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*The open door was only yards away, and beyond it lay the outside world, eerily unaffected by anything happening inside the abandoned snooker hall. Two thickset men had slumped bloodily to the floor. Four more figures were seated on chairs, hands tied behind them, ankles bound. A fifth was wriggling like a snake towards the doorway, straining with the effort. His girlfriend was yelling encouragement as the man called Hate stepped forward and slammed the door shut on all their hopes and dreams, hauling the chair and its occupant back to the original line.*

*“I’m going to kill you all,” the man spat, face smeared with his own blood. Mike Mackenzie didn’t doubt him for a second. What else was someone called Hate going to do? Mike was staring at the door, reminded that this chain of events had begun—so innocently—with a party and with friends.*

*And with greed.*

*And desire.*

*But above all, with doors opening and closing.*

# A FEW WEEKS EARLIER

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Mike saw it happen. There were two doors next to one another. One of them seemed to be permanently ajar by about an inch, except when someone pushed at its neighbor. As each liveried waiter brought trays of canapés into the salesroom, the effect was the same. One door would swing open, and the other would slowly close. It said a lot about the quality of the paintings, Mike thought, that he was paying more attention to a pair of doors. But he knew he was wrong: it was saying nothing about the actual artworks on display, and *everything* about him.

Mike Mackenzie was thirty-seven years old, rich and bored. According to the business pages of various newspapers, he remained a “self-made software mogul,” except that he was no longer a mogul of anything. His company had been sold outright to a venture capital consortium. Rumor had it that he was a burn-out, and maybe he was. He’d started the software business fresh from university with a friend called Gerry Pearson. Gerry had been the real brains of the operation, a genius programmer, but shy with it, so that Mike quickly became the public face of the company. After the sale, they’d split the proceeds fifty-fifty and Gerry then surprised Mike by announcing that he was off to start a new life in Sydney. His emails from Australia extolled the virtues of nightclubs, city life, and surfing (and now for once, the computer kind). He would also send Mike JPEGs and mobile-phone snaps of the ladies he encountered along the way. The quiet, reserved Gerry of old had disappeared, replaced by a rambunctious playboy—which didn’t stop Mike from feeling like a bit of a fraud. He knew that without Gerry, he’d have failed to make the grade in his chosen field.

Building the business had been exciting and nerve-racking—existing on three or four hours’ sleep a night, often in hotel rooms far away from home, while Gerry preferred to pore over circuit boards and programming issues back in Edinburgh. Ironing the glitches out of their best-known software application had given both of them a buzz that had lasted for weeks. But as for the money... well, the money had come flooding in, bringing with it lawyers and accountants, advisers and planners, assistants, diary secretaries, media interest, social invites from bankers and portfolio managers... and not much else. Mike had grown tired of supercars (the Lambo had lasted barely a fortnight; the Ferrari not much longer—he drove a secondhand Maserati these days, bought on impulse from the small ads). Tired, too, of jet travel, five-star suites, gadgets, and gizmos. His penthouse apartment had been featured in a style magazine, much being made of its view—the city skyline, all chimneypots and church spires until you reached the volcanic plug on top of which sat Edinburgh Castle. But occasionally visitors could tell that Mike hadn’t made much of an effort to adjust his life to fit his new surroundings: the sofa was the same one he’d brought from his previous home; ditto the dining table and chairs. Old magazines and newspapers sat in piles either side of the fireplace, and there was little evidence that the vast flat-screen television with its surround-sound speakers ever got much use. Instead, guests would fix their attention on the paintings.

Art, one of Mike’s advisers had advised, was a canny investment. He’d then gone on to suggest the name of a broker who would ensure that Mike bought wisely; “wisely and well” had been his exact words. But Mike learned that this would mean buying paintings he didn’t necessarily like by feted artists whose coffers he didn’t really feel like filling. It would so mean being prepared to part with paintings he might admire, solely to comply with the fluctuations of the market. Instead of which, he had gone his own way, attending his first sale and finding a seat right at the front—surprised that a



few chairs were still vacant while people seemed content to stand in a crush at the back of the room. Of course, he had soon learned the reason—those at the back had a clear view of all the bidders, and could revise their own bids accordingly. As his friend Allan confided afterwards, Mike had paid about three grand too much for a Bossun still life because a dealer had spotted him as a tyro and had toyed with him, edging the price upwards in the knowledge that the arm at the front of the room would be hoisted again.

“But why the hell would he do that?” Mike had asked, appalled.

“He’s probably got a few Bossuns tucked away in storage,” Allan had explained. “If prices for the artist look like they’re on the way up, he’ll get more interest when he dusts them off.”

“But if I’d pulled out, he’d’ve been stuck with the one I bought.”

To which Allan had just shrugged and given a smile.

Allan was somewhere in the salesroom right now, catalog open as he perused potential purchases. Not that he could afford much—not on a banking salary. But he had a passion for art and a good eye, and would become wistful on the day of the actual auction as he watched paintings he coveted being bought by people he didn’t know. Those paintings, he’d told Mike, might disappear from public view for a generation or more.

“Worst case, they’re bought as investments and placed in a vault for safe keeping—no more meaning to their buyer than compound interest.”

“You’re saying I shouldn’t buy anything?”

“Not as an investment—you should buy whatever *pleases* you...”

As a result of which, the walls of Mike’s apartment were replete with art from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—most of it Scottish. He had eclectic tastes, so that cubism sat alongside pastoral portraiture beside collage. For the most part, Allan approved. The two had first met a year ago at a party at the bank’s investment arm HQ on George Street. The First Caledonian Bank—“First Caly” as it was more usually called—owned an impressive corporate art collection. Large Fairbairn abstracts flanked the entrance lobby, with a Coulton triptych behind the reception desk. First Caly employed its own curator, whose job it was to discover new talent—often from degree shows—then sell when the price was right and replenish the collection. Mike had mistaken Allan for the curator, and they’d struck up a conversation.

“Allan Cruikshank,” Allan had said, shaking Mike’s hand. “And of course I already know who you are.”

“Sorry about the mix-up,” Mike had apologized with an embarrassed grin. “It’s just that we seem to be the only people interested in what’s on the walls...”

