwork, most of which she hadn't seen before. Due to the demands of the insurance company, this exhibition was sketch-heavy. Julie did manage to secure eleven more well-known oil paintings worth a few million apiece, but that was as far as the exhibition's insurers would go. Zelda didn't care either way because the charcoals, line drawings, watercolors, and oil sketches were just as captivating as many of these painters' finished pieces. In many cases, they were more spontaneous and invigorating to look at than the final version of the same scene.

When Zelda saw the ad for this temporary position, she wasn't certain the Amstel Modern would be a good fit. The museum was established in 1972 by diamond trader Henrik Lomak to house his extensive collection of postmodern Dutch art, in particular his paintings and sculptures created by CoBrA artists. Other than Karel Appel, she knew little about CoBrA, an international avant-garde art movement founded by artists based in Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam that only officially existed between 1948 and 1951. Seeking to achieve direct and spontaneous expression, they were inspired by the creativity of children as well as folk and tribal art forms. The results were always colorful, often surreal and sometimes disturbing.

The position's title and responsibilities convinced her to apply. Not only would *collection researcher* look great on her résumé, but it would also keep her mind occupied while she waited for her master's thesis to be approved. Her university supervisor and the senior Oceania curator from the Tropenmuseum were reviewing her thesis now. They had another month to critique it as well as request any explanations about her sources or methodology. After they gave her their assessment, she would defend it publically before receiving her degree.

Writing her thesis about bis poles and the restitution of colonial-era objects had been therapeutic. She had been able to weave her experiences gained during her work for the *Bis Poles: Sculptures from the Rainforest* exhibition as well as the knowledge she gained during her investigation into Nick Mayfield's disappearance. It had been a turbulent year, one she would never forget. The Asmat and their art still fascinated her. But after a year of being occupied solely with ethnography and colonial history, she was glad for the change of pace the Amstel Modern and its postmodern collection provided.

To her delight, the role and artwork suited her. She was halfway through her six months. Zelda knew the museum's director was considering hiring another part-time researcher. Maybe she would apply for the job when this contract ended. However, once she had her master's degree, she would be able to apply for more senior positions instead of only the assistant roles. After three years of studying art history and museology, she was ready to

graduate and start working her way toward her dream role of curator.

But until she had her master's degree in her hand, she was happy to be an assistant *anything*.

Zelda looked down at the exhibition timeline in her hand, wishing Jacob, her boyfriend of eighteen months, could attend the opening. Unfortunately, he would still be in Cologne next Thursday night. They could visit it together on the weekend, she knew, but it just wasn't the same as if he'd been able to be there. Truth be told, Zelda hated attending exhibition openings but knew her presence was required. She never knew who to talk to or what about. Most invitees were there to network with important friends, not look at the artwork on display or chat with museum assistants.

Esmee, Zelda's favorite of the three other collection researchers working on this exhibition, rushed into their shared office and began rummaging around her desk for a pen. "Come on, Zelda. You know how mad Julie gets when anyone's late," she chided.

It was never Mrs. Merriweather but Julie. The new director insisted everyone use her first name. In the Netherlands, using someone's first name was a privilege, not a given. Zelda had grown accustomed to Dutch formality and was irked her new boss was trying to integrate her American ways into their office. Zelda chuckled at the irony that after four years of living in Amsterdam, she was starting to feel more Dutch than American.

She joined Esmee and walked with her to the conference room. "I don't understand why we need to meet today," Zelda grumbled. "Didn't Julie approve the catalogs yesterday? Have you seen them? How do they look?"

"Yes, and they are spectacular. The depth of color is quite extraordinary. The last printer we used made everything look so washed out. I don't think Julie would have stood for it." Esmee was in awe of their new director who had become an instant role model for the young art historian.

"You're right. She is quite the perfectionist. But now that the catalogs are approved, I think we are completely on track for the opening. All the signs and text boards for the exhibition halls arrived last week. Marketing is taking care of the posters and flyers. The website will go live tomorrow. Every item on our list has been crossed off. What else can we do except wait for the paintings to arrive?"

"That's true. But you know Julie. She leaves nothing to chance. I can't say I blame her. It is her debut here and one of the biggest exhibitions the Amstel Modern has ever organized. I can imagine she's feeling a lot of pressure to succeed at the moment and wants to leave nothing to chance," Esmee responded quickly.

Zelda snorted. "What could possibly go wrong?"

## 4 A Golden Opportunity

August 16, 2018

Ivan Novak hummed *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart as he slowly flipped through the images on the screen, eyeing each critically. He'd started with a list of ninety potential targets but had eventually whittled it down to a more manageable number. His final selection of forty was a mix of modern and contemporary art by American and European artists. Most were sketches, watercolors, and pastels as the buyer had requested.

When he reached a sketch by Paul Cézanne, he stopped to admire the loose interpretation of a small mountain village, soaking up the simple lines and dramatic color choices. Cézanne was on the verge of discovering cubism, and his geometric renderings of the houses and mountains showed it. Ivan couldn't wait to hold this piece in his hands.

Compiling this list of artwork to steal was a pleasurable exercise of his research abilities, even under such a tight deadline. And the buyer's particularly stringent prerequisites meant he'd gotten a chance to reacquaint himself with the Dutch museum scene. In his older age, he preferred warmer climates and hadn't visited the country in a year.

Based on the auction sales and estimates of similar works, he calculated the total worth of his list to be 20.3 million euro. That gave him three hundred thousand in wiggle room in case the Turkish buyer got greedy and lowballed his estimates. He clicked quickly through the last of the images. His choices were exactly what the buyer asked for.

Luka's call earlier in the week had been an unpleasant surprise, to say the least. And one Ivan had ended abruptly. He'd listened long enough to hear what the Croatian mobster wanted before hanging up on him. It had only taken a few minutes to realize that this was a golden opportunity, and one he could not pass up. Yet it took more than an hour to control his emotions enough to speak calmly and rationally to the man who had destroyed his life.

