

# CHAPTER 1

*Los Angeles, California*  
*Getty Museum*  
*August 3, 2018*

If she didn't get a good night's sleep soon, she would go mad.

Angela Renatus sat at her desk and stared with bleary eyes at her computer screen. Headaches and insomnia had kept her up night after night for weeks. It had all started when she began her internship at the Getty Museum six weeks ago. She'd always been a sound sleeper, but now her nights were plagued with vivid dreams that left her wary and unsettled.

The intercom on her phone lit. Extension 212. *It's him*. She shuddered. "Yes, sir."

"Angela can you come into my office, please."

The pounding in her temples accelerated.

"I need your research on the Botticelli in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir. I'll print what I have so far."

"Don't bother. Just email it to me and I'll read it before you get here."

Trembling, she hit send, then picked up her cup and took a sip of water. The dream job of a lifetime had become a nightmare. Landing an internship at the Getty Museum had been a coup, but she couldn't stomach working with Dr. Alberto Scordato, the director of the museum. She'd begun to dread being called into his office, trying to come up with ways to avoid being alone with him. It sucked up a lot of her mental energy. What little she had left, given her lack of sleep.

She needed coffee before facing him, and she needed a minute to collect herself. In the employee kitchen, Kathryn Hayes, Scordato's administrative assistant, was refilling her coffee cup.

The woman turned to her and must have read her distress. "Angela, dear, are you all right?"

Recovering herself, Angela forced a smile. "Just tired, I guess. Haven't been sleeping lately. I have to meet with Doctor Scordato in a few minutes."

Kathryn's smile faded. "I've worked for that man a long time and I know how difficult he can be. Don't let him get to you."

"It's just that I fought so hard to get this internship. This is supposed to be the gold star on my resume, my paved-with-gold path into the art world. Instead, I'm struggling to survive."

Kathryn tilted her head. "I've seen many interns come and go over the years, but you, my dear, are putting them all to shame with your long hours and coming in on weekends. Too much work and not enough fun isn't healthy."

"I've been doing that for years. I'm not sure I know any other way." Angela shrugged.

"Honey, this isn't the end for you; it's just the beginning. It will all work out, you'll see." Kathryn stared at the coffee in her cup as if she were trying to decipher tea leaves. "He's done this before, Angela."

"Done what?" Angela said, a chill skittering up her spine.

Kathryn hesitated. "He has a penchant for the ladies. You know how men are. Just be careful

when you're alone with him."

Angela gripped the counter, watching the coffee flow into her cup. "There are too many jerks in this world. My dad taught me how to fight. I can take care of myself."

"Is Scordato the reason you haven't been able to sleep?"

"No, not him, although his behavior is far from professional. I'm not sure why I'm having trouble sleeping. It's strange, really. It's been so disruptive that I'm keeping a journal to help track my dreams and how often I wake up throughout the night. So far, it's only shown me how vivid my dreams are."

"Are they nightmares? Do they frighten you?"

"No, not really," Angela replied. "They're about Leonardo da Vinci and his friendship with Fioretta Gorini." Her lips quirked. "Isn't that odd?"

"Maybe the dreams are a message," Kathryn suggested. "Believe me when I say, there's life after the Getty. I can assure you, a qualified academic like you will have no problem doing well in the art world."

Angela thanked Kathryn and made her way to Scordato's office. A recent conversation with her thesis advisor, Dr. Hoffman, flickered through her mind. A private investigator who specialized in retrieving stolen art had contacted Hoffman, asking if he could recommend a renaissance expert. Hoffman relayed the offer to her, encouraging her to look into it. The detective had followed up with her and set up a meeting for that night. Alexander Caine was his name. Could this be a way out for her? Could she somehow bow out of her miserable internship and avoid risking her career in the art world?

Angela knocked lightly on Scordato's door.

"Come in."

Scordato's corner office was filled with light from the border of windows that looked over the hills of Bel Air. The silver-haired director was in his fifties, and known to be exceedingly charming, except to her. Besides being a brilliant art historian, he was a master in the art of siphoning donations from corporations and wealthy patrons, and of wrestling artwork from prospective donors. Because of his position, he held a lot of power and could make or break a career.

"Angela, my dear." His smooth smile assailed her from across the room. Seated at his desk he stood and approached her. Standing just inside the threshold, her hand gripped the doorknob. *You know what he's going to do. Leave. Now. Quit.* Her feet were frozen to the floor. *I can't. Can I?*

As she continued to battle with herself he reached her side, his hand landing on the small of her back. The pressure of it propelled her forward, forcing her to let go of the doorknob. Bile rose in her throat as his hand roamed up her spine, her back ramrod-stiff at the unwanted intimacy. She sunk into the leather-upholstered chair facing his desk. Shrugging his fingers off her shoulder as she leaned forward to lay a file on his desk.