Allan Cruikshank was in his late forties and, as he put it, “expensively divorced,” with two teenage sons and a daughter in her twenties. He dealt with HNWs—High Net Worth individuals—but had assured Mike that he wasn’t angling for business. Instead, in the absence of the curator, he’d shown Mike as much of the collection as was open for general viewing.

“MD’s office will be locked. He’s got a Wilkie and a couple of Raeburns...”

In the weeks after the party, they’d exchanged emails, gone out for drinks a few times, and become friends. Mike had come to the viewing this evening only because Allan had persuaded him that it might be fun. But so far he had seen nothing to whet his jaded appetite, other than a charcoal study by one of the major Scottish Colorists—and he already had three at home much the same, probably torn from the self-same sketchbook.

“You look bored,” Allan said with a smile. He held his dog-eared catalog in one hand, and a drained champagne flute in the other. Tiny flakes of pastry on his striped tie showed that he had

sampled the canapés.

“I *am* bored.”

“No gold-digging blondes sidling up to you with offers you’d be hard-pressed to refuse?”

“Not so far.”

“Well, this *is* Edinburgh after all; more chance of being asked to make up a four for bridge...”

Allan looked around him. “Busy old night, all the same. Usual mix of freeloaders, dealers, and the privileged.”

“And which are we?”

“We’re art lovers, Michael—pure and simple.”

“So is there anything you’ll be bidding on come auction day?”

“Probably not.” Allan gave a sigh, staring into the depths of his parched glass. “The next lot of school fees are still on my desk, awaiting checkbook. And I know what you’re going to say: plenty of good schools in the city without needing to pay for one. You yourself attended a rough-hewn comprehensive and it didn’t do you any harm, but this is *tradition* we’re talking about. Three generations, all schooled at the same fusty establishment. My father would curdle in his grave if I put the boys elsewhere.”

“I’m sure Margot would have something to say about it, too.”

At mention of his ex-wife, Allan gave an exaggerated shudder. Mike smiled, playing his part. He knew better than to offer financial assistance—he’d made that mistake once before. A banker, a man whose daily dealings involved some of the wealthiest individuals in Scotland, couldn’t be seen to accept handouts.

“You should get Margot to pay her share,” Mike teased. “You’re always saying she earns as much as you do.”

“And used that purchasing power to good effect when she chose her lawyers.” Another tray of undercooked pastry was coming past. Mike shook his head while Allan asked if the fizz could be pointed in their direction. “Not that it’s worth the effort,” he muttered to Mike. “Ersatz, if you ask me. That’s why they’ve wrapped those white cotton napkins around the bottles. Means we can’t read the label.” He took another look around the chatter-filled room. “Have you pressed the flesh with Laura yet?”

“A glance and a smile,” Mike replied. “She seems popular tonight.”

“The winter auction was the first one she’d fronted,” Allan reminded him, “and it didn’t exactly catch fire. She needs to woo potential buyers.”

“And we don’t fit the bill?”

“With due respect, Mike, you’re fairly transparent—you lack what gamblers would call the ‘poke face.’ That little glance you say you exchanged probably told her all she needed to know. When you see a painting you like, you stand in front of it for minutes on end, and then you go up on your tiptoes when you’ve made up your mind to buy it.” Allan attempted the movement, rocking on his heels and his toes, while holding out his glass towards the arriving champagne.

“You’re good at reading people, aren’t you?” Mike said with a laugh.

“Comes with the job. A lot of HNWs want you to know what they’re thinking without them having to spell it out.”

“So what am I thinking now?” Mike held a hand over his own glass and the waiter gave a little bow before moving on.

Allan made a show of screwing shut his eyes in thought. “You’re thinking you can do without my smart-assed remarks,” he said, opening his eyes again. “You’re wishing you could stand in front of o

charming hostess for minutes on end—tiptoes or no tiptoes.” He paused. “And you’re just about to suggest a bar where we can get ourselves a *real* drink.”

“That’s uncanny,” Mike pretended to admit.

“What’s more,” Allan added, raising his glass in a toast, “one of your wishes is about to be granted...”

Yes, because Mike had seen her, too: Laura Stanton, squeezing her way through the throng, heading straight towards them. Almost six feet tall in her heels, auburn hair pulled back into a simple ponytail. She wore a sleeveless knee-length black dress, cut low to show the opal pendant hanging at her throat.

“Laura,” Allan drawled, pecking her on both cheeks. “Congratulations, you’ve put together quite a sale.”

“Better tell your employers at First Caly—I’ve got at least two brokers in the room scouting on behalf of rival banks. Everyone seems to want something for the boardroom.” She had already turned her attention towards Mike. “Hello, you,” she said, leaning forward for another exchange of kisses. “I get the feeling nothing’s quite caught your fancy tonight.”

“Not strictly true,” Mike corrected her, causing her cheeks to redden.

“Where did you find the Matthewson?” Allan was asking. “We’ve one from the same series outside the lifts on the fourth floor.”

“It’s from an estate in Perthshire. Owner wants to buy some adjacent land so developers can’t spoil the view.” She turned towards him. “Would First Caly be interested...?”

Allan offered little more than a shrug and the puffing out of his cheeks.

“Which is the Matthewson?” Mike asked.

“The snowy landscape,” Laura explained, pointing towards the far wall. “Ornate gilt frame... not really your thing, Mike.”

“Nor mine,” Allan felt compelled to add. “Highland cattle and sheep huddled together for warmth beneath trees with no leaves.”

“Funny thing about Matthewson,” Laura added for Mike’s benefit, “is that they fetch more if you can see the faces of the animals.” It was the sort of titbit she knew would interest him, and he nodded in appreciation.

“Any sniffs from overseas?” Allan was asking.

Laura gave a thoughtful pout, measuring her response. “Russian market is strong... same goes for China and India. I reckon we’ll have plenty of telephone bidders come sale day.”

“But no preemptives?”

Laura pretended to swipe at Allan with her catalog. “Now you’re just fishing,” she chided him.

“Incidentally,” Mike began, “I’ve hung the Monboddo.”

“Where?” she asked.