Most humans wouldn't dare dismiss or ignore Luka Antic—let alone wait an hour to call him back—but Ivan didn't care. *Let the bastard simmer with worry for a bit*, he thought and poured himself a double shot of vodka.

They were once best friends and business partners. Both came from the same small town in the Croatian mountains, yet their lives had taken drastically different turns after they left high school. Luka began working for his powerful family as was expected of him.

After earning degrees in art history and business management, Ivan opened his first art gallery in Split, Croatia's cultural capital. Business hadn't been great that first year until Luka made him a proposition he couldn't refuse. His childhood friend was responsible for overseeing the Antic family's increasingly lucrative art studios. Luka managed a team of artists who forged paintings stolen in Western Europe before both pieces were sold as the original to collectors on the opposite sides of the world.

The Antic crime family was expanding their operation into Western Europe, and Luka offered Ivan the chance to be a part of it. Ivan had said yes without hesitation. Five days later, he began creating paper trails and fake documents to support the forged artwork's fictitious provenance. Months later, he began selling work created by Luka's team of artists in his own gallery. With the help of Luka's family, Ivan was soon able to open galleries in Barcelona, Bern, Amsterdam, Venice, and Paris. The choice of locations was well suited to another task he took on for Luka's family, that of collection point for their thieves to drop off

their ill-gotten goods. All he did was store the work while Luka took care of the transportation to and from his galleries.

What Luka's talented team forged, Ivan sold to an endless supply of louche collectors based around the world. Thanks to Luka's investments, he had expanded further. Nowadays, he had galleries in fifteen major European cities and a team of sales associates who represented hundreds of talented artists. He always felt like he was blessed. At least until that horrible day three short years ago when his beautiful daughter passed away.

Looking back now, he could still feel the greed that consumed him in his youth. How he regretted ever saying yes to Luka, stepping so happily into his family's criminal activities, never considering how his actions could affect his future. What a fool he had been. By saying yes, he had sealed his daughter's fate.

Ivan hadn't spoken civilly to Luka since Marjana's passing. He'd broken all contact the day after the funeral, and to his relief, Luka accepted it, allowing him to retreat out of criminal life without any further repercussions. To Ivan, his old friend's uncharacteristic display of sympathy confirmed Luka's guilt.

Since burying his daughter, Ivan had become a shell of a man, haunted by nightmares and consumed with a desire to get revenge. He had dreamt of this day for three years, and in that time, he'd imagined multiple scenarios and schemes but hadn't found a way to hurt Luka without putting himself in mortal danger. And now the object of his rage had presented him with the ultimate opportunity to do so. It was time to stop the nightmares and hurt the man who had destroyed his family.

When Ivan called Luka back, he drove his fingernails deep into his thigh to help keep his voice tempered. "Yes, I accept your challenge. Tell me again the names of the artists your buyer is interested in. Wait. Let me get a pen." A pen and notepad were already laid out before him. Just hearing Luka's raspy voice made his blood boil. Ivan put a hand over the receiver and breathed deeply, his heart racing as anger and sadness surged through his body. Simply speaking to this monster would take all of his self-control. When he was able, Ivan recorded the buyer's list of preferences then hung up.

It took him four days to compile this list of potential targets. He looked at the map of the Netherlands spread out on his dining room table. Red circles surrounded seventeen cities. With three teams, Ivan figured they should be able to complete the robberies within twenty-one days. That was ahead of Luka's already tight schedule and involved more risk, but it was the best way to complete the work he'd agreed to do for Luka as well as execute his own plan. His team would need that extra week. Now all he had to do was figure out a way to convince Luka that the timing, as Ivan had laid it out, was necessary.

But first, Ivan faced a daunting task—convincing his artists to work with him on this rather rushed and unusual assignment. Only then could he call Luka.

Not only did the Croatian crime boss ask him to compile a list of art to steal but he also wanted Ivan to arrange collection points for his thieves to drop off their loot. Instead of using his galleries, as he had done in the past, Ivan decided to use his own artists as the drop-off points. It would save time and keep more distance between his gallery in Amsterdam and the thefts. It would also simplify the execution of his plan.

Luka wanted the originals, and he would get them. But he didn't need to know about the second set Ivan would have created. Several of the artists his galleries represented had copied a piece of artwork for him in the past but never under such a tight deadline. Ivan hoped the extra cash incentive would be enough to help speed their efforts and get everything finished on time.

To assist his flock, he had already prepared packets about each piece, including information about the canvas size, frame, medium, general condition, and paints used. That would be enough to get them started. However, he knew from experience that nothing beat copying the real thing.

He opened one of the folders on his desk and quickly checked that all of the printouts and photos were inside. The Amstel Modern in Amstelveen was about to host an exhibition that was perfectly suited to his needs. For that job, he was planning to use his most experienced and trusted artist, a strong-willed and bad-tempered Croatian beauty named Gabriella Tamic, who happened to live in nearby Amsterdam. Now all he had to do was convince her to take on the assignment. If she agreed, the rest would easily follow suit.

## 5 A Job Proposal

*August 16, 2018*

Ivan rang the intercom to Postjesweg 1, apartment number seven. He smoothed back his long, gray hair, mentally running through his approach as he waited for Gabriella to answer. Seconds later, the speaker crackled to life.

“Yes?”

“It’s Ivan.”

“Come on up.”

The door buzzed open. Ivan entered the expansive lobby of Het Sieraad and rode the elevator up to Gabriella’s apartment. It shuddered slightly as it reached the top floor. The door at the end of the short hallway was already open, and the bitter scent of turpentine grew stronger as he approached her studio, one of three that he owned in this building.

Ivan had represented Gabriella since she graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp four years ago. She was also from Split and the same age as his daughter Marjana. The girls had been best friends since they first met in primary school, and Ivan had followed Gabriella’s evolution as an artist with interest. She was almost as talented as his daughter was. He was thrilled she agreed to let him represent her and promised her widowed mother that he would take good care of her.

