



# When You're Lost

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**Category:** Crime And Mafia, Thriller, Suspense

**Description:** Recently put on leave and divorced after he caught his wife cheating on him, Finn needs a fresh start in life. He thought a visit to an old friend in a tranquil small town in England would be a good step—until his friend needs his expertise with a series of murders in spectacular estates. With the local police chief impressed, Finn is asked to stay on, as they need his help. As Finn's eyes are opened to a world of storied wealth, history and privacy, he realizes that he has much to learn—but that killers are universal....

A page-turning crime thriller featuring a brilliant and tortured FBI agent, the Finn Wright series is a riveting mystery, packed with non-stop action, suspense, twists and turns, revelations, and driven by a breakneck pace that will keep you flipping pages late into the night. Fans of Rachel Caine, Teresa Driscoll and Robert Dugoni are sure to fall in love.

**Total Pages (Source):** 52

## PROLOGUE

Victoria Palmer felt the last rays of the waning sun stretch over her shoulders as she tried to capture the light on her canvas. She was an old woman—well into her seventies—yet she still possessed a steady hand for delicate brushstrokes. Her hair had once been the color of honey but was now a muted silver, swept into a small bun at the nape of her neck. She sat perched on a folding stool in her back garden, wearing a frayed straw hat, the brim shading her eyes from what remained of the early morning light. It was a type of light she was trying to capture and one that did not hang around for long.

A pair of sturdy, dark-green wellies covered her feet. She wasn't sure how much longer she could remain outside before the cold of early March settled into her joints, but she was determined to finish as much of this painting as she could. Behind her rose the modest stone cottage where she lived—ivy crawling along the walls, a thatched roof in dire need of an update. She'd been meaning to hire someone, but the trouble had seemed so minor compared to her immediate needs.

The back garden was both her pride and her refuge. It took up a decent stretch of land, bordered on three sides by tall hedgerows. These hedges—trimmed at the top but dense in the middle—were thick enough to block the wind and create a sense of seclusion. At the far end of the garden, an iron gate stood, leading to a narrow lane behind the property. The lane wound beyond fields and a few scattered houses, including her friend Daisy's place.

If Victoria looked past her easel, she could make out the lines of the gate from where she sat. It was a simple wrought-iron design with vertical bars, but thick patches of

untrimmed growth on both sides made it feel half-reclaimed by nature. And though she tried to keep her eyes on the painting, she found herself glancing toward that gate every so often—drawn by a nagging worry she couldn't name.

She dabbed her paintbrush in a spot of ocher mixed with white, carefully adding lighter tones to the sky on her canvas. The painting itself showed the scene of her garden in the early sunrise: the lawn, the hedges, the line of daffodils that were only just beginning to open, and the cottage in the right foreground. She wanted to highlight how the early morning sun's last beams gilded the stone walls and made the damp grass glisten. The composition was coming along, but she wanted to get the hedgerows right, too—the way they loomed just so, with their mottled greens and browns.

Her gaze flicked to the real hedgerow, then inevitably drifted once more to the gate. The iron bars stood silent. There was no silhouette, no movement, just the emptiness of the lane beyond. Victoria gave her brush a small sigh.

“Calm down, woman,” she muttered under her breath. “Nothing there. Just your imagination.”

She returned to the painting, aware the light was weakening. In about ten minutes, she wouldn't be able to pick out the subtleties of color she needed. With swift strokes, she tried to capture the shifting hue in the sky—somewhere between lavender and pale gold. A few more seconds passed in relative peace, the only sounds a distant blackbird warbling and the faint rustle of a breeze. Then she heard a sharp noise from the lane—a scrape, like metal against stone.

She froze. For a moment she listened, paintbrush suspended midair. The noise didn't repeat. Slowly, she stood, setting her brush on the wooden ledge of the easel. Her knees protested, but curiosity and caution propelled her forward. She walked toward the gate, the hem of her tattered sweater brushing her legs. The moment she placed her

hand on the cold iron, her heart thudded heavily in her chest.

She nudged the gate open and peered through. Evening shadows stretched along the lane's packed dirt surface, the tall hedgerow on the opposite side creating pockets of darkness. Victoria stepped out, letting the gate creak behind her. A quick wave of unease made her stomach churn. She saw no one. The lane lay empty, quiet.

She pressed her lips together. "Hello?" she called softly, hardly daring to raise her voice above the hush of the countryside. Wind teased the branches overhead, but no person answered.

After half a minute, she stepped back into her garden, closing the gate firmly with a clang. She walked back to her seat, scolding herself as she went.

"Jumpy old fool," she whispered, settling onto the folding stool again. "You're seeing ghosts and hearing nonsense."

But she knew exactly why she was on edge. She rubbed her free hand along her elbow, recalling how, two nights ago, she'd been startled awake around midnight by a scratching noise. At first, she thought it was the branches outside her bedroom window. Then she realized it came from the front door. Alarmed, she had hurried to her window and peered out. Sure enough, a figure was crouched at the door—tall and wearing something dark. She couldn't see their face, but she could see an arm moving, a hand scratching at the wood or carving something.

She'd called down at the person, voice trembling, "Who are you? Stop that! I'm calling the police!" The figure hadn't even glanced up. That had terrified her more than if they'd run away immediately. Instead, they just... continued. She dialed the police station—her heart hammering so loudly she could barely hear the ringtone. When she looked back out the window, the figure was gone.

The police had come and found nothing but some faint scratches on the door's surface that looked almost like letters, but they weren't sure. They'd told Victoria to keep her doors locked and to call if she saw anything else. The entire ordeal made her uneasy. She'd gone to bed with that feeling of dread lodged in her chest, and now, every noise set her off.

She sighed, refocusing on her painting. The early color in the sky was nearly gone. She'd either have to wrap up soon or paint on memory. Still, she tried to capture a final flurry of detail in the garden scene, lightly brushing in the suggestion of pebbles on the footpath near the hedgerow. She forced herself not to look at the gate. But within moments, her eyes darted there anyway.

Nothing. Just the black iron bars, silent and dull in the dimming light.

She dabbed a few finishing touches at the row of daffodils. The smell of turpentine and paint mingled with the fresh, earthy scent of the garden. Then, wanting to rest her arm, she turned to pick up her glass of lemonade from the small foldable table. The liquid was cool—probably too tart from the extra lemon she always added, but it refreshed her. She took a steadying sip, telling herself everything was fine and that the local police would patrol the area more frequently.

When she set the glass down, a quick rustling noise snagged her attention—like fabric or a sleeve brushing against leaves. It came from the hedgerow behind her. Could have been the wind, but it sounded... heavier.

Her pulse spiked. "Hello?" she ventured, forcing her voice to sound braver than she felt. "Show yourself!"

A span of quiet followed. She realized her own breathing was loud in her ears. Eyes narrowed, she stepped closer to the gate again, this time being careful not to make as much noise. The gate was latched, so she pressed her face near the bars, peering into

the lane. The passing gloom made it tough to see past the bend. She risked unlatching the gate, pushing it open with a squeak, and leaned her head out into the lane's hush. The hedge on the other side was tall and thick. If anyone was out there, they could easily slip behind that corner, but she saw no movement.

"I...I'll call the police," she tried once more, voice echoing faintly off the hedgerow. The lane remained empty.

She withdrew, letting the gate swing closed. "You old goose," she chastised herself audibly. "Nothing's there but your shadows. Even if someone had been there, they're gone now."

Back at her easel, she paused, a pang of frustration rippling through her. She needed a finished painting, but her focus was shot. One ear was practically tuned to every small noise. Standing there, half-silhouetted by the cottage lights behind her, she gave a short, unamused laugh.

"Right, that's enough for one day," she said to herself. Still, the painting was so close to completion that a small part of her argued to keep going. She tried, for several more seconds, to add faint detail to the leaves at the top of the hedgerow. But her brushstrokes felt jerky, her mind not on it.

Disgusted with her own nerves, she set the brush down. "I can't go on like this. Let's have a chat with Daisy," she muttered. She fished her mobile from her cardigan pocket and dialed.

The phone barely rang twice before Daisy answered, voice warm and lilting, "Victoria, everything all right, dear?"

Victoria forced a bit of brightness into her tone. "I'm not entirely sure. I keep thinking someone's snooping around the back lane, but every time I check, there's nobody

there."She hesitated, then her voice dropped."You remember I told you about that strange person the other night at my front door?Well, I'm sure I'm not imagining things."

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

There was a rustling on Daisy's end of the line, perhaps as she moved about her own kitchen. "Oh dear. I can send Tyler around right now, if that would help. It's his day off. He's just upstairs, fiddling with who-knows-what on his computer."

"Could you?" Victoria asked softly, relief creeping in. "I'd rather not call the police again with no real evidence. Just... see if Tyler can come by the back way, in case someone is lurking near the gate?"

Daisy's tone was resolute. "Of course, love. He'll be there in a jiffy, and he'll check around the hedgerow. You just sit tight, all right?"

Victoria exhaled. "Thank you, Daisy."

Hanging up, she immediately felt calmer. Tyler, Daisy's son, was a strapping twenty-year-old, used to farm work, and although he was kind, he had a hard edge to him. If someone was skulking about, Tyler would flush them out. She gripped her phone, feeling foolish for letting fear clamp down on her so thoroughly.

Still, she glanced at the painting with regret. "Right," she repeated. She rose from the stool. Her knees crackled in protest, but she forced them to move. Gently, she slid the brushes into a jar of water so the paint wouldn't dry in the bristles. The colors of the early sunrise had taken effect, but there was a gloom that had settled over the garden as a thick band of cloud acted as a barrier to the great blue beyond. The horizon glowed a pale lavender, soon to be replaced by the brighter morning.

Then she heard it—a dull thump against the gate. She froze, heart leaping into her throat. For a moment she considered ignoring it, but her nerves were taut.



“It’s the breeze,” she whispered, flexing her fingers. “Probably just the wind pushing it.”

But no wind brushed her cheeks. The air had grown almost unnaturally still. Her every sense went on high alert, scanning the gloom for a shape or silhouette. Time seemed to slow. She waited, but the thump did not repeat. Slowly, her breathing steadied, and she told herself it must indeed be just a momentary jostle from a stray gust.

A few seconds later, footsteps. This time, the sound was unmistakable: measured steps scraping along the lane’s dirt. They came closer, accompanied by a slight scuff of shoes.

She put a hand to her chest. “Tyler?” she called, voice tinged with the barest hint of hope. “Is that you?”

From beyond the gate, a muffled reply: “Yup.”

Victoria felt a wave of relief so strong her knees nearly buckled. “Oh, thank goodness,” she murmured, hustling over to unfasten the latch. “I’m so glad you’re—”

She pulled the gate wide enough to poke her head into the lane. The shape looming over her didn’t match Tyler’s lean silhouette. In the vague half-light, she glimpsed broader shoulders, a heavier frame. Alarm crashed into her gut. She tried to step back, tried to slam the gate shut, but the figure moved too fast.

A glint of metal caught her eye—a cleaver, impossibly large. Her mouth opened to scream, but only a strangled gasp emerged. The stranger raised the cleaver high.

This can’t be real. She thought. This can’t be happening.

She didn’t even feel the first blow. She only registered a flash of silver, then an abrupt

sensation that her entire body jerked. The cleaver bit into her flesh with a sickening sound. Shock flared, bright and cold. Victoria's final thought was a dawning realization that she should have never opened the gate.

Her vision collapsed into darkness. A momentary awareness told her that her body—her very self—was no longer in one piece. Then, that consciousness faded, leaving only the hush of the garden, the creeping shadows of the early sun, and a silent iron gate swaying open into the empty lane.

## CHAPTER ONE

Finn felt the morning breeze cool the sweat on his face as he and Amelia rounded the far side of the lake. The park spread out around them—early joggers, parents pushing strollers, and an older couple walking hand in hand. But he hardly noticed anyone else. His world, at that moment, was simply the rhythm of his breathing, the slap of his trainers on the path, and Amelia's steady presence right beside him; athletic, red hair up in a ponytail, and a vision of beauty to Finn even when being competitive. Finn was pushing himself—not quite at full tilt, but enough that he felt his quads burning.

His lungs protested a bit when he tried to talk. "We... can stop... whenever you want," he managed, glancing sideways at Amelia. Her ponytail swished from side to side, and she looked remarkably unflustered despite the quick pace.

"Stop?" Amelia replied, arching an eyebrow. "If... If you're tired, by all means, Finn. But... I'm fine."

He puffed out a chuckle. "Oh, I'm more than fine. I'm only running at... maybe fifty percent right now." The words came out between panted breaths.

Amelia let out a quiet laugh. "Fifty, is that all? I'm at twenty."

Finn nearly stumbled, shooting her an incredulous look. “Twenty? If that were true, you’d have lapped me by now.”

She gave an effortless shrug, eyes dancing with good humor. “I’m merely sparing you the embarrassment. Don’t want to make the entire United States look bad.”

He burst into laughter. It came out loud enough that a nearby jogger glanced over with mild curiosity. Amelia smirked in satisfaction. They continued in a synchronized stride for a few moments more, the patter of their feet blending with ducks quacking at the lake’s edge.

When they reached a slight incline near a stand of willow trees, Finn noticed Amelia’s breath quicken at last. He shot her a teasing smile. “I’m surprised you’ve still got so much energy, considering how late you were up last night.”

Amelia’s eyes flicked away, just briefly. “I’m sorry,” she said, pushing a strand of hair back from her forehead. “It’s just... things have been complicated.” They crested the small slope and headed downhill, letting momentum carry them. “The task force trying to track Wendell Reed’s whereabouts had me on a call until midnight. But I think they are annoyed the Home Office has told them to consult me.”

Finn’s tone turned a shade more serious. “Hey, I understand. I just—” He paused to leap over a stray twig on the path. “I’d love to help you guys if I could. You know, handle the Wendell problem as a team. After all, we’re not exactly novices at finding dangerous criminals.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

Amelia breathed out hard, controlling her pace. "I asked about that. They said it's already enough of a courtesy that I'm involved. They don't want more outside help. 'Too many cooks spoil the broth,' was the phrase." She rolled her eyes at the memory.

Finn shook his head. "They just don't get it, do they? It's personal to you. You're the one who originally caught him. And he's obviously hell-bent on revenge. Why else would he have been watching you outside the Monarch Club?"

She swallowed, a shadow crossing her expression. "I'm sure he's toying with me. It's a mess."

They slowed a fraction, coming around another bend of the lake. A scattering of geese waddled nearby, eyeing the runners warily. Finn glanced up at the park's leafless trees—Spring still felt in its infancy, and the sky was a dull gray. Still, the loop around the lake was beautiful. This run had become their routine whenever they wanted to talk in relative peace without the bustle of city noise.

He decided to pivot the conversation. "Hey, Rob told me yesterday that his aunt has extended my lease on the cottage for another twelve months. That's a load off my mind. I thought she might want it back by May."

"Really?" Amelia gave him a warm smile. "That's good. Would you ever think of buying it from her if she's living abroad permanently? That might be simpler than indefinite rent."

Finn slowed his stride, considering the notion. "I'd love to. It's a nice place—it feels

like home. But... finances aren't exactly robust right now, you know after I gave up half of the apartment to my ex. I wanted her set up properly, but it was a bit of a hit."

Amelia's eyes flickered with a mixture of admiration and disbelief. "That was a noble thing to do, Finn. Possibly not the cleverest move financially, but definitely noble."

A playful grin tugged at his lips. "Noble like a knight, then?"

She snorted. "I was thinking more stable boy. But sure, if a knight is what you need to hear."

He let out a sarcastic gasp, but his laughter was soon cut short by the shrill ring of Amelia's phone. They both slowed to a jog, then to a full stop, breathing heavily in the crisp morning air. Amelia pulled out her phone, pressing it to her ear. Finn couldn't catch the words, just the low sounds of a voice on the other end. Her face grew focused, eyebrows knitting.

"I'll be right over," she said, her posture taut. When she ended the call, she looked at Finn apologetically. "Wendell Reed was spotted at a London jeweler's shop yesterday, apparently. I need to check it out with the task force."

Finn felt a surge of concern. "He was at a jeweler's? That's... unusual. Could he be trying to hock stolen goods, or—?"

She shook her head, already stepping into motion. "I don't know. Probably. Either way, they want me in, so I have to go." She hesitated, leaning up to kiss him quickly. He returned the kiss, resting his hand on her shoulder for a moment.

"Want me to walk you to your car?" he asked.

She looked over his shoulder toward the car park, which was visible just through a

row of hedges. "I'm literally a minute away, Finn. You might need to keep running, or you'll get stiff." Her lips curved in an affectionate smile.

"Okay," he agreed. "Be careful."

She nodded, giving him a gentle press on his arm and a kiss on his cheek. "I promise."

Finn watched as Amelia jogged off across the grass, then broke into a brisk walk. She left the path, heading up a short bank to the parking area. He caught sight of her swinging open the driver's side door, glancing back once, then slipping behind the wheel. The engine rumbled to life, and soon she was gone, merging onto the nearby road. In the sudden stillness, Finn realized how empty the moment felt without her beside him.

