

The Art Thief

New York City 1921

It was not the shabby clothes or the way I reeked of a pungent odor that kept people away from me, lying in the alley on 34th Street. It may have been the cardboard sign asking for cash. This was my third day on the job and so far no suspicious characters have shown up. Being a private investigator in a big city does have some advantages. There are always good samaritans, who despite my efforts to keep people away, sometimes see me and drop a nickel or a few pennies in the small metal cup I keep by my side. I try to discourage them by growling or coughing loudly, but they feel sorry for me and pluck coins into the container. Sometimes a beat cop sees me and uses a billy club to move me away from the alley. I wait until he leaves and I carefully return to my spot.

Why do I go through all this, you ask? It began a few days ago when a well-dressed man and a similarly attired woman entered my office, *Oates Investigations*, on a hot summer day. The man was in his thirties with slick brownish hair, a thin body, and a thin mustache. His burgundy-colored suit came with shiny black shoes and a fashionable fedora. The woman who accompanied him was in her late twenties I guessed, with freshly shampooed black hair and large earrings that glittered like diamonds below her earlobes. Her bright red lipstick accentuated her round face and cute nose. Her eyes darted back and forth, scanning my small office, taking in the pictures on the wall, a small sink near my window overlooking 33rd Street, and my cluttered desk. She seemed amused. The man saw my two client chairs in front of my desk.

"Marabelle, darling, why don't you sit here?"

"Thank you, I believe I will," she said.

I stood up, shook the man's hand, and did the same for the woman, who gave me a slightly longer, appraising look, as though she was sizing me up for something. Her prey?

"My name is Lawrence Faraday. This is my betrothed, Marabelle Sanford. You are Joshua Oates, I assume?"

"You assume correctly, Mr. Faraday."

Faraday nodded. He helped Marabelle to her chair and sat beside her. The two held hands and Faraday cleared his throat.

"Mr. Oates, I am here because someone wishes to do me harm."

"Did you go to the police, Mr. Faraday?"

"The police, well, that is the problem, isn't it?"

"I don't follow."

Faraday looked at Marabelle, who made a face like *you know what to say*. She squeezed his hand for encouragement and the young man sat up and turned to face me once again.

"If you will permit me, I want to tell you my version of recent events that happened in the past few days. It concerns my family and if the police become involved the scandal could ruin everything,"

I was not sure how to respond or why Faraday and his fiancée chose to hire me. By the way he was dressed, and his elegant mannerisms, his family probably reeked of money as members of New York City's elite upper crust. Which means, it could become a big payday for my struggling business. I was still new to the big city, having moved from Boston just before spring. It was now summer in the city and I completed a total of four investigations that paid just enough to keep the lights on. Faraday was having difficulty continuing his narrative and Marabelle leaned toward her fiancée to encourage him to continue. I decided not to say anything yet. I waited for him to continue.

"Mr. Oates, it is difficult to speak of this, yet I must."

Faraday leaned forward and spoke in a way that conveyed a sense of calm, despite the very troubling and disturbing subject matter he was about to impart.

"It happened a few weeks ago when I opened my art gallery here in Manhattan. I am an art broker, you see. I appraise artworks and provide a venue to display the creations of different artists in exchange for a modest percentage of sales."

Faraday spoke in a deliberate manner, slowly and distinctly, as though he was giving a lecture at a university. I decided to bring him around to the point. What was he trying to tell me?

"That does not sound like a reason for anyone to do you harm, Mr. Faraday. Something must have happened to make you come here, to me."

"Yes, I was getting to that. A young artist came to me around the same time period. He insisted that I should display his paintings in my gallery. When I examined them, the crude and shallow drawings led me to conclude that this young man knew nothing about art. It was as if a child in grammar school splashed paint on a canvas."

"So, you told him no?"

"Yes, exactly. I dismissed him and asked that he take back all his paintings."

"What happened after that?"

"That is when it all began."

Faraday began to shake a little and Marabelle squeezed his hand and leaned toward him. I watched as she quietly encouraged him to continue his narrative.

"My betrothed gives me the strength to continue, Mr. Oates. It began shortly afterward. The artist stood outside my gallery entrance and stared at it for hours. This went on for days. Then I received visitors who confronted me with threats. If I did not display the young man's artwork and sell them, some terrible things may happen. I had no choice and now his paintings hang on a wall by the exit sign."

I leaned back in my chair before I responded.

"Mr. Faraday, this sounds like a classic shakedown. For some reason certain people want the artist's painting to be displayed in your gallery. Do you know why?"

"No, I do not. I assumed that the young artist is looking for fame and fortune, I suppose."

"I think it might be something more."

"That is why I wish to hire a private investigator, someone who can find out the reason without involving the police. You see, some of the artwork obtained for my gallery might not have been procured, ah, legally. Do you understand?"

"That is why you do not want the police involved."

Faraday nodded. Marabelle turned to face me.

"Mr. Oates, we wish for you to investigate this matter discreetly."

Marabelle reached for her purse and opened it. With Faraday watching, she removed a bank check already made out to *Oates Investigations* for the tidy sum of one thousand dollars. I took the sizable check, not fully grasping the implications of what this amount would entail. Visions of a spending spree invaded my thoughts. I could pay off my pending debts and make improvements to my office, maybe even hire a secretary to help.

“Mind you, Mr. Oates, we expect you to begin your investigation right away and this retainer should cover your expenses and your daily fee for the duration. We would like a receipt as well.”

I could see that Marabelle was the one in charge. Faraday seemed to take on a passive role when it came to the dirty business of business.

“Yes, of course,” I said.

I took out my pad of printed receipts and filled one out, handing the finished product to Faraday’s fiance instead of him. Faraday did not seem to mind.

“I expect you to keep us informed during your investigation,” Faraday said, after being nudged by Marabelle.

