



**THE
COLLECTION**
THE DEWITT AGENCY FILES #1

A NOVEL BY
LANCE CHARNES



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FOUR YEARS AGO

“Next is Lot 17, a landscape, *Ferme près Ville D’Avray*, by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot...”

Showtime.

This isn’t my first auction, just my first solo. I’ve been wingman/apprentice for Gar—my boss at Heibrück Pacific, the gallery I work at back home—at almost a dozen. But now the bidding’s started, I can’t shake the feeling I don’t belong here, that I’m an imposter, that I’ll screw this up and everyone will know and I’ll end up like Cary Grant in that auction scene in *North by Northwest*. I can talk the talk now. Can I pull this off?

I check the other eighty-some people in the salesroom. I don’t see anybody drooling over the canvas, but this isn’t that kind of crowd. The Swiss are that way; the Brits are like volcanoes compared to them.

“*Monsieur?*” Lisanne’s voice in my ear. She’s in the phone bank about thirty feet from me, but as far as she’s concerned, I’m some anonymous guy on another continent. “Lot 17 is here, the Corot. You’re interested in this, *non?*” *Lee-zahne*. Mmmm. Her English is very good, but she has the cutest accent and I keep thinking of Leslie Caron in *An American in Paris* instead of the tidy blonde in a blue blazer in the booth along the room’s right-hand wall.

“That’s right. Thanks for the warning.” I have a noise-canceling headset and mike attached to my phone. If I do this right, the only sound she’ll hear from my end is my voice.

The bid caller—fifties, charcoal suit, careful hair, an English accent layered over a German one—says, “Bidding begins at forty thousand francs. Do I have forty?”

Bidders run up the price to sixty pretty fast without my help. That’s about \$67,000; the Swiss franc’s trading at .895 against the dollar today. Gar set the reserve, or acceptable minimum, at

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\$90,000, or a bit over eighty thousand francs. My job's to make sure the bidding goes as far above the reserve as possible. It's called "shilling." Which isn't *strictly* legal, though "legal" can be a flexible concept in Switzerland.

After all, shilling's small change when the Corot probably isn't really a Corot.

"Seventy-five." Lisanne's still murmuring in my ear. "Sixty-one thousand euros."

"Got it." I'd asked her to quote in euros. She might guess I'm American, but I don't need to confirm it.

The bidding's turned into a three-way: Paddle 43 (older guy, balding, tweed jacket) and Paddle 59 (mid-thirties like me, slicked-back hair, black Hugo suit) in the room, and a phone bidder relayed by Gilbert, two call-takers down from Lisanne. I'll let them have fun until they get tired.

The Georg Heinemann Kunst salesroom—just down the road from Christie's in downtown Geneva—is roughly fifty by eighty. The fifteen-foot white ceiling bounces the indirect lighting. Instead of going for the fake-English-clubroom look, the designers went modern, with flat ipé paneling and brushed-aluminum hardware. The room's set with ten rows of ten seats each, split by a central aisle. I'm in the next-to-last row so I can watch everyone else.

"Ninety. Seventy-three thousand euros."

"Thanks, Lisanne. That's a pretty name, by the way."

"*Merci, monsieur.*" I can almost hear the blush.

We're clear of the reserve. Gar's got his money. Now the higher I can push the price, the more he'll give me, and the smaller those debts I'm bleeding cash into will get. Also, I need to show Gar I can do this. This is where the money is.

Paddle 43 drops out. Time to go to work. "Lisanne? Ninety-five, please."

"Of course."

The bid caller's been saying, "The bid is ninety. Do I have ninety-five?" He sees Lisanne's hand shoot up. "Ninety-five, a new bidder, on the phone. Do I have a hundred?"

The room pauses. There's always a little pause when the number of digits changes. A couple other bidders near me look more interested now. I can hear mental calculators clicking, angles

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being measured, profit margins refigured.

The bid-caller's podium is on the dais up front. Gar's canvas is on an easel next to him. I glance at the image on the projection screen above the dais. The canvas is a pretty little thing—twenty by fifteen, a stone farmhouse, green-gray trees, a couple fat, white cows. Corot was a leading light in mid-nineteenth century landscape painting and a direct influence on the early Impressionists. This *could* be one of his, or maybe one of his better students did it. All I know is, those block letters C-O-R-O-T weren't on the lower-left corner of the piece when it came through our gallery's back door, and now they are, and the price difference between "circle of Corot" and "Corot" can be a couple extra decimal places.