He took a deep breath, the cool air filling his lungs. A faint swirl of regret mingled with worry for Amelia's safety; Wendell Reed was no small threat. He wished he could help her the way she had helped him when Max Vilne was on the loose.

Turning away from the distant hum of traffic, Finn strode to a nearby wooden bench beside the lake. Instead of continuing his run, he lowered himself onto the bench, resting his forearms on his thighs. The water's surface rippled in slow circles, a pair of ducks drifting lazily. Beyond, tall reeds swayed, their golden stalks catching whatever feeble sunlight broke through the clouds.

He rubbed the back of his neck, thinking about Amelia, thinking about Wendell, about the uncertainty of the future. He wanted to be more involved. He understood the task force's caution, but it still left him feeling sidelined. As if fate wanted to remind him that life never stayed quiet for long, his phone vibrated. Glancing at the screen, he saw Chief Rob Collins' name flash across.

He answered on the second ring. "Hey, Rob."

“Finn!” Rob’s voice came through with a note of urgency. “Where are you?”

“At the park. Why, what’s up?”

“I’ve just been handed a new case by the Home Office. A murder in the Cotswolds. Victim named Victoria Palmer—a well-respected museum curator and artist. It happened early this morning. A particularly nasty one.”

Finn closed his eyes momentarily. This was exactly the sort of scenario he usually faced with Amelia at his side. “That’s terrible,” he said quietly. “I guess you want me on it?”

“Yeah,” Rob replied. “I know you and Amelia usually come as a pair, but I heard Amelia’s joined the Wendell Reed task force on a lead. She’s not going to be available for a while, from what I gather.”

“No,” Finn admitted, glancing again toward where Amelia’s car had disappeared. “It’s just me, I’m afraid. That all right?”

Rob gave a short laugh. “I mean, half the dream team’s better than nothing. You know how these things go.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

Finn snorted softly. "Half will have to do."

"Of course," Rob said lightly. "In fact, she's probably three-quarters of the dream team. But I'll make do with the remaining quarter if it means we can solve this murder quickly." He paused, as if giving Finn a moment to protest.

"All right, that's enough," Finn teased. "Keep your granddad jokes to yourself. Send me the details, and I'll head out. Might as well keep myself busy."

A quiet moment passed, then Rob added more gently, "She'll be fine, you know. Amelia, I mean."

Finn swallowed a tinge of worry. "Yeah. She's capable of handling anything, but Wendell is... personal to her. I just want to be sure."

"You always do," Rob said in a tone that suggested he understood all the unspoken weight behind Finn's words. "Let me email you everything on Victoria Palmer's murder, and we'll coordinate from there. Take care, mate."

"Thanks, Rob," Finn said, ending the call.

He lingered on the bench, phone still in hand. A breeze stirred, rippling the surface of the lake. It was as if the water's gentle motion mirrored the unsettled feeling in his chest. He had grown so used to Amelia's presence whenever a new case came knocking—her sharp insight, her calm approach. Now, he'd be delving into a homicide alone. The last time he'd worked solo, he'd ended up in more trouble than he cared to recount.



He took one last moment to collect his thoughts, staring at the water as it lapped against the low bank. "Idle hands," he murmured, recalling an old saying. Then, with a wry grin, he finished it, his voice subdued in the cool air. "Idle hands are the devil's workshop."

He started up the path towards his car as the morning air seemed to fall more silent than it had any right to.

## CHAPTER TWO

Finn pulled his red Corvette to a halt on the dirt shoulder outside the low stone wall of Victoria Palmer's cottage. The engine rumbled for a moment before settling into silence. Beyond the wall, a small Cotswolds house nestled amid bare shrubs and leafless trees, the early spring sunlight illuminating a pair of uniformed police officers stationed at the entrance. Yellow forensic tape fluttered in a mild breeze. It all looked so incongruous—a quaint rural setting turned into a murder scene.

He stepped out of the car, pushing the door shut with a squeak. Rob stood on the gravel path, thick coat pulled tight over his Chief Constable's uniform, arms crossed. A mild tension lay in the tilt of his head; he always got that look when the watchful eyes of the Home Office were involved. Finn forced a wry grin, approaching him.

"You don't look happy to see me," Finn remarked, glancing around at the cluster of police vehicles and a forensics van. It seemed half the local constabulary had converged.

"It's nothing, just the Home Office on my back," Rob replied, but his expression contradicted the words. He rubbed the back of his neck. "Walk with me."

They headed up a short flagstone walkway. Finn noticed fresh footprints overlapping

older ones—some from the forensics team, presumably. He frowned, but Rob's voice drew his attention away.

"The Home Office is aware Amelia's on the Wendell Reed task force," Rob began. "They'd hoped to have you two working together on this case."

Finn shrugged. "Why's that an issue? Amelia's obviously tied up, so they've got me. They'll just have to accept it."

Rob sighed, pausing before a closed wooden gate that led from the front garden to the rear. "They claim you work best with a partner. They... want to ensure you're not going lone wolf."

Finn clapped a hand on Rob's shoulder. "Excellent! Old buddy, it'll be like our college days—roommates investigating all over again."

Rob smirked but shook his head. "Unfortunately, I'm not your partner. The Home Office has sent someone else—she's already arrived, actually. Doctor Eleanor Matthews."

Finn arched an eyebrow. "Doctor, huh? I best find my professor spectacles to outrank her,"

"She's an expert in British and European art," Rob clarified. "Victoria Palmer was well known among the upper echelons—worked with the Royal Family on their private art collections. This might not be just a random murder. Doctor Matthews is here because there's an art connection."

Finn made a face, stepping aside as two forensic techs rushed by with evidence bags. "So what you're saying is I'm babysitting an art historian while Amelia isn't here?"

Rob shrugged. “Something like that. But apparently, she’s got talents worth tapping into. Use her expertise. She’s a polymath.”

Finn exhaled. “All right then. Let’s meet this brilliant scholar.” He tipped his head at the gate. “Lead the way.”

They navigated past more uniformed officers and stepped through into the cottage’s rear garden. Immediately, Finn saw the tidy lawn, the tall hedgerows, and an unfinished painting set on an easel. Despite the presence of more forensic tape and a few scuffed boot prints, the place looked tranquil—like it had a few hours ago, maybe, when Victoria was likely alive and painting. The bright colors on the canvas contrasted sharply with the grim reality of a homicide.

He surveyed the painting: a partial depiction of the yard, including the hedges and an old iron gate in the background. Whoever had started it was clearly skilled—the brushstrokes near the sky were detailed, though the rest was still incomplete.

“Where’s the body?” Finn asked, noticing there was no white-sheeted form. Instead, a small patch of dark discoloration drew his attention in the lane beyond the garden’s boundaries. It looked like dried blood but was only partially visible through the rear iron gate, the rest of the lane cut off from view by the tall hedgerows.

Rob gave Finn a meaningful look. “If only the body were here, it’d be simpler.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

Finn exchanged a glance with him, stepping over to the iron gate and to the spot at its threshold. He crouched, noting the dark stains. “Victim’s blood,” he surmised, “but no sign of drag marks in the grass or soil of the garden. She must’ve stepped outside to the lane on her own, or been coaxed.”

Rob nodded. “A local lad, Tyler, was on his way to check on Ms. Palmer. She’d told his mother, Daisy, that she was afraid someone was snooping around. She was expecting Tyler—only instead...”

“She got her killer,” Finn finished grimly. His gaze flicked to the iron gate. It stood partially open, leading to a narrow lane behind the hedge. “So the body ended up somewhere else entirely?”

“Yeah. Tyler found her, but not here. He noticed something nearby. We’ll show you,” Rob said. He gestured for Finn to follow. Finn slipped on a pair of forensics gloves from his jacket pocket.

“Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen,” he muttered to the small forensic team swabbing the area around the dark patch. They nodded, letting him pass. He felt a chill at the notion of an elderly woman confronted right here, presumably by someone with enough intent to kill and then move her corpse.

Finn glanced at the lane, which stretched North to South for a distance, flanked on one side by intermittent cottages, and the other by large fields, eagerly awaiting the summer. The ground was loose dirt and pebble. A few more forensics techs busied themselves. “So where’s the body exactly?”

Rob pointed across the lane to a field that stretched out behind a low fence. “Over there.”

Finn followed his line of sight. A drab cornfield sprawled across the landscape, though at this time of year the corn was long gone—just the skeletons of dead grass and brittle stalks. From this vantage, Finn couldn’t see anything but uniform dryness. He frowned. “No sign of blood along the way, though? If they dragged her body across, it should leave a trail.”

Rob gave him a tight shrug. “That’s what we found odd.”

Finn crouched near a patch of disturbed earth. A faint line, like something had been pressed or pulled across the ground, cut through. He reached out and carefully lifted a tiny scrap of blue thread from the dust. “Looks like part of a tarp or cloth. It could mean the killer moved her in it. That would explain the lack of blood trail—like wrapping a painting in protective fabric.”

Rob blinked at Finn’s analogy. Then he shouted to one of the forensic experts, “Hey, can we get a photo and bag here? We’ve got a potential thread sample and drag mark!”

The forensic lead hurried over. Meanwhile, Finn rose and eased into the field. Stalks of last summer’s crop lay flattened, leaving patches of nothing but dried, lifeless grass. He saw a cluster of people in the distance near what looked like a small pond or water collection area.

He slogged toward them, feeling the uneven ground shift under his feet. Rob caught up, stepping carefully to avoid trampling possible evidence. Approaching the group, Finn spotted a single woman—light hair swept into a loose ponytail—who stood slightly apart from the uniformed officers. She was stooped over a shape on the ground.

Finn's jaw clenched at the sight of the body. Victoria Palmer, face down, with her head... separated... resting close to the shoulders but turned inward. He glanced away just for a moment, forcing composure. Then, stepping up, he addressed the woman. "Finn Wright. I'm with the Home Office in a consulting capacity." It felt oddly formal, but seeing the victim's decapitated form rattled him enough to resort to crisp introductions.

The woman straightened. She was in her mid-thirties, tall, with blonde hair and bright blue eyes. She wore a dark jacket and a scarf looped casually at her neck. Despite the gruesome body at her feet, she seemed poised, if a bit grim. "Doctor Eleanor Matthews," she replied. "We'll be working together, I hear—since your usual partner is otherwise occupied."

Finn was aware of a subtle arch in her brow, as though she found the entire situation more intellectually engaging than horrifying. "Seems so," he managed. "Rob said you have a background in British and European art."

She nodded. "Yes. Specializing in eighteenth and nineteenth-century works. But I've studied quite broadly. That's part of the reason I'm here."

Finn tried a half-smile, glancing at Rob. "So, hopefully we'll get to do some art appreciation once we wrap this up."

Doctor Matthews regarded him with cool disapproval. "I'm here for a very specific purpose. This murder, and the manner in which the victim was... displayed... has an artistic element."

Rob piped up. "Forgive him, Doctor. Finn's an outstanding detective, but sometimes his sense of humor arrives at the wrong moment."

Matthews brushed aside a strand of hair. "One cannot always blame humor for a lack

of observation.”

Finn cleared his throat. “All right. So, what is this ‘specific purpose?’ To be a pain in the ass?”

She rolled her eyes, turned her attention back to the body, then motioned around the field. “Tell me what you see.”

He followed her gaze. The body’s position was deliberate: face-down, arms at the sides, head placed near the hand as if it had rolled there. The small pond behind the victim reflected a now dull gray sky. There was dried grass everywhere—no sign of the tarp. “A murder scene,” he offered. “Decapitation at the garden gate, presumably. Then the killer placed or posed her here, in the field, near the pond. No sign of a tarp, so they must have taken it with them after dragging the body with it.”

Matthews nodded, crossing her arms. “Sure. But do you notice anything else?”

Finn blinked, scanning again, trying to catch a clue: footprints, tire tracks, some sort of pattern in how the victim was placed. The stance of the arms? The angle of the head? He found nothing obvious. “I’m... not sure,” he admitted.

Doctor Matthews’ expression softened, but urgency filled her voice. “Time is short, Mr. Wright. The killer staged this to echo a famous painting—one that belongs to the British tradition. Look at the pose of the body, the presence of a water source, the farmland.” She lifted a brittle length of grass from the ground. “In summertime, this is a cornfield.”

Finn’s eyes widened. “Constable’s ‘The Cornfield’? But I’m no art expert. I vaguely recall a child drinking from a stream in that painting.”

Matthews nodded. “Among other details. The point is, the killer is copying a well-

known composition. Decapitation aside, the scene is reminiscent of that painting's arrangement. They're creating an artistic statement. And if they're referencing historic art, I suspect this won't be the last time."

Finn inhaled slowly, glancing at Rob. The presence of an art theme meant this might be the work of a killer with a bizarre, methodical plan. Finn knew people like that rarely stopped at one victim.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

Eleanor stepped away from them, calling an instruction to a nearby officer to get more photographic angles. Rob gave Finn a sideways look. “She’s quite brilliant, I’d say.”

Finn blew out a breath. “Fantastic. So we’ve got a killer staging murders to resemble classic paintings, my partner is chasing a psycho named Wendell Reed, and I’m stuck being tested by an art scholar.” He planted his hands on his hips. “Should be fun.”

He sighed, letting the weight of the situation settle. This was a different kind of puzzle—one steeped in references he’d have to learn. And with Amelia absent, he felt a twinge of loneliness, offset only by the flicker of challenge that always sparked in him at a new case. In an area out of his depth, Finn was going to have to rely on the expertise of Doctor Eleanor Matthews.

Fun, indeed.

### CHAPTER THREE

The morning light above was stark in the gray sky, and Amelia paused just inside the front door of the small jewelry store, trying not to frown at the chemical smell of recent disinfectant and glass cleaner. The proprietor, a wiry man in his late fifties, hovered behind the display counter, looking as though he regretted ever calling the police. But given the circumstances—Wendell Reed’s visit—he’d had no real choice.

Right next to Amelia stood Inspector Harris McNeil, posture rigid, a severe expression on his face that barely masked his annoyance. He glanced at her with thinly veiled disapproval, then returned his attention to the jeweler. To Amelia’s other

side was Detective constable Clint, younger, friendlier, and apparently more at ease with her presence than McNeil was. Clint even offered Amelia a brief, sympathetic nod as if to say, I know this is awkward, but let's make it work.

"It's unfortunate we had to trouble you again, Mr. Turner," McNeil said in a flat tone, "but we need every detail about Wendell Reed's time here. The Home Office wants us to examine the scene thoroughly." His voice caught slightly on the words Home Office. Amelia resisted the urge to sigh. She knew exactly how McNeil felt about her involvement—and that it wasn't his choice. Mandates were mandates.

"Yes, Inspector," Alfred Turner, the owner, replied. He wrung his hands, shifting from one foot to the other. "As I mentioned on the phone, he came yesterday around midday. I didn't realize who he was until later when I saw a picture of him on the television, or I'd have—"

McNeil lifted a hand, cutting him off gently but brusquely. "We understand. Let's not dwell on that. We'd like to see the security footage you mentioned."

Turner's gaze slid to Amelia nervously, as though seeking validation. "I—I have it queued up in the back."

Amelia offered him a small nod. "We'll follow you. Lead the way."

They trailed him behind the counter, stepping through a narrow door into a cramped office space. A modest desk overflowed with receipts, watch catalogs, and business documents. Near the far wall, a small computer monitor sat on a battered table, cables snaking behind it. Turner approached the monitor and gestured for them to gather around.

"Here," he murmured. "I've got it paused at the part where he asked to see a specific watch."

Amelia leaned in, focusing on the screen. The black-and-white footage showed Wendell Reed—hair cropped short, wearing a worn jacket—standing on the customer's side of the display case. Turner, visible from behind the counter, slid something across: presumably a high-end watch. Wendell reached for it, then the footage caught him dropping it. He bent to pick it up, rummaging out of view for a moment. Then, a second or two later, he straightened, handing the watch back.

“There,” Turner said, pointing at the figure. “He apologized for being clumsy. Seemed genuinely sorry.”

Amelia frowned. “Wendell Reed never does anything by accident. He's not clumsy.”

McNeil threw her a sideways glance, lips pressed in disapproval. “People slip up sometimes, Winters. Even criminals.”

She shook her head decisively. “Not him. There's always a reason. He never does anything randomly.” The evidence on the screen validated her suspicion: Reed had stooped out of camera range for a moment—time enough to do something else.

Clint, looking at the short replay, gave a thoughtful hum. “He's down there for about three seconds, at least. Could be he slipped something under the counter or tampered with something. Hard to see from this angle.”

Amelia turned to the shop owner. “Where is that watch now?”

“Back out in the front display,” Turner said. “I couldn't find anything wrong with it. It's not damaged or missing parts.”

“Could you show it to us anyway?” she asked gently.

“Of course.” Turner clicked a key to pause the video, then led them back through the

office door and around the display cases. The shop's overhead lights gave off a yellowish hue, reflecting off polished glass and silver. Through the front window, faint midday light seeped in but didn't do much to warm the sterile interior. Amelia spotted the watch in question, resting on a velvet pad, center of a row of similar high-end timepieces.