I took out my standard contract for Faraday to look over and sign. He did. We shook hands before they left. And that is why I now sat outside the 34th Street gallery in shabby clothes, observing the flow of pedestrians walking by. I kept an eye out for any patrons entering or leaving the entrance to the gallery. In the past few days, nothing unusual occurred and customer traffic was sparse. It was getting close to dinner time and I was ready to pack up and leave when a black Dodge sedan screeched to a halt in front of the gallery building. The driver parked it on the side of the street. He exited the vehicle in a manner that left little doubt he was not there for art’s sake. A passenger in the front seat did the same and both looked around menacingly before proceeding to the gallery entrance. My instincts told me they were definitely not art lovers. I waited until they entered the building. Rising from a sitting position on the cobblestones, my body was stiff and I had to move about to shake off my rustiness. Some pedestrians glanced my way and disapproved of my actions. I shrugged. Crossing the street, I ran around to a side entrance that would get me into the gallery unseen, I hoped. Faraday gave me a key for the door and I used it. Moving quietly through the hallway leading to the main gallery I could hear voices. Some were loud.

“If you do not do as we say, there could be unforeseen consequences.”

It was the driver of the Dodge. He was six foot tall and must have weighed close to two hundred pounds. His suit was black to match his mood and I saw his scarred face under a gray fedora. The passenger of the Dodge was just as imposing. Short, and slim, he had one hand in the pocket of his gray suit where I saw a bulge that usually indicated where a pistol was kept.

“My boss wants you to display the paintings when we send them to you, or you can tell your boss there might be, I don’t know, a fire, or some other disaster that may occur. Do you follow me?”

“Ah, yes, yes I do.”

The man he was talking to was a nervous type who was practically shaking in his expensive leather shoes. According to my client, Lawrence Faraday, the nervous man is the gallery’s manager. His name is Montgomery Sloane. I waited for the unwanted visitors to leave the gallery.

“Tell your owner we will deliver more paintings in one week. We will be back to make sure it gets done.”

The black-suited man and his crony walked out of the gallery, confident they did their job. The scared gallery manager took on a new persona when he saw me, still clothed in rags, with a two-day-old beard and a pungent odor.

“Get out of this establishment at once, you miscreant.”

“Mr. Sloane, I presume? Let me introduce myself. Mr. Faraday hired me to look into threats to the gallery without involving the police.”

Sloane seemed confused at first until I pulled out my PI license. He took it hesitantly and studied the print carefully until he was satisfied I was legit.

“Have you ever seen those two before?”

“Yes, they visited the gallery last week. They looked around at the paintings. I knew immediately that those two were not art admirers.”

When I questioned Sloane further he could not add any more information about who the two hoods worked for. It was up to me to try to find out before anything happened. I knew just who to see.

Even though my clients did not want the police involved in this case, I had a personal connection to a very smart and dedicated police detective at the West 35th Street Manhattan South precinct. Her name is Angela Lang. Before she became the only female police detective in the borough of Manhattan, the young woman began her career in the secretarial pool at the 35th. She kept sticking her nose in missing person cases and helped find both victims and perpetrators. A police sergeant suggested she train to be a cop and eventually, a detective. We became very close after she helped me back in the year 1919.

It was another hot day in the city when I asked the desk sergeant in the reception area to speak with Angie. That is the name she uses with her co-workers and friends. The sergeant pointed me to the back of the building near the breakroom. Angie has a small desk, away from the other detectives. Even though she is a well-known and respected investigator, it is still an odd thing for the fraternity of detectives in her unit. There she was, steep into her case files, assorting different ones to be assembled and given to her sergeant to assign to the other detectives.

“Hi, Angie.”

Angela Lang smiled when I approached her desk and rose from her chair behind her cluttered desktop. Standing at 5 foot 3 inches tall, her raven hair was pulled up in a bun to make her appear a little taller. A round pair of glasses rested on her pug nose. She adjusted them as she had a habit of doing whenever she is thinking about something and working out all the scenarios. Angie was dressed in her favorite blue work dress which went well with a pair of black low-heeled shoes. We had been seeing each other on a regular basis since I moved to the city this past spring. Our relationship has had its ups and downs, but now it has grown to an exclusive one of mutual trust and a love that cannot be denied. We are practically engaged.

“Josh, I was not expecting you.”

“Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“No. Are we still meeting for lunch?”

“Sure. I actually came over this morning to ask for your help.”

“Oh? You *do* take advantage of our relationship. Sometimes I think you are just using me.”

“Well, I am, in more ways than one. I have a new client and I need to identify a couple of rough characters, which may be in that large mug book of yours.”

While every police precinct has a mug book with the faces of criminals who had been arrested, Angela Lang, behind a desk most of the time, created a new type of mug book. Next to every photograph of a criminal, she typed a short biography for each one to accompany it.

“So, you want to use police resources to help with your private investigations *again*.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Let’s see. This will cost you an expensive dinner date at *Delmonicos*.”

“You drive a hard bargain.”

“Well, have a seat. I will bring you the book.”

Angie shook her head in annoyance, barely hiding a smile when I sat down in front of her desk. When I removed my fedora, she lightly brushed my dark auburn hair as she went to gather her mug book. Moments later I was flipping through a rogue's gallery of faces, next to neatly typed

information for each one, including names, what crime they committed, and a brief biography. So far I had nothing to show for my efforts and my eyes grew tired. I was just about to give up when I spotted a face I recognized from the other day. It was the driver of the Dodge sedan. His name is Claude McDermitt and his criminal history reads like a laundry list. Attempted murder, armed robbery, and aggravated assault topped the list. What was he doing threatening the manager of an art gallery? It was not his usual modus operandi. I tapped my fingers on Angie's mug book and considered my next move when I was suddenly interrupted.

"Where are we having lunch?"