A row up and across the aisle, I notice a woman noticing me. She's a bit older than me—maybe forty—olive skin, dark eyes, plum jacket, standing collar. Perfect makeup. Our eyes catch for a moment. She slowly looks away and tilts up her chin, giving me a great profile and a good shot at her glossy black hair pulled into a tight bun. *Very* tasty.

"One hundred, in the room," the bid caller says. Mr. 59 stows his paddle. "Do I have one hundred ten?"

We step up to one-twenty with the help of a new bidder, one of the maybe twenty women here besides Lisanne. Mr. 59 knocks her out with a jump bid—he raises by twice the new increment of ten thousand francs—to one-forty. He must like cows. *Try that with me, dude.* I wait for Lisanne to tell me what I already know, then I say, "One fifty, please."

Mr. 59 hesitates, then bids one-sixty. His counter-bids are getting slower each time, which means we're getting closer to his limit. Now I have to think harder. I'm here to push up the price, not buy this damn thing, which is the *last* thing I want to do.

"*Monsieur?* The bid is now one hundred sixty."

"Thanks, Lisanne. Give me a moment."

We're seventy over the reserve, or a bit more than \$78,000. I get fifteen percent of the excess, or \$11,700 so far. I've got two more lots to shill after this, but they won't get anything like this kind of money. My oldest student loan—the one coming due in three months—still has fourteen grand on it. Janine (my wife) just

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got another prescription she'll try to ignore; it's not a generic and it costs a fortune. I still have high-four figures to pay off on a credit card I didn't know Janine had until the nasty letters started coming from the bank. I need Mr. 59 to go in for as much as I can get out of him.

"*Monsieur?*" Lisanne sounds concerned.

I ask Lisanne for another minute to run some numbers. I can probably chip Mr. 59 up to one-seventy; not the whole boat, but I have some savings. With my commission from this and whatever I get from the other two lots, I can pay off at least the student loan and get by unless something stupid happens, like my car breaks or Janine has to go back into care.

Drop now, my smarter side tells me. Don't risk it.

I've got to make him think I'm ready to drop out. Waiting this long to bid is a big clue for him. Deep breath. "One sixty-five, please," I tell her. A half-bid; another good distress signal.

The bid caller nods at Lisanne, then points to Mr. 59. "One hundred seventy-five to you, sir."

Mr. 59 sits there, chewing his lip.

Come on, you bastard. Jump it. Show us how big your balls are. Do it.

"The bid is one hundred sixty-five thousand francs. Do I have one hundred seventy-five?"

I feel the first trickles of sweat roll down my flanks. I just bid \$184,000 for a painting I don't want and sure as hell can't afford. *Bid, goddamnit! Bid!*

The bid caller has his little wooden mallet in his left hand. *No no no give him time...* "Fair warning. One hundred sixty-five thousand."

I call myself *idiot* about a hundred times. It doesn't help. I've given up on breathing.

The bid caller points one last time at Mr. 59. "Sir? Will you bid?"

Mr. 59's shoulders inch up, like he's taking the same big breath I took a couple minutes ago. His paddle slides up.

"One seventy-five in the room. Thank you, sir."

Yes!

That first hit of air feels like pure oxygen. I work at keeping my

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face and body completely still so the other people in the room don't wonder why I'm having an orgasm.

"*Monsieur?*"

"Yes, Lisanne? Where are we?"

"The bid is one hundred seventy-five. What do you want to do?"

I want to kiss you, is the first thing I think of. She probably won't go for that. In my best disappointed voice, I say, "I'm sorry, that's over my limit. I'll have to pass."

"Of course, *monsieur*. Perhaps next time." She shakes her head at the bid caller.

The bid caller beams, raises his mallet. "Fair warning. One seventy-five, in the room. Do I have one eighty-five?"

Nobody moves.

Twok! He hammers down. "Lot 17 is sold for one hundred seventy-five thousand Swiss francs to Number 59. Thank you, sir."

Mr. 59 just handed me \$15,750. His contribution to my tax on silly rich people.

I feel eyes on me. The tasty brunette in the eighth row has hiked her thin, dramatic eyebrows. Her perfect white smile isn't saying "hey, handsome"; it's more like, "I know what you just did." But I'm so stoked, I don't stop to think about it.

