

EXCERPT FROM THE VOYNICH GAMBIT

Seated opposite Rupert in the back of the limo, Norman and Kavitha sat quietly and let him run the show.

Rupert said, "Let's not play games. I know you tried to have me killed. You wanted me out of the way to cut a deal of your own. Nothing personal, just business."

"I had a chat with Bo Satō and examined his jewelry box. His box was a decoy, too. The one in the Folger vault is the genuine article, and you have the writing table. It is hidden inside of the Folger and you are going to get it for me. Need I spell out why you are going to get it for me?"

Norman said, "No, that won't be necessary. You'll make me suffer if I don't."

Rupert shook his head slowly and grinned, "No. *Both* of you."

"All you had to do was honor our agreement and our business would have been over..."

Norman interrupted, "Yeah, and I'd be dead by now. The minute you'd gotten your hands on the BlackBerry I would have been taken out."

Rupert said, "You're being paranoid, Dr. Blalock. I'm a businessman, not a murderer. I offered you good money for your services. I have no reason to kill you...unless you try to screw me again!"

"Now, to make amends for screwing me the first time, you're going to steal the Voynich Manuscript for me."

"How am I supposed to do that?" Norman said. "It's at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library."

Rupert said, "It's going to be on loan to the Folger Library in a couple of months. You must return to work ASAP, case the job. I understand security is being enhanced just for the manuscript."

"How did you find out it was coming?" Norman asked.

Rupert looked at Kavitha and then back to Blalock. He said, "A little birdy told me."

Norman looked at Kavitha, but she would not make eye contact.

Rupert said, "But I want the writing table as soon as you return to work. First day."

Norman said, "How do you expect me to get away with stealing an item from a display case? As soon as they see the case is empty, the world will catch fire."

"My client has a counterfeit Voynich Manuscript, which I will give to you when the time is right. Substitute it for the real thing and no one will be the wiser. By the time anyone finds out, you'll be retired."

Norman nodded and said, "I see."

Whyte said, "That's all for now. Dismissed. Back to work, Norm, ASAP. And I reiterate, don't try to screw me again. You cannot outsmart me. You're out of your league, Dr. Blalock."

Norman opened the door and he and Kavitha climbed out of the black limo.

The half-hour-long drive home was quiet. Norman usually listened to music in the car, but he switched off the sound system when Kavitha switched on his Jag. And neither said a word. The story was different once Kavitha parked the car in the garage and they went into his house.

After hugs from Bruno, Norman turned to Kavitha and said, "“You think you can run a game on me? Let's open an antique shop, Norm. We're partners. You must think I'm Sammy Sausagehead!”"

Kavitha said, "Norman..."

Norman continued, "You think I don't know why you've been hanging around? You think I believe you care about me?"

"I *do* care about you, Norm! He's got me under his thumb, too. For ten years now, ever since he pulled me from a gutter in Calcutta. I'm trying to be rid of him..."

"Then why did you bring him this new job, Kavitha? Now, I get you ingratiating yourself with me so you can get your hands on the dingus for your boss, that's understandable. What I don't get is why you brought this new job to Rupert Whyte if you're just working for him and aren't his partner?"

"We're under the gun here. I used the only bargaining chip I had to buy us some time. He means to kill the both of us once he has what he wants, no doubt about it. We have got to get out from under; *both* of us have got to get out from under.

"So, what you're saying is we're partners now that your head is on the chopping block too. Partners like we were with Bo Satō? Right? You tried to screw me on that deal, and probably will try to screw me on this one."

Kavitha shook her head.

"I've been trying for years to break out on my own and nobody's going to stand in my way now, Norman."

"Nobody wants to break out on their own more than me, baby. I've been guarding the Folger Library for decades when I should have been teaching. That's what I wanted out of life; it was my calling. I committed one stupid indiscretion and cheated myself out of being who I was supposed to be. Now all I want is to live on my own terms and I'm running out of time."

"We are who we are, Norm. But we *can* become who we want to be. It's never too late to do that. If we work together, we can win."

Kavitha threw her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately.

When his lips were free, Norman looked her in the eye and said, "Don't tell me you love me."

"What if I do?"

"I'd rather you like me."

"What's the difference?"

"Plenty. I love my children, but I don't like them. I'd kill for them, but we don't enjoy each other's company."

Kavitha said, "Good point." She kissed him passionately again, looked him in the eye, and said, "I like you."

"I like you, too," Norman said. "Get out."

"What?"

"We're partners until we see this thing through to the end, but you can keep your bullshit. Pack your shit and get out."