I turned around to see Angela Lang standing over my right shoulder, her left hand resting on it. She saw the mug shot of Claude McDermitt and made a face.

"I see you picked a fine representative of the criminal world."

"Yes, well what do you know about him?"

"He was released from prison two months ago and has not broken any laws so far. Just what are you involved with this time, Josh?"

"That is something we can discuss at lunch. We can try that new restaurant on 8th Avenue."

And we did. The B & J Sandwich Shop debuted in Midtown Manhattan last year and offered a casual dining experience with a gourmet touch. Angie ordered a chicken sandwich with a side salad and I chose a turkey sandwich on a hard roll. Both turned out to be very tasty and lightened the mood as I told Angela Lang all about my new clients and the art gallery.

"Well, from what I know about McDermitt, he is strictly an enforcer and my precinct has had some complaints from his victims, but nothing to do with art."

"That's what I figured. So, I will have to find out who hired him."

"You said your client does not want the police involved? I find that highly suspicious, Josh."

"I know. Faraday sounded desperate and I almost told him to take a hike, but his check for one thousand dollars cleared and curiosity got the better of me, too."

Angie reached across the small table and held my hand. She seemed worried.

"Just be careful, please. I have enough to worry about."

"Why, what is going on at work?"

Angie smiled. She released my hand and looked at the dessert menu.

"You do not wish to talk about it yet, I see. Okay, enough said."

Angela Lang confided in me often since we became lovers and companions. However, I knew when to give her space and not pry too much into the politics at her police precinct. As a former police captain, I knew it all too well. Besides, she would most likely tell me later. Almost done with our lunch, it was a good time to tell her about my case.

"You disguised yourself as a beggar on 34th Street?"

"It was the best way to observe who came in and out of the gallery."

Angie shook her head.

"Well, I hope it pays off for your client."

"Me, too."

"I have to get back to the precinct."

I paid the bill and accompanied Angie back to the West 35th Street Mid Manhattan South's precinct. We kissed behind the break room door before I left and used the room to wipe off a bit of her lipstick from my mouth. It tasted like cherry.

While I was cleaning Angela Lang's lipstick off my face, the previous night an incident occurred that would change the dynamics of this case. The manager of the gallery I spoke to a couple of nights ago was preparing to leave for the day since there did not appear to be any patrons that evening. Montgomery Sloane was in his forties and managed other fine arts galleries in Boston, Chicago, and Manhattan. Single, with no children, he often traveled to see some of the finest works of art. Due to a gambling problem, however, Sloane lost his employment at various other galleries. That is why he felt lucky to land this job until he was threatened the other day. Checking the lock on the door and making sure the windows were similarly secured, Sloane was making ready to leave when he heard a noise near the rear of the gallery building. When he strolled toward the noise a dark figure emerged from behind a sculpture. The gallery manager recognized the person at once.

"Oh, it's just you."

Sloane did not see the pistol until it was too late. Before he had the chance to say anything a shot rang out, reverberating throughout the empty main hall of the gallery. His body collapsed to the floor as the dark figure held the pistol slightly lower than before.

The next morning I was back at my office on 33rd Street going through mail when my phone rang. Police Sergeant Sean Bannon was on the other end of the phone line. A veteran cop of over twenty years, I considered him a friend. A mentor to young cops and detectives like Angela Lang, Bannon helped me in the past and I returned the favor more times than not.

"Oates, we need you to come down to the precinct for questioning."

"Right down to business, eh? Why should I come down?"

"Homicide case."

I could tell Bannon was not going to discuss this over the phone. He could have just as easily sent a patrol car down to my office and two burly cops would escort me down to the 35th.

"Okay, should take me about thirty minutes."

Soon I found myself in the interrogation room at the West 35th Street precinct leaning back in a hard metal chair. No matter how I sat it was still uncomfortable. Sergeant Sean Bannon was not in the room, nor Angela Lang for that matter. Instead, I was grilled for close to an hour by a veteran detective named Raymond O'Connor. He interrogated me earlier in the year. I remembered his habit of twirling a pencil with his fingers and he did so during this inquiry.

"Who taught you the delicate art of interrogation detective, the Marquis de Sade?"

"The who?"

"Never mind."

"Okay, wise guy, let me hear it one more time. We found your business card on the dead body. So, how long have you known Montgomery Sloane, the manager for the Faraday Art Gallery?"

"And for the twentieth time, I told you that I met him for the first time two nights ago."

"Where were you last night between the hours of seven o'clock and nine o'clock?"

"In my apartment, trying to digest my supper from that new Italian restaurant on 33rd Street."

"Any witnesses?"

"There was a pudgy guy who served me the food. The short, plump cashier who took my cash, and an obnoxious fellow patron who kept up a steady stream of complaints to his server. Look, I came down here as a courtesy to Sergeant Bannon."

“Yeah, you keep bringing up my sergeant’s name. Think that is going to protect you?”

“Apparently not.”

“You got that right.”

“Somehow, I just knew you would say that.”

Detective O'Connor let me go with the admonition not to leave the city. It was way past my usual lunchtime and I was hungry. Pounding the sidewalk in my scuffed leather shoes on West 35th Street I had many questions about this case and no answers. Now there was a murder investigation and the police were definitely involved. This ran counter to the request of my client, Lawrence Faraday. I knew he would be contacted by the cops fairly soon, if not already. That is why before I could have lunch, I needed to contact him. After hailing a cab I was dropped off at my building on 33rd Street. I climbed the stairs to the second floor and headed for my office. To my surprise, Lawrence Faraday's fiancée, Marabelle Sanford stood by my office door. She was dressed in a form-fitting dress that accentuated her shapely curves. Holding a tiny black purse in her gloved hands, she frowned at me as I approached.

"Miss Sanford. Have you been waiting long?"

"I have been standing here approximately thirty minutes. Do you always keep your clients waiting?"