When the crowd starts to applaud, it feels like it's for me.

TODAY

I didn't know it then, but that day in Geneva four years ago? The auction, and Allyson (the gorgeous brunette in the eighth row)? The things I did in those twenty-four hours?

That was the high point of my life.

It all turned to shit after Geneva. The auction—and Allyson—had nothing to do with it, though. No, Gar and I took ourselves down by being stupid and greedy and sloppy. It was our own damn fault. We deserved every bit of it.



It's almost midnight, and I'm sitting on the floor with what's left of my life in fourteen moving boxes stacked up around me.

Everything else is gone. Gave up the apartment two-plus years ago. Sold the car to start paying for a lawyer after the guy from the public defender's office showed up five minutes before my arraignment and couldn't get my name right. My suits, the TV, the furniture: all sold. Janine... well, she took off the day after I got arrested. Didn't even leave a note.

Fourteen boxes. Ten of them are books—art books, architecture books, history books. I don't really *need* them anymore; the Feds say I can't work in a gallery again, and there still aren't any architecture jobs, especially not for convicted felons. I could probably get a few bucks for some of them online. But getting rid of them feels like giving up, like throwing away the first half of my life. I'm not there yet... soon, maybe.

It's been a year since I graduated from the Federal Prison Camp Pensacola (PEN, a pretty ironic nickname). Fourteen months and seventeen days inside, three months and thirteen days

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knocked off for good behavior and time served. I'm trying real hard to not go back. They may call it Club Fed, but there's nothing country-club about it when you're locked up there.

So I'm sitting on a dusty rug in the non-bedroom room of the ex-pool house I share with Chloe (don't get any ideas—she likes girls) in a 405-adjacent wedge of Los Angeles called Palms. I've got a book open in my lap, but it hurts too much to look at it. It's the big Abbeville Press survey of John Singer Sargent. All those beautiful works by my favorite artist, images I know by heart. Each one's like a stab in the gut.

"Why're you still up?"

Chloe's leaning against the doorjamb between this room and her bedroom, wearing a pink miniskirt-length tee shirt with "BEACH" in faded black block letters across what there is of her chest. The floor lamp behind me makes her pale skin glow in the semi-dark. Her white-blond hair looks like dogs have been fighting in it. Some women look incredible when they roll out of bed. Chloe's a total sweetheart and I love her to death, but she's not one of those women.

I thump the Sargent book into its box. "Going through my boxes, like you asked."

She scratches her head, which actually helps her hair. "I didn't mean, like, at midnight."

"Can't sleep." I pull the next box against my knees. "Did I wake you?"

"Uh-uh." She yawns and leans her head against the doorframe. "You okay? You been awful quiet the past three-four days, even for you."

"Sorry." Truth is, getting out of that ratty sofabed in the morning has become a major life decision. It doesn't help that I have to be out of here by four so I can help open the store at five. The why-bother factor's been pretty high lately.

"Don't be sorry." Chloe shuffles to where I'm sitting and flops down next to me, her arm pressing against mine. "Wanna talk about it?"

She's warm, and this is the most physical contact I have with women these days unless I hand one her grande decaf skinny macchiato and our fingers touch. Yeah, I *would* like to talk about

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it. But having to think about things enough to put them into words would make it worse, not better.

She nudges me with her shoulder. “Hey, still there?”

“Yeah. Sorry. It’ll just sound like whining. I don’t want to lay that on you.”

“I’m your friend. That’s what I’m for, to listen to you whine.”

She pulls open one of the box flaps. “What’s this stuff?”

“It’s the junk that used to be in my desk before I sold the desk.”

I pull out a handful of papers and try to let the subject drop.

She starts rooting through the box. “It’s your birthday, isn’t it? That’s what’s got you down. Thursday?” She plays Pac-Man with a staple remover.

“Friday.”

“Right. Hey, let me take you out to dinner. It’ll be my present, someplace nice.”

“Someplace with tablecloths?”

She purses her lips. “Um, maybe not *that* nice.” She drops the staple remover on the pile I’m building up and rattles through my office supplies some more. “Birthdays are hard, huh? Last year, when I turned twenty-seven? I was thinking, like, a third of my *life*? I’m getting so *old*. All I wanted to do was get wasted and sleep through it.”

