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The Cubist Supremacy

a pre-apocalyptic
novel

GARY WOLF

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The Cubist Supremacy

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Aesthetic interest does not stem from our passing desires: it reveals what we are and what we value. Taste, like style, is the man himself.

—Roger Scruton

CHAPTER ONE: DESTRUCTION OF A MYTH

About two years ago, I experienced one of those profound turning points that occur only once, maybe twice in a lifetime. The chain of events leading to this transformation began on a Friday afternoon in September, when a little balding man with a disagreeable face entered my Manhattan antique shop.

After browsing for several minutes, the gentleman presented a bracelet for my consideration. As I examined it, he delivered a long-winded sales pitch for this supposedly rare find, which in reality was nothing more than an elaborate piece of costume jewelry. With great indignation, he rejected my offer of thirty dollars. Even though the fellow seemed impervious to rational discourse, I attempted to reason with him. “Your bracelet is old and attractive,” I admitted, “but worth only thirty dollars because it’s gold *plated*, and the gemstones are made of glass.”

He defiantly leaned forward onto the counter that separated us. “What’s with you antique dealers in this city? Can’t you see that it’s Victorian? I saw one just like it for sale at a jewelry store for over a thousand dollars. And you want to give me thirty!”

“Sir,” I said, in a conciliatory tone, “may I respectfully suggest that you return to that jewelry store and take another look. Their bracelet is probably made of solid gold, fourteen or eighteen karat, and has real diamonds and rubies, not glass.”

He muttered a juicy epithet, grabbed his treasure, and stormed out of the shop. Alas, conflicts of this kind are an unavoidable part of the business. After fifteen years as proprietor of Uptown Antiques, I had experienced my fair share. In the early days, I handled such glitches with less emotional agony. One is better able to brush off unpleasant incidents when the overall tenor of life is exciting and challenging. But when boredom and apathy take hold, as they had for some time, the unpleasantness is liable to become almost unbearable.

I began my closing routine, a matter of ten minutes at most. Normally, upon finishing, I would climb the stairs to my apartment, located above the shop. On that Friday evening, however, I was scheduled to have drinks with a business acquaintance named Jason Barnes. He worked at Muller’s, a prestigious international auction house based in New York. Barnes was an up-and-coming associate in their department of American art. A true expert, not one of those glib

marketing types. He once assisted me with a consignment of paintings and drawings by Edward Redfield and several other Pennsylvania impressionists. Ever since that mutually beneficial collaboration, Barnes and I would occasionally meet for a drink to catch up on the latest scuttlebutt in the rarefied world of high-end art and antiques.

I locked the front door of the shop, lowered the grille, and walked the quarter-block or so to Lexington Avenue. I was heading for the subway, en route to the appointed meeting place, an upscale watering hole in Midtown. Viewing the urban scenery near the shop gave me, as it often did, a bit of a shiver: Surroundings that are as familiar as the back of my hand, yet somehow alien, a feeling that had become more acute over time. With the exception of a four-year stint in the Marines, I, Carleton Peabody, had lived my entire life on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. In fact, my childhood residence was just a few blocks away, in the heart of the east eighties. Spoiled is too weak a word to describe my upbringing: Beautiful spacious apartment, elite private schools, full schedule of wholesome activities, friends from the same milieu. Respectable parents, no divorce, no scandals, no skeletons in the closet. I was on the fast track for a stellar career in law or business—that is, until my Rebellion. More about that later.

I arrived at the drinking establishment at precisely half past five, as requested by Barnes. The place was overflowing with bipeds, mostly well-dressed professionals in their thirties and forties, discharging in loud voices the tensions of the work week. I spotted the art expert standing near the end of the bar, and jostled my way through the crowd. I approached, shook hands, and squeezed myself into the narrow space he was guarding. We ordered drinks: pina colada for Barnes, bourbon for me. Contemplating this skinny, delicate-looking man with a high-pitched voice, I knew that we could never be close friends. The feeling was amplified by his spiky haircut, and tight designer jeans that squeezed his meager flesh with the force of a tourniquet.

We traded customer horror stories. I recounted the incident of the gold-plated bracelet; Barnes told of a pedantic collector who was livid over a tiny dab of color on his newly-acquired painting, which had cost him a cool half million. The collector claimed that the dab was the result of an undisclosed touch-up performed by the auction house; Barnes had to convince him that it came from the artist's very brush. After a heated exchange, a colleague saved the day by showing a

detailed photo of the painting, dab and all, hanging in the museum whence it originated.

Our drinks arrived. I paid the bartender.

“But that’s nothing,” said Barnes, “compared with something else going on at Muller’s. You’re never going to believe this.”

“Try me.”

“We just made an awesome discovery about Jensen Haddock.”

“Oh?” I said, trying to look interested in this demigod of abstract art.

“You know the old story about how, after studying with the Regionalists at the Art Students League, Haddock went on to develop his famous splatter technique?”

“Of course.”

Barnes laughed under his breath. “Well it’s not true. You know, it’s like, phony.”

“Really?”

“Yup. Misinformation cooked up by Haddock’s promoter, Clyde Greenhill, and that whole crowd.”

“So what actually happened?” I asked, becoming genuinely curious.

“Haddock copied someone else’s paintings. The artist he copied was an African-American woman named Emma Azalia Jefferson.”

I paused to absorb the flurry of revelations. Barnes sipped his pina colada while I downed the rest of my bourbon.

“That’s an incredible discovery,” I said. “How did you obtain this information?”

“From Emma Jefferson’s granddaughter, Rosa, who came to the preview at our last auction of Impressionist art. She saw the Haddock poster in our lobby, you know, of the giant splatter canvas at the Modern.”

“Sure, I know the one you’re talking about.”

“Well, Rosa stood in front of the poster, like in shock, and started shaking her head back and forth. We thought she was getting sick or something. She pointed at it, and kept saying ‘Grandma! Grandma!’—we knew something was up.”

“Wow.”

“And so,” continued Barnes, “Rosa told us that her grandmother painted exactly like Haddock, and that she had one of these works at home. After talking with her a bit more, I arranged a visit to see

Grandma's painting. The very next day, at Rosa's apartment, I saw it for myself. If it weren't for the signature, I would have sworn it was a Haddock. Scotch-taped to the back of the canvas was a handwritten note in which Haddock thanks her for being his guide and inspiration, and then pretty much admits that he copied her work. Imagine, Grandma Jefferson was Jensen Haddock's teacher—behind the scenes, of course. The whole splatter idea was appropriated from this great, unknown African-American female artist, who never got any credit. But now, that's going to change."