Before I could answer she reached into her purse and pulled out a small makeup kit with a mirror that she popped open to look herself over. I used the time to unlock the door. I let her in and the clicking sound of her expensive high heels reverberated throughout my office. After being grilled by O'Connor I was not looking forward to Marabelle's questions I am sure she had. The young woman stood by a client chair waiting for me to attend to her. I pulled the chair out and asked her to sit, which she did.

"How can I help you, Miss Sanford?"

"Lawrence and I are distraught. The police came to his home this morning and informed us that Montgomery Sloane was murdered last night. This was a day after you spoke to him at the gallery. Do not deny it. Is this what you call being discreet?"

"No, I call it a murder investigation."

"I came to your office today to sever our contract with you. Minus any expenses you have accumulated, I want you to return the rather large check we handed over."

Instead of panicking, I decided to be all business.

"Fine., let me see. As I recall Lawrence Faraday signed the check. Since he is my client in the technical sense, I will not honor *your* request, even though you used the word *we* in your sentence. If Lawrence wants to, as you say, sever his ties to my investigation, let him contact me directly. After that is done my obligation to him is over and if the police wish to question me further about my knowledge of any inappropriate business dealings at Faraday Gallery, well, that is their prerogative."

"You would not dare."

"It is not my first choice. By the way, does Lawrence know you came here?"

Marabelle Sanford looked down for a moment and I could tell by her expression that she came on her own. She reached for her purse and took a deep breath. Her gloved hands took the makeup mirror and Marabelle looked over her neatly combed hair and shiny earrings before she closed the compact mirror and placed it back in her purse. Raising her head to look directly at me, I witnessed a change in her manner and tone.

"Forgive me, Mr. Oates, I am just very worried about Lawrence and quite upset at Mr. Sloane's murder. It is quite shocking to us."

Marabelle dabbed at her right eye with her gloved hand.

"I understand. Would you like a handkerchief?"

"Yes, thank you."

I waited for her to use my offering and compose herself. She did.

"I am sorry what happened to Sloane. It is in the hands of the police now. Whether it is connected to the situation we discussed in my office a few days ago remains to be seen."

"What else could it be?"

I thought of my previous cases and the many twists and turns that happened during my investigations.

"You would be surprised. Right now, that is for the police to handle. Have Lawrence call me."

Marabelle Sanford rose from the client chair and gathered herself. I stood up and got the door before she nodded at me and left my office. I gazed out the window and waited until Marabelle left the building. I watched as she hailed a cab. There was something about her that both fascinated and troubled me.

For the next half an hour I began adding up my three days of expenses and hours spent watching who came and went to Faraday's gallery when my office door opened and two men walked in. One was very familiar. Claude McDermitt looked even more sinister than the face I saw in Angela Lang's mug book. The scar on his left cheek was prominent and added to his natural scowl. His six-foot frame was clothed in a black striped suit and shiny black shoes. His white starched shirt was faded and his thick neck held a red tie. His companion was shorter with a brown suit and brown fedora. I could detect no scars on his pudgy face. McDermitt looked around my office and then he focused his eyes on me. I gave him my brightest smile.

"Can I help you, gents?"

McDermitt did not answer. Instead, he nodded to his buddy who stood by the entrance door to block it. Would this be a friendly chat? I did not think so. I reached under my desktop where I kept a Smith and Wesson .38 caliber revolver pointed straight ahead. McDermitt strode forward and sat on a client chair. I waited for him to talk.

"Do you know who I am?"

"You are Claude McDermitt I presume."

McDermitt gave me a crooked grin. He seemed surprised or impressed that I knew his name.

"So, you know who I am. Well, I know who you are and who hired you."

"That information is confidential, at least it was."

"My associate and I had a chat with your client, Lawrence Faraday. He hired you to poke around and watch his art gallery. I convinced him to send you packing."

"Really? Am I going on a vacation to the tropics, all expenses paid?"

"No, wise guy. He no longer needs your services."

"You are the second person who said that to me today. Well, you know what? I have yet to hear it from my client."

"You don't need to. I just told you, back off."

As we were having this conversation I kept an eye on both McDermitt and his brown-suited buddy who had his right hand in his suit pocket that looked like it held something bulky, like a gun.

"Okay, I will take it under advisement, Claude."

“Don’t use my first name, Oates. I don’t like it.”

I have a big mouth sometimes that gets me into trouble. This was an opportune moment to practice restraint, something Angela Lang encouraged me to do.

“Ok, so noted.”

McDermitt looked mad. I waited for him to also practice restraint and calm down. He was used to intimidating people, but he wasn’t sure about me. Men like him expect to scare their subjects. He looked a little confused about why I seemed not to be. Continuing to stare at me menacingly, he rose and straightened out his suit. Pointing his index finger at me, McDermitt gave a final warning.

“If I catch you sniffing around my business after this I will visit you again and it will not be a friendly visit, understand?”

I nodded.

Satisfied I was warned, Claude McDermitt headed for the door, smartly opened by brown suit man, who gave me a parting, sinister glare. With a sigh of relief, I reached inside my desk drawer and removed a small bottle of bourbon. Pouring a generous portion into an empty glass on top of my desk, I drank, letting the gold-colored liquid burn my throat. With a sigh, I decided to soothe my hunger and proceeded to a nearby eatery that served pretty tasty sandwiches and coffee. Feeling well-fed, I headed back to my office to ponder my next move.

Angela Lang was enjoying her steak at *Delmonico's* with me later that night. I liked to watch her eat and she noticed.

"Why are you watching me eat?"

"Well, you seem to be enjoying your meal and it is fun to watch."

Sticking her fork into the mashed potato, Angie shook her head.

"After I take a bite, I will watch *you* eat."

"Nah, that's weird."

"So, how is your case going?"