She doesn’t notice me roll my eyes. For the record, I’m nine years older than her. I found my first few gray hairs last month. Thanks, Dad, for the premature gray.

Chloe holds up a red plastic box. “What’s this?”

“That’s where I kept business cards.”

“Business cards? That’s pretty old-school.” She pulls out a wad and starts riffling through it. “What’s this on the back? ‘Barbizon?’”

“A pre-Impressionist school of French—”

“I know *that*.”

“I kept notes on what clients liked.” I had a database on the gallery’s computer, too, but I liked having the paper backup. “What do you do with your clients’ cards?”

“Give ‘em to Shel.” Her boss at her gallery, one I didn’t blow up while mine was sinking. I get a little peace until Chloe sticks a card in front of me. “Who’s this?”

Black serif text against a rich cream cardstock heavy enough to

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make armor plate: *Allyson DeWitt*.

Geneva. I've replayed that one incredible night about a million times in my head. Every time I do, I get that king-of-the-world feeling for a minute. Then I feel like a total shit.

"Well?" Chloe pokes me with her elbow.

She won't give up, and after all the secrets she's shared with me, she'll get pissed if I blow her off. "Remember the woman in Geneva I told you about? The—"

"The hookup?" Chloe's eyes light up. "This is *her*?"

"Yeah."

"The one who took you to that fancy restaurant?" It had a Michelin star, so yeah, I guess it rates as "fancy." "The one with the suite? 'The best sex of my life?' And you still have her *email*?" She slugs my shoulder. "You dork! Why didn't you get back with her?"

She's way more excited about this than I am. I didn't know I still had that card, and I'm not sure I want it. "It's not that simple," I finally say after trying a few other answers. "I was still with Janine when that happened. I—"

"And she was *crazy*." Chloe leans in when she sees me wince. "Sorry, but she was, and she was totally dragging you down. If I had that going on, and I met *her*—" she waves the card at me "—I'd jump her, too. So what's the problem?"

I should never have told her about this, but I'd just moved in and we were both drunk and playing "Truth or Dare" and I'd needed to tell *somebody* so it didn't drill a hole through my gut. I never finished the story, though. "I felt like the ultimate asshole afterwards, that's the problem." Chloe starts to say something, but I hold up my hand. "Just... That's the first time, the only time I cheated on Janine. I still sort-of loved her. She made it so hard, but... well, she was still my wife. I couldn't tell her, I couldn't do that to her. It tore me up."

I was sure Janine would sense it, but she didn't notice. Every time she hit bottom, she'd say I should get rid of her, then accuse me of having an affair, but she'd been doing that for years. Before Geneva, I could deny it. After Geneva, I just changed the subject and drank more.

Then she ran off with that guy from the Harley dealership and my friends started telling me about shit she'd done when she was

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manic. “Dude, you didn’t *know?*” they always asked. No. I didn’t. I wish I still didn’t. I just feel like a bigger idiot.

Chloe’s looking at me like I’d just told her I have cancer. “So *that’s* why you were so down after that trip. You didn’t smile for, like, months.”

“I couldn’t.” I grab the card from her hand and drop it on the discard pile.

She sighs. “Matt, geez. We need to find you a someone.” She picks up the card again. “How ‘bout Allyson? I mean, a rich girlfriend? That’ll cheer you up.”

Allyson? A girlfriend? Like that idea hasn’t kicked me in the butt a bazillion times since Geneva. But I always come up with the same answer. “She probably forgot about me before she got out of the elevator.” I take back the card and drop it on the trash pile. “You want her? Go for it. You probably have a better chance than I do now.”

Chloe wraps her hands around my arm. “I’m serious! It’s not good for you to be alone.” Her eyes get wide. “Oh! I know! Remember Sam?”

“Which one was she?”

“Kinda retro, you know, Forties hairdo, stockings with seams?”

Brass-colored hair, cherry-red lipstick. Plus she dumped Chloe, so really, how good a person could she be? “Sort of.”

“Anyway, she’s bi, and she said you’re cute. Maybe—”

I hold up my free hand. “When she finds out what I’ve been doing the past four years? So much for the second date.” I peel Chloe’s hands off my arm and hold them between my palms. They’re small and delicate and warm. “But thanks for the idea. You’re the best.” She smiles. I give her back her hands. “It’s past your bedtime, young lady.”