“Just inside the front door.” The Albert Monboddo still life had been his only purchase at the winter auction. “You said you’d come see it,” he reminded her.

“I’ll email you.” Her eyes narrowed a little. “But meantime, feel free to quash a rumor I’ve been hearing.”

“Uh-oh,” Allan said, snorting into his glass. “What rumor?”

“That you’ve been cozying up to the city’s other, less likable auction houses.”

“Where did you hear that?” Mike asked her.

“Small world,” she replied. “And gossipy with it.”

“I’ve not bought anything,” Mike said defensively.

“Poor swine’s actually blushing,” Allan added.

“You don’t want me visiting the Monboddo,” Laura went on, “and have to turn on my heel because there’s half of Christie’s and Sotheby’s hanging next to it. Well, do you?”

But before Mike could answer, a meaty hand landed on his shoulder. He turned his head and was staring into the dark, piercing eyes of Robert Gissing. The older man’s huge dome of a head gleamed with sweat. His tweed tie was askew, his blue linen jacket creased and stretched beyond saving. All the same, he carried real presence, and his booming voice took no prisoners.

“I see the playboys have arrived, just in time to save me from this awful hooch!” He wafted his empty champagne flute like a conductor’s baton. His eyes fixed on Laura. “I don’t blame you, my dear, it is your job after all...”

“Actually, it’s Hugh who orders in the catering.”

Gissing shook his head theatrically. “I’m talking about the paintings, child! Don’t know why I come to these tragic affairs.”

“The free booze?” Allan pretended to guess, but Gissing ignored him.

“Dozens and dozens of works, representing the best each artist could muster... a story behind each brush stroke, each carefully considered placement of object or subject...” Gissing had pinched his thumb and forefinger together, as though holding a tiny brush. “They belong to us all, part of our collective consciousness, our nation’s narrative... our history.” He was in his element now. Mike caught Laura’s eye and offered a wink: they’d both heard the speech—or variations on its central theme—plenty of times in the past. “They don’t belong in boardrooms,” Gissing went on, “where only a security pass will get you into the building. Nor do they belong in some insurance company’s vault or a captain of industry’s hunting lodge...”

“Or a self-made millionaire’s apartment,” Allan teased, but Gissing wagged a finger as fat as a sausage at him.

“You lot at First Caly are the worst offenders—overpaying for undeveloped young talent that then gets too big for its boots!” He paused for breath, and slapped a hand down on Mike’s shoulder again. “But I won’t hear a word said against young Michael here.” Mike flinched as Gissing’s grip tightened. “Especially as he’s just about to buy me a pint-pot of whiskey.”

“I’ll leave you boys to it,” Laura said, fanning out the fingers of her free hand as she waved good-bye. “Sale’s a week today... make sure it’s in your diaries.” There was, it seemed to Mike, a final smile just for him as she moved away.

“The Shining Star?” Gissing was offering. It took Mike a moment to realize he was talking about the wine bar along the street.

It was a low-ceilinged, windowless basement with mahogany slats on the walls and brown leather furnishings. In the past, Gissing had complained that it felt like being in a well-upholstered coffin.

After private viewings and the auctions themselves, it had become their custom to drop into the Shining Star for what Gissing called “post-match analysis.” Tonight, the place was half full—students by the look of it, albeit of the well-heeled variety.

“Living in Daddy’s Stockbridge pied-à-terre,” Gissing muttered.

“But still *your* bread and butter,” Allan teased him.

They found an empty booth and waited for the staff to take their order—whiskey for Gissing and Mike, the house champagne for Allan.

“Need a glass of the real McCoy to wash away the memory,” he explained.

“I mean it, you know,” Gissing was saying, rubbing his hands together as if soaping them. “About all those paintings in purdah... meant every bloody word.”

“We know,” Allan told him. “But you’re preaching to the converted.”

Robert Gissing was head of the city’s College of Art, but not for much longer. Retirement was only a month or two away—at the end of the summer term. It seemed, however, that he was determined to argue his various points to the very last.

“I can’t believe it’s what the artists themselves would have wanted,” Gissing persisted.

“In the past,” Mike felt obliged to ask, “didn’t they all crave patrons?”

“Those same patrons often loaned out important works,” Gissing shot back, “to the national collections and else-where.”

“First Caly does the same,” Mike argued, looking to Allan for support.

“That’s true,” Allan agreed. “We send paintings all over the place.”

“But it’s not the same,” Gissing growled. “It’s all about commerce these days, when it should be about taking pleasure in the works themselves.” He balled one hand into a fist, thumping the table for effect.

“Steady there,” Mike said. “Staff’ll think we’re impatient.” He noticed that Allan’s gaze was fixed on the bar. “Good-looking waitress?” he guessed, starting to turn his head.

“Don’t!” Allan warned, lowering his voice and leaning across the table, as if for a huddle. “Three men at the bar, necking a bottle of what looks suspiciously like Roederer Cristal...”

“Art dealers?”

Allan was shaking his head. “I think one of them’s Chib Calloway.”

“The gangster?” Gissing’s words coincided with the end of a music track, seeming even louder in the sudden silence, and as he craned his neck to look, the man called Calloway caught the movement and stared back at the trio. His bulbous shaved head rested on huge hunched shoulders. He wore a black leather jacket and a distended black T-shirt. The champagne glass looked like it was being choked by his fist.

Allan had opened his catalog on the table and was pretending to skim through it. “Nice going,” he muttered.

“I was at the same school as him,” Mike added quietly. “Not that he’ll remember...”

“Probably not the time to remind him,” Allan cautioned as their drinks arrived.

Calloway was a known face in the city: protection, strip bars, maybe drugs, too. Their waitress added a warning look of her own as she moved off, but it was too late: a hulking figure was moving towards the booth. Chib Calloway rested his knuckles against the table and leaned across it, casting a shadow over the three men seated there.