Of his current flock of artists, Gabriella was the most profitable, and that was saying something. Last time he counted, his gallery represented three hundred artists residing in the fifteen European countries where his chain of modern and contemporary art galleries were located. This mix of old and new was the key to his galleries’ successes, and one born out of necessity.

To meet the specific demands of his financial backers and keep all the galleries profitable, he had to get creative and carve out a unique niche. In contrast to most, his galleries showcased expensive masterpieces worth millions alongside works by emerging artists worth tens of thousands. Oddly enough, his unusual tactic worked, and the pieces spoke to each other thanks to his incredible eye and clever placement. To most of his competitors’ surprise, his clients bought both kinds of works and proudly hung them in their residential museums-in-the-making. Now, instead of mocking his approach as amateurish, his fiercest critics copied him in style and selection.

Despite the number of galleries employing a similar approach, artists still flocked to him, knowing he was one of the few able to turn them into European stars. He went above and beyond most galleries by providing his artists with studio space, quality supplies, and the freedom to experiment. Being chosen by Ivan Novak was akin to being anointed by one of the gods of the art world.

Long ago, when Luka’s crew of forgers became swamped with work, Luka had asked him if some of the more talented artists he represented could help out. At first, Ivan wasn’t sure how to approach them or what their reaction might be, but to his surprise and delight, most were so hungry to get ahead they had no trouble completing the work, no questions asked. Especially when they were rewarded with a substantial bonus and a prime spot in one of his galleries.

The few who had refused to play along were quietly removed from his flock and warned

never to say a word. And even if they did, he was one of the most successful and respected art dealers in Europe. It would be easy enough to portray them as an artist scorned. Thankfully, he'd yet to have to deal with such an incident.

In many ways, this new job was not unlike his past requests. The tricky part was the timing. His artists wouldn't have the originals in their possession for weeks, but days. And their versions would have to be collected shortly after. When selecting works to steal, the drying time had been a major factor. Ivan had purposely chosen sketch-like works that would not require several layers. He knew creating perfect copies would be simple enough for Gabriella and several others he represented, even within this tight timeframe.

"Gabriella, darling. It's wonderful to see you again."

The young artist pulled him in for a hug then kissed him on each cheek. Her short bob tickled his chin.

"You too, Ivan. It's been too long." She pushed him back, holding his shoulders tight, and eyed him critically.

He attempted a soft, fatherly grin, but it came out more of a grimace. Gabriella was looking at him like his daughter used to when she was worried he wasn't eating well.

Despite her obvious concern, she said, "You look good, much better than you did the last time you visited. The twinkle's back in your eye. What are you up to?"

Gabriella's brow furrowed as if she were trying to understand what could have changed his mood. From her expression, she clearly assumed it wasn't good. He had forgotten that it was no use lying to the girl because she was always able to see right through his lies. But that wasn't why he had avoided Gabriella. When he looked at this vibrant young woman, he saw his daughter—the same talent, self-assuredness, charisma, and passion for life. He saw what should have been, and it broke his heart to be around her for long.

Ivan shrugged as he forced himself to smile. "I've embarked on a new project, and I guess it suits me."

Gabriella finally released his shoulders then plopped onto her overstuffed couch. She patted the space next to her. "Why don't you tell me more about it."

Ivan slowly lowered his old bones onto the soft upholstery and pulled a folder out of his briefcase.

"I have been asked to arrange something extraordinary. However, it is quite a large project, and I need the help of several artists. If you choose to work on it, you must understand that it will demand all of your technical prowess, but you will be highly rewarded for your efforts. Even more than usual." Gabriella was unique in that she could paint convincingly and rapidly in any style. She could easily complete this task if she agreed to do so.

The young woman's eyes widened. "Oh, that's generous! I'm all ears. Ever since my neighbor flew to Indonesia, I can't stop thinking about studying abroad. I've got my eye on a three-month residency in Tahiti. A cash injection is just what I need." She tucked one leg up under the other and leaned forward.

Ivan opened the folder and handed her the four full-color images on top.

She grabbed them greedily, though her enthusiasm quickly faded once her eyes took them in. "Okay, nice sketches. Alexander Calder painted quite a few of these studies, and Franz Kline made a lot of sketches like this one. Hans Hofmann is one of my favorites; his use of color is extraordinary. This Pollock is lovely. You don't see his early drip paintings often in Europe. I take it you need a copy?"

Gabriella was a long-time forger and knew the copies she made for him were sold at a

significant profit to gullible buyers. After Marjana's death and his break with Luka, he had resorted to selling forgeries more frequently to keep his galleries profitable. In the beginning, he'd tried to fool her by saying the copies were for clients who couldn't afford the real thing. Unlike the others he represented, Gabriella wasn't content with this obvious lie. If she weren't so talented and hadn't been his daughter's best friend, he probably would have cut her loose after the first round of questioning. Instead, he'd chosen to trust her.

"This assignment is a bit different than the rest. These copies have to be perfect in every way, preferably museum quality."

With the enthusiasm of the young, the artist didn't cringe or become wary but snickered. "You know my work is always perfect."

"Yes, of course," he soothed. "But this time, your copy needs to fool an expert. At least, at first glance. These clients are more, let's say, upscale than usual. More risk means more reward for us both."

Gabriella opened her mouth to respond when Ivan added, "The trouble is, you will only have a few days to complete them."

The artist cocked her head and frowned. "Umm, I've never seen these pieces before. And while your printouts are a good starting point, there's not enough detail here to copy them precisely. Where are the paintings now? In one of your other galleries? Or still with the owner?"

"They will be on display in the Amstel Modern next Friday as part of a special exhibition of American modernists. I'm fairly certain the museum's security will let you sketch with pencils in the hall. At least, they usually do." Ivan held his breath, hoping Gabriella wouldn't bail out now.

Instead, she arched her eyebrows, the first indication she understood there was something different about this job. "What do you mean?"