"Better late than never."

"Very soon," said Barnes, now at the peak of his excitement, "the whole thing will be public. After the art world learns about this, we're going to sell Grandma Jefferson's painting at auction. Rosa agreed to do it."

"That should be worth a pretty penny."

"No kidding. Big water-cooler topic at Muller's right now is what the estimate should be. Consensus seems like five million at the absolute lowest."

"A well-earned, if belated, compensation for the artist's estate," I said. "I assume the Scotch-taped note has been thoroughly analyzed, so that there's no doubt whatsoever."

"Oh, boy, you don't know how many people have seen it, both Haddock scholars and handwriting experts. Everyone agrees that it's legit."

Barnes finished his drink, glanced at his phone, and apologized for the hurried departure; he had another appointment, this one with a potential consignor. We elbowed our way to the front door, exited the establishment, and parted on the sidewalk, with mutual wishes for a good weekend.

It was a pleasant September evening, perfect for a stroll. I decided to do exactly that, and walk home from Midtown. What's the rush? It's not as if something (or someone) enticing awaited me at home. I had great affection for Oliver, my huge gray tabby cat, and looked forward to greeting him upon arrival, but feline companionship only goes so far.

So off I went, choosing Fifth Avenue as my northbound footpath. I knew that after crossing Fifty-ninth Street, having Central Park on one side and those gracious upscale buildings on the other would help settle my nerves after a long and eventful day. Throw in the bonus of

Grand Army Plaza: If one stands in front of the General Motors building, facing away, it is possible to ignore the monstrosity at one's back. Then, by concentrating on the Plaza Hotel, the park, the equestrian statue of General Sherman, and the Sherry-Netherland, one can feel the grandeur of eras past. This exercise does, however, demand a fair amount of mental focus to filter out the incongruous visual elements.

As the stroll progressed, I reflected on the revelations concerning Jensen Haddock. As always, Muller's was at the top of their game. Five million dollars minimum, is that what they say at the water cooler? Fuggedaboutit; after their publicity machine kicks into high gear, and polite society is saturated and abuzz with Emma Azalia Jefferson, I figured we're looking at ten million, without batting an eyelash. Resulting in promotions and kudos all around, not to mention the melodious and comforting cha-ching of the cash register. To complete the scene, the buyer could then flip his captivating paint-splatter, for double or triple the price, to some nouveau riche hi-tech mogul from the Far East.

I have to admit, I was jealous of Barnes and his colleagues, and their admirable score. In my career up to that point, I was well established, but always a sole practitioner, with no significant expansion of the business. I was not a recognized expert in any field, though I considered myself quite knowledgeable in certain areas, such as the American Arts & Crafts movement of the early twentieth century. My business was mostly dependent on local clients. The shop had only one employee, an older woman named Shirley, who lived in the neighborhood and came over to help for a few hours per week.

Sales were steady but mostly unimpressive. Rarely did anyone spring for more than a thousand dollars, even though in that category there was an ample selection of items. I did, however, have one sale that was particularly lucrative. About five years after the establishment of Uptown Antiques, on a slow day in the middle of the week, an old man wandered into the shop and presented for my consideration a small Chinese jade figure of a camel. Although I do not have in-depth knowledge of Asian antiques, I knew it was authentic and had some age to it. I offered him two thousand dollars, which I honestly thought was a fair wholesale price. The gentleman was happy as a clam. After he left, I put a price tag on the camel,

around five thousand. But a little voice in my head told me to investigate further.

I took the piece to a specialist in Chinese antiques. He examined it, ran his fingers over it, held it to his cheek, and examined it some more. There were some phone calls and much perusal of old books and catalogues. He announced, with great confidence, that my jade camel was from the Song dynasty, circa A.D. 1000–1200, and extremely rare. I consigned the piece to auction at Muller's, and netted just over three million dollars from the sale. This windfall, together with some assets that I liquidated, enabled me to buy the building in which the shop was located.

Presently, on my northbound trot, I ran out of steam at Seventy-second Street, and hailed a cab. The driver knew the streets well, and without my intervention, chose the correct blocks through which to rapidly pivot and weave, eventually screeching to a double-parked halt in front of my building. I paid and thanked the man, stepped out of the vehicle, and made my way to the sidewalk.

Approaching my four-story, Federal-style townhouse always filled me with pride and satisfaction. Most of the facade on the ground floor was taken up, on the left side, by the shop entrance and main window, which was chock full of antiques. From time to time I rotated the forward display; the current centerpiece was a Mission-style dining table by Gustav Stickley, in quartersawn oak, circa 1900. The shop interior was always lighted to some extent, so that passers-by could stop and examine the wares on offer, even after nightfall. To the right of the shop entrance and window was a separate entrance that served the upper floors. The narrow yet ponderous oak door opened into a small foyer containing a row of brass mailboxes built into the wall; beyond this space was a second door that led to the stairwell. At the back of the stairwell were two doors, one that opened to reveal the tiny rear courtyard, and another that provided access to the back of the shop.

Prior to my acquisition of the building, the upper floors were divided into separate apartments. I combined them to form a single-family house for me, my cat, and my treasures. The second floor became a storage area; the various units on the third and fourth floors were united and transformed into a spacious duplex containing my living quarters. In one corner of the top floor was a spiral staircase leading up to the roof, which hosted a furnished deck and garden.

That Sunday I decided to take a break from my usual world, and telephoned Vinny, my old army buddy. He lived in Brooklyn, in a modest flat in the Bensonhurst section. We decided to meet halfway, at Battery Park, and take a cruise on the Staten Island Ferry. The air was warm, but not so much as to be uncomfortable. On the contrary, with a light sea breeze, it was balmy and pleasant.

Vinny was quite the character. Where I tended to be reserved and understated, Vinny was outgoing and rambunctious. This was partially the result of his upbringing, which might as well have taken place on a different planet than mine. I have already mentioned the genteel, urbane existence of my early years, tucked away in the magical kingdom known as the Upper East Side. Vinny grew up in a tough Italian neighborhood, surrounded by individuals who would not be out of place in a movie about the mob. The toughness was aggravated when he was orphaned at a young age.

Despite our divergent backgrounds, we were drawn together. For both of us, joining the Marines was the result of a personal rebellion, though each was rebelling in his own way. I was lashing out against a world that I thought was stuffy and pretentious whereas Vinny sought to distance himself from what he called the “ethnic straitjacket,” and reach out to the wider society. These struggles for independence provided us with common ground that formed the underpinnings of our close bond. Add to that the deep camaraderie of a military setting, and you have a friend for life.