“Are my ears burning?” he asked. No one answered, though Mike returned the gangster’s stare. Calloway, only half a year older than Mike, had not worn well. His skin had an oily look to it, and his face was chipped and dented, evidence of past battles fought. “Gone all quiet, hasn’t it?” he went on, lifting the catalog and examining its cover. He opened it at random, examining an early masterpiece by Bossun. “Seventy-five to a hundred? For some wattle and daub?” He tossed the catalog back onto the table. “Now that, my friends, is what I call daylight robbery. I wouldn’t pay seventy-five pence for it, never mind K.” He met Mike’s stare for a moment, but, as the silence persisted, decided there was little else to detain him. He was chuckling to himself as he went back to the bar, chuckling as he finished his drink and headed out into the night with his scowling colleagues.

Mike watched as the waiting staff’s shoulders relaxed and they scooped up the ice bucket and glasses. Allan’s eyes were on the door. He waited a further few seconds before speaking.

“We could’ve taken them.”

But his hand wasn’t at its steadiest as he lifted the champagne to his mouth. “Rumor has it,” he added from above the rim of his glass, “our chum Calloway pulled off the First Caly heist back in ninety-seven.”

“He should be retired then,” Mike offered.

“Not every retiree is as canny with their cash as you, Mike.”

Gissing had drained his whiskey and was waving towards the bar that a further offering was required. “Maybe we could get him to help us,” he said as he gestured.

“Help us?” Allan echoed.

“Another raid on First Caly,” the professor explained into his empty glass. “We’d be freedom fighters, Allan, fighting for a cause.”

“And what cause might that be?” Mike couldn’t help asking. He was working hard at controlling his breathing, bringing his heartbeat back to something like normal. In the years—around twenty of them—since he’d last seen Calloway, the man had changed substantially. These days he glowed with menace and a sense of his own invulnerability.

“Repatriation of some of those poor imprisoned works of art.” Gissing was grinning as the whiskey arrived. “The infidels have held on to them for long enough. Time we took our revenge.”

“I like your thinking,” Mike said with a smile.

“Why pick on First Caly?” Allan complained. “Plenty of other villains out there.”

“And not all of them as public as Mr. Calloway,” Gissing agreed. “You say you were at school with him, Mike?”

“Same year,” Mike answered, nodding slowly. “He was the kid everyone wanted to know.”

“To know or to be?”

Mike looked at Allan. “Maybe you’re right. Be nice to feel that sense of power.”

“Power through fear isn’t worth the candle,” Gissing grumbled. As the waitress swapped his glass for its replacement, he asked her if Calloway was a regular.

“Now and then,” she said. She sounded South African to Mike.

“Big tipper?” he asked her.

She didn’t like the question. “Look, I just work here...”

“We’re not cops or anything,” Mike assured her. “Just curious.”

“Pays not to be,” she confided, turning on her heel.

“Tidy body,” Allan said appraisingly, ~~once she was out of earshot.~~

“Almost as tidy as our own dear Laura Stanton,” Gissing added, winking in Mike’s direction. By way of response, Mike said he was heading outside for a cigarette.

“Can I bum one off you?” Allan asked as usual.

“And leave an old man on his own?” Gissing pretended to complain, opening the catalog at its first page. “Go on then, off with the pair of you—see if I care...”

Mike and Allan pushed open the door and climbed the five steps leading from the basement bar to the pavement. It had only just grown dark, and the roadway was busy with midweek taxis seeking work.

“Pound to a penny,” Allan said, “when we go back inside he’ll be bending someone’s ear.”

Mike lit both their cigarettes and inhaled deeply. He was down to four or five a day, but couldn’t quite give them up completely. As far as he knew, Allan only smoked when around smokers—*obligatory* smokers. Looking up and down the street, Mike saw no sign of Calloway and his cohorts. Plenty of other bars they could be in. He remembered the bike sheds at school—there really had been bike sheds, though they were only used for improvised soccer games. Behind them, the smokers gathered break and lunchtime, Chib—having earned the nickname even at that early stage in his career—chief among them, breaking open a pack of ten or twenty and selling singles at inflated prices, plus another few pence for a light. Mike hadn’t smoked back then. Instead, he would hang around on the periphery hoping for some sort of welcome into the brotherhood—an invitation that had never come.

“Town’s quiet tonight,” Allan said, flicking ash into the air. “Tourists must be lying low. I always wonder what they think of the place. I mean, it’s home to us; hard to see it with anyone else’s perspective.”

“Thing is, Allan, it’s home to the likes of Chib Calloway, too. Two Edinburghs sharing a single nervous system.”

Allan wagged a finger. “You’re thinking of that program on Channel 4 last night... the Siamese twins.”

“I caught a bit of it.”

“You’re like me—too much TV. We’ll be in our dotage and wondering why we didn’t do more with our lives.”

“Thanks for that.”

“You know what I mean, though—if I had your money I’d be helming a yacht in the Caribbean, landing my helicopter on the roof of that hotel in Dubai...”

“You’re saying I’m wasting away?” Mike was thinking of Gerry Pearson, of emails with embedded photos of speedboats and jet skis...

“I’m saying you should grab what you can with both hands—and that includes the blessed Laura. you nip back to the auction house, she’ll still be there. Ask her out on a date.”

“*Another* date,” Mike corrected him. “And look what happened last time.”

“You give up too easily.” Allan was shaking his head slowly. “It amazes me you ever made any money in business.”

“I did, though, didn’t I?”

“No doubt about it. But...”

“But what?”

“I just get the feeling you’re still not comfortable with it.”

“I don’t like flaunting it, if that’s what you mean. Rubbing my success in other people’s faces.”

Allan looked as though he had more to say, but natural caution won him over and he only nodded. Their attention was distracted by sudden music, pulsing from a car as it cruised towards them. It was gloss-black BMW, looked like an M5. Thin Lizzy on the hi-fi—"The Boys Are Back in Town"—and Chib Calloway in the passenger seat, singing along. The window was down, and his eyes met Mike's again. He made the shape of a pistol with his fingers, thumb curving itself into a trigger, drawing a bead on the two smokers. And then he was gone. Mike noticed that Allan had been watching.

"Still reckon we could've taken them?" he asked.

"No bother," Allan replied, flicking the unsmoked half of his cigarette into the road.

That night, Mike ate alone.