With a trembling hand, Turner unlocked the case and plucked it out, offering it to Amelia. She slipped on a pair of latex gloves—she'd brought a few pairs for evidence handling—and accepted the watch. She turned it carefully, checking the dial, the casing, the strap. Nothing indicated any unusual additions.

"I don't see anything," she muttered, handing it to Clint for a second look. "What about you?"

Clint squinted at it, tested the clasp, weighed it in his palm. "Feels normal. If Reed sabotaged it, I'm not sure how." He passed it to McNeil, who barely glanced at the face before returning it to Turner.

McNeil cleared his throat. "Seems like a dead end." He faced Amelia, eyes narrowed. "Let's not waste more time. If there's no sign the watch was tampered with, we'll note it. Unless you want to examine every last item in the store?"

Amelia bit down on her impatience. She understood that McNeil resented being forced to work with her. She was also aware that, from his perspective, she was an extra complication, courtesy of higher-ups who thought her personal history with Wendell might be relevant. Amelia suspected she was some sort of bait.

"No," she answered calmly, turning to survey the store. "But you said you didn't realize who Wendell was until you recognized him on the news later, right, Mr. Turner?"

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

“That’s right,” the owner confirmed. “He was quite polite—except for that odd moment with the watch. I assumed he was just careless.”

Amelia exhaled slowly. “He’s not. There had to be some reason for him to drop it.” She looked around the store again, taking in the layout. Central display counters formed a rectangle, with small gaps at the bottom. The area behind was a waist-high shelf for spare watch stands. She cast her gaze across each corner, each edge.

McNeil tapped his foot lightly. “Winters, we have enough for our report. Reed came, looked at a watch, left. The watch is fine. If there’s nothing else to discover, let’s move on.”

She said nothing, instead letting her gut guide her. Her eyes kept returning to the spot on the floor in the security footage where Wendell had crouched. It was right by the front of the main counter. “He bent down about here, didn’t he?”

Turner nodded uncertainly, shadowing her steps. “Yes, near that corner.”

Amelia advanced, kneeling by the display cabinet. The polished wooden base looked solid, but a narrow gap between the wood and the tiled floor might allow someone to slip something underneath. She pressed a palm against the wood; it had maybe a half-inch clearance above the tile.

McNeil grunted. “What exactly are you doing?”

Clint, sensing Amelia’s purpose, gently moved around to shine his phone’s flashlight into the space. “Here, let me help. The underside is dark.”

Amelia muttered her thanks, then crouched even lower, belly nearly touching the floor. She wiggled her hand into the gap. Her fingertips brushed something—paper. In a rush of adrenaline, she pinched and dragged it out.

“What is that?” McNeil demanded, stepping closer. Turner’s mouth fell open, while Clint held the phone’s light steady.

Amelia carefully eased the folded slip of paper free. It was small and slightly bent, as though crumpled in haste. She swallowed, unfolding it to reveal a short message in scrawled handwriting:

Ludgate Station, 2 PM.

She stared at it, heart pounding. “This... this has to be Wendell’s doing.” Her voice quivered with triumph and apprehension.

Clint exhaled, a low whistle. “Holy— So he did hide something.”

“Of course,” Amelia said, a tightness in her chest easing into something like vindication. She rose to her feet, turning the note so all three could see. “He doesn’t do mistakes, Inspector.”

McNeil, lips thin, examined the scribbled text. “Ludgate Station, 2 PM. That’s... today’s date? Tomorrow’s?” He checked his watch, voice still colored with reluctance to concede Amelia was right. “It’s almost one now. If this is for two o’clock today, that leaves us an hour. That’s not much time to get ready.”

Clint’s eyes flickered with both excitement and worry. “He’s giving a location and time—like an invitation or a meeting spot. Or a trap.”

Turner hovered near them, still shocked. “He must’ve placed it there when he bent

down for the watch.I... I had no idea.”

Amelia closed the note, carefully putting it into a small evidence bag from her coat pocket.“We’ll treat it as potential evidence.Forensics can check for prints or residue, though I suspect Wendell will have wiped it.”

McNeil still looked displeased, though he seemed duty-bound to address Amelia more respectfully now.“We’ll inform the rest of the task force.Likely they’ll want eyes on Ludgate Station.Clint, you up for that?”

Clint nodded.“Absolutely.We can stake it out, see if he shows.”

Amelia inhaled slowly.She’d dreaded the possibility of facing Wendell again, but the lead was too tangible to ignore.“I’ll go as well.If that’s all right.”She tried to keep her tone civil, aware that McNeil might push back.

A flicker of frustration crossed his face, but he gave a curt nod.“Fine.We’ll need every available body.Let’s hope we’re not being drawn into a wild goose chase.”

Amelia slid her gaze back to the gap under the cabinet, thinking of Wendell’s cunning.“Even if it is a trick, it’s our best shot at catching him right now.He's playing games with us.There was no guarantee we'd find this.It's likely he thinks he's operating with fate on his side, and this was a test of that belief.”

Clint placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, just briefly.“Good instincts, Inspector Winters.If you hadn’t insisted on checking, we’d have missed that note.”

McNeil didn’t respond, but Amelia could almost sense his grudging acceptance that her presence had proven useful.Meanwhile, Turner stood behind the counter, looking as though he was ready to faint from relief that the police would handle this next phase.“Thank you for your help,” Amelia told him.“And if Wendell tries to contact

you again or returns, call us immediately.”

The jeweler nodded, bobbing his head repeatedly. “I—I will. Thank you, Inspector. Detective Clint. Inspector McNeil”

The three officers walked to the door. McNeil opened it, letting Clint and Amelia step out into the chilly air. They paused on the pavement, the store’s CLOSED sign still hanging behind them. A mild wind stirred litter in the gutter. Amelia buttoned her coat, mind racing with the possibility that Wendell wanted them to be at Ludgate Station in less than an hour.

“Clint, get on the radio,” McNeil said, pulling his own phone from his pocket. “We’ll mobilize a small team. I’ll inform the higher-ups. Winters... you can join us, but keep your eyes open. If Reed’s there, he’ll be dangerous. He might be gunning for you.”

Amelia gave a short nod, adrenaline flaring in her veins. “Understood.”



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

They strode down the sidewalk together, pace quickening. The tension between McNeil's reluctance and Amelia's determination hung in the air, but their immediate focus was the same: catch Wendell Reed, or at least glean his next move from the cryptic note.

Amelia's thoughts churned. She'd made her point—Wendell didn't drop that watch by accident, and it led her right to his hidden message. But why a station? And why 2 PM? She suspected he was orchestrating something more twisted than a mere meeting. He loved these mind games.

Clint, finishing a short radio call, caught up to her with a faint, encouraging smile. "Good job in there, by the way," he said quietly, out of earshot of McNeil. "Don't let him get to you. I know McNeil's not thrilled you're on board, but you proved your worth."

She offered a tight smile in return. "Thanks. We'll see if it actually leads somewhere. If he doesn't show—"

"This is as good a lead as we have," Clint finished firmly.

Amelia nodded. Wendell wasn't a typical fugitive. He held grudges, especially against her, and had a knack for staying a step ahead. But she wouldn't let that fear paralyze her. This was a chance for them to corner him, to end his twisted trail before he got started.

At the corner of the block, McNeil halted. "We'll take separate cars. Clint, you're with me. Winters, you can follow. Make sure we coordinate so we arrive at Ludgate with at

least a few minutes to spare.”

Amelia accepted the instruction, ignoring the patronizing edge in his voice. A minute later, they parted ways. She climbed into her unmarked sedan, turned the key, and felt the engine roar to life. Glancing in the rear-view mirror, she inhaled deeply, an odd mixture of nerves and excitement thrumming through her.

The note with “Ludgate Station, 2 PM” replayed in her mind’s eye. She pictured Wendell stooping to place it. He’d known she would be here, scouring the shop, maybe. Or he suspected any officer with half a mind would find it. The clock on her dashboard read 12:56. Time was short. They had to hurry.

She pulled away from the curb, trailing a half-block behind McNeil’s car. Detective Clint would be in there, likely discussing final arrangements. Amelia tapped her phone’s hands-free system, calling ahead to another colleague for backup. With enough presence, they might secure the station’s exits.

This is it, she thought. My first real chance at confronting Wendell since he escaped. I have to make it count. The image of him dropping the watch replayed in her mind, the skillful way he manipulated everything to hide a simple slip of paper. He was cunning, always planning. She prayed they wouldn’t be walking into an ambush.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Finn pressed his foot lightly against the gas pedal, guiding the red Corvette around a narrow curve. Early afternoon light shone through the windshield, illuminating the dust specks that rested along the dashboard. He glanced at the passenger seat where Doctor Eleanor Matthews sat, her posture upright, eyes trained on the road ahead. Her blonde hair was swept into a low bun, but a few loose strands brushed her cheeks. She hadn’t spoken much since they’d driven away from the crime scene. All Finn knew was that she clearly didn’t like him so far.

He decided to try conversation, but he could only think of generic questions. “So,” he began, forcing a light note into his voice, “how long have you been an art expert? I mean, did you always want to do this, or was it a surprise career path?”

Eleanor kept her gaze forward. “I studied art history at university,” she said. “Traveled a bit, got involved in curation. One thing led to another.”

Finn nodded, though that was hardly the in-depth answer he’d hoped for. “Ever work in a museum, or mainly in private collections?”

She hesitated. “I spent a couple of years doing restoration work and authentication for various institutions. Private, public, a mix. Then I found myself consulting with certain agencies that needed my expertise.”

She left it at that. Finn glanced at her face—pale, composed, with no sign she wanted to elaborate. He cleared his throat. “And what about, uh, your personal life? Married, family...? I don’t want to pry, but we might be on the road for a while together. Helps to know each other.”

Her hands stiffened against her lap. “There’s nothing relevant to discuss on that front.”

He exhaled softly, wondering if he’d tread on a sore subject. “Look,” he said, “I’m not trying to cross any lines. Just thought we could pass time with some chat, that’s all.”

Eleanor turned her head slightly, her tone guarded. “We could also drive in silence.”

Finn felt a flicker of frustration but tried to keep things calm. “I guess that means I got off on the wrong foot.” He let out a short laugh, a forced attempt to ease the tension. “If so, I’m sorry. Really. I know I can come across as—”

“A man who uses jokes when a woman’s decapitated body is lying in front of him?” Eleanor cut in, voice icy. “Let’s just say that doesn’t sit well with me.”

His jaw clenched, recalling the moment back in that field when he’d made a quip about art or membership. “I didn’t mean to trivialize it,” he said quietly. “You have to understand, sometimes I crack jokes because otherwise I— Well, it’s a coping mechanism. Seeing something that horrific... I’m not sure how else to process it.”

She sighed, shifting in her seat. “I don’t like men talking down to me or dismissing the brutality of what we just witnessed. I’m not some fainting Victorian maiden. I can handle reality without humor.”

Finn nodded, letting that settle. “Ever been involved in many cases like this before?”

She kept her gaze on the road. “I’ve consulted on numerous investigations, yes.”

"What about... physically being at a scene?" he pressed. "With a victim so mutilated, you can barely look?"

For a second, she didn't respond as if weighing how much to divulge. Then: "I've been to a crime scene once, if you're asking whether I've witnessed a body firsthand. But nothing as savage as a decapitation."

Finn flicked his eyes at her profile. “So, no. Not like this.”

She shook her head. “No.”

“All right. Then... let me explain something, if I may.” He took a breath. “When you’re used to this—when you see gore and violence at levels that make most people ill—some of us crack jokes. Firefighters, paramedics, soldiers do it, too. It’s not to minimize the horror; it’s a shield. Helps them keep functioning, helps them stay sane.”

Eleanor’s lips pressed together. “I’m well-versed in human psychology. But fine. You don’t need to keep justifying it to me.”

He nodded, a bit relieved she hadn’t skewered him with another cutting remark. “So we can move on from that, yeah?” He drummed his fingers on the wheel. “Because if we’re working this case together, I want us on the same page. It does the victim—and her family—no favors if we’re butting heads.”

She looked down at her lap, then lifted her chin, meeting his gaze for half a second. “Agreed on that count, at least.”

A slight tension eased in Finn’s shoulders. He decided to shift the mood. “So... you like old rock and roll?”

She blinked. “I don’t... mind it.”

Finn grinned, rummaging in the glove compartment. “Excellent. I’ve got a tape somewhere. Give me a second.” The car wobbled slightly on the lane, and Eleanor tensed.

“I would prefer you keep your eyes on the road.”

With a chuckle, he quickly snatched a battered cassette from the compartment and slid it into the ancient stereo. “This Corvette was built before CDs were a thing. Or at least before they became mainstream. She’s a classic, but it’s not always smooth sailing.”

He jabbed the stereo’s button. A scratchy riff of guitar blasted from the speakers, some classic rock tune nearly drowning out the engine’s hum. Finn turned the volume down a notch to be courteous. “Getting her to pass emissions was a nightmare, I’ll admit. But she’s got a soul, you know?”

Eleanor folded her arms. “She might have a soul, but I’d rather not end up dead because you’re fiddling with tapes.”

Finn patted the dashboard. “This baby will take us far. I promise.” He flashed a confident grin.

“Into a ditch, maybe,” Eleanor muttered. But she settled back, allowing the guitar solo to fill the silence. Whatever tension they’d had, at least it seemed to rest now in a truce of sorts.

For the next hour, they navigated the tangled London streets, heading toward the Blackthorn Gallery where Victoria Palmer had apparently been working just before her murder. Finn concentrated on the road, tapping his foot occasionally to the music. Eleanor gazed out the passenger window, silent. He noted the furrow of her brow, guessing she was lost in thought about the case—maybe the painting references at the crime scene.

Eventually, the traffic thickened as they neared a busy commercial district. Sizable buildings rose on either side, old brick facades interspersed with modern steel

structures. A line of cabs sat at a curb, waiting for fares. Finn steered the Corvette onto a smaller side street, where the sign for the Blackthorn Gallery caught his eye. He eased the car along until he found a parking space.

The gallery sat in a Victorian-era brick building. Large, arched windows dominated the front, displaying tasteful posters of upcoming exhibitions. A carved sign reading BLACKTHORN GALLERY hung above the elegant double doors, each door inset with frosted glass panels. Potted plants flanked the entrance, though one looked wilted, as if neglected. Overall, it gave an air of quiet prestige, the sort of place that might host private showings for wealthy collectors.

“Well, here we are.” Finn pulled the key from the ignition, letting the engine sputter to a stop. The music clicked off abruptly. He patted the steering wheel. “Thanks for the ride, old girl.”

Eleanor raised an eyebrow but said nothing, pushing open the door. Finn climbed out on his side, taking a moment to survey the street: a few pedestrians strolled by, a delivery truck idled near a loading bay, and a low murmur of city hustle formed a backdrop. He caught up to Eleanor as she reached the gallery’s front steps.

“So this is where Victoria Palmer last worked, right?” he said. “Authenticating some painting a few days ago.”

Eleanor nodded. “That’s what Rob said, and it’s in the files we have. She was finishing up an analysis for the gallery. Let’s see who we can talk to.”

They passed through the glass doors into a small foyer. To their right, a sleek reception desk stood beneath a hanging modern chandelier. The interior contrasted with the classic building exterior—spotlights illuminated abstract sculptures, while a large painting of a swirling galaxy took up most of one wall. A sign directed visitors to various exhibition rooms.

A young woman with pinned-up hair and a crisp blouse—likely in her late twenties—stepped forward, looking curiously at Finn and Eleanor. “Welcome to the Blackthorn Gallery. Can I help you?” Her tone was polite but guarded.

Finn cleared his throat. “I’m Finn Wright, a consultant with the Home Office. This is Doctor Matthews. We’re here about Victoria Palmer. She was here recently... We have some news about her.”

The woman’s expression tightened, something close to alarm flickering in her eyes. “Mary Whitmore,” she introduced herself briefly, voice dipping. “I’m Mr. Blackthorn’s personal assistant.”

Eleanor glanced around the open space beyond Mary’s shoulder—display stands showcasing paintings and sculptures. Finn noticed the tension in Mary’s posture. He didn’t want to deliver the news harshly, but they needed honesty. “Miss Whitmore,” he said gently, “I’m afraid Victoria Palmer has been killed.”

Mary’s gasp was audible, and her face lost color. “Killed? That’s... That’s horrible. I had no idea.”

Finn studied her reaction, noting the genuine shock. But there was also an undercurrent of something else—apprehension, maybe. “We know Victoria was here a few days ago, authenticating a piece. We’d like to talk to anyone who interacted with her then. Maybe she mentioned something important about her work.”

Mary hesitated, eyes darting toward the corridor leading deeper into the gallery. “Well,” she began slowly, “Victoria mostly spoke to Mr. Blackthorn and I. It was strictly about the painting she was examining. There wasn’t... anything else, to my knowledge.”

Eleanor stepped in. “We’d still like to hear specifics of those conversations. And we’d



like to speak with Harrison Blackthorn, too.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

Mary's mouth pulled tight. "He's very busy today. A new shipment of works came in, plus we have a private viewing tonight."

Finn felt a flicker of impatience. "Mary, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. I can call in twenty officers and forensic teams, and we'll have them crawling all over your gallery. That wouldn't look good for anyone's reputation, would it?" He slipped his Home Office ID from his pocket, flashing it just enough to underscore his point.