I told Angie about my interrogation by O'Connor and the visits by Marabelle and McDermitt. She listened intently and seemed to frown when my summary was completed.

"I have yet to hear from my client directly."

Angie adjusted her glasses as she often does whenever thinking about something. She raised an eyebrow.

"What do you really know about Lawrence Faraday? Maybe you should find out more about him before you continue your investigation. And, if he does contact you and says to drop the case, then do it."

I knew Angie was worried for me. How many times has she witnessed the myriad of threats to me from mob bosses, killers for hire, and even law enforcement? For a seasoned cop, Angela Lang knew the dangerous situations I got into could get me killed one day. Tonight though I noticed she seemed more worried about something else.

"I know I shouldn't pry into your work, but I cannot help but notice you seem more worried than usual. What is going on?"

Angie frowned.

"You know me too well. Okay, Baldwin has been promoted. He is the new deputy police chief."

"Captain Lester Baldwin, your boss?"

"Yes."

"He was the one who promoted you to detective, right? So, what does this mean for you?"

"I do not know, and that is what worries me."

"Angie, you have proven yourself more times than I can count. Baldwin knows your value as a detective. So do Sean Bannon and even the other detectives. Do you know who is taking Baldwin's place?"

"Not yet."

I could tell the changes at her precinct were having a serious effect on Angie. She had worked her way up from a clerical position to a female patrolman and now a police detective. There was no guarantee that the new police captain would approve of the status quo. I tried to cheer her up. "Well, whoever it is will be glad to have you. He would be a fool not to."

"Thanks, I hope you're right."

We left the restaurant after paying the bill and I walked her back to the boarding house that Angie calls home. We kissed passionately under a moonlit sky.

Early the next morning I awoke to find a letter that appeared under the entry door of my new apartment on 34th Street. The first-floor two-room apartment provided me with a place to hang

my hat as well as walking distance to my office. Rubbing my sleepy eyes I picked up the folded letter and opened it.

Dear Mr. Oates,

I am sure by now you have been approached by certain people, some very close to me and some not so. Whatever they have told you, do not listen to them. There is something going on that you need to investigate, aside from any police investigation. I have closed the gallery for now. One painting by the young man is in a safe place in the back of the museum for now. The gallery will be closed for an unspecified period. I hired you because of your reputation. In your own way, it seems you get results. Because of the situation, I am leaving the city for the time being. Do not follow me, and do not stop until you get to the bottom of all this. I have faith in you.

*Sincerely,
Lawrence Faraday*

The letter was on expensive stationery and the signature matched Faraday's signature on the contract he signed at my office. Strangely, the letter was not dated which indicated to me that it was rushed and left for me to find this morning. My new apartment is an improvement from my old place on 35th Street. I had been living in a converted attic of a house where the bathroom was on the first floor and it was very inconvenient. This new one has an ice box, a small stove, a table and chairs in the kitchen, and a small bathroom. The bedroom has a full bed, a nightstand, and a small dresser. Adequate for a single person, but too small to entertain visitors. Angela Lang refers to it as cozy. After I read the letter I was able to fix myself an egg and toast, with a cup of coffee for breakfast. After washing up, I changed into my gray suit, black tie, leather shoes, and dark brown fedora. I headed to my office on 33rd Street, sat at my desk, and took out my casebook. A habit I kept since I was a police captain back in Los Angeles, the casebook contained information I gathered on any case I worked on. So far I wrote down more questions than answers. I thought of what Angela Lang asked me. Who is Lawrence Faraday? Why did he pick me for this case? And why was Sloane killed? In addition to these concerns, Faraday's fiance Marabelle Sanford wants me to drop the case. Not to mention, a known killer, Claude McDermitt, threatened me to drop the case as well. Maybe I should. My instincts told me not to for now.

While I was contemplating this, Detective Angela Lang was not looking forward to meeting her new police captain. It was difficult enough to deal with change in the workplace. In her case, Angie, as the only female cop at the precinct, had to deal with how a new captain would see her. Would she continue to be an asset to the force? Would she be a liability? Or, worse, would she be a mere curiosity that can be displayed like an exotic animal at the zoo? A meeting for all cops and detectives were held that same morning in order to meet the new captain of the West 35th Street Mid Manhattan South precinct. Angie sat with Sergeant Sean Bannon, the 20-plus-year veteran who acts like her surrogate father and mentor at times. "Have you ever met the new captain, Sergeant Bannon?"

“I saw him a few times when I was still a patrolman. He was a little rough around the edges, but that was years ago.”

The meeting room was crowded with patrolmen, detectives, sergeants, and clerical staff all standing in place, waiting in anticipation for their new captain to make his appearance. Former captain Lester Baldwin, now the newly appointed deputy police chief came into the room. He was followed by a short, thin man, impeccably dressed in a formal police captain’s uniform. With a stern look, he cast his beady eyes around the room as he followed Baldwin to the podium standing in the center of the large room. Everyone stood at attention, like a military platoon would when a general inspected the troops. Baldwin smiled. He wore a three-piece suit and gold-colored tie. His clean-shaven face was topped by his thick black hair with speckles of gray. “At ease. I am here to welcome my replacement. As you know, I begin my new job as deputy police chief today, so with no further adieu, may I present Captain Michael Stoddard.”

Stoddard scanned the room for a moment before he approached the podium to address the assembly. His policeman’s cap rested snugly on his head, yet he adjusted it to stay in place. “Thank you, Deputy Chief. I am looking forward to leading this precinct and meeting with each and every one of you in the next few days. This will help me evaluate this precinct to see if and where it can be improved.”

Baldwin waited to see if the new police captain had anything else to say, but Stoddard backed away from the podium. Lester Baldwin knew the men and women of the 35th and how they operated. While he was honored to be promoted, there was still a part of him that found it difficult to leave. He approached the podium once more and smiled. Now in his mid-forties, Baldwin hid his emotions in his grizzled face.