Gissing had suggested dinner, but Allan had said there was work waiting at home. Mike, too, made his excuses, then hoped he wouldn't bump into the professor later on in the restaurant. Thing was, he quite liked eating without company. He'd picked up a paper from a late-opening newsagent's. Walking towards Haymarket, he'd decided on Indian. Restaurants didn't much cater for readers—the lights were usually too low—but he was able to find a table with a wall lamp behind it. In the paper, he read that it was crunch time for Indian restaurants—rice shortages leading to price hikes; tighter immigration meaning fewer chefs were entering the country. When he mentioned this to the waiter, the young man just smiled and shrugged.

The restaurant was pretty full, and Mike's table was too close to a party of five drunks. Their suit jackets were draped over the backs of their chairs. Ties had been loosened or undone altogether. An office night out, Mike guessed, maybe celebrating a satisfactory deal. He knew how those nights could go. People he'd worked with, they'd often commented on how he never seemed to get quite drunk enough, never seemed completely elated whenever a major contract was concluded. He could have told them: *I like to stay in control*. Could have added a postscript: *these days*. The men were on to coffee and brandies by the time his food arrived, meaning that they were getting ready to leave as he asked for his bill. Rising to his feet, he saw that one of the men was losing his balance as he shrugged his arms into his coat. With the diner threatening to back into Mike's table, Mike held a hand out to steady him. The bleary head turned toward him.

"What you up to then?" the man slurred.

"Just stopping you falling over."

Another of the group had decided to step in. "Did you touch him?" he asked Mike. Then, to his friend: "He lay a finger on you, Rab?"

But Rab was concentrating on staying upright, and had nothing further to say on the subject.

"I was trying to help," Mike argued. The men were gathering around him in a semicircle. He knew how easily these things could turn tribal—five against the world.

"Well, help yourself right now and piss off," Rab's friend snapped.

"Before you find your face on the wrong end of a bottling," one of the others piped up. The waiters were looking on anxiously. One had pushed open the nearby swing door to alert the kitchen.

"Fine." With his hands held up in a conciliatory gesture, Mike headed for the street. Once outside he moved briskly along the pavement, glancing back. If they were going to come after him, he wanted a bit of distance. Distance meant time to think, to assess the situation. Risk versus return. He was fifty yards away before the men emerged. They were arm in arm, pointing across the street towards their next destination: another pub.

Probably forgotten about you already, Mike told himself. He knew that he would remember the



encounter in the restaurant. In the next few weeks and months there'd be flashbacks, and he would consider alternative scenarios that would leave him the last man standing, the drunks sprawled at his feet. Aged thirteen, he'd got into a fight with a kid in his class and come off second best. For the rest of his school career, he had plotted elaborate revenge scenarios—without ever carrying them out.

The worlds he moved in these days, there was no need to watch your back. The people were polite and civilized; they had manners and breeding. For all Allan's bravado at the Shining Star, Mike doubted the banker had been in a punch-up in his whole adult life. Walking in the direction of Murrayfield, he thought about student days. He'd found himself in a few bar brawls. Another time, he'd tangled with a potential suitor over a girlfriend... Christ, he couldn't even remember her name! Then there was the night he'd been walking back to his digs with friends and some drunks had lobbed a metal rubbish bin at them. He'd never forget the fight afterwards. It had traveled from the street into an adjacent tenement and out of the back door into a garden, until a woman had screamed from her window that she was calling the police. Mike had emerged with bruised knuckles and a black eye. His opponent had gone down and stayed down.

He wondered how Chib Calloway would have reacted to the situation in the restaurant. But then Calloway traveled with backup—the two men in the bar with him weren't just there for the conversation. One of Mike's colleagues had joked once that he should maybe think about a bodyguard “now that you're so publicly rich.” He'd meant the publication the previous Sunday of a newspaper list placing him in the top five Most Eligible Men in Scotland.

“Nobody needs a bodyguard in Edinburgh,” Mike had answered.

And yet, pausing at a cash machine to take out some money, he looked to right and left, assessing the level of threat. A beggar sat against the shop window next to the bank, head bowed. He looked cold and lonely. Allan had accused Mike once of being a loner—Mike couldn't disagree; didn't mean he was lonely. Tossing a pound coin into the beggar's cup, he headed in the direction of home, some late night music and his collection of paintings. He thought of the professor's words—*those poor imprisoned works of art*—and then of Allan's—*grab what you can with both hands...* A pub door swung on its hinges, expelling a drinker into the night. Mike dodged the stumbling man and kept on walking.

*As one door closes, another one opens...*

So far, it had been another bad day for Chib Calloway.

The problem with surveillance was, even if you knew you were being watched, you couldn't always know who the watchers were. Chib owed a bit of money... all right, a *lot* of money. He owed other things, too, and had been keeping his head down, answering only one or two of his dozen mobile phones, the ones whose numbers only kith, kin, and close associates knew. He'd had two meetings scheduled for lunchtime, but had canceled both. He'd apologized by phone without bothering to explain why. If it got out that he was being tailed, his reputation would dip further. Instead, he'd drunk a couple of cups of coffee at Cento Tre on George Street. It was a pretty upmarket spot—a bank at one time. A lot of Edinburgh's banks had been turned into bars and restaurants. With cash machines everywhere, banks weren't needed. The machines had brought with them a variety of scams, of course: card numbers skimmed, the cards themselves cloned; devices attached to the machine that could transfer the necessary info to a microchip... There were some petrol stations you didn't dare use. They sold your details on. Chib was careful that way. The gangs with the cash machine know-how all seemed to originate overseas—Albania, Croatia, Hungary. When Chib had looked into it as a possible business proposition, he'd been informed that it was something of a closed shop—which rankled, especially when the gangs then targeted Edinburgh.

It was a small city, population of under half a million. Not big enough to attract the major players, which meant a lot of the available territory belonged to Chib. He had understandings with a number of the bar and club owners. The past several years, there'd been no need for a turf war. Chib had served his apprenticeship in turf wars, building up a solid rep as a soldier. He'd worked as a bouncer for Bill McGeehan at his pool hall and at a couple of his pubs in Leith, just Saturday-night stuff, regulars becoming rowdy as the evening dragged, strangers getting uppity with the locals.