"A mutual friend wants to remove them from the Amstel Modern. I am arranging the drop-off points for him. I hoped you would agree to be one of them. I need a copy made of all four. I'll let you decide which ones you want to work on. You'll have one to two weeks, at most, to copy them. I was planning to ask Anthony to help you." Ivan rushed his words, praying she would agree to help him. Otherwise, it was going to be nearly impossible to convince the others to take this big of a risk.

Gabriella's face grew increasing ashen as he spoke. "You don't mean Luka Antic, do you?" Her voice was a whisper.

"Yes, I do."

Gabriella's body trembled. "Why would you agree to work with that monster again?"

Her outburst reminded Ivan of his youth when the world was still black and white. The shades of gray would come later. "Can we ever say no?"

"Yes, you can! You broke free from all of that. Why would you agree to help him with anything?"

Ivan wanted to grab her and hug her tight, to protect her from the cruel reality of their world. He longed to tell her the truth but knew it was far too risky. No one could know what he was planning. Luka had eyes and ears everywhere. Instead of baring his soul, he sighed.

"I have my reasons. It's a simple job, and we will be well paid for it. Luka wants me to arrange drop-off points for a series of robberies. As far as he is concerned, you are nothing more than an address. It is my responsibility to get the artwork to him shortly after it is delivered to you. You won't have any contact with him. He won't know about the copies you will then make, nor does he need to. They are for me. I can turn two profits from one robbery

and help you get to Tahiti. The only problem is a tight deadline. That's why I need my best artists to help me."

"Even after everything that happened with Marjana?" Gabriella asked, tears forming in her eyes.

He frowned. She hadn't been listening to him. Ivan wondered if she was overwhelmed by anger, sadness, or fear. *Probably all three*, he thought. Ivan knew Gabriella was no stranger to organized crime or the ensuing violence. Her father was killed by a prominent Croatian mafia family when she was fourteen years old. Soon after, her mother had immigrated to Luxembourg to get Gabriella away from that life.

Ivan always suspected Marjana had told Gabriella who Luka really was and what she did for him despite being repeatedly warned never to tell a soul. It was only natural. He could imagine Marjana had needed someone to confide in, especially when she was older and her talents made her Luka's prisoner. Did Gabriella also know about his role in Marjana's demise?

"Gabriella, he's unintentionally providing me with a way of building up my pension. I'm not getting any younger, and the galleries eat up most of the cash that comes in."

"Be careful, Ivan. You know as well as I do that you don't want to cross men like him."

"He wants the originals, and he'll get them. What's the problem?"

Gabriella stared at him then started to laugh, a sinister bray that sent chills up his spine. "Are you serious?"

"This is a chance of a lifetime. I cannot say no. And I don't want to." He gathered up the photographs and began placing everything back into the folder. "This job needs to be as perfect as possible, which means I need your help. I'll get you the special brushes and paints that you'll need. If you want to use ovens to dry the layers faster or age the canvas, just let me know. I can arrange one to be brought here or move you to a larger studio with one already in it. I'll let you decide."

Gabriella searched his face as if she expected to find answers in his wrinkled skin for his seemingly rash and unwise decision.

"Once the art is delivered, you will have about a week to finish your copies before I pick up the originals. I will take care of any transport issues. All you have to do is buzz the robbers into your lobby and collect the artwork. As far as anyone else is concerned, they are artist friends delivering a few pieces for an upcoming show. That happens all the time, so no one will look at any of you twice."

"And you think Luka will let you do this because?" Gabriella stared at him.

"What he doesn't know won't hurt him."

"But he may hurt me. And he has a habit of finding things out." Her words carried more weight than they should have. Marjana couldn't get away from Luka despite her immaculate planning. There was no shortage of those willing to rat out another to improve their lot in life.

"He won't hurt you. I will make sure of it." His voice broke as his words sunk in. He couldn't protect his daughter from the Croatian's wrath, and they both knew it.

"But he'll know where I live."

"You're going to Tahiti in a few weeks, right?" Ivan smiled, trying to lighten the mood. Gabriella's somber expression made it clear his efforts were not appreciated. "His team will have your address and a code name. Your only contact with them will be via a disposable phone, one that I will provide, which should be destroyed as soon as the artwork is delivered. Luka will never know that you live here, Gabriella. He'll never know your real

name. Once Luka gets his paintings, he'll forget you ever existed."

Gabriella's terse lips told him she wasn't convinced.

"If you want, I'll move you to another studio, a bigger one in another city. Just say the word. But really, we're not in Croatia, and things are different here." Even to his ears, his excuse sounded lame. Of course, there were no land boundaries that could stop a force of nature such as Luka Antic. The man had a sixth sense for betrayal, and his organization had tentacles everywhere in Europe.

Gabriella remained silent, clearly still contemplating his proposal.

"I have chosen smaller pieces that are easy to carry and transport," Ivan pushed on. "The thieves will receive instructions to pack them up so the images aren't visible just in case one of your neighbors stops to chat before you can get them upstairs. No one will be the wiser." He tried to say it casually so as not to upset her. "I'll come by the next day and take whichever pieces you won't have time to copy to Anthony so that we can meet our deadline. You get first choice."

"The most difficult, of course." Gabriella folded her arms over her chest and stuck out her lip.

Ivan smiled. Even fear couldn't temper her youthful arrogance. "Good. Sure. I'll let you choose. It sounds like we've got this all worked out then. Right?"

Gabriella's face was awash with emotions. "Would you have asked your daughter to do this? To work with Luka's men?" she asked, her voice quiet.

Ivan looked stricken. He lay one hand on Gabriella's arm. "Oh, yes. Marjana would approve of my plan. I assure you."

Gabriella gazed deeply into his eyes then took his hands in hers.

"Okay, I'll do it. I trust you implicitly, Ivan."

## 6 Sleepless Nights

*August 17, 2018*

Zelda slapped her alarm clock, silencing the incessant beeping for the third time. Rubbing at her eyes, she yawned deeply, sucking in enough warm air to energize her lungs. She'd slept poorly and couldn't quite get her eyes to open fully.