“So, Mr. Antique Boutique,” he declared, after the boat eased away from its dock at the foot of Manhattan. “What about the babes?”

I had expected this inquiry, after several months without female companionship. “Same,” I said, with a sigh.

Vinny could barely conceal a smirk as he leaned back against the railing. He had a face that was custom-made for smirking, that classic look of southern Italy, combining the features of ancient Rome with those of the latter-day Maghreb. This blended nicely with his tall, lanky frame, and the slight olive tint of his skin. His black hair was presently being blown in all directions by the wind.

“How about that one over there?” he asked, motioning with his head toward a young lady seated on a bench, about ten yards away.

I glanced discreetly in her direction while making believe I was stretching my neck. “Nah. Too much hair. Probably in all the wrong places. I’ll leave that species for you eye-talians.”

Vinny laughed and slapped me on the shoulder. “You’re just jealous, Carleton.”

“Speaking of the opposite sex, how’s Monica?”

Suddenly he looked uncharacteristically grim. “It was going great, but then ... well ... her father wants me to marry her. You know, he *strongly* suggested it, if you get my drift.”

“So? You said you wanted to have a family. Why not with her? You two seem to get along famously. And she’s cute, I have to say.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Vinny, with a dismissive wave of the hand. “I don’t see you rushing out to tie the knot.”

“That’s a separate topic.”

“No kidding. What about Lauren, Monica’s little sister, you met her once.”

“Nice,” I said, “but way too young.”

“She can vote and buy liquor. That’s old enough.”

“Let’s get back to you. Why not Monica as a wife?”

“It would suck me into the straitjacket. We’re talking peak Guido, my friend.”

“Sounds to me like an excuse.”

He looked at me with a pained expression. “Yeah, you’re right, it could be done. I dunno ...”

“How’s work going these days?” I asked, changing the subject to relieve him of his agony. “You haven’t mentioned it in a while.”

Vinny again looked grim as he turned around to face the water. I did likewise, leaning over the rail alongside him.

“You know, Carleton, you’re my best friend in the whole world. But let’s not discuss my work. In the past I gave you bits and pieces, but we’ll both be better off if you don’t know any more about it. For now. Just trust me on this.”

A long silence followed. We moved on to other topics. Soon the boat docked at St. George Terminal in Staten Island. We disembarked, and walked to a nearby restaurant to have lunch. Then it was back to the ferry for the return trip to the Battery. We parted soon after coming ashore.

The following week saw quite a commotion in the art world. After my meeting with Jason Barnes, I had expected the PR machine

at Muller's to kick into high gear. What amazed me, however, was the speed and intensity at which it occurred. Within days, art-related media were chock full of stories about "the big steal," the "Haddock conspiracy," "past racism acknowledged and corrected," and the like. Rosa Jefferson, the granddaughter of the newly-revealed artistic genius, became a celebrity overnight. By all accounts, she would soon be a wealthy individual as well.

I found her to be a nice and soft-spoken person. We met briefly at the VIP preview of the ballyhooed splatter painting. The event was a big-ticket formal bash, held at the opulent Hotel Pierre. I was compelled to extract a suit and tie from the back of my bedroom closet, a rare occurrence in those days. The pot of money from the eye-popping entrance fee was donated to charity (I believe it was a scholarship fund for aspiring practitioners of Outsider art). Jason Barnes was good enough to slip me in the back door, quite literally.

The event was a veritable Who's Who of the Manhattan literati: patrons of the arts, critics, media people, wealthy intellectuals, trendsetting artists. And these alongside politicians, civil rights activists, and other assorted publicity hounds. They imbibed champagne and munched elaborate hors-d'oeuvres, hobnobbing and brown-nosing away. I knew from long experience how to properly behave at these functions, but could never bring myself to take them seriously. That's probably why I remained at a small, obscure antique shop.

After surveying the crowd, I gravitated to the food tables, and happily consumed some of the delicacies on offer. Barnes, from across the room, spotted me there and waved. As he approached, I noticed that his coiffure was even spikier than usual, held in place by a robust mass of hair gel. Fancy that, I mused: a work of art appended to an art expert.

"Hey, Carleton, enjoying yourself?" he inquired.

"I could hardly imagine a more fascinating and enriching experience."

There seemed to be the slightest movement of his facial muscles in acknowledgment of my sarcasm. Or maybe I was imagining it. "Can I introduce you to someone?" he asked.

"Sure."

He led me across the room to a small group hovering around the historic splatter painting. In the middle of the group was Rosa Jefferson. Barnes introduced us, and out of courtesy did the same for

the three or four forgettable individuals who happened to be in the vicinity.

“Carleton runs an upscale antique shop on the Upper East Side,” said Barnes, motioning in my direction with his champagne glass.

“I love antiques,” said Rosa, with a sweet smile that matched her demure appearance. She looked to be in her mid to late sixties.

“Any particular kind of antique?” I asked.

“Mmm ... no, I guess not. Just nice looking things. What do you have in your shop?”

“Nice looking things.” The two of us shared a chuckle. There was no reaction from the others. “Seriously, though, I have quite a variety. Bronze sculpture and figurines, some Asian pieces, artwork, porcelain, glass ...”

“That sounds great. I’d love to see it.”

“Any time you like.” I handed her my business card. “Call me or just drop in.”

A well-known media personality arrived on the scene, and the attention of all present shifted in her direction. I returned to the food tables, and left the event a short while later.

The Haddock/Jefferson affair had a noticeable impact on my state of mind, being a catalyst for further deliberations about the direction my life was taking. Already the next day, this process was in gear.

The morning began with the usual routine. I was awakened by my cat, Oliver, at around five o’clock. Wash, shave, feed the cat, clean the litter box, put on sweat pants for light workout in the exercise nook. Breakfast of eggs and grits. Get dressed. Sip a potent cuppa-joe while sitting at the computer, checking the latest news and discussions on my favorite blogs and websites. Sure enough, there was ample coverage of the VIP preview, and commentary without end. Again, I felt a tinge of jealousy toward Barnes and his crew. Even though the project had all the trappings of an elaborate publicity stunt, these people were leaving their mark on the world.

A few minutes before opening time (nine o’clock), I descended from my apartment to the shop via the internal stairway, initially to the second floor storeroom, and from there to the ground floor. I turned on the lights, fired up the cash register/credit card apparatus, turned on the faint background music (classical, usually Haydn or Mozart), unlocked the front door, and raised the grille. A change in

weather made it unlikely that many people would make the journey to Uptown Antiques; the light rain of early morning gradually turned into a major downpour, accompanied by fierce gusts of wind. I sat on the raised chair behind the counter and watched some poor souls confront the storm as they fought their way forward along the sidewalk.