In his early teens, he had thought himself a fair footballer, but a trial with Hearts had been a washout. He was reckoned too big, too awkward.

“Switch to rugby, son,” had been the scout's advice.

Rugby! As if...

He'd tried boxing as a means of keeping fit, but couldn't seem to control himself—got in the ring and wanted to lash out with his feet, his knees, his elbows, thrash the opponent to the floor and keep on thrashing.

“Switch to wrestling, son,” had been the advice that time around. But then Billy McGeehan had come to him with another proposal, one that suited Chib fine: he could sign on, pretend to be looking for work, and do some cash-in-hand at weekends—enough to see him through to the next government handout. Slowly, Billy had taken him into his confidence, which meant that when Chib switched allegiances and started working for Lenny Corkery instead, he'd taken a fund of knowledge with him. During the war that followed, Billy had decided to up sticks to Florida, signing over the pool halls and pubs, leaving Lenny Corkery king of the hill and Chib his trusted lieutenant.

But then Lenny had dropped dead on the eleventh fairway at Muirfield, and Chib had made his move. He'd been thinking about it for a while anyway, and Lenny's men hadn't made any complaint—not to his face, at any rate.

“A smooth succession is always best for business,” one of the club owners had commented.

Smooth for the first few years, anyway...

Trouble had been brewing for a while. Not his own fault, not entirely: the cops getting lucky with shipment of coke and eccies, just after the money had changed hands, meaning a double whammy with Chib on its receiving end. This was unfortunate, as he already owed on a shipment of grass that had come into the country by way of a Norwegian trawler. The suppliers, a Hell's Angels chapter from a town with an unpronounceable name, had given him ninety days to settle.

That was a hundred and twenty days ago.

And counting.

He could have gone to Glasgow, secured a loan from one of the heavyweights there, but that would have meant word getting around. It would involve loss of face. Any sign of weakness, there'd be vultures hovering... and worse.

He'd demolished those two cups of Italian coffee without tasting them, but knew from his heartbeat that they'd been extra-strength. Johnno and Glenn had accompanied him, all three of them squeezed into a booth by the window, while good-looking women took the other tables, not giving them the time of day. Stuck-up bitches. He knew the type: shopping at Harvey Nicks; cocktails at the Shining Star later on; and a lettuce leaf to sustain them between times. Their husbands and boyfriends would work in banking or as lawyers—bloodsuckers, in other words. Big houses in the Grange, skiing holidays, dinner parties. It was an Edinburgh he'd hardly been aware of while growing up. As a young man, his Saturdays had been about football (if Hearts were at home and a rumble with the away fans seemed probable), or the pub. Maybe chasing skirt along Rose Street or attempting chat-ups in the St James Centre. George Street, all boutiques and jewelry windows with no prices, had seemed alien to him—and still did. Which didn't stop him coming here: why shouldn't he? He had the same cash in his pockets as anyone else. He wore Nicole Fahri polo tops and DKNY coats. Shoes from Kurt Geiger, socks by Paul Smith... He was as good as any other bastard. Better than the bulk of them. He lived in the *real* world.

“Warts and fucking all.”

“What's that, boss?” Glenn asked, making Chib realize he'd spoken the words aloud. Chib ignored him and asked a passing waitress for the bill, then turned his attention back to his two foot soldiers. Glenn had already been outside on a recce, reporting back that there was no one loitering in the vicinity.

“What about office windows?” Chib had asked.

“I checked.”

“In one of the shops maybe, pretending to browse?”

“I already said.” Glenn had bristled. “If there's anyone out there, they're better than good.”

“They don't have to be better than good,” Chib had snapped back. “Just better than *you*.” Then he'd gone back to gnawing his bottom lip, the way he sometimes did when he was thinking. Until, having paid the bill, he'd come to a decision.

“Okay then... the two of you can eff off.”

“Boss?” Johnno this time, trying to work out if he'd heard right.

Chib didn't say anything, but the way he saw it was, if it was the Angels or someone like them, they'd be more likely to make their move if he was alone. And if it was the cops... well, he wasn't sure. But at least he'd know, one way or the other. It was a plan. It was *something*.

The look on Glenn's face, however, told him this didn't mean it was necessarily better than nothing...

Chib's idea was to hit the shopping crowds on Princes Street. Cars weren't allowed down there, so

any tail would have to come after him on foot. He could then climb the steep flight of steps at the side of the Mound and head for the quieter streets of the Old Town, streets where anyone following on foot would be easy to spot.

It was a plan.

But not much better than nothing, as he soon learned. He'd told Glenn and Johnno to stay with the car, he would call them when he needed them. Then he'd headed down Frederick Street, crossing to the quieter side of Princes Street, the side with no shops. The Castle loomed above him. He could make out the tiny shapes of tourists as they leaned over the battlements. He hadn't been inside the Castle for years; seemed to remember a school trip there, but he'd sneaked away after twenty minutes and headed into town. A couple of years back, he'd been cornered in a bar by someone he knew. The man had confided a carefully thought-out scheme to steal the Scottish Crown Jewels, but Chib had given him a slap across the jaw for his trouble.

"Castle's not just for tourists," he'd explained to the hapless drunk. "It's a working bloody garrison. How you going to sneak the jewels past that lot, eh?"

He crossed the foot of the Mound at the traffic lights and walked towards the steps. Kept stopping and casting glances back—no sign of anyone. Bloody hell, though... Peering up the incline, he realized just how steep the steps actually were. He wasn't used to walking. The shoppers and tourists on Princes Street hadn't helped his blood pressure. He'd broken into a sweat just dodging the buses as he crossed the road. What was the point of banning cars when the place just became a racetrack for taxicabs and double-deckers? He knew he couldn't face climbing those steps, so stood his ground for a moment instead, weighing up alternatives. He could take a detour into Princes Street Gardens—couldn't stomach the thought of Princes Street itself again. There was a big Greek-style building in front of him; two of them, actually, one behind the other. Art galleries: he knew that much. One of them, they'd wrapped its pillars last year to make them look like soup cans. Something to do with an exhibition. Chib remembered the three guys in the bar. He'd gone over to their table knowing a fifteen-second glare would put the frighteners on them, and it had. That catalog they'd been perusing—full of paintings. Now here he was outside the National Gallery of Scotland. Yeah, why not? Sort of like a sign from above. Plus, if anyone followed him inside, he'd know for sure. As he walked up to the door, it was held open for him by one of the staff. Chib hesitated, hand in pocket.