Mary seemed to shrink slightly, swallowing. "All right. One moment, please. I'll see if he can spare a few minutes."

She retreated down the corridor, her footsteps echoing on polished flooring. Finn let out a breath. "Sorry to strong-arm her," he said quietly to Eleanor. "We do need answers."

Eleanor crossed her arms. "Do you always threaten people?"

He offered a lopsided grin. "Only when my charm doesn't do the trick."

She shook her head, turning her attention to a few framed paintings that lined the foyer's walls. Finn watched her move from piece to piece, leaning in to read the small placards describing each artist and date. Despite her aloof manner, she examined the artwork with sincere interest, her head tilting slightly to capture the details. He had to admit she looked calm and competent despite having been unsettled earlier.

Before Finn could comment, footsteps approached again. Mary led a tall man in a tailored navy suit, neatly combed dark hair shot through with silver at the temples. He

wore designer glasses with thin frames. His posture conveyed self-assurance—borderline arrogance—and he had a certain polished handsomeness that might appeal to wealthy patrons. This was Harrison Blackthorn, presumably.

He extended a hand, though his expression remained guarded. "Harrison Blackthorn, I understand you're here about Victoria Palmer?"

Finn shook his hand. "Yes, I'm Finn Wright, with the Home Office, and this is Doctor Eleanor Matthews. We're investigating Victoria Palmer's death."

Harrison's lips parted in a momentary gasp. "But... She was just here a few... This is terrible news! Victoria... What happened to her...?" He trailed off, letting the question dangle, but Finn suspected he wasn't as clueless as he appeared.

Finn opted for brevity. "She was murdered."

Harrison's eyes flickered with something—shock, or perhaps something well-performed. "That's... appalling. I can't imagine."

Eleanor stepped forward. "We'd like more information about her recent work here. She was authenticating a painting, correct?"

"Yes," Harrison replied, clearing his throat. "A piece we acquired not long ago. We wanted her confirmation before announcing it for display. Unfortunately, she left abruptly, and we never got a final verdict."

Finn caught the slight twitch at Harrison's jaw, as though recalling an uncomfortable memory. "Why abruptly?" he asked.

The gallery owner's mouth thinned. "We had a... disagreement. She suggested it might be a forgery, which, given the funds we'd spent, was not something I wanted to

hear. We'd just paid a considerable amount to put it on show soon. Victoria left in frustration, I believe."

Eleanor nodded. "Would it be possible to see that painting?"

Harrison glanced at Mary, who stood behind him. She gave a small nod, and he sighed. "Fine, follow me. It's in a private room."

They trailed him past a series of lit alcoves featuring modern artwork, then down a short hallway to a door marked PRIVATE. Inside was a narrow storage and preparation space with tall easels and racks of paintings. Spotlights on adjustable arms provided focused illumination. A single canvas sat in prominence on a large easel: the piece in question, presumably.

Harrison led them to it. "It's titled God's Hand, the Puppet Master. Allegedly a work of the mid-19th century by Elias Balcombe, an English artist known for dark, philosophical themes."

Finn eyed the painting. It depicted an enormous white hand descending from the top frame, each finger connected to thin strands that dangled downward, manipulating tiny human figures below. The background was a cloudy, muted sky, and the human figures looked anguished, their arms and legs contorted as if controlled by invisible strings.

"It's... unsettling," Finn remarked.

Harrison clasped his hands behind his back. "Precisely why certain collectors like it. Symbolic, thought-provoking."

"But Victoria suspected a forgery," Finn prompted.

“Yes.Said some details were inconsistent with the period.We hired another expert who authenticated it afterward, though.So presumably, it’s genuine.”

Eleanor stepped closer, leaning in.The overhead lamp revealed textures of paint, cracks along the canvas.She narrowed her eyes.“Well, I’d suggest you get a third opinion.”She pointed at a patch of bright turquoise in the corner.“That pigment looks suspiciously modern.If this was truly mid-1800s, Balcombe wouldn’t have had access to that particular synthetic dye.”

Harrison’s lips tightened.“Are you questioning our second expert’s credentials, Doctor?”

“I’m questioning the painting,” Eleanor shot back calmly.“And, by extension, the gallery that might be promoting a forged piece.”

Finn watched Harrison’s face darken.“We wouldn’t intentionally display a forgery,” he said.“We’re a reputable institution.And I certainly didn’t threaten Victoria over it, if that’s going to be your next question.”A forced smile tugged at his mouth, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

Finn folded his arms. "So you're aware the stakes are high, yes? Your gallery's reputation... finances. If Victoria was right, that means you wasted a fortune, or perhaps risked a scandal."

Harrison's eyes flashed. "Are you insinuating I'd harm her to cover embarrassment? Please. I wouldn't hurt a fly."

Eleanor gave a faint snort. "Unless your gallery's reputation were under threat. People do desperate things when money and image are on the line."

That seemed to push Harrison over the edge. He turned abruptly, stepping away from the painting. "You're both done here. I've answered your questions enough. This is harassment."

Finn raised both palms. "We're just trying to figure out if Victoria's suspicion caused friction. That friction could be motive for—"

Harrison cut him off. "Out. Now. I have real work to do." He waved his hand, nearly dismissing them.

Mary, hovering in the background, appeared anxious, stepping aside to let them leave. Finn caught her eye—she looked torn but said nothing.

Eleanor turned on her heel without a word, heading out the door. Finn lingered an extra moment. "We'll be in touch, Harrison," he said quietly. "For now, good day."

Harrison responded with a tight, forced smile. "Yes, good day." Then he turned back

to the painting, ignoring them.

Finn followed Eleanor down the hallway and past a set of modern sculptures. She didn't speak until they were outside in the crisp afternoon air. The gallery door clicked shut behind them, leaving them on the sidewalk once more. Cars passed by, a few pedestrians bustled. Finn inhaled, shaking off the confrontation.

"He's on edge," Finn muttered. "As if we scraped something raw. I'm guessing he knows more than he's letting on. But it might be worth not pushing people's buttons unnecessarily."

Eleanor set her jaw. "But it's okay when you do it? He obviously despises the idea that his expensive painting might be fake. But would he be desperate enough to murder Victoria? That's the question."

Finn nodded, stepping toward the Corvette. "True. We should look into him. His background, his finances. See if he had motives beyond bruised pride."

She glanced up at the gallery's tall windows. "Agreed." Her gaze dropped to meet Finn's. "Let's not dismiss it."

Finn ran a hand over his hair, still bristling from the tense exchange. "We'll dig deeper. Let's give Rob a heads-up."

He unlocked the car, Eleanor slipped into the passenger seat, and he settled behind the wheel. As the engine roared to life, he cast one last look at the gallery's facade. Something about Harrison's controlled fury made him suspect that beneath the polished exterior, there was a man capable of doing quite a bit to protect his status.

He shifted into gear and pulled away from the curb, thoughts churning. The memory of Victoria Palmer's decapitated body lingered in his mind, and now the added

complication of a potentially forged painting. He knew how greed and reputation could drive people to extremes. If Harrison was hiding a secret, Finn intended to find it, no matter how carefully it was concealed behind the gallery's sophisticated walls.

As they merged back into the main road, Eleanor said nothing, lost in her own thoughts. Finn respected the silence this time. In their own ways, they were both steeling themselves for the next steps in this case, uncertain just how many twisted turns they'd take before uncovering who had truly cut Victoria's life short.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Amelia stood on the lone platform of Ludgate Station, cradling a takeaway coffee in her gloved hands. The sky was bleak overhead, and a thick mist had gathered across the tracks that stretched out in both directions. Through the haze, the station's modest sign—white letters reading “Ludgate”—was barely visible. If it weren't for the occasional crackle of voices in her earpiece, she might have believed she was entirely alone.

In the thin afternoon light, she scanned the limited structures along the platform: an old wooden bench, a small enclosed ticket office, and a metal shelter for rainy days. There were no large boards or bustling crowds here—just a handful of passengers, a few of them reading newspapers or checking their phones. The place felt remote, an odd limbo between farmland and commuter lines, as though it couldn't decide which it belonged to.

Amelia drew her coat tighter around her. The chill seeped through the mist, making the entire scene more eerie. She found herself thinking it must be what standing in purgatory felt like: suspended between two worlds, waiting for something to happen. The swirl of fog across the tracks only deepened that sense of unreality.

A voice crackled in her earpiece: Inspector Harris McNeil “Any sign of Wendell yet,



Winters?”

Amelia pressed a finger discreetly to her ear. “Negative. I see a couple of local travelers waiting for the two o’clock train, but no one matches the description. This won’t be simple. If he is here, it’s only because he wants us to find him.”

Static hissed momentarily before McNeil spoke again. “Stay sharp. The second we see him, my officers will storm the platform and grab him.”

Amelia exhaled, resisting the urge to pace. She’d positioned herself near a small station bench, far enough from the ticket office to avoid drawing attention. Two other figures leaned against a distant railing, chatting softly, neither looking suspicious. She wondered if they were undercover members of the task force or genuine locals. Hard to tell in all this mist.

As she took a step forward, the sound of footfalls on the concrete platform alerted her. A man with short, sandy hair and a lean frame strode past—Detective Clint, wearing a plain jacket and carrying a folded newspaper under his arm. He didn’t meet Amelia’s gaze, just continued on and settled onto a bench about fifteen feet away, opening the paper as though uninterested in his surroundings.

Through her earpiece, she heard Clint’s low mutter, “I don’t like this at all. Too quiet. I think you’re taking a risk, Amelia.”

She responded just as quietly, lips barely moving, “Your concern is noted, Detective. But I’m certain the note left in the jeweler’s was for me. Wendell wouldn’t pass up the chance to toy with me.”

“McNeil thinks so, too,” Clint murmured, ruffling the newspaper as if turning pages. “We just need to be sure we’re not being lured into a dead end.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Amelia said, eyeing her watch. It was 1:52 PM. The train was scheduled to arrive at precisely two.

"Everyone remain alert," McNeil's voice interjected in her ear. "We have plain clothes across the platform and near the ticket office. The station master is on standby. Let's hope nobody spooks him if he shows. Keep the chatter to a minimum."

Amelia's heart pounded at the prospect of confronting Wendell again. She tried to quell the uneasy swirl in her stomach by focusing on the meager details: the shape of the ticket office, the distant shape of farmland behind the station, the swirl of fog that concealed the horizon. The place truly felt like a stage set for something ominous.

Suddenly, a shrill scream shattered the silence. Amelia jerked upright, spinning toward the small ticket office building. The other passengers jumped, startled.

“Winters, is that you?” McNeil asked urgently.

Amelia was already sprinting across the platform, coffee forgotten as she rushed to the doorway. Inside, a woman in a station clerk's uniform stood behind a narrow counter, rolling her eyes dramatically. Another clerk, younger, stood by a back door with tea staining her blouse and dripping onto the floor.

Amelia glanced around, breath still racing. “Is everything all right? We heard someone scream—”

The older clerk waved a dismissive hand. “Apologies. My colleague Martha here spilled her tea and got hot water on her wrist. You’d think it was the end of the world

the way she yelped.”She shot the younger woman a mildly reproachful look.

Martha’s face was flushed.“I—I just burned my hand a little.I’m sorry for alarming anyone.I was surprised, that’s all.”

Amelia blew out a breath, relief mingled with frustration at the false alarm.She forced a tight smile.“No worries.Just... be careful.Hot tea can be nasty.”

“Tell me about it.”The older clerk sighed, bending to pick up a dropped cup.“Sorry again for the commotion.”

With a nod, Amelia ducked back outside, heart still beating a touch too fast.She spoke softly into her earpiece, “False alarm.A spilled cup of tea.”

Clint let out a low grunt.“Better that than an actual emergency.”

Amelia thought for a moment that had Finn been there, he'd have made a joke about a bunch of British people getting worked up over a cup of tea.She could really have used his sense of humor right then.

She retook her spot on the platform, checking her watch.1:58 PM.The train was due in just two minutes.A flicker of movement caught her eye: a tall man in a hooded jacket stepping out from behind a metal shelter on the opposite side of the platform.The hood partially concealed his face.He glanced around, posture tense.

Amelia’s instincts flared.“Possible suspect,” she murmured.“Tall male, hoodie—he just stepped out from the far shelter.”She flicked her gaze around to see if any of the other plainclothes officers were closer.

“I see him,” Clint replied quietly, though he didn’t move from his bench.“Should we approach?”

McNeil's voice broke in. "No direct ID yet. Let's make sure it's him."

Amelia nodded to herself, shifting position. The man was pacing near the platform edge now. She started walking along the concrete, casual but purposeful, closing distance. The mist still clung to the tracks, and a distant rumble signaled the train's imminent arrival. The station's single loudspeaker crackled with static.

At 1:59, the man in the hoodie began walking toward the far end of the platform, away from most other passengers. Amelia followed, half a dozen yards behind, heart thudding. Over her earpiece, she heard Clint quietly say, "I'll circle around the other side. If he tries to bolt, I can intercept." She caught a glimpse of Clint rising from his bench, folding the newspaper under his arm as he headed off in the opposite direction.

The train pulled into view, a dull metal shape emerging from the mist with a squeal of brakes. Amelia kept her gaze on the hooded man, who paused momentarily, then looked over his shoulder. She couldn't see his face clearly.

He strode forward again, stepping toward one of the train doors. It hissed open, and he slipped inside. Amelia cursed under her breath. "He's boarding the train," she hissed into the comm. "I need a better look."

"Careful," McNeil warned. "There are a lot of civilians on that train."

"Roger that," she replied, heart hammering as she stepped onto the same carriage a second later. Her eyes darted left and right, scanning the seated passengers. The hooded figure had vanished, presumably moving further down the carriage.

Clint's voice crackled: "I'm coming in from the next door. If he heads that way, I'll see him."

Amelia walked down the narrow aisle, searching each row. The seats were half-empty, mostly subdued travelers. She saw no sign of the man's hoodie. Then an older woman gestured politely for her to pass, so she obliged, murmuring an apology. Another passenger read a magazine, not looking up. No one matched the figure's height or attire.

"Where did he go?" Amelia muttered. She reached the end of the carriage, where a small corridor led to the onboard toilet. A rectangular sign read "Engaged," the lock indicator glowing red.

She pressed a finger to her earpiece. "He's in the toilet, I think. Engaged sign is on. Could be him changing or hiding."

Clint's tone turned wary. "I'm at the carriage connector."

Amelia inhaled, stepped closer to the toilet door. "Police," she called out, rapping her knuckles on the metal. "Open up. We just want to talk."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

No immediate response. She jiggled the handle, but it was locked from inside. She felt a surge of anxiety. If it was Wendell, cornered, he might be armed. "Police," Amelia repeated, voice sharper now. "Open this door."

The lock clicked, and the door slid open. A lanky man in a gray hoodie stared at her, brow furrowed. "What's the problem?" he grumbled. "Can't a bloke take a dump in peace?"

She blinked, taking a swift step back. "We... sorry, sir." Her gaze flicked over his face—no sign of Wendell's distinctive features, no sign of a disguise. "We had reason to believe—"

He scowled, zipping up the hoodie. "You've got the wrong bloke, love."

Amelia exchanged a quick glance with a plainclothes officer who'd sidled near the carriage door. "Apologies," she said stiffly. "We, uh, must have made a mistake."

"Bloody ridiculous," the man mumbled, brushing past her to take a seat.

Amelia pressed her earpiece. "Not our suspect. Just a passenger. I'm getting off the train before it leaves." She could hear Clint sigh in relief from the adjacent aisle. So it was a false lead—someone who merely resembled Wendell.

As Amelia moved to exit the train, the quiet station sounds resumed—footsteps, a faint announcement garbled by static. Then an odd drip-drip sound reached her ears. She paused on the platform, glancing down. Something dark trickled from beneath the carriage. Her stomach lurched.

She bent to look, heart thundering. In the dim shadows under the train, she could make out a figure—or rather, a body pinned to the undercarriage by rope. A slick wetness that could only be blood dripped onto the rails. Amelia's mouth went dry, and a cry tore from her throat.

“Stop!” she shouted at the driver, who was leaning out of his cab window. “Don’t move the train! We have a situation!”

"Go, go, go!" McNeil yelled over the radio.

Within seconds, half a dozen undercover officers and uniformed police converged on her position, the tension crackling in the air. McNeil came rushing from the other end of the platform, and Detective Clint sprinted out of the carriage, both looking alarmed.

Amelia pointed, voice low. “There’s a body—under the train. A woman, tied up under there.”

McNeil looked and then stood up, his face paled. “God help us,” he muttered. He signaled to the others to cordon off the area.

Clint placed a hand on Amelia's shoulder, concern flashing in his eyes. “You all right?”

She swallowed, stepping back so the forensics crew could approach. “I’m fine,” she lied, gazing once more at the twisted shape. “This must be what Wendell wanted us to find. But we're missing something.”

McNeil nodded grimly, turning to speak urgently into his radio. The station staff, wide-eyed and shaken, gathered at a distance. Passengers began to realize something was terribly wrong, and an officer shouted for them to move away.