“I have known a good many of you during my time as captain here. I will always be grateful for your support over the years as I begin my new job. New York is a great big city, but the West 35th Street Mid Manhattan South will always be my home.”

Then the men and women in attendance began to clap their hands for a full minute. Lester Baldwin was clearly moved. Sergeant Sean Bannon was a little choked up, and Angela Lang wiped a tear off her cheek. Angie was not sure, but she told me later that she detected a look of jealousy in Stoddard’s expression on his face.

While Angie was introduced to her new captain, I decided to continue my investigation. I was convinced Faraday was being used by someone in connection with his gallery. There was something that did not add up. Was this really about a young artist with mob connections that wanted his paintings to be on display? Or, was there more going on here? My detective instincts told me the latter. I knew of only two people who could give me answers. One is Claude McDermitt, hired thug, but for whom? The other is Faraday’s fiance, Marabelle Sanford. Angela Lang wanted me to stay out of trouble and try to avoid danger. If we were going to be together she was adamant about it. That is why I decided to pay a visit to Marabelle.

I took a subway train to meet with Faraday's fiancée. From the contract information signed by Lawrence Faraday, I learned that Marabelle Sanford lived in a very wealthy section of Park Avenue, a part of New York City in a wealthy neighborhood on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The address I had for her brought me to a brownstone building a block away from the subway stop. I took out the slip of paper with Miss Sanford's address just to be sure I was at the right place. A doorman stood at attention in front of the entrance to the privately owned brownstone building and stared at me suspiciously as I approached. The weather was fair and in the seventies. I wore my tan suit, a blue tie, brown leather shoes, and my favorite dark brown fedora. The doorman seemed to frown at my outfit.

"May I assist you, sir?"

"Yes. I am here to see Miss Marabelle Sanford. Is she in?"

"Whom should I say is inquiring?"

"My name is Joshua Oates. She will know who I am."

The doorman had me sign a large guest book showing names and the times people arrived. I was a bit annoyed, but in order to see her I entered my name and the time of arrival. The doorman allowed me to enter the building. I walked down a wide corridor until I found a door to an apartment the doorman said Marabelle occupied. Straightening my tie, I knocked three times. After the third knock, the door opened and an older, aristocratic-looking man of average height and expensive clothes seemed surprised to see me. His right eyebrow arched up as he decided how to handle my intrusion. I broke the ice.

"Hi, my name is Oates. Is Marabelle Sanford in?"

"Is she expecting you?"

"Just let her know I am here. She knows what this is about."

"I see. Very well, you may step inside and wait here."

"Thank you. I did not catch your name."

"It is Desmond, sir."

He led me to the foyer where I waited to be introduced. Moments later he came back to usher me into a large parlor. I removed my fedora and nodded to an eclectic group of people seated in a circle. They turned their heads to examine me. To my right sat Marabelle Sanford, who did not seem very pleased to see me at all. She rose and approached me, warily. In a low whisper, Marabelle spoke.

"What are you doing here? I told you that your services are no longer required. However, now that you are here, let me introduce you and play along when I do. You may be in danger."

Before I could respond, Marabelle embraced me and pulled away to speak to the other guests.

"I did not expect you today, Mr. Oates. Let me introduce you. Ladies and gentlemen, may I present Joshua Oates."

Marabelle locked her arm around mine and steered me to a sophisticated, looking older woman, dressed in an expensive dress made of fine silk, and a sequined flowered pattern from the neck down to her ankles. She looked to be in her early fifties. Her blonde hair exhibited gray highlights and her face, while somewhat wrinkled around the eyes, was covered in makeup. This made her appear younger for her age, yet with a look in her eyes that told me, this woman had seen a lot. Her strong perfume was palpable.

"Lady Pasley, may I introduce Joshua Oates? He is a private investigator working for my fiancée, Lawrence."

"How do you do, Mr. Oates."

Her accent was definitely British. She extended her right hand which I took in mine, slightly bowing. She seemed to be waiting for me to do something else. Was I supposed to kiss her hand? Before I embarrassed myself, a man seated close by speaking with a noticeable German accent, interrupted.

"I think you can let go of Lady Pasley's hand now."

Turning around, I released her hand immediately. My eyes rested upon a middle-aged man of average stature with a shock of black hair, a touch of white on the sides, thick black eyebrows, and an even thicker black mustache. His puppy dog eyes showed amusement as well as curiosity. I recognized him at once. Professeur Albert Einstein had arrived by ocean liner in New York City earlier this year in connection with a series of lectures he was to give at Columbia University as well as other venues. I remember there was a parade in his honor that was given in early April by the mayor of the city. Lady Pasley appears to have connections.

"Ah, right, thank you, Professeur Einstein."

"Are you a real private eye, as they say?"

"Yes, I am a private investigator, Professeur."

"Oh, just call me Albert."

Einstein extended his right hand and we shook. Lady Pasley witnessed the transaction and seemed to smile, hesitantly.

"I see you made a friend with our detective here, Albert."

"Vell, as a scientist I am always trying to solve mysteries, much like you do, no?"

"When you put it that way, yes. Our singular occupations are alike."

Einstein chuckled, much amused with my answer. Lady Pasley seemed to frown for a moment when she turned to Marabelle.

"Perhaps you can find somewhere to talk in private with your detective friend, Marabelle, while I entertain our other guests."

Marabelle took the hint. She took my arm to lead me to another part of the large apartment, but not before I spoke to Albert Einstein once more.

"It was very nice meeting you."

"Likewise."

Marabelle practically pulled me into another room of the large apartment. Surrounded by marble sculptures, the wall was covered with paintings from various artists, plus an elaborate display of rare books from previous centuries as far as I could determine. She turned to me once we were safely inside and away from Lady Pasley.