She stretched out on her bed, staring out at the blue skies above. The skylights running the length of the apartment were her favorite feature of this top-floor studio. They even opened, which was a great way to ventilate the strong chemical smells that often leaked into her apartment. Most of her neighbors were oil or acrylic painters and tended to leave their doors open to air their spaces out while they worked, meaning the hallway often reeked.

The only downside of leaving the skylights open was the noise. Depending on where Zelda was standing, it sometimes sounded as if strangers were inside her apartment. The sound was amplified when Zelda lay in her bed, which was built on a makeshift loft only a few feet away from the open skylight. Luckily, Zelda's apartment was at the end of the hallway, meaning she only had one direct neighbor to contend with—a young Croatian painter named Gabriella.

Zelda didn't know what to make of Gabriella when she first met her. It was obvious the girl was talented, but she was so distant that Zelda didn't think they would get along, yet time had proven her wrong. Once she'd broken through Gabriella's icy reserve, Zelda discovered that the twenty-four-year-old was an incredibly warm and generous person, which made it impossible for her to complain about Gabriella's night owl behavior. She knew from her own experience what a wonderful feeling it was when creativity flowed through her veins. It was only too bad her neighbor's happened mostly at night. The fact she also often had friends over didn't help matters.

Jacob was less enamored with Gabriella's odd hours and the constant stream of visitors. Just thinking about her boyfriend soured Zelda's thoughts. His opinion about their living space was of minor importance. He was in Germany most of the time anyway and only returned home every other weekend.

When Jacob told her he had finally found a full-time research position, she was thrilled even after she found out it was at an ethnographic museum in Cologne and for a year. It was an impressive institution with a long history and varied collection, and Zelda was pleased for him. He had been looking for work for months but hadn't made it past the first round of interviews. There was a glut of qualified researchers all fighting for a tiny number of available positions in the Netherlands. She knew he had recently begun looking and applying for jobs in Germany, Belgium, and France, so his news shouldn't have come as a shock.

She couldn't help being upset that he had said yes before telling her about it. Cologne was a three-hour train ride away, meaning they would effectively be living apart for a year. They had only been dating for sixteen months, and, at first, Zelda didn't know what the distance would do to their relationship, which made Jacob's proposal to move in together even more confusing. There was no reason for him to rent another apartment if he was going to be in Amsterdam only for a few days a month, he reasoned. Zelda agreed wholeheartedly, especially when he offered to help pay part of the rent. The studio she was now residing in

was more expensive than she'd planned.

She had been on the hunt for a new place for months and told anyone who would listen that she was looking. When a fellow student's sister won a grant to study in Indonesia, he asked Zelda if she would be interested in subletting her studio for a year. She had jumped at the chance, sight unseen.

Because Jacob was so rarely home, Zelda didn't think he had the right to criticize her neighbor's lifestyle, and she refused to look for another place to live. Neither the chemicals, noises, nor Jacob's disapproval would drive her away. She felt lucky to have found it even if it was only for a year. There was something quite exhilarating about living in an artist's colony.

Her new neighborhood, de Baarsjes, was quiet though petty theft was a problem. An intercom system in her building kept most of the riffraff out. The imposing five-story, red-brick structure was originally built as a trade school. The lower floors were transformed into office spaces for cultural start-ups, and the top floor was converted into studios where artists were welcome to live and create. The woman Zelda was renting from built a small loft in one corner for her twin bed and dresser, reachable with a wooden ladder. Underneath was a tiny kitchen, toilet, and shower. The rest of the space she used as her studio.

The best feature of her new home was the creative vibe. It was almost palpable. Since moving in, Zelda had even taken up working with stained glass again. When she worked at Microsoft, cutting glass and soldering it into colorful objects was her relaxation therapy after long days of staring at the computer screen. The calm, meditative effect of carefully executing steps and following patterns was refreshing after dealing with the chaos of multimedia development, project team meetings, and the like. She was so glad she had given up her old profession to come and study art history here in Amsterdam. Despite some of the more hair-raising moments, her quality of life had improved dramatically since.

When Gabriella saw one of Zelda's abstract windows, she asked to borrow it, claiming it inspired her. Considering how talented she was, Zelda consented without question. A week later, Gabriella returned it. The subtle shading and soft forms she'd added to Zelda's hard edges elevated the window's beauty. It almost looked like a woman in a long dress was reaching up to a glowing sun instead of a random mishmash of shapes and colors. Since then, they'd collaborated on four more pieces. Gabriella had even asked if they could create a few to sell in her next gallery show. Zelda attended her last opening and was impressed by how expensive her paintings were and how many had already sold. She was so flattered by Gabriella's suggestion that she immediately began drawing up a series of ten new windows, all abstract yet complementary to each other in shape and style, which made her sleepless nights *her*—not Gabriella's—problem.

*No one else on my floor complained about the noise, so why should I,* Zelda thought. She'd even told Jacob that the last time he grumbled about it. Last night, he would have blown a fuse if he'd been here. Gabriella was up partying with friends until four in the morning. The way they were drinking and joking around meant they were clearly celebrating something big. All Zelda could understand clearly was Tahiti. The rest was a drunken jumble.

Zelda was a bit miffed that she had not been invited to the party, but Gabriella knew that she had to get up early for work. She wondered if the party was because her neighbor had scored an international fellowship. It seemed to be the strive for most of the artists in the building. Before she could think up other options, her alarm clock began beeping again. She slowly rose out of bed and shuffled to the shower, hoping the warm water would help wake her up faster. She would need her wits about her at work. She loved her current job at the

Amstel Modern, but the mounting pressure of the upcoming exhibition was too much for some of her coworkers who became irritated with the slightest problem or delay. It took all of her energy to remain cheery and not snap back.

Only five more workdays until the official opening then everything will be back to normal, she told herself, then stepped into the soft spray.