“Who is she?” Amelia asked, voice unsteady. The question hung in the stagnant mist, unanswered. The woman’s face was concealed by the tangle of rope and the awkward angle. Blood smeared her hair.

No one spoke for a moment, the shock too raw. Finally, McNeil shook his head. “We won’t know until we get her out from under there.”

Amelia closed her eyes briefly, wishing she could block out the gruesome sight. Another victim. Another life ended in Wendell’s twisted game. “He left that note at the jeweler’s specifically so we’d come here for the 2 PM train. We walked right into his plan.”

“Or he lured us,” Clint said, biting his lip. “But at least we found her. If the train had started moving—” He didn’t finish the sentence.

Amelia forced herself to meet McNeil’s gaze. “We’d have seen the trail of blood left behind... We need to find out who the victim is. Then figure out if she’s connected to Wendell or one of us. Because if he’s leaving bodies like this...”

McNeil set his jaw, frustration emanating from him. “We’ll have the body identified. Meanwhile, station’s locked down. Let’s do our jobs.”

Amelia nodded, stepping away from the grisly scene. She wiped a shaky hand across her forehead. Her earpiece crackled faintly, but all she could think was the same question: Why did you kill this woman, Wendell?

It echoed in her mind even as she ushered passengers off the platform, even as forensics went to work, even as the creeping dread settled deeper and deeper into her bones, that Wendell Reed would always be one step ahead. And with no immediate answer, she could only stand there, the cold mist coiling around her, sorrow and anger twined in her chest.



## CHAPTER SIX

Edmund Garner leaned back in the high-backed chair of his spacious sitting room, the embers in the fireplace casting shifting ribbons of light across the walls. The room itself spoke volumes of his status: plush burgundy wallpaper, gold-framed portraits of various European landscapes, and shelves of leather-bound books that had never truly been read. Shadows danced across a large portrait mounted above the mantel—his latest acquisition, a painting of Edgar Allan Poe, which he'd managed to snatch from a struggling estate sale at a fraction of its presumed worth.

He sighed, swirling a glass of Amontillado between his thumb and forefinger. The wine glowed a deep amber in the fire's flicker. He found grim pleasure in the irony: Edgar Allan Poe's chilling story 'The Cask of Amontillado' was said to have brought the drink to public attention, and here was Edmund, sitting before the author's likeness, sipping that very drink. A slight smile tugged at his lips.

"All very fitting, don't you think?" he murmured, raising the glass as if to toast the figure in the painting. Poe's painted eyes stared back, haunting and inscrutable.

Just then, a soft buzz interrupted the quiet. Edmund glanced at the small marble-topped side table, where his mobile phone vibrated insistently. He huffed, annoyed at the disturbance but nonetheless leaning forward to pick it up. The screen read: Fontaine Williams.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

He stared at the name for a few beats. “Could she be more predictable?” he said under his breath, considering ignoring the call. Then, with a resigned shrug, he swiped to answer.

“Good evening, Fontaine,” he said, injecting a note of polite indifference into his tone.

“Edmund,” she snapped. “Don’t you dare pretend courtesy with me. You’ve gone and bought that Poe portrait from my grandfather’s estate, haven’t you? I just found out.”

He stifled a smile. “I might have, yes. Why does that concern you?”

Her response came in a furious rush, “Because you took advantage of our family’s misfortune, that’s why! That painting was worth far more than you paid. Grandfather must be rolling in his grave.”

Edmund took a long sip of the Amontillado, savoring the taste, letting the silence linger before he spoke. “Well, I can’t be blamed if others fail to recognize an item’s true value at auction, Fontaine. If you want to be angry, direct it at those who handled your grandfather’s estate sale. I simply appeared with my checkbook at the right moment.”

“You’re despicable,” she hissed, voice trembling with fury. “I know you made sure you were one of the only bidders! You prey on people when they’re vulnerable. That painting was part of our family’s heritage—Grandfather’s pride. And you stole it for a pittance.”

He tapped the side of his glass. "Your grandfather's pride led him into debt if memory serves. Careless business decisions, substantial losses... these things tend to land precious heirlooms in the open market. I merely seized an opportunity."

Fontaine's voice quaked, edging on heartbreak. "You'll get what's coming to you, Edmund Garner. One day, you'll regret how you've profited from other people's hardships."

At that, Edmund let out a dry chuckle. "So you believe in karma, is that it? I'm touched by your concern. But truly, if it's any consolation, I'm looking at the portrait right now—quite a handsome piece, especially at such a bargain price."

She began shouting, though her exact words were half lost to his ear when he pulled the phone away. He pressed the button to end the call. For a moment, his phone glowed in the dim light before he set it back on the side table.

He couldn't resist a short laugh. "People do love to moralize when they lose out on a deal." Finishing his Amontillado in one swig, he placed the glass beside the phone. He studied Poe's painted face again, then spoke lightly. "And now to bed. I've had enough drama for the night, haven't I, Mr. Poe?"

He rose, stretching. The room around him was tastefully decorated: thick velvet drapes in a deep green, a plush rug that swallowed the sound of his footsteps, and the gentle glow of the fireplace that cast dancing shadows across the furniture. Softly, he headed for the hallway when a sudden knock shattered the hush.

He halted, brow furrowing. "What now?" Another knock echoed through the door. "Bremner!" he called, impatience creeping into his voice. "What is it? I told you no disturbances tonight. Very well—come in!"

The door inched open, revealing his butler, Bremner, who looked apologetic. Bremner

was a tall, thin man well past his sixties, with neatly combed silvery hair and a slight stoop in his posture. He wore a perfectly pressed black suit and white gloves that had once been fashionable among old aristocratic households. His face bore an expression of mild worry.

“Sir,” the butler began with a slight bow. “I’m sorry to interrupt. There’s a visitor here to see you.”

“At this hour?” Edmund demanded, glancing at the antique clock on the mantel which read nearly midnight. “Did you bother to ask this person why he thought a call so late was acceptable?”

Bremner inclined his head. “Yes, sir. He was insistent. An elderly gentleman, quite stooped and coughing. He apologized for the late intrusion and said he was a friend of Lord Maguire’s. He claimed Lord Maguire told him you’d be the best man to speak to regarding a potential purchase—a rare Stanley Spencer painting, soon to be authenticated.”

That piqued Edmund’s interest at once. His annoyance at the hour began to give way to excitement. “A Stanley Spencer? If it’s genuine, that’s no trivial prospect.” He rubbed his chin. “And he specifically asked for me?”

“Indeed, sir. He said that if anyone had the resources—or the will—to buy such a piece, it’d be Mr. Edmund Garner. He is currently waiting in your business study.”

Edmund flicked a look at the empty glass on the table, then back at Bremner. “All right. This changes things.” He straightened his jacket, his mind already racing about the possibility of acquiring another gem for his collection. “But at this hour?” He thought for a moment. The man must be desperate. That might mean a chance for a bargain.

Bremner cleared his throat delicately. “He did seem... anxious, sir. Unwell, too. I offered him some water, but he declined.”

Edmund waved a dismissive hand. “He’s either truly ill or playing the sympathy card. No matter.” He walked over to the mantel, the glow of the fire casting his shadow across Poe’s portrait. “I suppose that’s all, then. You can retire for the night, Bremner. I’ll handle this.”

“Sir, are you sure?” Bremner asked, concern flickering in his eyes. “I mean, if the gentleman is unwell—”

“I’m perfectly capable of dealing with an elderly invalid,” Edmund said curtly. “And I’d rather not have staff hovering about. If he’s come this late, it’s likely he wants the matter kept private. So off to bed with you.”

Bremner gave a slight bow. “Yes, sir. Good night, Mr. Garner.” He backed out, closing the door softly behind him.

Alone again, Edmund glanced once more at Poe’s calm, painted expression. “Strange night, indeed,” he mumbled, crossing the threshold into the corridor. The soft glow of wall sconces guided him toward the far end, where a wide door with polished brass handles led to his business study—the room he used for more clandestine negotiations.

He paused outside the door, recalling quickly the times he’d secured lucrative deals in that very study with unsuspecting sellers who thought they were outsmarting him. Usually, he was the one who walked away victorious. A smile spread over his lips.

He opened the door to find the space gently lit by a single brass lamp on the wide oak desk. The drapes were drawn, shutting out the night. A large Persian rug covered the

floor, and a small fireplace stood unlit on one side, leaving the room a bit cool.

In the center of the room sat a high-backed chair, facing away from the door. The old man occupied it. He wore a scuffed overcoat pulled tight around narrow shoulders. Beside him, a plain wooden walking stick leaned, testament to frailty. Edmund cleared his throat.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

“Good evening,” he said, shutting the door behind him with a soft click. “I understand you have news of a Stanley Spencer piece?”

The figure offered a raspy cough. Up close, Edmund saw that his neck was wrapped in a thin scarf, and a hat lay on his lap. What was visible of his hair was gray, almost white. His voice emerged low, as though weighed with age. “Yes... yes, sorry for the lateness, Mr. Garner. I... had no choice. Time is of the essence as I have a critical debt that must be paid.” Another cough shook him. “Lord Maguire indicated you might... be the buyer I need.”

Edmund circled around, stopping near the unlit fireplace so he could see the man's face. The visitor kept his face turned down. “Lord Maguire was correct,” Edmund said, trying to sound friendly. “I have a keen interest in noteworthy art. Especially if it's undervalued.”

The stranger nodded slowly. “Stanley Spencer... not fully authenticated, you see. There's some... damage. Possibly a minor restoration required.” He let out a string of hoarse coughs.

“Ah,” Edmund said, his pulse quickening. If the painting was damaged, that meant a chance to argue down the price. “A pity. But perhaps fixable, yes?” He gestured vaguely at a sideboard where a decanter of brandy awaited. “Would you care for a drink?”

The man shook his head feebly, hand trembling over the chair's armrest. “No... no, thank you. I'm not well enough for spirits.”

Edmund forced a sympathetic frown he didn't feel. "Of course." He turned his back, moving to the sideboard, pouring himself a small measure of brandy. With his face away from the old man, he allowed himself a triumphant grin. Damaged, unauthenticated... The man was clearly desperate for a sale. This could be a windfall. "I've always admired Spencer's work," Edmund said casually, swirling the amber liquid. "Might be a lovely addition to my personal collection—or for future sale at a tidy profit if I restore it."

The old man coughed again. "Yes... I suspect you'd find it quite... profitable." A reluctant laugh rattled from his lips.

Edmund, glass in hand, pivoted to face his guest. "Yes indeed, though if the piece is truly compromised, I may have to offer a modest sum. I trust you understand that." He paused, letting the insinuation hang. "But let's discuss specifics, shall—"

He stopped short. The man had begun to rise from the chair. At first, Edmund thought it was a labored attempt, but then, with startling swiftness, the figure straightened. The stooped posture vanished, replaced by an almost towering stance. The walking stick clattered to the floor, echoing off the walls.

Edmund's heart lurched. "What...?" His voice faltered.

In one swift motion, the man's hand flew up to his own face, tugging at the wrinkled skin along his jaw and cheeks. Layers of skin tore off in his hands, revealing a thinner, sharper face; eyes cold and piercing.

Edmund's grip slackened on the brandy glass as fear shot up through his entire body, his mind not grasping what he had just seen. "What... What is this!?"

No reply came—only a predatory glare. Edmund saw the flash of steel, a hooked knife held tightly in the intruder's hand. Horror clutched Edmund's chest. This was no



elderly seller, but a killer who'd used the guise of frailty to gain access.

"Oh God, Bremner—!" Edmund shouted reflexively, voice cracking. He doubted the butler would hear him. The thick walls, the hour, plus Edmund's explicit dismissal of staff assistance... He was effectively alone.

The intruder lunged with shocking agility, closing the distance in an instant. Edmund scrambled sideways, brandy sloshing out of his glass, but the killer swung the blade in an arc. Pain exploded in Edmund's abdomen, a hot, ripping sensation. He choked on his own scream, stumbling backward.

His mind reeled in disbelief. Blood soaked through his shirt, each heartbeat intensifying the pressure. The glass slipped from his hand, shattering on the rug. He heard a dull ring in his ears, overshadowing even the sound of the killer's ragged breathing.

He staggered, one hand pressed to his wound. Crimson stained his palm. "No... please..." he gasped, voice barely audible. The killer's eyes were fierce, unmerciful.

Lurching toward the door, Edmund made a final, desperate attempt to escape. But his legs weakened, folding beneath him. He crashed to his knees, agony flaring with every movement. The intruder stepped forward, overshadowing him like a dark specter. The knife gleamed, spattered with Edmund's blood.

Trembling, Edmund looked across the room in a daze, his vision tunneling. Above the unlit fireplace, that wide space on the wall seemed to yawn at him—a reminder of the painting he'd planned to hang there, perhaps the splendid Spencer to impress his guests. How he would have loved to have unveiled it at lavish dinners...

A strangled breath escaped him, blood bubbling at his lips. His eyes dimmed, but he kept staring at that empty patch.

The intruder faded from Edmund's failing sight, though he sensed the figure towering closer. Pain roared through him once more, then receded into cold numbness. His body collapsed onto the rug, arms splayed. He heard the soft drip of blood on the floor, felt the creeping chill spread through his limbs. Darkness surged, extinguishing the last spark of consciousness.

Then, Edmund Garner—the man who prided himself on cunning business deals—slid into oblivion, his blood oozing out across the floor like spilled paint.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Finn was on the train, seated in a half-empty carriage that rattled and swayed as it slowed to a halt. He was almost mesmerized by the gentle movement. Outside the window, the world looked strangely bright, every color sharper than real life. The carriage lights flickered. He rose from his seat, noticing how quiet it was—no chatter, no conductor's voice. Then, with a soft hiss, the train stopped at a small rural station.

Peering out the glass, Finn saw Amelia standing on the platform. She was smiling at him, eyes warm, and she offered a gentle wave. The sight of her lifted his heart; everything in the dream felt painfully vivid.

He moved quickly to the doors and pressed the button to open them. Nothing happened. The button gave an unresponsive beep, but the doors stayed firmly shut. He jabbed it again, more urgently this time. Still nothing. Amelia was waving at him, looking as though she couldn't hear his muffled calls.

"Amelia!" he shouted, pressing himself against the clear doors. "I can't get out!" He slammed a fist on the window. She just kept smiling, beckoning him forward.

Suddenly, the bright dream light dimmed. Finn's eyes flicked to the far end of the platform, where a tall figure emerged—a silhouette that he recognized with a jolt of

terror: Wendell Reed, knife glinting in his hand.

“No...” Finn whispered, dread pounding in his chest. “Amelia, behind you!” He shouted again, frantically hammering on the door, but her face betrayed no awareness of the approaching threat. She waved again, as if to say, Is everything all right?

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

Wendell came closer, each step slow, menacing. Finn felt panic seize him. He yanked at the door's edge, trying to wedge his fingers between the seals. "Open up, damn it!" He could see Wendell was just a foot or two behind her.

Amelia continued to wave cheerfully, still oblivious.

Finn screamed, "Amelia, run! Turn around!" But the glass muffled his voice, and it was as though she existed in a bubble separate from his frantic warnings. His hands clenched on the metal door frame until his knuckles whitened, but it refused to budge.

Then Wendell struck. He lunged forward, driving the blade into Amelia's back. Her expression changed in an instant—shock and pain flickered across her features, and Finn let out a hoarse cry that tore his throat. The world seemed to shudder, everything going dark at the edges.

"No!" he screamed.

Finn jolted upright in bed, chest tight, breath ragged. Darkness swathed the room, broken by a soft glow from his digital alarm clock. He clawed at the sheets, trying to steady himself. For several seconds, all he could hear was his own heartbeat pounding in his ears.

"It was just a dream," he muttered, fighting to reel in the panic. Yet it felt so real, his mind replaying the image of Amelia's wave, Wendell's knife.

The alarm clock showed 6:00 AM. Finn exhaled, raking a hand over his sweat-damp hair. He turned to the empty space beside him in the bed. On nights like these, he

wished more than ever that Amelia were with him. But the covers were undisturbed on her side.

He grabbed his phone from the bedside table. A single message notification glowed:

“Sorry, crashed back at mine as was exhausted. Will call you later. Had quite a day. Love you. A.x”

His tension eased marginally. She was safe. She hadn't come over last night after her work finished with the task force. He let his shoulders sag, relief flooding him enough that his pounding heart began to slow. "She's all right," he told himself. "She's fine."

He lowered himself back against the pillows, closing his eyes, hoping for a few more minutes' rest. But the phone rang, abrupt and sharp in the predawn hush. Finn groaned, fumbled for the device, and answered. "Oh, what now?" he mumbled under his breath, then spoke into the receiver: "Yeah?"

Rob's familiar voice crackled through "Finn, you better get here. There's been another murder."

Finn went rigid, the last threads of grogginess burning away. "Another one? You're certain it's the same killer?"

"Not certain yet," Rob replied quickly, "but it looks staged again. Meet me at Thornfield Manor. I'll text you the address. We need you on site. Eleanor is already on her way."

A fresh knot of worry coiled in Finn's gut. "All right. I'll head out in ten."