"I thought I told you to stop any investigation. You are off the case."

"Not according to your fiancée, Miss Sanford."

"What? No, that is impossible. You are wrong."

"Have you spoken with Lawrence recently?"

"Of course."

"When?"

"Are you accusing me of something, Mr. Oates?"

"If you did speak to him, where is he now?"

Marabelle Sanford looked like she was just asked to recite the Declaration of Independence. She stepped back and folded her arms over her shapely bosom.

"I wish you to leave now, or I will have you escorted out."

"Not until you answer a few questions."

Marabelle seemed to be processing possible scenarios in her mind. She knew I could not be intimidated, or persuaded easily. She lowered her arms and seemed to relax a little.

"Okay, I can see you are determined. I warned Lawrence about that. Look, there is more going on than you wish to know. If you dig too deep, it could be very dangerous for all involved. No, I did not speak to Lawrence. I fear he is in trouble and it may mean his life. Do you understand?"

Marabelle was either a damn good actress, or she really believed what she was saying. Either way, I was going to see this through. I owe it to Lawrence Faraday, but mostly to myself.

"I understand the danger, Miss Sanford. That could be why Lawrence seems to have gone into hiding."

She studied me like a puzzle that could not be solved. Marabelle Sanford was hiding something. I was determined to find out what.

"I warned you. I will not answer any more questions. Now it is time for you to leave. I have nothing more to say to you."

Marabelle unfolded her arms and walked back into the sitting room where Lady Pasley, Albert Einstein, and the other distinguished guests mingled. She called for Desmond, the aristocratic-looking man who greeted me at the door. With a stern look on his face, he went up to me in the private room. He stood as menacingly as he could and with chin up, he spoke.

"You are asked to leave, sir."

"I see. Will you be threatening me now?"

This was not the response he was hoping for.

"Do not embarrass yourself, Mr. Oates. If you do not leave it will be very painful for you."

"There it is, Desmond."

When I did not begin to leave, Desmond tried to grab hold of my suit with both hands.

"Let go, Desmond."

Still holding the lapels of my suit, Desmond began to yank me forward. That is when I reached under his arms and thrust them upward, breaking his hold. Desmond reached back with his right hand to throw a punch, but not before I hit his jaw with a left jab. I followed this up with a right to his midsection. Desmond tried to catch his breath. I leaned him against the wall. Marabelle, Lady Pasley, Albert Einstein, and the other guests witnessed the whole thing. I casually walked by them and headed out the door.

The next morning I was going over the mail I accumulated on my office desk on 34th Street when my phone rang. I picked up the receiver and answered with a half-hearted hello.

“Joshua, is it true you met Albert Einstein?”

It was my friend, sports reporter, and writer Damon Runyon of the *New York American*. Always up on the social and celebrity news about town, Runyon must have heard about my chance meeting with Einstein from one of his many sources in the city.

“Yes, I did.”

“Well, what was he like?”

“Like you, Damon, smart and curious.”

“Why, thank you, my good man.”

There was laughter at both ends of the phone. Runyon was in town to cover the New York Yankees baseball games, mainly because of Babe Ruth, the biggest sports attraction around these days. Runyon agreed to meet me later in the week to fill me in on the latest news on the street.

“Okay, talk to you later.”

After I hung up the phone the door to my office opened and Detective Raymond O’Connor and another police detective I was not familiar with entered. They walked over to my desk and O’Connor leaned on it, his puffy reddish face inches away from mine.

“I’m watching you, Oates. So far you are my leading suspect in the murder of Montgomery Sloane.”

“Is that so? What caliber bullet was found on the victim? I use a Colt six-shooter with 44 caliber bullets.”

“We found a .22 slug in the victim’s body,” the other detective said.

O’Connor turned to his young, clean-shaven, blonde-haired partner and frowned.

“Keep quiet, Benson. He doesn’t need to know that.”

“Plus, you checked my gun when you interrogated me the other day.”

“How do I know you don’t have another pistol that uses .22 slugs?”

“Come on, Detective. The only other gun I own is a 38, which you also checked.”

O’Connor got red in the face, on top of his already reddish complexion. He pointed his right index finger at me and shook it before he spoke.

“Just know this, Oates. Until we find a better candidate, I’m keeping my eye on you.”

“Would you mind leaning back some, O’Connor? Your breath smells of stale cigarettes.”

Sometimes I have a big mouth and cannot help myself. Detective Raymond O’Connor had no love for me, but I just poured gasoline on the smoldering fire of his pent-up rage against me. He leaned back from my desk and I could see the malice in his eyes.

“Next time I see you, Oates, I hope it will be with a warrant for your arrest. Come on Benson, let’s go.”

O’Connor turned around and stormed out of my office with Benson dutifully following him. As I watched them leave, I thought to myself this could have gone a lot worse.

As I dodged a near fight with O'Connor, at the 35th Street precinct Angela Lang was being called into the office of the newly appointed police captain Michael Stoddard. Angie thought it strange to enter the familiar room and not see veteran police captain Lester Baldwin. While she had her own difficulties with her former captain, Baldwin was always fair with his only female detective and even encouraged her at times. Stoddard sat at his new desk going over paperwork. Angie cleared her throat to speak.

"You wanted to see me, captain?"

"Yes, detective, please sit down,"

Angie pulled a chair to sit in front of Stoddard's desk and folded her dress in an attempt to keep it from wrinkling. She waited for her new captain to speak while she checked over the blue one-piece dress she often wore at work. Stoddard was clothed in a light tan suit with a white shirt and black tie. His neatly combed brown hair was thin to match his thin neck and body. Angie caught a scent of cologne on his clean-shaven face. The captain put down the paper he was reading and focused on Angela Lang.