It was time for my morning reading, so I cracked open Friedrich Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*, and read a few pages. As I contemplated the fate of my civilization, Oliver arrived on the scene. He was able to move freely among all the floors of the house by navigating the specially-constructed cat doors and tunnels. Presently, he claimed his usual spot in the cat bed at the far end of the counter. He then viewed the goings-on outside with a serene but attentive mien.

The heavy rain, together with my reading selection, drew me into a pensive mood. How did I arrive at such a condition, jealous of the people at Muller's, engaged in their silly shenanigans? As usual, the chain of causality led back to my Rebellion and its aftermath. What on earth was so bad about the Upper East Side? No use searching for logic in adolescent revolt. It happened, and that's that. It led me to the Marines, a transformative event if there ever was one. I could easily have been a character in one of those movies about a veteran coming home, and then unable to fit in. After being discharged from military service, I wanted to return to my erstwhile environment, with its comforts and familiarity; I craved the beauty with which I grew up, the art and antiques and culture that filled my home. It was the Rebellion in reverse. Alas, it was not to be. Sure, I could still enjoy many aspects of my former world. Eating delicious Hungarian food in Yorkville is a pleasure regardless of one's station in life. So is the contemplation of a Rembrandt or a Renoir at the Metropolitan. But I was unable to attain a satisfactory level of social integration. I had fallen into a permanent state of limbo, becoming this odd creature, neither fish nor fowl.

I glanced around the interior of the shop. The wonderful objects on display were now my social circle. It seemed that I had settled into an exquisite stagnation. At times I could accept it, and feel calm and satisfied. But the satisfaction was wearing off, as various needs came to the fore: interaction, influence, conquest. How to meet those needs? It seemed pointless to try and reinvent the wheel. Shouldn't I rather aim for a breakthrough within my existing business? Perhaps expand

into other aspects of art and antiques? Outsider art, now that's where the action is. I laughed to myself: Me taking that seriously would be like some graffiti sprayer writing a dissertation on Vermeer. I was disconnected from current trends, and that wasn't going to change.

To whom could I talk about my future? Vinny, of course, was always willing to listen. We had discussed this subject more than once. But much as he loves me, and would do anything to help, he had a limited understanding of my world. What about family? No solace in that quarter. For many years, a dark cloud had been hanging over the relationship between me and my parents. The Rebellion could never be completely forgiven, unless of course I would have re-integrated into their milieu. In any case, they decided to pack their bags and retire to Panama, where they were living high on the hog. My one sibling, a sister, was domiciled in southern California, where she and her "partner" lived and breathed the world of the Current Thing—and they tolerated no deviation from the party line. Extended family? Weddings and funerals. If I were in some desperate trouble, there were people I could call to bail me out. But a heart-to-heart talk? Never.

Around five minutes before closing, the phone rang. It was Rosa Jefferson. She wanted to make an appointment to visit the shop as soon as possible. We settled on half an hour before opening time the following morning, so that we would not be disturbed by customers, at least initially. Her palpable eagerness caused me to suspect a motivation other than interest in antiques.

Rosa arrived the next day at exactly the appointed time. I offered her the bagels and coffee I had purchased in preparation for the visit, and she happily accepted. I threw a tablecloth over the Gustav Stickley dining table, and set up our impromptu breakfast.

After a long silence punctuated by eating, drinking, and polite smiles, I broke the ice. "What part of town do you live in?" I ventured.

"Harlem," replied Rosa. She spoke softly, almost in a hush. "In a brownstone. I've lived my entire life in that same building. It was originally purchased by my grandparents, the Jeffersons, the ones you know about." She paused to swallow some bagel and cream cheese. "But they both passed away, and my parents as well. So I live alone in a huge apartment, and rent out the other units."

"What about siblings? Children?"

"All I have is one sister, who lives in Philadelphia. I've never been married. What about you? Where do you live?"

I pointed toward the ceiling and smiled. “Upstairs. Just like you, a solitary existence in a big dwelling, all alone in Manhattan. My parents and sister live far away, and I’m a bachelor.”

“It has its advantages,” she remarked, “but it can get lonely.” By this point in the conversation I noticed that Rosa spoke with barely a trace of the distinctive accent that marked the speech of most black New Yorkers. But neither was it the celebrated “New Yawk” vernacular, rather a more generic American pronunciation.

“How did the VIP preview work out for you?” I asked.

She glanced at the street, looking pensive. “It went okay, I guess. All the auction arrangements seem so complicated. But I suppose it has to be that way.”

“Yes, it can get complicated. It would probably be best, considering the importance of the consignment, to have the paperwork reviewed by an attorney, and preferably one who is familiar with the art world.”

“That sounds like a good idea.” Rosa paused again to drink some coffee and collect her thoughts. “Tell me, Mr. Peabody ...”

“You can call me Carleton.”

“Sure, Carleton. And you can call me Rosa.” She had a distinct look of trepidation. “Do you think I can trust the people at Muller’s?”

I was amazed that after such a brief period of acquaintance she was comfortable enough to ask about trusting the auction house, especially when I could be biased from possible ties with the company. “It depends which part of the deal we’re talking about,” I replied. “When it comes to the consignment itself, the answer is yes, absolutely, you can trust them. They will sell your grandmother’s painting for top dollar, and you will promptly receive every penny coming to you. No messing around.”

“Are there other parts of the deal that are different?”

“Possibly. Caution is advised in the realm of ... how shall I put it ... extra-curricular activities. In other words, when the people at Muller’s start exercising their imagination. Again, attorneys and other relevant professionals, such as PR agents, can be very useful. It’s well worth the expense.”

Rosa nodded her acknowledgment. I cleared the table, removed the tablecloth, and disposed of the paper and plastic utensils. “How about looking at some antiques?” I suggested.

“Sure.”

“Would you like to browse, or would you prefer a little tour?”

“I’d like the tour.”

We spent a while exploring the treasures of Uptown Antiques. Rosa was particularly fascinated with an antique French glass paperweight by Baccarat, in the millefiori style. She also concentrated her attention on a still-life oil painting by the Swiss painter Adolfo Muller-Ury. “I see that you don’t have anything here that looks like a Jensen Haddock painting,” she remarked. “Only beautiful things from olden times. That’s why I like it so much. It reminds me of the way the world used to be. So much prettier.”

“You don’t care for the newer stuff?” I inquired.