## 7 Time to Get Robbing

*August 17, 2018*

“Hello, Ivan. How is your assignment working out? All is going well, I hope?” Luka Antic asked. He despised the pleading tone in his voice, but he had been anxiously awaiting this call from Ivan Novak. The future of his deal with Kadir Tekin depended on the art dealer’s answer. If Ivan couldn’t do what he’d asked, Luka would be forced to find another project manager for this job, and right now, he couldn’t think of anyone more qualified to complete the tasks he’d laid out faster than Ivan could.

There was so much riding on this job. Without the artwork, Kadir wouldn’t work with him. He had already presold most of the hundred kilos he had ordered. The men he had made promises to were not the sort you wanted to disappoint. The clock was ticking, and it was time to get robbing.

Ivan cleared his throat, breaking Luka’s train of thought. “Yes, I’ve finished my tasks. The locations and contact information your teams will need are in your email. I’ve grouped the thefts geographically. I figure you’ll need three teams to be the most efficient. You will also find the appraisals I used to estimate the works’ value. No doubt your client will require that.”

Luka walked to his desktop computer and opened his inbox. Ivan’s list included several locations he’d never heard of, but the artwork was exactly what he was looking for. Relief washed over him. Despite the extra challenges inherent to working with Ivan, the art dealer was definitely the right man for the job.

“My team will expect to be contacted via SMS when a delivery is imminent. They will be on call for the next three weeks. The order of locations is up to you.”

Luka examined the map of the Netherlands Ivan had sent him. Red, yellow, and blue circles were around seventeen cities. It took a moment for the art dealer’s words to register.

“Three weeks? You have five to complete this assignment. Why rush things?”

“I have a plan.” Ivan’s voice remained calm.

Luka could feel his blood starting to boil. “What do you mean *you* have a plan? I told you what the plan was already. Have you changed something without consulting me?”

“No, just adjusted the timing.”

“Why?”

Ivan’s voice remained neutral. “Two reasons. Firstly, your client’s wish list is quite specific. If anything goes wrong with one of the heists, I’ll have time to locate a suitable alternative. Secondly, the number of pieces you require means this assignment will bring a substantial amount of attention to your teams and my associates. Whether it happens in three weeks or five, the fact is, the longer we wait to finish the job, the greater the chance security will be improved—at least temporarily—and possibly thwart our effects.”

Luka knew he was right. Most art crimes happened under the radar, and the victimized museums usually refused to release information to the media because they didn’t want the general public to know they’d been robbed or how. This time, the museums involved wouldn’t be able to hide so many thefts from the media. And if the institutions on Ivan’s list increased their security, his teams may not be able to complete their assignments on time. And that was the last thing Luka wanted to happen.

“The police will be expecting someone to claim the robberies and demand a ransom,” Ivan explained. “If no organization claims the thefts, the police will probably assume criminal organizations are somehow involved. We don’t want special teams of investigators on our tail before we have a chance to finish the job. I have thought up a way to divert the attention of the police, media, and the general public. It is of crucial importance that the Robber Hood cards get delivered—no matter how ridiculous you think they are.” Ivan’s tone made clear there was no room for questioning.

Fear gripped Luka. He didn’t like conditions of any kind. “Robber Hood cards? What is this nonsense?”

“I have mailed you a package, which you should receive later today. Once you do, my plan will become crystal clear. Inside, you will find seventeen cards labeled with sticky notes indicating where each should be delivered. It is imperative they are left behind at every robbery.”

Luka bit his tongue. He hated that the dealer had thought out the police’s response better than he had. Stealing so many pieces in such a short amount of time was new territory for him. He was used to pilfering artwork, forging it, and then finding a suitable buyer for both the real painting and the copy a few months later. His team of forgers and art dealers worked like a well-oiled machine. But now he was stealing a specific list of work for his buyer. The reversal in order was making him nervous and edgy. It also made him completely reliant on the art dealer—at least until this job was complete. Luka hated to be dependent on anyone.

“Okay, I’ll do as you ask.” Luka hung up as soon as the words were out of his mouth. That simple gesture lessened his feeling of being emasculated, ever so slightly.

## 8 Late Night Visit to Museum Friesland

*August 21, 2018*

Tomislav and Sebastijan had plenty of time to get to know each other and discuss their preferred work methods during the long drive through Southern and Central Europe. Tomislav always found it important to discuss such things before working with someone new. It saved time, and sometimes lives, knowing how his teammate thought.

The two thieves had arrived in Drachten a day earlier. It gave them just enough time to make a quick visit to their first target and buy the supplies they needed to get the job done.

Before they left Split, Luka Antic called a meeting of six thieves in his employ. He divided them into teams of two then gave Tomislav and his partner a map with six locations in the Northern Netherlands and a list of specific targets displayed in each. Luka didn't need to remind them not to deviate from it. They knew how important it was to follow his instructions implicitly, that their futures within the organization depended on it, which made not reacting to the extra instructions even more difficult. Luka had also given each team an envelope full of cards, one of which was to be left behind at each location they robbed. Tomislav accepted the envelope without a word, making sure his face remained neutral as he read through the strange set of instructions. Team Will? Robber Hood? He didn't know what Luka was playing at, but he wasn't paid to think.

Another worrying aspect of this job was the breadth. Luka only made each of the teams aware of the other's presence because this 'project' —as Luka called it—had to be completed within a short period. If any of the teams needed an extra set of hands, they could request assistance by contacting Ivan, their team leader. Tomislav didn't know what this Ivan's last name was or what he did for a living, only that he was their contact on this job. After that initial meeting, it was the intention that the teams never contact each other directly.

But right now, none of that mattered. Ivan and Sebastijan were about to break into their first museum. He had to forget his nagging reservations and concentrate on getting tonight right.

They were able to conduct basic research about all six targets on the drive over. Per usual, they had free rein when deciding the order and timing. The internet, and in particular Google Maps, was a godsend. They could explore the landscape and terrain with the satellite view, allowing them to get a feel for the location.

Still, nothing beat walking around the grounds and through the hallways before embarking on a job. Only then could they see where the cameras were placed and pointed as well as the location of emergency exits and offices.