He cleared his throat and strolled back to his chair opposite her. Impeccably dressed in a silk-blue suit, his right hand smoothed down the front of his jacket. She suppressed a shudder as she watched his fingers preening the cloth. "Angela, I've gone over your analysis of the Botticelli and I'm afraid it's lacking in historical context." He leaned forward, his hands palms down on the clear glass top. "Why don't you and I have dinner and go over your findings—brainstorm a little." His charming smile didn't fool her for one second.

"I'm sorry but I have plans this evening." She crossed her arms over her chest, unconsciously shielding herself from his bold perusal. "But I should have a more detailed outline for you tomorrow morning."

The director frowned. "I'm sure you know how busy my schedule is. The fact that I'm willing to make time for you, to help you through this muddle is all but unheard of, especially for an intern.

*Well, the thought of fending off your advances makes me sick.* "I'll give it some thought, sir. I hate to deprive you of your free time."

"Please, Angela, I'm only concerned for you to do well in your position."

She stood, eager to make her exit. "Thank you. Perhaps we can arrange some time soon."

"I have a better idea." He stood and came around his desk, his hands reaching for her shoulders.

She wanted to push him away and get the hell out of there. But something kept her rooted to the spot—Fear. Uncertainty. Worry about her future.

"Plan on having dinner with me tomorrow night." The pressure of his fingers cemented his words.

It wasn't a request, it was an order.

She didn't reply. He dropped his hands and stepped back, allowing her retreat.

She hurried out the door and bee-lined to the library in the research center where she'd set up a temporary workstation. *I can't do this anymore. I can't take this anymore.*

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Scordato picked up his phone and punched in a number.

"Security, Charles speaking."

"Bring me yesterday's video from the red gallery where the Botticelli is hanging."

"Yes, sir."

Ten minutes later Scordato loaded the video into his computer, steepled his fingers, and waited. The video image showed Angela walk into the gallery, sit down on the bench in front of a Botticelli portrait of Giuliano Medici. Her shoulders relaxed and her breathing became deep and even, as though she were sleeping. Except her eyes were open. He turned up the sound when she began to speak in Italian . . .

His beautiful, young intern was carrying on a one-sided conversation with a painting of a man who'd been dead for nearly five-hundred years.

It had been going on for weeks. Charles, one of the security guards, first brought it to his attention, asking if he should approach Angela about her "problem." Scordato had vetoed that idea, telling him he would keep an eye on matters and to tell no one. He made a point of slipping the security guard a crisp hundred-dollar bill. Subterfuge and bribery served Scordato well.

This business with Angela was unusual. Unbelievable really. If Scordato hadn't been privy to the conversations himself, he wouldn't have believed it. The intern had some kind of connection to Giuliano Medici and, more importantly, Leonardo da Vinci. Somehow, she was tied to the mystery of the missing da Vinci painting. It had to be the same painting Max Jaeger was after.

Scordato had spent the summer in Florence searching for the elusive painting, but every road led to a dead end. Frustrated, he returned to Los Angeles, only to have this little gem fall into his lap. Rather than telling Jaeger, he decided to keep the information to himself. The German billionaire was only interested in trying to clear the name of his uncle from the Nazi taint. A noble cause to the international philanthropist

If found, a da Vinci would be worth a fortune and the prestige priceless. Why share the golden egg with Max when the painting could be his alone? He'd already hired someone to watch Angela and follow her. But Scordato needed more. He needed to get into her head, to control her and have her lead him, and only him, to the painting. Disposing of her was not past his machinations. Whatever it took was well worth the risk. One way or the other, he would use her to find the painting and then he would get rid of her.

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It was nearly closing time, and there were few people left in the North Pavilion where pre-1700 paintings and sculptures were displayed. Natural light from the ceiling cast a warm glow, washing the precious masterpieces in a filtered luminosity. Alex Caine entered one of the gallery rooms and noticed a young woman sitting by herself. Something about her stillness drew him.

Her midnight hair, secured in a bun atop her head, and her black-framed glasses couldn't hide her beauty. The prim accoutrements enhanced her high cheekbones and full mouth. He moved closer to get a better look at her. She was oblivious of him and showed no sign that her private sojourn had been intruded upon.

With her hands folded in her lap, the young woman sat like a statue. Her dark eyes were riveted to a painting. A portrait of a young man captured in eternal contemplation. The subject's eyes were hidden from the viewer. Why Botticelli had chosen to paint the young man with his eyes downcast was a mystery. The youth was handsome, almost beautiful. Thick dark waves of hair framed his face. He wore a stylish red velvet tunic that distinguished him as a man of royalty or rank. However, wealth could not dispel the overwhelming sadness imbued in his face. In three-quarter profile, his finely etched brows portrayed a man of extreme sensitivity, his face and demeanor more of a poet than a man of commerce.

He recognized the painting of Giuliano Medici—he'd seen it before, in Berlin. But never had he witnessed such a visceral reaction to a painting as this young woman had. The woman was so deep in contemplation that he could have broken out in song and she wouldn't have flinched.