“No, not at all. I went to the Guggenheim Museum once. It was awful.”

“Best not to go there after a big meal.”

She laughed. “You know, Carleton, I don’t really like my grandmother’s splatter painting. Several times I almost gave it away, but I felt guilty. She’s been dead for thirty years. Maybe that’s how much time I needed.”

“Did she live with you and your parents?”

“Yes ... well, in a separate apartment above ours.”

“Is that where she painted?”

“No,” replied Rosa, chuckling to herself. “There isn’t a room in our house that would have been big enough. My grandfather had some money, and owned a few buildings. One of them was a warehouse in the Bronx. Grandma convinced him to let her use that huge space for doing her art. I watched a few times, when I was a child. She was up on a catwalk, pouring paint from a bucket down onto giant canvases. I didn’t imagine that those were actually paintings that someone would hang on the wall.”

“Where did all the paintings end up?”

“I don’t know. I guess she sold them. The one going to auction is the only splatter I have.”

“Does Barnes know about this studio?”

“No. And I don’t want to tell him.”

“Good,” I blurted rather hastily, not knowing exactly why.

We examined a few more items, and chatted about this and that. When a customer entered the shop, Rosa excused herself, thanked me for my time, and parted.

After I closed the shop that afternoon, I decided to take advantage of the marvelous weather, and go for a stroll in Central Park. It was a good place to clear the mind, and sort out the tangle of thoughts circulating within my skull. I headed west, eventually coming upon the Metropolitan. I lingered there for a long moment, enjoying the enormous, stately facade whose length is no less than four city blocks, or around one-fifth of a mile. I entered the park just north of the museum, and from there it was a short distance to the Reservoir. I joined the pedestrians and joggers circling the artificial lake.

My cranial tension soon began to thaw. Reexamining the Jefferson situation, it all clicked: If Emma Azalia Jefferson was selling her paintings, these huge Haddock-ish splatter canvases, presumably through a gallery, but today her work is unknown—then the paintings, when presented to the public, must have carried the signature of a different artist.

CHAPTER TWO: THE SMOKING GUN

Grandma Jefferson's splatter masterpiece, bearing the newly-bestowed title *Juxtaposed Oppression*, was sold on the auction block at Muller's to an anonymous buyer for a paltry \$1.5 million (on an estimate of \$5–7 million). I tried to discern the reason for the poor result. Perhaps it all happened too fast. Even with the publicity blitz, it takes time to erode the Haddock mythos, entrenched as it was in the collective consciousness of the art world. Or maybe people were not fully convinced by the revised story, including the handwritten note linking the two artists.

Speaking to Rosa soon thereafter, I expressed my surprise, and tried to console her for the disappointment. She took it well, especially considering that the million or so she had netted from the sale—still a substantial sum—was already spent. In anticipation of the promised pot of gold, Rosa had pledged all kinds of financial aid to friends and relatives in need. The million-dollar check almost exactly covered her obligations, from which she was too proud to withdraw.

Jason Barnes, by contrast, was inconsolable. In our brief but stormy phone conversation, he railed against “ignorance” and “the latent racism and unconscious bias that still plagues our society.” He had staked his reputation on this coup, which went down in flames like the Hindenburg. The higher-ups at Muller's must have been unhappy, to put it mildly.

Vinny found the whole episode hilarious. We were on my roof deck, relaxing after work on another splendid late-September day, quaffing some beers. Oliver was curled up in his outdoor cat bed, observing the scene with great curiosity. I related the conversation I had with Rosa when she visited the shop, and the outcome of the auction at Muller's.

“You know,” said Vinny, recovering from his latest bout of laughter, “it serves them right. I mean, c'mon, the *splatter* method? Oliver could step in paint, and then walk on a canvas, and it would look better.”

“Sounds like a viable business idea.”

“They should destroy the painting, and then force everyone from Muller's to march from one end of the city to the other, each person carrying fifty pounds of splatter paint on his back, and people throwing rotten eggs at them along the way.”

"I'd pay good money to see that," I said.

We continued drinking our beers. A sparrow landed nearby, and was promptly chased away by the cat. From an open window in the apartment building behind us, a lady could be heard expressing righteous anger at her spouse.

"Life in the big city," remarked Vinny.

"Indeed."

"So, Mister Art Expert, you really think that someone else's signature ended up on Grandma Jefferson's splatter paintings?"

"I'm certain of it."

"Yeah, it sounds right, after everything you said." Vinny laughed again, shaking his head. "It's incredible, to think that some of those ridiculous paintings were made by a *malignan*"—he loudly cleared his throat—"pardon me, a person of color."

"Imagine," I said, "when the art world suddenly realizes that it's a case of forgery. Think about it, the great Jensen Haddock being outed as *completely* fake. They required a white guy to be the public face of splatterism. He didn't even need to copy anything, just sign someone else's work."

"What'll all the people do who own the Haddocks? The paintings will be worthless."

"Not at all," I asserted. "They could be rebranded as Jeffersons, and worth even more. If these paintings don't sell for megabucks after a story like this breaks, I'll eat my hat, and have an antique glass paperweight for dessert. We might be looking at a hundred million for a good splatter-fest, instead of the forty or fifty million they currently fetch."

"Wow," said Vinny, polishing off his beer. "If only we could bite off a piece of that action."

"Yes, if only."

"But how can you prove that the signature forging really happened? Sure, everything lines up, but where's the smoking gun?"

I paused to consider this pragmatic line of questioning. "The smoking gun is probably buried in the records of some gallery in Soho."

"Or in Rosa's apartment," said Vinny.

"Her apartment?"

"Yes. You know how people keep old documents from their folks after they die. Maybe something is sitting in a dusty box in the attic."

I reached over and slapped Vinny on the thigh. “My friend, that may be the comment of the year. We have to get moving, not a moment to lose.” I picked up the phone to call Rosa.

“Whoa, hold on there,” he said, holding both palms forward to emphasize the point. “Don’t go off half-cocked. We have to think this through. Let’s say you get the receipts and all that. Then you publicize it. What’s to stop anyone else from doing the rebranding of the Haddocks to Jeffersons, and then selling them?”

“Perhaps you’re right,” I said. “But if we can prove that a supposed Haddock painting is actually a Jefferson, which means that fraud took place, then it seems to me that Rosa—as heir of the true artist—would have a very strong claim on the painting. Especially when you factor in the racism angle.”

“I dunno. Sounds like a long shot.”

We tossed around a few other possibilities, and concluded that one thing was certain: We needed to bring Rosa on board, and find the smoking gun. Later, after we complete these two pressing tasks, solutions to the other challenges could be found.