They chose Museum Friesland in Drachten as their first target because it sat in a large field that bordered a hundred-acre nature reserve. It seemed to be the easiest to break into. At least it did when they viewed the six museums' locations on the internet.

When they visited, they realized that visitors had to follow a single-lane road, which wound its way through a patchwork of protected wetlands to reach the museum. There was not a tree in sight. High winds whipped through the long grass lining the many waterways draining the landscape, flattening it as it crossed the vast open fields. After the robbery, they would be sitting ducks.

Yet once they had a chance to walk some of the trails crisscrossing the fields and test the

peaty soil's density, they quickly realized a heavy-duty 4x4 truck would be more than capable of crossing the fields and could thus bypass the twists and turns any responding police cars would be forced to follow. With a well-placed second car, they could leave the 4x4 behind in a residential neighborhood and be heading in the other direction before the police could reach the museum.

Tomislav and Sebastijan had spent the morning getting their supplies together and stealing the proper vehicles. It was now one in the morning, and the two men stood outside the museum's darkened entrance. The museum's only security guard had left hours ago. They had slowly driven their 4x4 with the lights off over the unlit road, taking care not to drop into one of the many small channels funneling water off the peaty soil. Sebastijan parked as close to the museum's entrance as he dared. They didn't know how far the cameras could see into the parking lot or if a security guard was actually watching the video feed.

They stepped out of the truck, tool bags in hand, and walked quickly across the stone bridge leading to the main entrance. Moonlight reflected off a small pond in front of the museum, lighting up three swans floating in the water. Tomislav tensed up, expecting them to honk before remembering they were lifelike statues created to move with the wind.

Once they reached the main entrance, Tomislav was aware that the cameras now pointed at them. Both men pushed buttons on their watches, starting timers. They figured they had ten minutes to work undisturbed before they should leave the scene. It would take the police at least that long to reach the museum's remote location, probably much longer, but in reality, they hoped to be out in five. Both men preferred to play it safe whenever possible.

Sebastijan quickly picked the lock then held it open for his partner-in-crime. Tomislav recalled that this first door brought them into a central space housing a small café and reading area that overlooked the small pool. On either side of the café were exhibition halls, one for the permanent collection and one for the temporary exhibitions. Sebastijan used the same method to enter the museum's right wing. According to the introductory text, the exhibition showcased a successful businessman's private collection of postwar and contemporary Dutch artwork.

Both thieves had already memorized their shopping list, but Tomislav pulled it out again. Before he cut the wire holding each piece to the wall, he double-checked the titles to ensure they grabbed the correct ones. He wasn't an art lover and couldn't tell the difference between a Robert Zandvliet, Piet Mondriaan, Leo Gestel, or Jan Schoonhoven let alone two pieces by the same artist. Once he'd freed the two sketches on his list, he helped Sebastijan pack them into the padded canvas bags they'd brought along.

According to his watch, they had been inside for almost six minutes. He'd wasted time by checking the names. For this job, it didn't matter, but he would have to memorize the names of the paintings next time. The other locations weren't nearly so remote.

They began to walk back to the front door when Tomislav stopped and spun on his heels, racing back to the exhibition hall they'd just plundered. He pulled out a Robber Hood card and set it in front of the spot the Zandvliet had been hanging in.

He sprinted back to Sebastijan, who glared at him with a questioning look on his face but didn't say anything. The men raced to the 4x4 truck. Sebastijan started the engine while Tomislav secured the artwork in the back. As soon as his door closed, Sebastijan flipped on the floodlights and went off-road. They bounced their way across the fields, scaring many birds in the process. Tomislav turned on the radio scanner he'd picked up yesterday, listening in to the police's response. Only after they'd crossed through the fields and reached

their second vehicle did the first police car arrive at Museum Friesland.

## 9 One Down, Sixteen to Go

*August 21, 2018*

"It's here. Both pieces arrived safely," Suzanne said.

Ivan murmured his approval, yet internally, he was jumping with joy. One down, sixteen more to go. Ivan wiped the sweat off his forehead. *It must be my age*, he thought. His heart had been racing since the robberies started, and while he usually felt a rush of adrenaline followed by a wave of relief whenever the sale of a forgery went off without a hitch, this was much more intense. As far as he could remember, he'd never been so nervous about a job before. Then again, there was so much more riding on this project than a bit of cash.

He glanced at one of several photos of his daughter, laughing and carefree as every teenager should be. Ivan wiped away a tear, telling himself to get it together. He had to stay strong and focused for Marjana, his little princess.

Suzanne remained silent, waiting for him to respond.

He wanted to ask if she was calling from the disposable phone he'd given her but knew she was a consummate professional. Instead, he said, "Excellent news. Thank you," then hung up without waiting for her to respond.

There was no going back now, he realized, not that he would have wanted to. This was his chance to bring down Luka Antic's empire. With a little luck, his actions would also get the crime boss killed. Ivan reveled in the thought. Would the mobster's death set him free from the pain and sorrow that had engulfed him since learning his daughter had passed? How he regretted the day he had suggested Marjana to Luka. Damn his fatherly pride!

Ivan smashed his fist onto his hotel room's chair, bruising his knuckles in the process. What could have been haunted him daily, but it was too soon to dwell on the future and what might be. He shouldn't get ahead of himself. They still had sixteen more robberies to pull off and a total of forty paintings to forge. So much could still go wrong, and it was early days.

He contemplated how long it would take Suzanne to copy the sketches by Robert Zandvliet and Jan Schoonhoven, mentally running through the various processes she would use to age the paper and final product. Suzanne wasn't nearly as fast as his daughter had been, but she was good enough. And she knew how to get in touch with him if she needed any extra equipment or assistance. He had to be patient and not pressure her to work faster. That was how mistakes happened. Instead, he pushed the copies out of his mind and mentally prepared himself for his next task.

It was time to call Luka and tell him the good news.

## 10 Conversations with American Modernists

*August 23, 2018*

Zelda walked around the Amstel Modern, her feet barely touching the floor. The *Conversations with American Modernists* opening party was in full swing and quite busy.