"Thanks, mate." The line clicked off.

Finn set the phone aside, staring at the dim ceiling. Another murder. Another possible reference to the killer who had posed Victoria Palmer's body in that grotesque imitation of a famous painting. He forced himself out of bed, ignoring the dull ache in his limbs and the lingering dread from his nightmare. Danger haunted Amelia in his dreams, but reality proved it might be lurking for anyone else, too. And if this new victim connected to the same case he was working on, the killer was stepping up the pace.

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By the time Finn arrived at Thornfield Manor, the sun had broken over a low ridge of hills, painting the stone facade in pale morning light. Several squad cars and an unmarked vehicle sat parked near the main gate, uniformed constables milling about. He recognized the tension in their faces—the usual hush after a violent crime. A short nod from one officer allowed him through, and he parked behind Rob's car.

He stepped across the gravel drive, noting the grandeur of the estate: tall windows, sprawling gardens. But crime scene tape fluttered around the front door, and the atmosphere felt heavy and quiet. Inside, the foyer was opulent—marble floors, a sweeping staircase, and walls laden with large paintings in ornate frames. The hush pressed on Finn like a weight.

Voices drifted from a corridor on the left. Finn followed them until he reached a wide doorway leading into a study. Inside, he spotted Rob and Eleanor near the center of the room. On the floor between them lay the body: a man in an expensive-looking suit, blood staining his abdomen where a deep slash left his insides exposed like chopped liver. Finn shuddered at the sight. Forensics team members were already taking photos and bagging evidence.

Rob turned at the sound of Finn's footsteps. "Glad you're here," he said, voice subdued.

Finn swallowed the knot in his throat and joined them, eyes on the corpse. “What do we have?” he asked quietly. “Is this connected to Victoria Palmer?”

Eleanor, her posture precise and her face set with grim composure, inclined her head. “We think so. The victim is Edmund Garner, an art collector. He was found with multiple injuries, but the staging looks reminiscent of another painting. We just discovered certain... details.”

Finn glanced around the lavish study—rich wood paneling, a massive mahogany desk, and a smoldering fireplace with no actual flame. “He was a collector, you say?”

“Yes,” Rob confirmed. “A man named Bremner, the victim's butler, discovered him this morning. He must have been killed last night. No forced entry—someone apparently came in with his permission.”

“Who?” Finn asked.

“We're waiting to question the butler further about that,” Rob said. “But it was supposedly an elderly man.”

Finn's gaze lowered to a patch of white powder near the body. “What's that on the floor?” He knelt, studying the chalky substance as a forensic tech carefully brushed it into a sample bag.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

Eleanor exchanged a look with Rob. “We’re not certain yet. We’ll need to get everything analyzed to be sure. The forensics team ruled out anything hazardous.”

Finn straightened, exhaling. “All right, so which specific artwork is this referencing, Doc?”

“Doc?” Eleanor asked with a sigh.

“Humor him,” Rob said. “Believe me, it’s less hassle.”

Eleanor pointed at the body. “Notice the victim’s arms: the right hand is holding a hat, and the left arm is posed on his hip. And if you look at his mouth—” She knelt carefully, opening the man’s jaw to reveal a dark bluish stain. “I think it’s paint, not ink. That’s consistent with Gainsborough’s *The Blue Boy*, a famous portrait featuring a figure in blue attire with a certain posture—hat in one hand, other hand on the hip. The killer probably forced the victim’s mouth open, used the paint to highlight the color. That’s my conclusion, at least.”

Finn shook his head, unnerved. “Another posed victim. The killer is systematically replicating scenes from iconic paintings. First *The Cornfield*, now *The Blue Boy*. It must be the same killer. Can I get a full report of the forensics once it’s done?”

Rob glanced at the door. “Yes, I’ll have it sent to you ASAP. We’ll see if we can find a reason behind all of this. In the meantime, want to question the staff? The butler’s name is Bremner—he says he was the last one to speak to Garner. He also let the old man into this study.”



Finn nodded. "Lead on."

They left the study, heading to a smaller parlor where a single older man in a crisp black suit sat trembling on the edge of a seat. Bremner, presumably. He looked up at their approach, eyes red and puffy.

Finn offered a sympathetic nod. "I'm Finn, and this is Eleanor. We're sorry for your loss. Can you tell us what happened last night?"

Bremner coughed nervously. "A man arrived close to midnight—an elderly gentleman, stooped with a walking stick. He said he was recommended by Lord Maguire to sell a rare Stanley Spencer painting. Mr. Garner told me to leave them be and insisted I retire to bed. This morning... I found him on the floor and cut... Dear God..."

Eleanor folded her arms. "So you never saw this man leave?"

"No," Bremner admitted, shoulders sagging. "I was told not to disturb Mr. Garner, so I went to my quarters. I... I can't imagine an old man doing something so violent. He could barely stand."

Finn exchanged a knowing look with Rob. "Or he was in disguise," he murmured.

Bremner's eyes widened. "Disguise?"

Finn pursed his lips. "It's possible. The killer could have used a disguise and pretended to be someone harmless. That's why you thought he wasn't physically capable of harming your employer."

Bremner let out a shaky breath. "God forgive me. If only I had stayed..."

Rob gently placed a hand on the butler's shoulder. "Then there would have been two dead people in the study. You couldn't have known. Let's gather your official statement soon, but for now, we appreciate your cooperation. I'll have someone bring you some water."

They left him with a constable, returning to the study. Finn hovered near the forensic team as they scooped more of the white powder from the floor. The tang of chemicals hung in the air. Kneeling again, Finn watched the matter being bagged. He stood, thoughtful. "I think I know what this is without the lab report. I'm pretty sure it's latex. If you look at how it's wrinkling—classic sign of dried latex after it's peeled off or torn away. Probably from a mask or facial prosthetic."

Eleanor raised an eyebrow. "You sound sure."

He gave a quick shrug. "Undercover work, plus... a bit of stage experience," he said, half-smiling. Rob coughed into his fist, about to mention something, but Finn cut him off before he could inform Eleanor about their amateur dramatics days during college. "Let's not go into details, yeah? The point is, I can recognize latex residue."

Rob smirked faintly. "As you wish." Then he turned to Eleanor. "So we have another murder, referencing another painting again. The killer might have many more works in mind."

"That's the fear," Eleanor said. "And we still don't know the motive beyond the staging. Are the victims random collectors? Art experts? Could they be chosen for personal reasons?"

Finn folded his arms. "Both victims had ties to art—Victoria was an artist herself and an expert on spotting forgeries, Garner a collector. If we keep searching, we might find a link or a clue that leads us to the next target."

Eleanor's phone chimed. She glanced at it, lips pursed. "Well, I do know one connection: The Cornfield and The Blue Boy were both part of that exhibit at Blackthorn Gallery. The gallery used them as highlights in a recent display about iconic British, Dutch, and Flemish masterpieces. I'm certain The Blue Boy was featured in a curated selection of Gainsborough prints."

Finn's eyes narrowed. "Blackthorn again? I had a feeling we'd end up back there. Then that's it. There's our lead. If the killer is referencing that exhibit, we'd better go see what else was shown there. Because if they're systematically re-creating each piece, there may already be a next painting lined up."

Rob exhaled, nodding grimly. "All right. Talk to the Blackthorn Gallery owner again. Let's hope he can give us a list of everything in that show. Or any suspicious visitors with an obsession."

Eleanor moved to leave, her gaze shifting from the body to the door. "We'll need to move quickly. This is an escalating pattern. The killer might be halfway done or just beginning."

Finn cast one more look at Edmund Garner's lifeless form, the hat propped in his limp hand, left arm contorted to mimic Gainsborough's famed subject. A chill laced his spine. "Time's not on our side," he said quietly. "Someone carrying out kills this brutal is only going to get worse."

"I dread to think what we might find soon if we don't catch him," Eleanor added.

Rob and Finn looked at each other, and Finn knew that Eleanor was right.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

Finn stepped through the heavy glass doors of the Blackthorn Gallery, the faint smell of fresh paint and lemon polish drifting into his nose. The space looked deceptively calm under high recessed lighting—white walls, smooth floors, and the echoing hush that came with high-end art exhibitions. Yet Finn felt tension bristling in the air, an undercurrent he recognized from countless investigations. He was here to uncover more about the killer who'd staged two murders like famous paintings, and, so far, the trail had led right back to this gallery, twice.

Beside him, Eleanor walked with her usual poised step. She glanced around, eyes skimming over the minimalist sculptures placed at intervals. Finn had come to appreciate her calm intellect, even if they didn't rub along too well together. She seemed equally determined to figure out how this gallery's recent exhibition connected to the violent poses that had claimed both Victoria Palmer and Edmund Garner in such brutal fashion.

"This place is busier than last time," Finn observed quietly. He noted a handful of staff scurrying about, moving crates and adjusting lighting fixtures. "They must be preparing for tonight's event."

Eleanor nodded. "Yes, they're opening a new show. It's always a stress for the artists. Looks to be more postmodern pieces. Quite a departure from the Shared Views: Four Centuries of English, Dutch, and Flemish Painting exhibit they hosted a few weeks ago—where they featured references to *The Cornfield* and *The Blue Boy*."

Finn wanted to joke that Eleanor sounded at times like a robot, but he kept that thought to himself. Amelia would have joked back in the blink of an eye, but Finn's new temporary partner didn't rise to the banter Finn used to get through jobs like this one.

Finn nodded. "I wonder where the owner is," he said, scanning the space for the gallery's owner, Harrison Blackthorn. "We need to see if there's a pattern in the rest of the pieces from that exhibit. If we can figure out the pattern and how the killer is identifying victims through these paintings, we might be able to protect the next person in line."

A flash of movement caught his eye: Mary, Harrison's assistant, hurried down a corridor, clipboard in hand. She looked up and recognized them with a startled expression. "Oh... Mr. Wright, Doctor Matthews," she greeted, seemingly trying to keep a polite tone. "You're back again. Is there something new I can help you with? As you can see, we're very busy."

Eleanor answered calmly, "We need more information. Specifically a list of every painting or item from a recent exhibit—the one that included references to *The Cornfield* and *The Blue Boy*."

Mary tucked the clipboard under her arm, biting her lower lip nervously. "I see. Well, Mr. Blackthorn's in the middle of last-minute arrangements for tonight's opening. He... he might not be thrilled to see you again." Her voice lowered. "He's already been... tense."

Finn shared a look with Eleanor. "We'll have to talk to him," Finn said. "We'll try not to hold him up."

Mary nodded, seeming to gather herself. "All right. Let me see if he's available. Wait here, please."

The gallery's main hall buzzed with staff members adjusting artworks on stands, some tapping at laptops to verify inventory. Finn noticed that most of the pieces displayed were modern: abstract paintings with bold swaths of color, edgy sculptures in steel and glass. None of them resembled the classic works the killer was referencing.

Eleanor leaned in, voice low. "Do you think someone like Harrison might be involved?"

Finn shrugged, scanning a series of plinths lined up against one wall. "I'm not ruling him out. He had a major disagreement with Victoria Palmer over a painting, and he was seemingly furious about the possibility of a forgery tarnishing the gallery's reputation. Then Edmund Garner is connected to another painting that was just displayed here. Seems too coincidental to ignore."

Before Eleanor could respond, Harrison Blackthorn strode into view, and the tension in his posture was instantly palpable. "You again?" he snapped, approaching with a forced, narrow-eyed smile. Dressed in a sleek black suit, he exuded the polished persona of a gallery owner but radiated an undercurrent of hostility. "I'm about to open a show in less than six hours. What do you want?"

Finn met his gaze, keeping his voice measured. "We have reason to believe the same killer who murdered Victoria Palmer has struck again. In both instances, the victims were posed to resemble paintings you featured in your previous exhibition. We need details about every piece in that show."

Harrison's face darkened. "This again? You come in here, making thinly veiled accusations. I've answered your questions. And now you want an entire list. Do you have a warrant?"

Eleanor arched a brow. "We can get one, if that's simpler. But that would mean

bringing uniformed officers here en masse. It won't be great for the gallery's image, would it? I certainly know it would put off patrons."

Harrison bristled, cheeks flushing. "Are you threatening me?"

"It's not a threat," Finn said evenly. "We're just trying to prevent another murder. If the reputation of your gallery has to be a casualty in that pursuit, so be it."

Mary hovered behind Harrison, touching his sleeve gently. "Mr. Blackthorn, please... They're only trying to help. It will be much worse if we have to close the exhibition due to a police raid. The newspapers would have a field day."

Harrison pulled away with an irritated jerk. "Fine." He glared at Finn and Eleanor. "But this is the last time I indulge these... intrusive demands. Mary—get them whatever they need."

"We might need to ask where you were last night and the night Victoria Palmer died," Finn added.

"An alibi?" he scoffed. "Am I under arrest? If so, I'll get my solicitor."

"You're not under arrest," Finn said. "But we just want to ask..."

Without waiting for a reply, he turned on his heel and stalked off, muttering about incompetent police and how the gallery was no place for a "circus." Finn watched him vanish around a corner, feeling a familiar prickle of suspicion. The man wore arrogance like a second skin.

Mary, cheeks warm with embarrassment, sighed. "He's under a lot of pressure. Tonight's event is crucial, especially after the rumors of forged paintings. Donations and endorsements are on the line." She forced a polite

smile. “Let’s go to the back office. We keep archives and lists there.”

Finn gave her a mild nod. “Sure.”



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

She led them down a hallway past a row of offices, each door bearing a nameplate. At the third door, the plaque read “Archival Records.” Inside was a compact space lined with filing cabinets and a pair of desks. A single overhead light buzzed faintly. David Smythe—the name printed on a small sign at one of the desks—glanced up from a laptop, startled at the visitors.

He was in his early forties, short hair combed neatly to one side, dressed in business-casual attire. A friendly smile crossed his face. “Oh, hi, Mary. Everything all right?”

Mary nodded quickly. “David, these are the police consultants I mentioned this morning. Mr. Finn Wright and Dr. Matthews. They need the old exhibit list—the one from a few weeks ago that featured The Cornfield.”

David stood, offering a warm handshake to Finn, then Eleanor. “Pleased to meet you. I’m David Smythe, one of the gallery’s administrative staff. Heard about the dreadful murder...” He trailed off with a note of concern in his voice. “I...I really liked Victoria.”

Finn thought David’s manner seemed pleasant, maybe a bit shy. “Nice to meet you, David,” he said. “We appreciate the help. Unfortunately, there has been another death. An Edmund Garner.”

“My God...” David said quietly.

“Did you know him?” Finn asked.

“Not to talk to,” he answered. “But he was a well-known collector in the community.”

Mary opened a filing cabinet, rifling through folders. “I’ll find the relevant paperwork. Might also have digital copies, David?”

David nodded. “Yes, they’re on the server. Let me pull them up.” He tapped at the laptop’s keyboard, face illuminated by the screen. “Harrison was big on that Shared View exhibit, insisted we highlight iconic works from multiple eras. We had curated prints, historical notes, and a few actual smaller pieces on loan. It was quite a show.” His eyes flicked to Finn, sincerity coloring his expression. “I do hope you find whoever’s doing this.”

“The truth will out,” Eleanor said softly.

Mary handed a thin stack of papers to Finn. “Here you go. This is the official list of items showcased. As you’ll see, we had a few items on loan from the Rijksmuseum and the Guggenheim, but most were sale items: paintings, sketches, unfinished works. We had a lot of interest, both at the gallery and from overseas buyers.”

Finn scanned the paper, noting familiar titles: *The Cornfield*, *The Blue Boy*, and a dozen or more from various centuries—Constable, Gainsborough, Turner, Millais, Rossetti... “This is helpful,” he said. “Thank you. We might need to follow up if anything else stands out.”

Mary managed a small smile. “Of course.”

Eleanor shifted, turning to Mary and David both. “We appreciate the cooperation. By the way, we saw Harrison storm off earlier. He seems... under a lot of strain. Has he been under a lot of stress lately?” She tried to keep her tone neutral, but curiosity laced her words. “Has he been erratic?”

Mary hesitated, glancing at David. “He’s just anxious about the opening, that’s all. Everything’s behind schedule.”

Finn caught the subtle concern in her eyes. It was time to push a little and see if they would say something useful. “He’s looking pretty suspicious, you know. Anger issues, connections to both victims. If we find more evidence of him threatening people—”

Mary’s cheeks reddened. “I... I don’t believe he’d ever do something violent. I think he just doesn’t handle stress well.”

Before Finn could press further, Mary’s phone chimed. She glanced at the screen and pursed her lips. “Excuse me. One of the caterers needs me.” She turned to David. “Will you show them out if there’s nothing else?”

David offered a quick nod. “I’ll walk them back.”

Mary gave Finn and Eleanor a brief goodbye, hurrying out. The office door drifted shut behind her. For a second, they all stood in awkward silence. David tapped a pen on his desk.

“Well,” he said, forcing a smile, “I hope that list helps. If you have any other questions, let me know.”

“Thanks,” Finn replied, folding the papers. “We might. For now, we’ll be going.”