The next morning, I called Rosa and asked if we could get together to discuss something important. She was entirely agreeable. I said I wouldn’t mind coming up to her place, if that would be convenient. It was, and the meeting was set for mid-afternoon.

My next call was to Shirley, my part-time shop assistant; luckily she was able to come over and mind the store for half a day. When she arrived, I inquired about her interest in an expanded role in the business, including a significant boost in hours worked. She told me that she could handle twenty hours per week, maybe more.

Rosa lived on a magnificent brownstone block in central Harlem. Each and every house was immaculately maintained, and the street was clean as a whistle. Her foyer, stairwell, and apartment were saturated with grand architectural flourishes, including moldings, wainscoting, and a superb parquet floor. The apartment itself was furnished primarily with “brown wood” as we say in the trade; that is, older furniture made from lesser-quality wood, not worth more than its utilitarian value. The decorative items (rugs, lamps, pictures, figurines) were tasteful, in a vaguely Southern style that would not be out of place in Savannah, Georgia.

Rosa greeted me with a smile, and led me to the sitting room (yes, she called it that), where I was offered tea and scones. After praising

her living quarters, I had intended to steer the conversation to the Haddock controversy, but she beat me to the punch.

“Carleton,” she began, in her usual soft voice. “I’m glad you called. Something disturbing is going on.”

“What is it?”

“Someone, I’m not sure who, started a rumor that my grandmother was a ... well ...”

“Yes?”

“A lesbian.” She looked at me with plaintive eyes. “It’s a lie. There’s no other way to say it. I don’t know where they got it from. Certainly not from me. My grandmother was a decent, upright woman.”

“I’m sure of it.”

“They put a stain, a curse on the family.”

I noted to myself how different Rosa’s family was from mine, where being known as a homosexual would be a badge of honor.

“It was bad enough when Mr. Barnes was repeating it to all his colleagues, but that TV interview ...”

“I know the one you’re talking about,” I said. “You were standing on the sidewalk, in front of Muller’s.”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“But you didn’t say anything to correct them.”

“I did,” exclaimed Rosa. “But they edited that part out, and switched things around, so when the interviewer stated that Grandma was ... you know, *that* ... I was nodding my approval.”

“And the nodding was a reaction to some other part of the interview.”

“Exactly.”

“Very devious.”

We took a short break from our conversation to enjoy the delicious scones and exotic tea.

“You know, Carleton,” continued Rosa, “it’s not nice to say it, but I really want to sue them. If only to clear the Jefferson name.”

I thought of my cousin, a tort lawyer downtown, who would have a field day with this. But instead of treading that path, I shifted gears. “A lawsuit would normally be a good idea. I believe, however, that under the circumstances, there is a better way to get back at them, and to restore and elevate your grandmother’s reputation, both in character and in art.”

Rosa looked on in rapt anticipation.

“When you were at my shop, Rosa, you told me about that warehouse in the Bronx, where your grandmother was pouring paint onto giant canvases, just like Jensen Haddock. Those canvases didn’t just disappear; that’s almost inconceivable. You don’t know where they went, your relatives don’t know, nobody in the art world knows. Complete blackout. That can mean only one thing: when the paintings came onto the market, they carried the signature of a different artist. I would bet the farm on it. The whole world was bamboozled. A monumental African-American contribution to the culture was simply erased.”

“Wow.”

“You and I can sit here and be certain of all this, but the big world needs hard evidence. When we find it, the sky’s the limit. Imagine if we could prove that a particular Haddock really was a Jefferson. You, as your grandmother’s heir, would have a valid claim on it. I’m not saying that, legally speaking, you would be the new owner. Not according to the strict letter of the law. But in the spirit of the law, taking into account the terrible injustice that has occurred, your case would be hard to resist.”

“Okay,” said Rosa, “let’s say that some kind of claim could be established. People aren’t just going to voluntarily give up their paintings.”

“Certainly not private individuals. But if a Jefferson splatter painting was hanging in a gallery or a corporate office, and all this fraud and racism came to light, they would feel the heat, and be anxious to arrive at some kind of settlement.”

“Yes, that makes sense.”

“Rosa, you will earn the money you should have had from the auction. Everyone at Muller’s will be eating their hearts out from envy. That slimy announcer will have to apologize on live TV, and he’ll be sitting in front of the Guggenheim wearing sackcloth and ashes by the time this is through. If you want, I can help you get this done.”

“Yes, of course, Carleton, it could only be you.” She conveyed these words in a warm, motherly tone.

“I’ll do my best. Our first challenge is to establish, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that the fraud took place. We must find a paper trail. Somewhere, there has to be something in print.”

“I’m not so sure. Don’t you think they would have kept it quiet and off the books?”

“Most likely,” I replied. “But still, there could be a letter, a memo, a diary, a receipt, maybe reimbursement for supplies.”

“That’s true. So what’s the next step?”

“I would ask you to search through all your papers, see if you can find anything. Do you still have old family documents, something that might have belonged to your grandmother?”

“Quite a bit,” said Rosa. “I’ll get started right away.”

“Good. In the meantime, I’ll check the public library, the big one on Fifth Avenue, maybe they have something. You know, press clippings, articles, something on microfilm.”

We sat quietly for a short while. Rosa poured some tea. We discussed the history of the neighborhood. At the next silence, I stood up, thanked my hostess, and headed for the door. We said our goodbyes, and promised to keep in touch.

“Wait, Carleton,” she said, as I was stepping through the doorway. “There could be a lot of money involved if all this works out. How would I pay you?”

“How much did Muller’s take?”

“Twenty-five percent, not including all kinds of expenses.”

“Well then, how about twenty percent, and no expenses.”

“You got it.”

I descended the stairs, exited the building, and headed for the avenue, where the yellow vehicles ply their trade.

The search for the smoking gun yielded good news and bad news. The good news was that the two co-conspirators, Rosa and myself, were highly motivated. Both of us completed our assigned tasks with lightning speed, and the smooth communication between us reflected a high degree of trust. The bad news is that both of our searches, the old family documents and the public library, produced exactly nothing.

“This isn’t going to be as easy as I thought,” I confessed to Rosa during the post-mortem phone call.

“Maybe we got too excited,” she said.

“I’m not giving up just yet. What about your relatives? Could they have documents?”

“No, I’m the only one who cares about family history, and bothers to keep anything.”

There was an uncomfortable silence on the line. My mind was racing, trying to come up with something. I didn't want to end the call with no further action determined.

"Carleton, maybe we just have to let it ride for a while. Something will come up."