She squeezed around a couple debating the merits of Karel Appel's later works to get closer to one of her favorite paintings by Jasper Johns. This later version of his iconic *Flag* was a small sketch-like image painted in green and black stripes with stars floating on a field of orange. Johns had worked so quickly that the canvas was still visible in places. Next to it hung a colorful and dreamlike work by the Danish painter, Asper Jorn. The square oil painting was almost as tall as her five-foot, ten-inch frame and was saturated in thick layers of color. The contrast between the two—reserved and linear versus explosively expressive—worked well, elevating both pieces. It did indeed seem as if the two artists were chatting with each other about the use of color or the lack thereof.

She turned to her left where an oil painting by Eugene Brands hung next to a sketch by Hans Hoffmann. Brands' wispy clouds reminded Zelda of a softer version of Hoffmann's harder, edgier composition, rendered with the same vibrant intensity. The simultaneous contrast—what Hofmann called 'push and pull'—of complementary colors side by side made the squares and rectangles dance on the canvas.

Up ahead was a Franz Kline paired with an Armando, both large canvases filled with bold, sweeping strokes of black and white. Close by hung a Cy Twombly. His canvas was filled with colorful, otherworldly scribbles hidden under a fog of white and gray. The way it was positioned next to Corneille's bold colors and childish shapes, it appeared as if the mist on Twombly's canvas had dissipated, and the images underneath had been captured by the Dutch painter.

In the center of the hall hung an early drip painting by Jackson Pollock next to a disturbing, surreal painting by Lucebert. The Dutch artist's canvas was a mess of linear scratches and slices of color breaking through a field of black. Paired together, the Lucebert looked like a linear version of Pollock's chaotic work.

Zelda was thrilled to see pieces by these American masters hanging next to works by their Cobra counterparts. Their similar yet different styles of expression, as well as their use of color and form, exhilarated her.

She wandered among the guests attending tonight's official opening party, feeling invisible. Most were already laughing a bit too gregariously, a reminder that booze had been flowing freely all night. And why shouldn't they celebrate? The exhibition's opening was a resounding success. Perhaps more importantly, it was also a chance for these museum professionals and the cultural elite to forget about the spate of robberies. Two Dutch museums had been hit in three days, and everyone had the feeling they could be next.

From afar, she observed the Amstel Modern's curatorial staff, marketing team, and director standing in the center of the exhibition hall, ringed by the most important people in the Dutch cultural scene. All had wide smiles plastered on their faces as guests greeted and congratulated them. Considering this was the first time so many American modernists were being shown in the Netherlands, the exhibition was almost guaranteed to be a success. The number of reporters from newspapers and television stations around the world was a

testament to that.

In one corner, a small group of directors from other regional museums were huddled together with their heads close, all glaring critically at a wall full of drawings made by American and Dutch abstract expressionists. Their haughty facial expressions were a combination of envy and contempt.

Zelda slowly walked to the bar all the while observing the who's who of the Netherlands social and cultural elite. She had no idea so many actors, writers, dancers, and television personalities would want to attend. Most stood clustered together in small groups, chatting away and only occasionally glancing at a painting or, at least, the majority of guests.

She'd almost reached the bar when she noticed two men in the crowd who seemed to be interested in the artwork—extremely so. Their ill-fitting suits and weathered faces stood out among the perfectly coifed and dressed cultural elite circling the room. She watched as the two men moved through the hall, chatting animatedly about the color and design of each painting, sketch, and watercolor before moving to the next. Her curiosity piqued, Zelda walked closer to them so she could hear what interested them so much. She had taken a few steps toward them when she noticed how the chubby one smiled at a hostess passing out the champagne. It made Zelda shiver. She veered away and headed for the crowded bar instead.

A tall man in an expensive suit pushed his body a bit too close to Zelda's as he squeezed past her. His lecherous smile made her tug at her dress's hemline, ensuring it hadn't slid up again. She was already feeling uncomfortable in this too-short green dress and chastised herself again for not wearing opaque tights under it instead of pantyhose. Her new stiletto heels were killing her feet, and she felt like she could topple over any second. Luckily, she was able to wrestle her long hair into a tight bun, which made her feel sophisticated enough to be here.

Zelda ordered a red wine then wandered through the crowd again, recognizing several highly-placed coworkers who pretended not to notice her. As a lowly assistant, she was not a desirable conversation partner, at least from a networking perspective. She couldn't blame them for ignoring her because tonight was about being seen with the right people. A bright flash on her left made Zelda blink. A professional photographer snapped a shot of the marketing director with her arm swung over the shoulders of a famous Dutch television presenter, their loopy grins perfect for Instagram. A lucky few would make it into the online media's society pages, important blogs, and social media channels as well as traditional newspapers.

She was almost at the back of the exhibition hall when she spotted several fellow collection researchers and marketing assistants huddled together, looking as uncomfortable as she was. She waved, and Esmee made a beeline for her.

"Phew, it's busy tonight," Zelda said.

"Yeah, it looks like everyone who was invited showed up this time." Esmee's words were a bit slurred. Zelda wondered how many spritzers she'd already had.

"Do you think it will be a blockbuster?" Zelda asked, knowing the museum always had a target number of visitors in mind that, when reached, meant the exhibition had made back its costs.

"I sure do. Look at the turnout! Nora from marketing said the opening is going to be splashed all over the Dutch media tomorrow, as well as several other countries. That's never happened before. I hope we have enough capacity. I can already imagine lines of visitors snaking out into the square." Her eyes twinkled with glee.

"That would be pretty cool," Zelda responded, feeling her joy intensify as she thought

about all those visitors reading her texts and learning from her research.

“The only thing that could stop us now would be if the place burned down,” Esme said. As soon as the words were out, she turned pale. “God, that’s a horrid thought. Time for another spritzer. Do you want one?”

“Sure, thanks.” As she watched her friend saunter away, wobbling only slightly on her stiletto heels, Zelda couldn’t shake the feeling that this exhibition wasn’t going to work out as everyone hoped...

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