He hovered for a few moments, inexplicably drawn to her serene beauty. She began to whisper as if she were speaking to the painting, but he couldn't hear what she was saying. Peculiarly, the lights dimmed and an encroaching darkness descended upon him and the young woman. Looking up, he noticed the skylight showed a clear, blue sky.

*What the hell is going on?*

A fog swirled up from the floor, forming a cloudy curtain, separating them from the other visitors to the museum, who seemed completely oblivious.

A sudden flash of light over the painting propelled Alex to protect the woman. He rushed to crouch in front of her, but she continued to stare at the painting as though in a trance.

"Are you all right?" he asked her with concern. He felt compelled to protect her, but protect her from what?

What happened next made him doubt his sanity.

Her eyes changed color, turning from dark brown to forest green. Her gaze fixated on the young man in the portrait as though he were alive and standing before her. Her expression reflected radiant, passionate, love. Intense. All consuming.

It took his breath away.

Alex's eyes shifted back to the portrait and what he saw sent his pulse racing.

The young man in the painting came alive, turned his face, opened his eyes and stared at the young woman, his dark eyes mirroring the same intensity as hers.

Alex was stunned. Never in his life had he witnessed such intense love in just one look, let alone directed at a portrait of a young man who'd died more than five centuries ago.

He shook his head, trying to clear his vision. Any minute he expected to hear Rod Serling's voice.

Another flash of light, like a lightning bolt, shot out from the painting toward them. Reacting

on pure instinct, Alex covered the woman with his chest and arms, feeling the jolt hit him in the back. Not pain, exactly. But certainly a shock.

He pulled away from the woman, hoping she was okay. And then something remarkable happened. She looked him straight in the eyes, laid her hands on either side of his face and spoke to him.

*“Ti amerò per sempre.” I will love you forever.*

He couldn't take his eyes off her as she spoke.

*“Sei l'unico uomo che amerò mai.” You are the only man I will ever love.*

Alex had lived most of his life in Europe and was fluent in Italian. He understood every word she said.

She leaned in and pressed her lips to his, provoking him to respond. Desire seized him, his fingers tangled in the silk of her hair, pulling it free from the confines of her bun. A waterfall of dark waves cascaded down her back. Their tongues danced together and for long, breathless moments, he lost himself in her kiss.

Regaining his composure, he pulled away from her luscious mouth. The woman gazed at him with the same intense love she'd directed at the painting only moments before. Her eyes, still the color of forest-green moss. He was mesmerized. A yearning flowed through him, the likes of which he'd never felt before. He wanted this woman with every fiber of his being. Shocked at his own visceral response, he let go of her and leaned back, his gaze straying to the painting of the young man. He was relieved to see the portrait had returned to “normal” and the young man's visage was turned away once more.

The young woman turned his face back to hers. *“Siamo insieme in questo,”* she whispered. *“Devi aiutarmi. È il nostro destino.” We are in this together. You must help me. It is our destiny.*

And without another word, she got up and left, walking through the swirl of gray mist.

The gallery filled with light again, the cloud lifted and the buzz of visitors walking by filled his ears. There was nothing to indicate anything out of the ordinary had occurred.

His heart was pounding, and he got up from the floor and sat on the bench. His face felt hot and feverish. The surprise kiss had unglued him. Hell, the entire experience had unglued him. He sought to find a plausible explanation.

He hadn't had a PTSD attack in about two years. It had taken a year of intense therapy to mitigate the effects of four deployments in Afghanistan, capped off by a compound fracture that had nearly cost him his left leg when the Humvee he was driving was blown up. He closed his eyes, breathed deeply, and focused his mind until the raging storm passed. This didn't feel like PTSD. This was something completely different.

*Inanimate objects don't come to life. It must have been the light playing with my imagination. And the kiss? Yeah, it's been too long . . . This case must be getting to me.*

The case was a conundrum. He'd been hired by Max Jaeger to find a painting that might not even exist. Max's claim was based on letters from an art historian who disappeared off the face of the earth seventy-three years ago, during the evacuation of Florence in World War II. Max's uncle, Gerhard Jaeger, had written to his mother in Germany of a great discovery—a misattributed Leonardo da Vinci wedding portrait.

It was a meeting with Alberto Scordato, the director of the Getty Museum, that had brought Alex to Los Angeles. In a surprising about-face, Scordato, who'd been a consultant on the case and an avid proponent of the painting's existence, had soured and declared the painting a fraud.

From what Max had told him, Alex suspected the director was on his own treasure hunt to find the painting first. Ironically, Alex had already been investigating Scordato, hired privately by a

Getty board member, who also happened to be a close family friend of Alex's mother. The board member mentioned odd financial discrepancies concerning Scordato, especially in regard to his expense account.

He glanced at his watch, noting the time. He'd ponder the extraordinary encounter with the mysterious young woman later. Right now, he had to keep his wits about him for his meeting with Scordato.