“Seriously, I totally mean it.” She gets up without flashing me too much. “I hate seeing you alone. You deserve better.”

I do?

She bends over to kiss my forehead. “You’re the nicest ex-con I know.”

She really is a sweetheart. I tap her nose. “And you know so many.”

Chloe scrubs her fingers through my hair so it stands up, then

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shuffles away to her room.

I start sorting through the business cards, putting them in two piles: one for people I want to keep, the other for people I've put in jail, or who're dead, or who've threatened to kill me. The second pile grows pretty fast. But all along, I hear Allyson's smooth alto: "What do you need?"

I was the one-nighter, the fling. We never would've been "together," I get that. Four years is a long time. With everything that's happened, I'm probably radioactive to her.

But I can't keep going the way things are now. I'm not even keeping my head above water. Between rent and my bus pass and paying off the lawyer and six figures of restitution and the garnish for the student loans and medical bills I defaulted on, every dime I make disappears before I see it. I can't even go bankrupt—most of my debt isn't dischargeable. I don't help Chloe nearly enough with our expenses, and I can't stay here forever. Someday she's going to find a nice girl and want to settle down, and I'll be one of those homeless dudes sleeping on a cardboard box.

What do you need?

Anything. Everything.

Allyson's card isn't hard to find again. I don't know how long I sit there staring at it, debating. I'd had my chance at a job back then and didn't—couldn't—take it. A beautiful night with a beautiful woman is supposed to *end* that night; you're not supposed to go work for her afterwards. What would I even say to her? "Hi, we slept together. Will you hire me?" Right.

Finally I say, *fuck it*. I can't get any more humiliated. I tap out an email on my phone:

We met in Geneva four years ago.
You admired my Corot auction. You
mentioned you need art
specialists. I'm interested in
learning more.

Matt Friedrich

Nothing ventured, right?



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It's radio silence for twenty-three days. Allyson's probably written me off. Maybe that old email address is dead. It was a nice idea, though. A reason to think about her, and what was, even if the guilt's still there.

Then I'm riding a Santa Monica Big Blue Bus back home from an open-to-close shift and I get a text. I figure it's Chloe telling me she's staying with a girlfriend or something. Then I notice the sender's a blocked number.

One Pico, Shutters on the Beach

11:30 Tuesday

3

Shutters on the Beach—a *faux*-shingle-style New England saltbox monstrosity right on the beach at the edge of downtown Santa Monica—is just a few blocks from work. Expensive rooms, its own spa. *Forbes* rated it one of the best beach resorts in the world. Figures Allyson would stay there.

One Pico is the hotel's restaurant. It's supposed to be very good. The lunch menu has a \$20 hamburger, which should tell you all you need to know.

I arrive ten minutes early and see Allyson sitting at a four-top against a window in the far corner. My heart starts pounding. She's really here. I'm really going to see her again. God, what am I going to look like to her?

"Sir?" The hostess stares at me. "This way?"

She leads me across hardwood floor past cream-and-white woodwork, tongue-and-groove ceiling decks above exposed rafters, and clerestory eye windows. Wooden boat-hull models and black wrought-iron *faux* gas lanterns hang from the beams.

Allyson stands when I arrive at the table. Looking at her for real, I see my memory's Photoshopped her a bit. She's not beautiful or gorgeous. She's *striking*, the kind of woman everyone in the room turns to look at when she enters. Presence, not looks.

Gar force-fed me a steady diet of upmarket fashion magazines while I was at the gallery. "Your customer tells you who he is, she is, with the clothes," he told me. "Learn the language." I kept it up at PEN; the staff would confiscate the men's mags, but my *Vogues* and *Ws* would sail on through with more T&A than *Maxim* or *FHM*. Before Gar, I couldn't tell Armani from Army surplus; now I can guess the label and line about 90% of the time.

Allyson's wearing St. John today: a camel notched-lapel maxi-vest over a black knee-length pencil skirt with a scalloped lace hem. It's worth four months of my pay, but it's a great look on her. Hell,

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hijab would be a great look on her. I'm wearing my last good suit—a navy Canali single-breasted—and a fresh haircut, but she makes me feel ragged.

We stand there a moment, her sizing me up, me trying not to stare. Then she extends her right hand. Her arms are toned and sleek, like I remember the rest of her being. “Mr. Friedrich.”