"Hang on—what about the warehouse in the Bronx? Couldn't there be some back room that's been locked up all these years, with one of those old steel filing cabinets?"

She chuckled. "You've been watching too many movies."

"Humor me. Do you or your relatives still own the building?"

"No, but the owner is a friend of the family."

"So you could get access ..."

"I suppose, yes."

"How about it?" I asked. "I'll bring a friend who can help us."

"Well ... okay."

"Great. Just don't tell the owner *exactly* what you're looking for."

"I understand."

It had been years since I set foot in the Bronx. Vinny chauffeured the three of us in his 1965 Lincoln Continental, the type with the "suicide doors." It was fun to drive around in this distinctive automobile. I especially loved the dashboard, with the elongated horizontal speedometer and the simple AM radio with push buttons.

Fortunately, my two companions hit it off right away. While undoubtedly true that my old buddy held prejudiced opinions about certain ethnic and racial groups (and didn't hesitate to voice them), when encountering a single member of the group, he treated that person as a unique individual. Another factor was Vinny's great respect for elders; although Rosa was healthy and vigorous for her age, she was certainly old enough to be his mother. This mental framework was in stark contrast to the people around whom I grew up: Never daring to voice the mildest slight against a protected group, they treated its individual members in accordance with whatever stereotype was current. And elders received no special dispensation; if anything, they were assumed to be malevolent, stubbornly clinging to their odious retrograde opinions.

The warehouse was located in a neighborhood of mostly dilapidated commercial structures. Cruising those streets, I had the distinct feeling of being on a movie set, about to experience a high-speed chase around the buildings. Riding in the '65 Lincoln

heightened the sensation. Our destination also was a showpiece of urban decay: a massive brick structure with a smattering of broken windows, and a worn-out company name painted on the front, having lost its legibility years ago. A rusty for-sale sign from a real estate agency was attached to the facade. It, too, seemed to have been rotting in place for quite some time.

The building owner, Rosa's "friend of the family," greeted us as we emerged from Vinny's car. Mr. Schmidt was probably in his late seventies, and looked nearly as run-down as the structure he owned. Rosa conducted the introductions, and thanked the man for the opportunity to look for a misplaced family Bible that had great sentimental value.

The four of us entered the building. It was dark and humid, with a light stench of mold lingering in the air. Schmidt turned on the lights, which consisted of antediluvian fluorescent bulbs, some dead and some flickering, suspended from the ceiling high above our heads. They were barely sufficient for the voluminous interior space, the size of a small gymnasium. Along the periphery, raised about twenty feet off the floor, was the catwalk from which Emma Azalia Jefferson had once hurled her paint. Dotting the walls at floor level were a number of doors that led to secondary rooms. Schmidt announced that he was returning to his car to make some phone calls; we could have the run of the place and should take our time.

After searching high and low for about half an hour, we came up empty-handed.

"Well," said Vinny, as the three searchers reassembled inside the front door. "I guess that's it."

"Sorry to put you both through this, for nothing," said Rosa.

"*You're* sorry?" I exclaimed. "I was the architect of this whole scheme."

The dejected trio emerged into the daylight. Schmidt was inside his car, engaged in animated conversation with a distant party. As we started toward the Lincoln, our heads involuntarily turned to the right, as a man emerged from around the corner of the building. He was moving slowly, almost limping, and carrying a box of tools.

"Hello there," he said, waving to us with his free hand. The man looked like he could be the twin brother of Schmidt.

"Hello," I replied, speaking for the group.

He rested his box of tools on the ground, and wiped his sweaty forehead with a grimy handkerchief. "I was fixing a window frame out back. The name's Johnson. I do maintenance for Mr. Schmidt. I could see that you were trying to find something. Can I help in any way?"

Rosa tried to form some words, but thought better of it. Vinny looked at me with anticipation.

"Thank you, Mr. Johnson," I said. "Yes, as a matter of fact we were searching for some family heirlooms that belonged to Miss Jefferson's grandmother."

Johnson looked at Rosa with great curiosity, squinting his eyes to better evaluate her. "Ahh, are you talking about Emma Azalia Jefferson?"

"Why, yes," exclaimed Rosa. "You know her?"

"I sure do, or rather did," said Johnson, with a big smile. "And I knew your grandfather too. Used to do work for him, when I was a young'un. Heh heh, I've been in the Bronx so long they should have a plaque for me at Yankee Stadium. Anyway, great people they were."

The rest of us looked on, not knowing what to say.

"I think I know where you should be looking for Grandma's stuff."

"Really?" I said. "Where might that be?"

"Follow me," replied Johnson. He led us back into the building, and from there into one of the secondary rooms, which of course we had searched thoroughly. He revealed, however, what we did not perceive: a hidden door, covered up by an enormous steel cabinet. Vinny and I, with some effort, pushed the cabinet to one side. We all stepped into the veiled chamber; Johnson turned on the light. Scattered about were art supplies of various kinds: paint tubes, brushes, cans of commercial paint, blank canvases of different sizes, easels. Everything was covered with a thick layer of dust. Hanging on one of the walls was a huge, unframed splatter painting that looked about one-third finished.

"Well," said Johnson, "this is it. Just artist stuff, I'm afraid. Doubt you'll find any family heirlooms here."

"No point rummaging through it," I said. "But at least Rosa can take the painting."

Vinny approached the canvas, and informed the group that there was no signature. I cringed internally, but managed to maintain a calm

exterior. “That work is obviously unfinished,” I declared, “so there was no reason to sign it.”

Johnson stared at the painting with a puzzled expression. “Yeah, it does look like it needs more paint. But she rarely signed her paintings, anyway.”

“Is that so?” I asked, hoping to elicit more information following this opportune revelation. “That’s kind of odd.”

“It was part of the deal she had with Henderson Gallery.”

“What do you know about that?” perked up Rosa.

“Henderson people were here all the time,” said Johnson, “picking up paintings and handing over wads of cash.” He crossed his arms and looked at us with suspicion. “Hey, are you people really looking for family heirlooms?”

I had to think fast. “Well, we didn’t expect to see any paintings here. The fact is, it just re-opened an old wound. A few galleries sold Emma’s paintings for a fraction of their value, because they weren’t signed. Of course the low price made them much easier to sell. I’m in the art and antique business, and I’ve been helping Rosa with some legal action ...”

Johnson wasn’t even listening to me, but rather staring at Rosa. “Hey, weren’t you the lady on TV? With that painting that sold for big bucks?” His face became tense. “Cut the nonsense. I’m on your side, for cryin’ out loud.”