"Detective Lang, I just completed reading your personnel file and I must say I am impressed. You worked your way up from the clerical pool and managed to become a policewoman and now a full detective. My predecessor is the one that promoted you with a recommendation from Sergeant Bannon I see."

"Yes, sir. He was the one who encouraged me."

Stoddard paused to look over another sheet in the file. He seemed to be studying it. A slight smile came across his rather stern expression. That is when he glanced up to look at his only female police detective.

"While your former captain gave you high marks on the job it seems you have also demonstrated you can be insubordinate at times. He also mentioned your apparent partnership with a private investigator who seems to get you into trouble with this department."

This is what Angie feared might happen. While Lester Baldwin never liked me or my methods, he knew she grew more confident as a detective because of her association with me. Stoddard did not understand that.

"Sir, any association I have had with Joshua Oates provided big collars for this department in the past and-"

"That is enough, Detective Lang. I will not tolerate another interruption."

"Yes, sir."

"I plan to make changes in this precinct in the next few days. There seems to be a lack of discipline in the ranks and a disregard for protocol. As of now, you will confine yourself to desk duties, going over case assignments to be distributed to the other detectives until I evaluate what your future status will be. You are dismissed."

Angela Lang braced herself before she rose out of her chair and turned around to walk away. How she kept her composure was a mystery for now.

While Angie dealt with her new boss, I still had a case to solve. The murder of Montgomery Sloane made it a bit easier for me to snoop around Faraday's art gallery since it was now a crime scene and closed to the public. It was late evening. I wore dark pants, a black leather jacket, a Donegal cap, and black leather gloves. A couple of years ago, the magician and escape artist Harry Houdini and I met and became friends. He gave me a few of his tools to

open all sorts of locks. That is why I now stood in the back alley of Faraday's gallery using these tools to open the back door. The key I had earlier was confiscated by the police. After picking the lock the door opened easily and I crept inside, holding a flashlight. The spot where Sloane was shot was roped off with police tape. I lifted it to gain entry. With a flashlight in hand, I saw the blood stains still covering a section where Sloane fell, and a chalked traced outline of the body was still visible on the floor. Examining my surroundings, I noticed paintings by famous artists displayed on the walls all around me. Shining the flashlight, I paused to take it all in. There were portraits by John Singer Sargeant and works by Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, and Pablo Picasso. Many were behind a special barrier set up to prevent theft. I was distracted, admiring the masterpieces when suddenly I heard a noise coming from another part of the gallery. Whatever it was, it appeared to be headed in my direction. I crept behind a marble sculpture and hid, turning my flashlight off. I felt for my Colt pistol in a shoulder holster under my jacket, hoping it would not be needed. I waited.

Another narrow beam of light swept across the large display of paintings, paired with the unmistakable sound of leather shoes lightly stepping on the hardwood floor of the spacious gallery. I held my breath waiting for the dark figure as it came closer, still sweeping the light back and forth until it was trained onto *Degas's Blue Dancers*, a painting the artist completed in 1890. The figure seemed to be transfixed by the work of art. That is when I moved in. I crept slowly until I was right behind my subject. Just as I reached out my hand to confront whoever this was, the figure spun around shining the flashlight in my eyes. I was pushed backward and I heard footsteps running away from me. Taking up the chase, I was able to reach out and grab an arm. The two of us stumbled and fell on the hardwood floor. We wrestled for advantage. My opponent tried to use the flashlight as a weapon until I snatched it away. Gloved hands tried to hit me, but I was able to overpower whoever it was and pressed the attacker's arms down.

"Let go of me!"

The voice was unmistakably female. I shined my light on her face to confirm my suspicions.

"Get off of me, you brute!"

"Not until you tell me who you are and what you're doing here."

"I can ask you the same question."

"I saw you staring at the Degas. You're an art thief."

"And what are you?"

"Look, I'm not a thief. I won't harm you, okay?"

I released my hold on her and moved off her prone figure. She was dressed all in black. Black slacks, a black sweater, and black leather shoes framed a trim, athletic body. She was about average height. This was an unexpected and curious development. I offered to help her up but she shook her head. Moments later we both stood in the middle of the gallery not sure what to do next. I offered a solution.

"Listen, there's an all-night cafe a block from here. We need to talk. Do you agree?"

In the dim glow of my flashlight, I saw my new acquaintance nod. New York City still hummed even in the late hour of midnight and the two of us slipped out the same door I came in by the alley behind the gallery. We managed to walk together, not talking to each other until we found *King's Coffee* on 8th Avenue. We both ordered coffee and a piece of chocolate cake for me. We sat at a booth by a window. The dim light of the cafe added to the faint glow of the streetlights

through the window pane. I had a chance to observe my new acquaintance. She looked to be in her late twenties, with blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail. With high cheekbones, piercing blue eyes framed under thick eyebrows, and an engaging mouth sipping her cup of coffee, this woman might be a thief, yet something told me she was much more.

"Let's start with your name. I'm a private investigator hired by Lawrence Faraday. My name is Joshua Oates."

She gazed at me, trying to determine if I was a threat or a possible ally. Letting down her cup for a moment, a reluctant yet engaging smile formed on her countenance.

"Alright, my name is Veronica Mills and I am not a thief, at least not anymore."

"What do you mean? Explain."

"Like you, I was also hired by someone to investigate, specifically the Faraday Gallery."

"I detect an accent, Miss Mills. Are you British?"

"How observant, Mr. Oates, though it is fairly obvious, wouldn't you say?"

"So, you were an art thief in the past?"

"Mine is a rather long story, growing up in London's East End. In short, I was caught by the police. Rather than serve prison time, I was recruited by a large firm working with Scotland Yard whose mission is to recover stolen works of art."

"That confirms my own suspicions about my client, Lawrence Faraday."

Veronica Mills leaned forward across the small table.

"Perhaps our meeting is fortuitous, Mr. Oates."