So “Matt” and “Allyson” are out the window. Okay. I hesitate before I shake her hand. It feels the same as it did back then. So does the residual guilt. “Ms. DeWitt.”

She doesn't let go right away. She must see something in my face, because her mouth goes a little tight. “This *is* a business meeting,” she says in that voice I've been dreaming about for so long.

I nod a few times before I can say, “I know.”

Allyson finally lets me go and gestures to the walnut scroll-back chair next to me. “Please, have a seat.” She signals for the waiter, who's there in an instant. “May I offer you something to drink?”

I'd love a beer—hell, I'd like a double vodka right now—but I need a clear head. “Iced tea, please.”

She nods to the waiter. “Another cappuccino *scuro*, please.”

Time's stood still for her. She looks *exactly* the same—not one extra wrinkle, not one gray hair. She's got to be in her mid-forties by now, and she's still one of the most attractive women I've ever met. That's saying something, considering who my clients used to be. I wonder what the portrait in her attic looks like. “You look... fantastic.”

She gives me a small, almost self-conscious smile. “Thank you. You look... older.”

“I know. It's the miles, not the years.”

I see her the way she was right at the end—sitting naked on the bed, her hair tumbling around her face, her cheeks flushed, her eyes shining in the bedside lamplight. I have to look out the open double-casement window to the beach and ocean. This was such a mistake. I'm such an idiot.

“Mr. Friedrich.” Her voice is low but firm. “Just by meeting you, I'm breaking a promise I made to myself. I don't mix business and pleasure anymore. I don't form personal relationships with my

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staff. It's much easier for everyone." She hesitates enough to make me turn back to her. Her hands are folded on the slate-blue tablecloth and she's drilling through my head with her eyes. "What passed between us is in the past. If you're here to try to... rebuild that connection, you should leave now." She pins my ears back. "Do you understand?"

I'd figured as much. Still, hearing it goes down hard. "Yes. I understand."

"Good. Should I take you on, you will never mention to anyone—*anyone*, but especially not a client or another staff member—the nature of our prior acquaintance. If you do, I'll terminate you immediately. I also have the ability to make your life extremely unpleasant. You can agree to that condition?"

"Yes, ma'am." Though I don't know how she can make my life any worse.

We pause while the waiter doles out our drinks. Once he leaves, Allyson asks, "How did you know to contact me?"

"You left me your card. I kept it."

She nods. Some silence passes by.

I say, "Um, before we start? I just want to say that, well, that night was—"

"Don't." It's like a slap. Then she takes a deep breath and says in a much softer tone, "I know what you're going to say, and I know you mean it to be flattering, and I appreciate the thought. But, please don't."

Yeah. She's heard it before. I'm not the first. "Sorry."

She nods once.

To cover the awkward pause, I unzip my black leather portfolio. "I have a resume if you'd—"

"I have it," she says.

Okay then. A tablet's propped up on its black folding cover next to her charger plate. It's not the right shape for an iPad, but I can't tell what it is. She whisks a finger across the screen a couple times. That must be her copy of my resume, my credit reports, my last physical, and maybe my baby pictures.

"You've had a very eventful four years," she says after a moment.

"Yes, I have."

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“You work at Starbucks. Why?”

“It pays better than McDonalds.”

Her dark eyes rake over me. “I believe my question is, why aren’t you working as an architect? That’s your training.”

“Well, there’s that felony conviction. But the big reason is, there’s too many architects now. The architecture schools keep churning us out, but there’s no place for us to go anymore.” It’s been that way for years. It’s depressing to keep seeing your degree show up on those “Worst College Majors” lists.

“That’s the reason you were at Heibrück Pacific?”

“One of them.”

Allyson looks up again. “Mr. Friedrich. Given our experience, we ought to be very frank with each other. There are no right answers here.” She dips a hand toward her tablet. “I know *what* you’ve done. I want to know the *why*. Is that clear?”

“Yes, ma’am.” It kills me to call her *ma’am*, but I have to so I don’t call her *Allyson*, which I can tell won’t go over well.

She settles back into her chair and scans me again. “Why Heibrück Pacific? Why a gallery assistant? You don’t exactly fit the profile.”