"How much?" he asked.

"No charge, sir," the guard answered. He even gave a little bow.

Ransome watched as the door swung shut behind Chib Calloway.

"Now I really *have* seen everything," he muttered to himself, reaching into his coat for his phone. Ransome was a detective inspector with Lothian and Borders Police. His colleague, Detective Sergeant Ben Brewster, was in an unmarked car, parked somewhere between the Mound and George Street. Brewster picked up straightaway.

"He's gone into the National Gallery," Ransome explained.

"Meeting someone?" Brewster's voice was tinny; it sounded like he was being beamed down from a space station somewhere.

"Dunno, Ben. Looked to me like he was considering the Playfair Steps, but then thought better of it."

"Know which I'd choose." Brewster was chuckling.

"Can't say I was looking forward to hauling myself up them," Ransom agreed.

“Reckon he’s spotted you?”

“Not a chance. Where are you?”

“Double-parked on Hanover Street and not making many friends. Are you going to follow him inside?”

“I don’t know. More chance of him clocking me indoors than out.”

“Well, he knows *someone’s* watching him—so why ditch the two stooges?”

“That’s a good question, Ben.” Ransome was checking his watch. Not that he needed to—a blast to his right was followed by a puff of smoke from the Castle’s ramparts: the one o’clock gun. He peered down into the Gardens. There was an exit from the gallery down there... no way he could cover both doors. “Stay put,” he said into his phone. “I’m going to give it five or ten minutes.”

“Your call,” Brewster said.

“My call,” Ransome agreed. He slipped the phone back into his pocket and gripped the railings with both hands. It all looked so orderly down in the Gardens. A train was rumbling along the railway track, making for Waverley Station. Again, all very calm and orderly—Edinburgh was that kind of city. You could live your whole life and never get any inkling of what else was going on, even when it was living next door to you. He turned his attention towards the Castle. It appeared to him sometimes like a stern parent, frowning on any impropriety below. If you looked at a map of the city, you were struck by the contrast between the New Town to the north and the Old Town to the south. The first was planned and geometric and rational, the second higgledy-piggledy and seemingly chaotic, buildings erected wherever space permitted. Story was, back in the old days they kept adding floors to the tenements until they started collapsing in on themselves. Ransome liked the feel of the Old Town even today, but he had always dreamed of living in one of the New Town’s elegant Georgian terraces. That was why he took a weekly lottery ticket—only chance he was ever going to get on a CID salary.

Chib Calloway, on the other hand, could easily afford the New Town life, but chose instead to live in a ticky-tack housing development on the western outskirts of the city, only a couple of miles from where he’d grown up. There was, it seemed to Ransome, no accounting for taste.

The detective didn’t think Chib would linger in the gallery—to someone like him, surely art had to act like kryptonite. He would emerge either from the main door, or from the one in the Gardens. Ransome knew he had to make a decision. But then again... how much did it matter in the great scheme of things? The meetings Chib had arranged—the ones Ransome knew about—were no longer going to happen. No evidence would be gathered; several more hours of Ransome’s life wasted as a result. Ransome was in his early thirties, ambitious and alive to possibilities. Chib Calloway would be a trophy, no doubt about that. Not, perhaps, as much of a trophy as four or five years ago, but back then Ransome had been a lowly detective constable and unable to direct (or even suggest to his superiors) a long-term surveillance operation. Now, though, he had inside info, and that could mean the difference between failure and success. One of Ransome’s first CID cases had been a push against Calloway, but in court the gangster’s expensive lawyer had picked apart the evidence—to the cost of the youngest member of the team of investigators.

*Detective Constable Ransome... you’re sure that’s your correct title? Only, I’ve known plain constables with more apparent ability.* The advocate smug and ruddy-cheeked in his wig; and Chib Calloway braying in the dock, wagging a finger at Ransome as the young detective sloped from the witness box. Afterwards, his team leader had tried telling him it didn’t matter. But it had; it did; all the way down the passing years.

The time felt right to him... right here, right now. Everything he knew, everything he suspected, led to one imminent prospect: Chib Calloway’s life was about to implode.

It might well be messy, might happen without any interference from Ransome himself, but that didn't mean he couldn't be there to enjoy it.

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Nor did it mean he couldn't take the credit...

Chib Calloway waited in the foyer for a couple of minutes, but the only other arrivals were a middle-aged couple with Australian accents and leathery skin. He pretended to be studying a floor plan of the building, then gave a twitch of the mouth, signaling to the guards that he was quite satisfied with arrangements. Taking a deep breath, he walked inside.

It was quiet in the gallery. Bloody big rooms, too, echoing with coughs and whispers. He saw the Aussies again, plus some overseas students who were being taken around by a guide. No way they were locals—too tanned, too fashion-conscious. They shuffled slowly, near-silently past the huge canvases, looking bored. Not too many guards in here. Chib craned his neck, seeking out the all-seeing CCTV cameras. They were just where he thought they'd be. No wires trailing from the paintings, though, meaning no alarms. Some of them looked fixed to the walls by screws, but by no means all of them. Even if they were, thirty seconds with a Stanley knife and you'd have what you came for... most of it, anyway. The canvas, if not the frame. Half a dozen pensioners in uniforms—no problem at all.