He and Eleanor headed to the corridor with David trailing behind. As they stepped back into the main gallery space, the buzz of last-minute preparations resumed. A couple of staff members wrestled a tall sculpture onto a plinth. Finn prepared to say a polite goodbye, but David abruptly cleared his throat.

“Can I talk?” David’s voice sounded unexpectedly urgent and hushed. “Not here.”

Finn nodded.

They headed outside the gallery's doors to the sidewalk. The sky overhead was dull, threatening rain. Finn turned, brows lifted in question.

David glanced around, as if checking who might overhear, then spoke in a low tone. "I—I don't want to cause trouble. But you were right... Harrison's been acting strange. More than usual."

Eleanor exchanged a sharp glance with Finn, then asked, "Strange in what way?"

David ran a hand through his hair. "He's always been temperamental. But since that fiasco with Victoria Palmer—when she suggested a painting was a forgery—he's been erratic, angry. That day, he practically shouted her out of the gallery. I overheard bits... it sounded borderline threatening. Mary doesn't see how bad it's gotten. She has a blind spot for him."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

Finn's suspicion about Harrison only deepened. "You think Mary's too close to see any of this?"

"Yeah," David whispered, sounding worried. "Harrison can be charming to her. But behind closed doors... he can blow up. I'm concerned. And with these murders connected to the gallery, I can't say I haven't considered that it could be connected to him or someone else here."

Eleanor nodded sympathetically. "We appreciate the warning. If you see or hear anything that suggests Harrison might be... beyond just temperamental, please call us." She rummaged for one of Finn's business cards and handed it to David, who accepted it with shaky fingers.

Finn offered a reassuring look. "We'll keep an eye on him. Don't lose sleep over it."

David nodded, then turned to go, but Finn stopped him with one more question. "David—did Harrison have arguments with anyone else, aside from Victoria?"

David hesitated, swallowing. "Yes. I heard raised voices from his office a few times. One was definitely with Edmund Garner... That's why I was shocked when you said he'd been killed. I didn't catch details, but Garner left swearing under his breath. That was about a week ago."

Finn frowned. "So that's two suspicious rows—Victoria and Edmund. Both victims now."

Eleanor shared a grim look with him. Finn cleared his throat. “You said there were at least two. Who else?”

“Right, sorry.” David took a breath, gaze flicking to the gallery doors. “Just three nights ago, a professor named Daniel Townsend came in after hours. He’s an art professor who sometimes helps Harrison authenticate pieces. I overheard a commotion—sound of things being knocked over—and then Townsend stormed out. It was late, maybe 10 PM. Harrison looked furious.”

Eleanor’s eyes narrowed. “Do you have Townsend’s address or contact info? We should check on him.”

David glanced at Finn, anxiety etched in his features. “Yes, but I’m sure you could find him at the Wilhelm Institute where he often teaches, though I should have his home address. Why? You think he’s in danger?”

“Possibly,” Finn said. “We have to consider he might be the next target. Or at least might have a clue we need.”

A flicker of alarm crossed David’s face. “All right, I’ll do it. I’ll call or email you once I have the details. But please... keep me out of trouble.”

Finn offered a half-smile. “We’ll be discreet.” He patted David on the shoulder. “Thanks, David. We appreciate the cooperation. But you mustn’t tell anyone about this conversation. I don’t want it getting back to Harrison.”

The man nodded, then hurried back inside, shooting a final worried look over his shoulder. Finn and Eleanor stepped away from the gallery entrance, the bustle behind them fading into the muted city sounds.

“Looks like Harrison is knee-deep in conflict with multiple people,” Finn muttered,

glancing at the folded list of paintings in his hand. “Victoria, Edmund, Townsend. All potentially threatened by him.”

Eleanor sighed. “Yes. Meanwhile, we still don’t have any definitive proof linking him to the actual murders. But this is a disturbing connection.”

Finn stared up at the gray sky. “We’d better track down Daniel Townsend quickly. If Harrison was furious with him, Townsend might be a prime candidate for the killer’s next pose.”

Eleanor nodded, checking her phone. “Agreed.” She caught Finn’s eye. “And if Harrison is innocent, he’s certainly bad at appearing so.”

Finn gave a rueful snort. “He sure is. Either he’s guilty, or he’s just an arrogant ass with terrible timing.”

They shared a tense smile as they walked away from the gallery, stepping into the drizzle that had begun to fall. Finn’s mind churned through the new leads: more reasons to suspect Harrison, a new name—Daniel Townsend—likely in the killer’s cross-hairs, and the puzzle of which painting the murderer might re-enact next.

## CHAPTER NINE

Finn pressed the accelerator a bit harder than he normally would, the late-afternoon sun dipping low on the horizon behind them. The roads were emptying now, with rush hour ended, leaving only a faint orange glow in the sky. Beyond the front windscreen, in the gathering dusk, fields blurred by on either side, dark shapes under a faint haze of twilight. Next to him, Eleanor Matthews gripped the door handle, her expression tense. She said nothing, but her posture made it clear she wasn’t comfortable with how fast he was driving.

“Almost there,” Finn said, glancing at the directions scrawled on a piece of paper. They had hustled out of Blackthorn Gallery less than half an hour ago, after David Smythe shared that Professor Daniel Townsend might be at risk—and the address he’d provided was thirty miles south, on a rural lane near the outskirts of Windsor.

“I don’t think you should drive so fast!” Eleanor said. “He’s not in imminent danger, the killer was too busy killing Edmund Garner.”

“Still, I’d like to get there ahead of time.”

She gave him a sidelong look, pushing a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. “I know. Just... watch the corners. This old Corvette doesn’t exactly handle like a new car, does it?”

The remark might have been lighthearted in other circumstances, but her voice quivered with genuine worry. Finn couldn’t blame her. The sun was almost gone, and the two-lane road offered little visibility. However, the sense of urgency burned brighter inside him: Victoria Palmer, Edmund Garner, and now the possibility of a third victim, all connected to those staged murders. They had gleaned from David that Townsend and Harrison Blackthorn had a heated argument three nights ago. That was enough to make Finn’s gut feel like they were close to a suspect.

“We’ll be fine,” he said, forcing calm. “Look, we’re pulling onto his road.”

Sure enough, an unpaved drive appeared on the right, partially concealed by overgrown hedgerows. Finn slowed the car, turning onto the gravel. Twigs and stones crunched under the tires. The beginning glow of twilight etched the silhouette of a modest country house up ahead—a two-story structure with a steep roof and a scattering of tall trees behind it. Lights glimmered in a few windows, but something about the place looked quiet, almost deserted.



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

He eased to a stop in a patch of weedy gravel near what appeared to be the front entrance. The building's facade bore dark-green ivy creeping up old stone walls. A single porch light flickered—either a faulty bulb or a wiring issue.

“Okay, so Townsend's place,” Finn murmured, switching off the engine. Darkness descended more fully without the headlights. “Let's do this carefully.”

Eleanor reached for the door handle. “Right behind—”

“No.” Finn's voice snapped out more sharply than he intended. He steadied himself. “Stay in the car, Eleanor.”

She frowned. “Why? You might need me if—”

“No arguments,” he insisted, meeting her eyes firmly. “You have no police or combat training. If there's a potential killer inside, I don't want you in harm's way. Let me check it out. I'm sure he's fine. Call me in five minutes if I don't come back. Agreed?”

She hesitated, torn between defiance and concern. Slowly, she nodded. “Fine. But don't do anything reckless. This isn't America. You're not armed, remember?”

“I have these guns.” He gave a wry smile, raising his arms up for a moment. “I'll manage. Five minutes, okay?”

She sighed and looked at him disdainfully. “Five minutes.”

He reached out and gently squeezed her shoulder. “Thank you.” Then he opened his

door and slid into the cool evening air. The faint sounds of nature formed a low chorus in the background. Gravel crunched under his feet as he approached the house.

There was a short path leading to the front porch, where the flickering light cast odd shadows. Finn immediately noticed something that made his gut clench: the door stood ajar—not fully closed, as if someone had left in a hurry or forced their way in.

He stepped onto the porch, heart pounding with adrenaline. “Professor Townsend?” he called, voice low but carrying. No answer. Silence pressed back at him. He winced. If Townsend was inside, maybe he was incapacitated or worse. Maybe the killer was still here.

With a slight push, he nudged the door. It swung inward on squeaky hinges, revealing a dim hallway lit only by a table lamp at the far end. The smell of old books and a lingering hint of coffee met his nose. He stepped across the threshold, scanning for movement.

“Professor Townsend?” he repeated, forcing calm. The hallway branched left and right, presumably leading to different rooms. “Police,” he added, hoping it might provoke a response if someone was lurking. Still, no one answered.

He crept further, noticing pictures along the walls: black-and-white photos of a man he assumed was Townsend at various academic gatherings, mixed with some countryside paintings. A coat rack near the door had a single jacket draped over it, pockets bulging. So Townsend was likely home. Or had been.

At the next intersection, Finn paused. The corridor to the right appeared to lead to a kitchen, glimpses of counter tops visible under dull overhead lighting. To the left, the lighting was even dimmer. He made a choice, turning left, drawn by an odd sense that the hush was deeper that way.

He passed a side room that looked like an office, door half open. Nothing stirred within. The only light came from the last door at the end, cracked open enough for a faint glow to spill out—like the soft greenish tint from overhead glass. A conservatory, perhaps?

His pulse thudded in his ears as he approached. He swallowed, uncertain what he'd find. "Daniel?" he tried one last time, pushing the door open. The space within, indeed, was a conservatory—large windows making up most of the ceiling and walls. Dusk tinted everything in a pale gloom. Leafy plants in pots lined the edges, some unkempt. A wrought-iron table stood at the center, next to a small fountain that bubbled quietly.

Finn froze when he saw the shape on the floor, near the table's far side: a crumpled form, splayed on the tiles. "Professor...?" he whispered, stepping closer. The evening's last light through the glass roof revealed a horrifying sight: a man lying on his side, one arm twisted under him, a dark patch of blood staining his shirt along the ribs. Another thin trail of blood ran from his mouth. Finn's stomach churned. This was no accident.

A glance at the face confirmed it matched the pictures he'd glimpsed in the hallway—Daniel Townsend. Only now, that face bore a shocking detail: the professor's hair had been braided with strands of dead grass, woven almost artfully into the man's locks. The stiff, withered blades poked out at odd angles, looking grotesquely like a parody of a wreath or a macabre headdress.

Finn's breath caught in his throat. Another staged murder. Another horrifying scene. He knelt, pressing two fingers to Townsend's neck. No pulse, and the body already felt cool. The professor was gone.

"Damn it," Finn muttered, shoulders sagging. The killer must have struck quickly, leaving this bizarre sign—like the others who'd been posed according to some art

reference.

Before he could stand, faint footsteps scuffed the conservatory floor behind him. The hair on his neck bristled. Could the killer still be here? Swiftly, Finn launched himself up, spinning around. He saw a figure looming in the doorway and lunged without thinking, hooking an arm around their shoulder to slam them back.

A gasp rang out—female, not male. “Finn, wait, it’s me!”

He realized the voice at once: Eleanor. He loosened his grip, stepping back, breath ragged. “What the—? I told you to stay in the car!”

She straightened, rubbing the arm he’d wrenched. “I heard nothing from you in a couple of minutes, so—”

He shut his eyes a moment, exhaling. “You said you’d give me five minutes, not two. Jesus, you scared me.”

She looked past him to where Townsend’s body lay. Her face paled. “Oh God. Is he...?”

“He’s dead,” Finn said quietly, trying to keep his anger from boiling over. “Look at his hair. The killers left some kind of twisted arrangement, like with the previous victims.”

Eleanor swallowed, stepping closer to the body with caution. “I’m sorry I rushed in,” she added, voice subdued. “I worried you might need backup, and I... well, I just couldn’t sit there.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

Finn ground his teeth, forcing himself to be calm. "Eleanor," he said, trying not to shout, "I appreciate the concern, but you're not trained for this. We have no idea if the killer was still here. Next time, do what I ask. You almost got yourself hurt, or me knocking you out in the dark. Understood?"

She nodded reluctantly, eyes lingering on Townsend's face. "Yes, understood." Then she looked away, hiding the flash of upset at his admonishment.

He softened, putting a hand gently on her arm. "Thank you for worrying. But please, let me handle the risk. Let's call this in."

She gave a short nod. "Right." Pulling her phone out, she dialed the emergency line. Within seconds, she was speaking in a low tone, giving the address, informing them of a discovered homicide.

While she did that, Finn surveyed the body more thoroughly. Townsend's shirt had a gaping tear on the left side, sticky with blood. Possibly a single deep stab wound. The braided grass in his hair reeked of something musty like it had been pulled from the yard. "All these details," he said to himself. "The killer invests time in these weird little touches."

Eleanor finished the call, stepping back to join him. "Police will be here in minutes. But look at that grass." She crouched carefully, avoiding the blood pool. "Dead grass, braided like... well, it reminds me of snakes writhing from his head. Like some sort of Medusa imagery. Possibly referencing an old painting or sculpture."

Finn stood straighter, pondering. "Medusa... Any idea of which painting it could be referencing?"

"I do," Eleanor said, frowning thoughtfully. "Caravaggio did a Medusa, but this is more in line with Rubens's interpretation from the 1600s—he depicted Medusa's hair as serpents, but look here, some of the grass has been coiled around on the floor next to the body. Rubens's Medusa has snakes coiled on the floor exactly like that."

Finn stared at her, impressed despite the grim context. "So it's another painting reference. That's three now: The Cornfield, The Blue Boy, and now a Medusa-inspired piece. Any more, and he'll be able to start his own gallery..."

"Finn, please..."

"Apologies. But remember what I said, sometimes levity in the worst places is the only way through."

She rose to her feet, her expression tightening. "We do have a strong lead: all three victims had connections to or run-ins with Harrison Blackthorn. Victoria worked with him, Edmund had an argument, and now Townsend apparently argued with him, too. I'm no police officer, but I'd say that's enough reason to bring him in for questioning. Are you allowed to arrest people?"

Finn ran a hand over his face, a weary sigh escaping him. "Yes, but I have to be careful with it. I'm technically a consultant detective, and usually, I have Amelia with me, who is an Inspector. But... We can't wait for more bodies to surface. If Harrison's behind this, or if he knows who is, we need to corner him. And if he isn't... well, we at least need to see what the link is."

Eleanor folded her arms, gaze flicking again at the motionless body. Finn took out his phone and dialed. It was quickly answered.

“Rob...I've found another victim,” Finn said.

There was silence for a moment. “Christ,” Rob answered. “Are you safe?”

“I think so,” Finn replied. “We'll need some units here and a forensics team. I wouldn't mind Wednesday on this, if you can get her.”

“Agreed,” Rob answered. “Send me the address.”

The call ended and Finn took one last glance at the poor man on the floor, before walking towards the exit to Eleanor. Finn knew they had to wait for the police, but as soon as they arrived, he'd be gunning for Harrison Blackthorn.

## CHAPTER TEN

Finn parked on the dimly lit side street adjacent to Blackthorn Gallery, cutting the Corvette's engine as he scanned the line of cars stretching along the curb. Soft music and hushed chatter drifted from the building's main entrance, where a discreet red carpet and a small gathering of well-dressed guests signaled a private opening event. Evening sky stretched overhead, starless with a low haze of cloud, and the old storefront glowed beneath brass lanterns. Clearly, the gallery was in the midst of its exhibition launch—a perfect time, Finn thought, for them to show up uninvited.

Next to him, Eleanor checked her phone, her expression tense. “Looks like Harrison went ahead with the exhibition tonight,” she confirmed. “From the looks of it, he's put a lot of money into this event.”

“That's precisely why we're here,” Finn replied, taking a measured breath. “We can't let him slip away. If Harrison's hands are clean, we'll find out soon enough. But if he's behind these murders or connected to the real killer, then tonight's the best time to confront him.”

Eleanor nodded, her blonde hair catching the glow from a nearby streetlight. “We should be ready for anything. He might try to bluff his way out, or worse. Take my lead, and if anything gets rough, take a step back and call for backup. Okay?”

“As you wish.”

They stepped out of the car and followed the short walkway to the gallery’s double doors. A uniformed attendant gave them a polite but questioning look. Finn flashed his Home Office ID. The attendant’s eyes widened briefly, then he stepped aside, letting them in without a fuss.

Inside, the gallery foyer radiated a warm, inviting glow. Polished floors and neutral-toned walls set off clusters of tasteful artwork. Well-dressed patrons milled about, sipping champagne. Music from a small quartet in the corner drifted softly across the space. Yet beneath the refined sheen, Finn detected an underlying tension—whether from their own sense of urgency or the knowledge that three grisly murders loomed in the background.

Harrison Blackthorn was easy to spot, standing near a large painting of a pastoral scene, deep in conversation with two elegantly dressed guests. He wore a tailored navy suit, hair perfectly styled. A forced smile graced his features, though his eyes flicked nervously around, as if anticipating trouble.

“There he is,” Finn murmured to Eleanor, nodding toward Harrison. “Let’s see if he tries running.”

Eleanor offered a tight smile. “If he’s not guilty, he’ll have nothing to hide. Right?”