“Gar asked me at the interview, ‘What do you think of when you hear “gallery assistant?”’ And I told him, ‘A 22-year-old blonde with a BFA and a black dress.’” That gets an almost-real smile out of Allyson. “I needed a job, something that didn’t involve french fries. Parsons laid me off after they botched their contract to build clinics in Iraq. Kunstler Homes crashed when the economy did. The studios I applied to, they said they got four or five hundred applicants for one position. It was nuts. I was carrying two rent payments, one for the apartment and one for COBRA, which is incredibly expensive. I needed that for Janine, my wife. She was—”

“I remember. You told me at dinner.”

I can’t remember half of what I said to her back then, but I remember every word she said to me. “Sorry.”

“We have limited time here.” Allyson’s tone is restrained, like she’s holding something back. “I have clients to meet. Assume I already know everything about you in the public record. I’d rather you spend our time here telling me what I don’t know.” She pauses. “Shall we?”

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“Yes, ma’am.”

Her eyebrows shrug. “Actually, I have more than simply the public record. For instance, I have your confession, and your testimony in the other trials. I noted your obvious hostility toward wealthy people, or at least toward a particular kind of them. Given what happened to your parents, I can’t say I blame you. I should tell you, though, that nearly all my clients are quite wealthy, either as individuals or as organizations. Feeling the way you evidently do, would you be able to work in their interests?”

Just the question I wanted to avoid. I can’t dance around it, though. I watch the breeze ruffle the palm fronds outside for a bit. “If I work for you, my loyalty’s to you, not them.”

“Just as your loyalty was to Mr. Heibrück?”

I walked into that one, eyes wide open. The nearest other diners—five Ladies Who Lunch half-a-dozen tables away—start laughing. Like they’re laughing at me for thinking I’d have any control over this interview once it started.

“Gar threw me under the bus. He kept telling me, ‘We have to stick together, we’ll win if we stick together.’ Then the minute he gets bailed out, the son-of-a-bitch runs off to Indonesia. No extradition.”

“I know. However—”

“So suddenly, I’m the only thing left of Heibrück Pacific that anybody can throw to the wolves. And man, did they. The Feds piled on every charge they could and some even my lawyer couldn’t figure out. They were talking *decades* in prison. I didn’t know it then, but that’s SOP for them. So when the U.S. Attorney offered the plea deal, I jumped on it. I’m not a martyr, not when I’m hung out to dry.”

She half-nods. “Is there anything you regret about your time at the gallery?”

“You already know that. You have my confession.”

“There’s what you told the authorities, and what you’ll tell me.”

“True.” There’s this deep, twisting pain in my gut every time I think about or say the name. “Ida Rothenberg.”

“You regret getting caught, then?”

“No. I regret it ever happened. It was a mistake. Gar was in a hurry and we got sloppy. That canvas should never have made it in

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the back door. That's the one thing I wish I could take back."

Allyson nods. She's been peering into my eyes, like she's lost something and hopes to find it there. "Why do you want to work for me?" She holds up a palm. "If you say it's because you have some sort of feelings for me, I'll end this interview."

"I thought there aren't any right answers."

"This is an exception."

I'd figured she'd ask something like this, and I'd worked up a few slick answers. They're all bullshit, though, and she'll know it. So I try something radical—the truth.

"You said you need people who understand... what was it? 'The gray and blurred lines of life?' Well, I've crossed most of those lines. It's hard enough for a normal person to get a job these days. The Target in Culver City had fifteen openings last week, and a thousand people applied. Somebody like me? I can't afford the jobs I can get. The truth is, I don't have a lot of options. I don't want to go back to prison, Al—Ms. DeWitt, sorry, but the whole making-an-honest-living thing isn't going so well. It seemed like you had a job for me in Geneva. Since you asked me here, I figure you still do." I hesitate, knowing I may be about to push too far. "If you do, I need that job."

For the first time, Allyson looks out the window. I'm not sure she's seeing anything, but she isn't X-raying my soul anymore. After a few moments, she sighs, clicks off her tablet, and closes its cover. I guess the interview is over.

She looks up. "I never told you what it is I do, did I."

"No. All you said was, you 'fill needs,' whatever that means."

She nods. "I do things for people who need things to be done."

"Why don't they do it themselves?"

"They haven't the skill set. They can't be seen to be involved. They're restricted from operating. Any number of reasons, none of which you'll ever be privy to should I employ you."