Rosa looked in my direction. “What’s the use. Just tell him already.”

“Okay,” I said. “Please understand, Mr. Johnson, that we have to be very careful, so don’t be offended. We believe that the gallery took those unsigned paintings, and then added someone else’s signature.”

Vinny, with an exaggerated pout, was shaking his head. “The nerve, to take advantage of her like that.”

“With all due respect,” said Johnson, “Emma agreed to do it, and got herself a nice income.”

I caught Vinny’s glance, and winked at him before addressing myself to Johnson. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. That’s just the way life is. Sometimes you make a deal, it works out for a while, and later it turns out that you made a mistake. C’mon, you two, let’s get going. I’ll make arrangements with Mr. Schmidt to pick up the painting. We appreciate your help, sir.” I extended my arm to Johnson, and shook his hand. The others did likewise as we filed out of the room. Once

outside, we thanked Schmidt, said goodbye to him and Johnson, and climbed into Vinny's beast of a car.

I sat in the front; Rosa claimed the roomy back seat. As soon as the Lincoln pulled away from the curb, I gently chastised my old buddy. "Vinny, you gave away the game with that remark about the signature. But I'll be damned, that caused Johnson to spill the beans."

"Yeah, I got lucky," said Vinny. "Now we know for sure the paintings were unsigned. But we still didn't get any documents, invoices, all that kind of stuff."

"Granted, there was no real evidence in that secret room. But now we know where there's a ninety-nine percent chance of finding it: Henderson Gallery."

"You know them?" asked Rosa, as Vinny swerved to avoid hitting a staggering drunk in the middle of the street.

"Oh, yes," I said. "They're down in Soho. They've been in the forefront of the abstract art industry from day one."

"Must be *lovely* people," remarked Vinny.

"The loveliest. Over the last few years they've specialized in laundering money for wealthy clients: selling, buying, reselling, speculating, tax write-offs, moving money across borders. Naturally, if they ensnare a sucker who actually believes the hype about abstract art, it's gravy. Look, nobody takes that stuff seriously anymore. The true believers are dying out. Of course the museums need to keep the charade going, or they would lose prestige. It's pure cynicism all the way down."

We crossed the Third Avenue Bridge into Manhattan. The traffic was becoming noticeably heavier.

I glanced at Rosa. She seemed ready to cry. "Are you okay?" I asked.

She looked at me with her soft eyes. "I guess so. It's all so crazy out there. Maybe we should just forget the whole thing."

"I know how you feel, Rosa. But don't give up, we just started to make progress. Listen, how about letting Vinny and me pursue this? You can step aside for now. Take a break. We'll let you know when we have the smoking gun."

"You really think it's possible?"

"Absolutely. Right, Vinny?"

"Right," he exclaimed, making a thumbs-up gesture.

"And Rosa, we'll get that painting delivered to you right away."

"I don't want it," she said, with a note of disgust.

"All right then, we'll keep it safe, in storage, and maybe we can sell it for you at some point."

We arrived at Rosa's house, and bid her farewell, with assurances that everything would work out. Vinny pointed the car east and then south, soon arriving at my building. We said our goodbyes; I entered my duplex through the residential door while Vinny rumbled away in his vehicular mastodon.

After playing with the cat, and eating some leftovers, I slumped into the couch. My body wanted to sleep but my mind was racing ahead. A major opening had presented itself; we were now aware that the keys to the kingdom were held by Henderson Gallery. But how to snatch those keys? I was unable to answer this question as I fell asleep amid a deluge of disconnected thoughts.

The next day, I found myself at Macy's, in the men's clothing department, viewing the ample selection of ties. This is where Vinny insisted on meeting me. I had to close the shop around noon because Shirley wasn't able to come over.

"We have to stop meeting like this," I whispered, when Vinny appeared at my side. He also pretended to be looking at the ties.

"You're not taking this seriously, Carleton. I'm telling you, we need better operational security. That includes being more careful on the phone and emails, and being aware of our surroundings."

"Why, is Jason Barnes going to be eavesdropping on us while disguised as a pretzel vendor?"

"My friend, it's time to crawl out of your little East Side bubble. Back in the Marines, you knew perfectly well how to be serious about this."

"The Marines? I think that was a little different."

"Different but the same. Just cooperate with me."

"Okay, okay," I muttered.

"Good," said Vinny, with an air of satisfaction. He held a gaudy orange tie up to his neck. "How do you like this one?"

"It's you, all the way. So how do we get those records from Henderson Gallery?"

"It's not going to be easy."

"What about just walking in there and asking for it?" I suggested. "We could make up a story, I don't know, we're doing research on the African-American role in early abstract art, blah blah blah, whatever."

“Nah, too ridiculous, no one would believe it.”

“Or we could find some low-level grunt who could use a few hundred dollars.”

“Boy, are you new at this.”

“New at what?”

“Never mind,” said Vinny. “The grunt idea is lousy, because you’re giving away the whole game. Let’s say it works—now someone there knows about us, and you have to worry about what he’s going to do. You’re barking up the wrong tree.”

“All right. What kind of tree do you suggest, then?”

“This has to be done carefully,” he said, with a serious face. “We have to go in there at night, look around, find the documents, and copy them. As long as we leave no trace, they won’t know that anything happened.”

“Leave no trace?” I exclaimed, genuinely shocked. “And at night? This is getting into some shady territory.”

Vinny stared at me with a pout that was heavier than an Olympic barbell. “What did you expect when you started this whole thing? You think *this* is shady? Wait until you see what comes next. If it bothers you, then you better end this whole adventure right now. Go back to your antique shop and sell a glass dog for fifty bucks.”

My heart sank as I sagged onto the table full of ties. I could feel my arms supporting my weight. Vinny patted me on the back. “Sorry about that crack. It’s just that we’re talking millions here. Megabucks. It’s not going to be a cakewalk and it’s not going to be polite.”

I stood up straight. “Okay, then. But snooping around in the gallery, isn’t that a long shot? Needle in a haystack, I mean. Henderson Gallery has been around a long time. Imagine the volume of documents they have.”

“You’re right about that. We might have to do a little reconnaissance.”

“Who is *we*, by the way?”

Vinny turned to face me. “Carleton, old buddy, we is *me*. Me and whoever I get to help. You can sit this one out. No need to be involved in this part of the game. I’ll come up with a plan and let you know when I’m ready. Then you’ll have one last chance to abandon the whole thing. I don’t want to go any further unless you are completely okay with it.”

I nodded without saying a word, realizing deep down that my whole life was about to change.