Chib sat himself down on an upholstered bench in the middle of one of the rooms and felt his heart rate begin to slow. He pretended to be interested in the painting opposite, a landscape with mountains and temples and sunbeams. There were a few figures in the foreground, dressed in flowing white robes. He'd no idea what any of it was supposed to mean. One of the foreign students—a bronzed, Spanish-looking lad—blocked his view for a moment before moving to the side to check out the information panel on the wall, oblivious to Chib's glare: *Hey, pal, this is my painting, my city, my country...*

Another man walked into the room: older than the student and better dressed. A black woolen overcoat fell to just above his feet. His shoes were black, glossy, and unscuffed. He carried a folded newspaper and looked like he was just killing time, cheeks puffed out. Chib gave him the stare all the same, and decided he knew the face from somewhere. His stomach clenched—was this whoever'd been tailing him? Didn't look like a villain, but then he didn't look much like a cop either. Where had Chib seen him before? The visitor had given the painting the briefest of glances, and was heading away, brushing past the student. He was already out of the room by the time Chib placed him.

Chib got to his feet and made to follow.

Mike Mackenzie had recognized the gangster straightaway, hoping it wasn't too obvious when he exited the room pronto. This collection wasn't really his thing anyway; he'd only come into town to do a bit of shopping: shirts to start with (not that he'd found any he liked). Then some eau de cologne and a slight detour into Thistle Street and Joseph Bonnar's jewelry shop. Joe specialized in nice antique pieces, and Mike had gone there with Laura in mind. He'd been thinking of that opal around her neck, imagining her wearing something different, something unusual.

Something bought by him.

But though Joe was a master of his craft—Mike had a pocket watch back home to prove it—he hadn't managed to work his charms this time. Mainly because it had suddenly dawned on Mike: *what the hell am I doing?* Would Laura thank him for the gesture? What exactly would she read into it? Did she even like amethysts and rubies and sapphires?

"Call again, Mr. Mackenzie," Bonnar had said, opening the door for him. "It's been too long." So no shirts and no jewelry. One o'clock had found him on Princes Street, not quite hungry enough for lunch and within a stone's throw of the National Gallery. His mind felt clogged; hard to say why he'd been drawn to the place. There were some nice pieces—he'd be the first to acknowledge as much—but it was all a bit stuffy and reverential. "Art is good for you," the collection seemed to be saying. "Here we have some."

The past few days, he'd been mulling over Professor Gissing's argument about art as collateral. He wondered what percentage of the world's art was actually kept in bank vaults and the like. Like unread books and unplayed music, did it matter that art went unseen? In a generation's time, it would still be there, awaiting rediscovery. And was he himself any better? He'd visited regional galleries and viewed their collections, knowing he had better examples of some of the artists hanging on his walls at home. Wasn't each home and living room a private gallery of sorts?

*Help some of those poor imprisoned paintings to escape.*

Not from public galleries, of course, but from wall safes and bank vaults and the unvisited rooms and corridors of all those corporate buyers. First Caledonian Bank, for example, had a portfolio running into the tens of millions—most of the usual suspects (they even boasted an early Bacon), plus the cream of new talent, snapped up at all those annual degree shows around the UK by the bank's portfolio curator. Other companies in Edinburgh owned their own hauls and were sitting tight on them the way a miser would sit on a mattress filled with cash.

Mike was wondering: maybe if *he* made a gesture. Opened a gallery and placed his own collection there... could he persuade others to join him? Talk to First Caly and all the other big players. Make a thing of it. Maybe that was why he'd felt drawn to the National Gallery—the perfect place to do a little more thinking on the subject. The last person he'd expected to see was Chib Calloway. And now turning around, here was Calloway stalking towards him, smile fixed but eyes hard and unblinking.

"You keeping tabs on me?" the gangster growled.

"Wouldn't have taken you for a patron of the arts," was all Mike could think of by way of an answer.

"Free country, isn't it?" Calloway bristled.

Mike flinched. "Sorry, that came out all wrong. My name's Mike Mackenzie, by the way." The tw

men shook hands.

“Charlie Calloway.”

“But most people call you Chib, right?”

“You know who I am, then?” Calloway considered for a moment and then nodded slowly. “I remember now—your pals couldn’t look at me, but you held eye contact throughout.”

“And you pretended to shoot me as you drove away.”

Calloway offered a grudging smile. “Least it wasn’t the real thing, eh?”

“So what brings you here today, Mr. Calloway?”

“I was just remembering that book of paintings, the one you lot were poring over in the bar. I take it you know about art, Mike?”

“I’m learning.”

“So... this one we’re standing beside...” Calloway took a step back. “Guy on a horse, so far as I can see. Not a bad likeness.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “How much would it fetch?”

“Unlikely it would ever come to auction.” Mike gave a shrug. “Couple of million?” he guessed.

“Hell’s teeth.” Calloway moved along to the next painting. “And this one here?”

“Well, that’s a Rembrandt... tens of millions.”

“*Tens!*”

Mike looked around. A couple of the liveried custodians were beginning to take an interest. He gave them his most winning smile and started to move away in the opposite direction, Calloway catching him up only after a few more seconds of staring at the Rembrandt self-portrait.

“It’s not really about the money, though, is it?” Mike heard himself say, even though he knew only a part of him really believed that.

“Isn’t it?”

“What would you rather look at—a work of art, or a framed selection of banknotes?”

Calloway had retrieved one of his hands from its pocket, and he was now rubbing the underside of his chin. “I’ll tell you what, Mike—ten million in cash wouldn’t be on the wall long enough to find out.”

They shared a laugh and Calloway ran his free hand across the top of his head. Mike began to wonder about the other hand—the one in the pocket. Was it holding a gun? A knife? Had Calloway come in here with something other than browsing in mind?

“So what *is* it all about then,” the gangster was asking, “if not the money?”

“Money plays a big part,” Mike was forced to admit. He glanced at his watch. “Look, there’s a cafe downstairs... do you fancy a quick coffee?”

“I’ve had a stomachful,” Calloway said with a shake of the head. “Might manage a cup of tea, though.”

“My treat, Mr. Calloway.”

“Call me Chib.”

So they headed down the winding staircase, Calloway inquiring about prices, Mike explaining that he’d only been interested in art for a year or two and wasn’t exactly an expert. One thing he didn’t want Calloway to know was that he had a collection of his own, a collection some would doubtless term “extensive.” But as they queued at the service counter, Calloway asked him what he did for a living.

“Software design,” Mike said, deciding that he would elaborate as little as possible.

“Cutthroat business, is it?”

“It’s high pressure, if that’s what you mean.”



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