I roll that around a bit. "Who are these people? The CIA? Oil companies? Political parties?"

She arches an eyebrow.

"The Mafia? Terrorists? Drug cartels?"

"Are they so different?"

Good point.

THE COLLECTION

“Our clients don’t care to be disappointed. In some cases, I’d be quite afraid to disappoint them. So I expect all my people to be resourceful and success-oriented while on a project.

“I have no full-time staff. All my people are independent contractors—it makes the tax accounting considerably easier for everyone. While in my employ, my staff has access to my legal and financial advisors for support. I pay for time and reasonable expenses. All—”

“What’s ‘reasonable?’”

“It’s highly situational. All my people have various means of accepting their pay discreetly. I have two main rules I expect everyone to follow. The first rule is, of course, to succeed. The second rule is, should whatever passes for the authorities take charge of you, say nothing about your project or me to anyone. Help will arrive.”

“The first rule of Fight Club is you don’t talk about Fight Club.”

Allyson smiles. She has a great smile. “Exactly. Does any of this cause you any concern?”

“Is this my on-boarding?”

“No. Should I decide to employ you—that’s *if*, not when—I’ll contact you with the particulars of your task and expect you to be available within forty-eight hours. You’ll be told where you’re going so you can pack appropriately.”

“Um... I still have two years left on my supervised release. I can travel inside the U.S., but I can’t leave the country. My PO has my passport.”

She frowns at me. “I’m aware of that. If it was a problem, you’d not be here. I’ll ask again: does any of this cause you concern?”

It sounds like a great way to end up in a foreign prison, or a shallow grave. But I sort of knew that before I sent her that email. Deep-breath time. “No.”

Allyson digests this, then stands. That’s my cue. As we shake hands, she says, “Thank you for your time, Mr. Friedrich. I hope I needn’t remind you that everything we discussed today is quite confidential.”

“Right.” I reluctantly let her take her hand back. “Thanks for seeing me... Ms. DeWitt.” I turn to go.

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“Matt?”

I almost didn't hear her. It took a moment to process that she called me “Matt.” I turn to see more concern in her eyes than I expected.

“You're quite... thin. Please take care of yourself.” For a moment, it almost sounds like she cares. Then she adds, “You're of no use to me sick.”

For once, I don't know what to say, and I don't trust myself to say it. I nod, take one last look, and leave.

4

It's six weeks since the interview. I've heard *nada*, not that I'm surprised. Our history's probably too much baggage for Allyson to overlook. Oh, well. I got to see her again, talk to her, touch her. I got to see that this woman I've been dreaming about for four years isn't some figment, some random chick I saw on the street that I spun this huge fantasy around. Not that it helps.

I'm sitting at one of the store's outside tables on Hill, watching the traffic and walkers pass by on Santa Monica's version of Main Street. It's the pre-lunch lull, just the usual people piling on the free wifi and treating the store like an office. I'm about halfway through my milk—they limit how much free coffee we can guzzle, but nobody seems to pay attention to milk—and watching a couple babes in shorts cross the street.

A dude in black bike-racing leathers rounds the corner and heads toward me. His visor's up, but all I can see is eyes and a nose. The leathers creak as he walks. A black messenger bag's slung across his chest.

He stops in front of my table. "Matthew Friedrich?" An accent, but I can't tell which one.

"Yeah?"

The guy zips open the messenger bag and reaches in. I flinch; I've seen this movie before, and the scene ends with him shooting me with a silenced pistol. But instead of a gun, he pulls a 6x9 manila envelope, drops it on the table, then turns and leaves.

I watch the thing for a few moments, waiting for it to explode or for poison gas to come out. It just sits there, my name and nothing else on the front. I finally pick it up—it's not heavy—and rip open the tape sealing the flap. Four things fall out.

A blue flash drive, about the size of my thumb. Great; all I need is a computer, which I don't have anymore.

A strap of used ten-euro notes. A thousand euros, or about

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\$1,100. A yellow sticky says, “Advance on expenses.”

A U.S. passport. Inside is my picture—my real DMV picture, except for the dress shirt and tie—and the name “Richard Hoskins.” This Hoskins dude lives on Mulholland and he’s been all over the place in the past two years—Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Greece, Russia, India, China, Brazil, on and on.

Finally, a folded itinerary for a United flight two days from now.

To Brussels.

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