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

Finn didn't answer. They navigated through the crowd, weaving past displays of modern sculptures and a few recognizable prints of British masters. The clink of glasses and low laughter momentarily masked their approach. Still, as soon as Harrison's gaze landed on Finn's face, the gallery owner stiffened. He mumbled something to his companions, then took a step back, scowling.

"Mr. Blackthorn," Finn said, voice calm yet firm. "We need a word."

Harrison's jaw tightened. "You again. I've already answered your questions, and I'm hosting an event. Must you keep harassing me?"

Eleanor interjected with measured civility, "Three people are dead, each staged in grotesque references to famous paintings. All three victims had links to you and your gallery. We have cause to suspect—"

"Rubbish," Harrison snapped, hushing his tone so the nearby guests wouldn't overhear. "I told you—someone's trying to connect me to these murders. I'm as much a potential victim as anyone. Why can't you leave me alone?"

Finn squared his shoulders. "We'd like you to come to the station for further questioning."

Harrison's eyes narrowed. "During the most important exhibition of our calendar year? Absolutely not! I have important clients, important pieces to unveil. If you want to talk, schedule something tomorrow with Mary."

Eleanor spoke softly, "We can't wait. This is urgent. Professor Daniel Townsend has

been killed.”

“Daniel? Well, that's a damned shame. But it has nothing to do with me!” Harrison's face flushed with anger. He spun on his heel, striding away through the crowd. “I've had enough of this,” he muttered under his breath. “Leave me alone.”

Finn shot a look at Eleanor. “He's panicking,” he said quietly. “Let's not cause a scene. I'll follow him. It looks like he's heading for that doorway.”

They slipped through the throng, trying not to shove guests aside. Harrison moved fast, heading toward a roped-off area that likely led to the gallery's back rooms, where employees prepared exhibits. A sign reading STAFF ONLY dangled from a cord. He ducked under the rope, glancing back once with wild eyes. Finn quickened his pace, ignoring the startled murmurs of onlookers.

“Mary!” Harrison called, spotting his assistant across the room. She was in a corner, speaking to another staff member. But she only managed to look up as Harrison disappeared into the restricted corridor. Finn caught Mary's eye, a fleeting moment of confusion on her face, before she returned to her conversation.

Eleanor stayed at Finn's heels, but the corridor was narrow and cluttered with crates and canvases leaning against the walls. The overhead lights buzzed softly, leaving pockets of shadow along the way. The swirling sound of violin music and chatting faded, replaced by echoing footsteps.

“Harrison, stop!” Finn shouted, voice echoing. “We only need to talk with you!”

From up ahead, Harrison's footsteps pounded louder, ignoring Finn's demand. The corridor twisted, leading into a larger storage area. Row upon row of statues, half-draped in protective sheets, formed a forest of white, eerie shapes in the dim light. Crates labeled FRAGILE and DO NOT OPEN lined the walls. The air smelled of

old paint and polish.

“Damn,” Finn muttered, pushing aside a large crate. “Why is there always something in the way?”

Eleanor, breath coming in shorter puffs, tried to keep up. “He’s... definitely not acting innocent,” she managed.

They heard a clatter as Harrison apparently knocked over something in his haste. Finn peered around a statue of a robed figure and spotted Harrison’s silhouette darting past a row of tall marble columns, presumably old exhibit pieces. The gloom made it hard to see, shadows distorting everything.

“I think you should head back into the hall,” Finn said.

“I’ll stay for now.”

“Stay close, then...” Finn whispered to Eleanor, though he realized that her ability to keep pace might be limited. He pressed on, weaving between dusty artworks. One statue of a Grecian woman loomed, arms outstretched, making the passage feel eerily claustrophobic.

Eleanor trailed behind, pausing momentarily when she nearly knocked over a bust on a crate. “I can’t see where I’m— Finn?”

He’d already moved ahead, spotting a flash of Harrison’s navy suit near the far corner. “This way,” he called back quietly.

As he entered the next section, the corridor branched in two directions. A faint scraping noise came from the left, followed by hurried footsteps. Finn chose left, diving past a trolley of rolled canvases. The tension soared—he pictured Harrison

careening through the labyrinth of back rooms, desperate to escape. If the man had nothing to hide, why run?

There was a crash from around the bend. Finn raced to the corner and glimpsed a door labeled DELIVERIES. It swung shut with a soft thud. "Got you," Finn muttered, pushing it open.

Beyond was a short hallway leading to the gallery's back door—an exit presumably used for loading big art pieces. Fresh nighttime air filtered in, suggesting Harrison had managed to unlock it. Indeed, the heavy door now stood ajar, a sliver of moonlight illuminating the loading bay outside.

Finn burst through. The small cement landing was lit by a single overhead security lamp. Stacks of wooden pallets and metal bins lined one side. No sign of Harrison at first. Then Finn heard scuffling steps—someone running.

"Finn? Finn, where are you?" Eleanor's voice carried from inside, but he had no time to wait. He slipped out the door. A glimpse of motion at the corner of the building told him Harrison was trying to circle around. Finn sprinted across the concrete, boots slapping loudly.

In the distance, a security fence loomed, topped with barbed wire. Past it lay a narrow alley. A clank echoed as Harrison evidently tried to slip out the side gate. Finn lunged around a stack of pallets, scanning. For a moment, he thought Harrison had vanished. Then he heard a faint "Ow!" followed by a pained hiss.

"Harrison?" Finn shouted, rounding a rusted metal bin. No response but a scraping sound of shoes against gravel. Another pained groan.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

He saw a shape crumpled near the fence—a man on one knee, clutching his leg. Drawing closer, Finn realized it was indeed Harrison, who half-whirled to face him, eyes flaring with resentment.

“You— get away!” Harrison spat. “This is entrapment, or... or something!”

Finn halted. Harrison was clearly hurt, likely having tripped over something in the dark. “Stop resisting, Harrison,” he said, trying to keep calm. “We just need to ask questions. You made it worse by running.”

Harrison cursed under his breath, attempting to rise. Just then, another figure emerged from the shadows—Eleanor.

Harrison glared at her. “This is your fault! I tripped—tripped over your foot! I’ll sue the police for assault!” He pointed accusingly at Eleanor.

She raised her hands. “I’m not in the police,” she said flatly. “And the only witnesses are these crates... or, at best, the moon up there. Good luck with that.”

A crack of humor danced in Finn’s eyes as he approached, pulling a pair of cuffs from his jacket pocket. “Quite a story you’d have. But I’m pretty sure we can handle it.” He nodded to Eleanor. “Nicely done.”

She shrugged, a half-smile ghosting her lips. “He wouldn’t stop, so I might have... extended my leg at the right moment.”

Harrison let out a frustrated cry, still clutching his ankle. “You can’t do this. I

haven't—haven't done anything!"

Finn knelt, deftly snapping the plastic cuffs around Harrison's wrists. "You're under arrest, Harrison Blackthorn, on suspicion of involvement in multiple murders. You have the right to remain silent.. "He cast a quick look around, seeing if any security or staff were near. No one, apparently, as Finn finished reading him his rights. The muffled sound of the gallery's music drifted from the closed door. "We'll take you in."

Harrison muttered another curse, clearly in pain but equally incensed. "I'll have your job for this, you incompetent—"

"Good," Finn muttered. "I wouldn't mind putting my feet up for a while."

Eleanor drew out her phone. "I'll call Rob to send a local unit and come pick us up. Because I don't think we can shuffle Harrison all the way through the exhibit in front of the guests."

Finn nodded, pressing a hand gently on Harrison's shoulder to keep him from trying another escape. "We'll see what you have to say back at the station, Mr. Blackthorn."

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Two hours later, they found themselves at Hertfordshire Constabulary: a large brooding building of brick and glass, fluorescent lights buzzing in the corridors. After some triage by station medics—Harrison's ankle was mildly sprained, no major harm done—they escorted him to an interview room. Finn sat on one side of the metal table, Eleanor next to him, while Harrison was across from them, arms uncuffed now but still wincing occasionally.

A digital recorder on the table clicked on. Finn gave a formal statement of date and time, reading Harrison his rights once more. Harrison glowered, crossing his arms. The

overhead lighting gave his face a haggard cast.

“All right,” Finn began calmly. “Harrison, we need to discuss the deaths of Victoria Palmer, Edmund Garner, and Daniel Townsend. All three had recent run-ins with you, were found staged in references to famous paintings, and we have reason to believe they’re tied to your gallery. Want to tell us what’s really going on?”

“Where the hell is my solicitor!?”

“We can wait, you don’t have to talk to us until you have legal representation,” Finn said.

Harrison exhaled a bitter laugh. “You think I’m afraid of saying the wrong thing and landing in prison? I told you everything before. I had arguments, yes. But arguments aren’t murder. Why would I kill them? You think I get some thrill out of that?”

Eleanor leaned forward. “Your behavior suggests you’re either hiding something or you’re extremely paranoid. Running away tonight didn’t help your case.”

He shot her a glare. “I ran because you keep treating me like a criminal. I’ve lost business deals since people have questioned the authenticity of the paintings I display, and no doubt clients are spooked by your incessant visits. My entire gallery’s reputation is on the line. So yes, I panicked.”

Finn kept his voice even. “Victoria Palmer suspected a forgery at your gallery. Edmund Garner also argued with you. Daniel Townsend, an art professor, quarreled with you days ago. They all ended up dead.”

Harrison’s gaze flicked from Finn to Eleanor, then down at the table. “What do you want me to say? I disagreed with them, sure. They all thought I was trying to pull a fast one at auction. But I have an alibi for the nights in question. Victoria died on a

Tuesday—I was at a private collector’s dinner, with a dozen witnesses. Edmund was killed two nights later—I was in London, attending a charity function, also with multiple witnesses. And Daniel Townsend today? I was at the gallery all day. My assistant Mary can confirm all the details.”

Eleanor frowned, glancing at Finn. “Were you alone at any point during these dinners or events?”

Harrison let out a short sigh. “Briefly to use the restroom, like any human being. But I wasn’t gone for hours. You can talk to them. They’ll verify I was there practically the entire time.”

Finn tapped the table. “We’ll check. But if your alibi stands, then how do you explain all your victims being linked to your gallery—and the killer referencing artworks from your exhibits?”

Harrison swallowed, eyes darting. “I don’t know. Maybe someone hates me, wants me implicated. A rival gallery owner, an ex-employee, or... or some deranged person who fixates on our curated shows. In all honesty, I’m afraid I’m next on their list.”

Eleanor studied him intently. “You claim you’re a target, not the perp. Have you been threatened? Seen anything suspicious?”



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

He shrugged helplessly. “No direct threats, but how else can I interpret these murders? They’re obviously staged to point at me or my gallery. Why else replicate paintings we’ve recently showcased?”

Finn exchanged a glance with Eleanor. If Harrison truly had an airtight alibi for each murder, it posed a serious complication. They only had circumstantial evidence tying him to these crimes.

“Look,” Harrison continued, weary frustration creeping into his voice, “I don’t want any more people dying, especially if this psycho is using me as a scapegoat. But you can’t pin these murders on me. Check my alibis. You’ll see.”

After a beat, Finn nodded. “We will. And if they hold, we have to let you go. But we’ll be keeping an eye on you—because if you’re not guilty, you may indeed be in danger.”

“Danger?” Harrison let out a hollow laugh. “That’s an understatement.”

“Who might want to kill you or destroy your reputation?” Finn asked.

“Half the bloody art community in London,” he let out a sigh. “The truth is, I make more enemies than I do friends. But I can’t think of any single one person who might want to go to such lengths.”

“And what about the question of a forgery? Have you been displaying fakes at the gallery?” Finn asked.

“No!”

“I wonder if all of the paintings in this case went through your hands at some point,” Finn added.

“I swear,” he replied, his eyes sincere. “I’ve got nothing to do with this.”

At last, a knock on the door signaled an officer stepping in. He murmured to Finn, “Mary Whitmore at the gallery has verified some of Mr. Blackthorn’s whereabouts today during the Townsend murder.”

Finn ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “I’ll need to know the exact time of death to verify that... All right. Let’s call it a night, then.”

Finn looked at Harrison. “Looks like you’ll be spending the night in a cell until we check out your story.”

“But...” Harrison looked defeated.

“No buts,” Finn said. “If it all works out, you at least know you’ll be out tomorrow. If it doesn’t, well...”

Eleanor flicked off the recorder. With a final glower, Harrison rose. Finn told him bluntly, “Have a good night.”

Harrison soon limped away on his sprained ankle, accompanied by a constable, occasionally spitting curses about the police hounding him. His complaints faded away as he was led downstairs to the cells.

“It occurs to me,” Eleanor said, “that you might be right. Perhaps all of the paintings involved have been at the Blackthorn gallery. Remember the printout David gave us at

the gallery with the names of all the paintings?"

"Yeah," Finn said. "You're right. So far, it contains the names of the paintings used by the murderer, as well as others."

"I wonder if they are all fakes," Eleanor pondered out loud.

Finn lingered in the corridor, fatigue settling deep in his bones. The overhead lights harsh on his eyes, and a faint rumble of activity from other offices wrapped around him. He caught Eleanor's eye. She looked equally spent, hair mussed and jacket rumpled. Their chase and interview had drained them, and they were no closer to identifying the real killer.

"You're not used to the hunt, are you?" Finn asked with a smile.

"I can keep up," she said.

"No doubt."

She sighed. "We have to keep digging for a link. If Harrison's telling the truth, we're missing something else connecting to those paintings."

Finn rubbed the back of his neck. "Agreed. But for now, let's get some rest. It's been a day."

She nodded, then parted her lips as if to say something else, but nodded and said "good night, Finn."

"Do you need a lift?" Finn asked.

"No," she said. "Rob has organized something for me. See you tomorrow."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

She disappeared through a set of double doors.

“Sure.Tomorrow,” Finn echoed.

Another wave of exhaustion hit him.He grabbed his coat and exited the building into the cool night air, and as he did so his own phone vibrated.He pulled it out.

A text from Amelia:

“Can I stay tonight?Think I need a shoulder.”

A small smile made its way to Finn's tired expression.Worry and relief mixed in his chest.He typed back:

“Of course.Always.x”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Finn stood in the cottage's small but cozy kitchen, ladle in hand, stirring a simmering pot of marinara sauce.The aroma of fresh basil and garlic wafted through the air, mingling with the lingering scent of candles he'd lit earlier in the adjoining living area.He paused a moment, letting the scent fill his lungs, then carefully tasted a spoonful.

Perfect.Maybe a touch more salt.

He set the ladle aside, glancing around the modest space that served as the cottage's

entire culinary domain—only a few feet of counter, plus an old gas stove and a small round table against the wall. Despite its simplicity, he appreciated how it all felt so personal, so different from any big-city apartment he'd rented in the past. This was his haven now: the walls painted a soothing pale green, a couple of framed prints hung near the window, and small wooden shelves held spices and mismatched china.

From the adjoining living area, a soft glow cast dancing shadows on the walls, thanks to the row of candles Finn had arranged. He wanted something warm, inviting—especially tonight. A break in the chaos of their investigations felt overdue, and he needed it every bit as much as Amelia did. The thought of her made him smile despite the tension still twisting in his gut from recent events.

He switched off the burner, checking on the lightly browned garlic bread in the oven, then arranged the plates on a tray: spaghetti tangled under rich red sauce, a side salad dotted with olives and feta, and a slice of the bread for each. He'd poured two glasses of red wine already. Everything was set for the quiet evening he'd promised her.

He gave a short exhalation—time to take a breath, time to shelve the murders for at least one meal. He lifted the tray and walked into the living area, where Amelia Winters sat on a small love-seat, knees curled under her. Her red hair, loose and slightly windswept from the chilly air outside, caught the candlelight's flicker. She looked up at him, meeting his eyes with a gentle smile.

“Wow,” she said softly, lips curving in warmth. “You went all out.”

Finn shrugged, setting the plates on the low coffee table before her. “We both needed a break,” he said. “Figure candlelight can't hurt.”

She inhaled the scent of the sauce and gave him a grateful look. “Smells incredible. Thank you.”

They clinked their wine glasses lightly, and Amelia took her first bite. A small hum of satisfaction escaped her lips. “Mmm, perfect. You’re getting better at this.”

Finn grinned. “Who says I wasn’t always a good cook? I just never had the time to prove it.”

She smiled back, but the expression flickered with a kind of heaviness that told him her mind was still burdened. He settled onto the couch beside her, one arm over the back. They ate mostly in companionable silence at first, savoring a moment that felt downright normal—two people sharing a simple meal in the soft glow of dancing candlelight, the world’s horrors locked outside.

After a few minutes, Amelia set her fork down, swirling a bit of pasta on her plate without actually raising it to her mouth. Her gaze drifted. “I appreciate this, Finn. I really do. I needed something... normal.”

He angled his head, noticing the slight tremor in her voice. “Tough day with the task force?”

She made a small sound of agreement. “Tough, yes, but also... horrifying.” She lowered her voice.

“Wendell Reed left a note, hidden at a jeweler’s. I’m convinced he did it on a security feed so we would see it. It pointed us to a train station, so we mobilized and arrived at exactly 2 pm. And...” Her voice caught.

Finn reached out, resting a hand on her shoulder. “What happened?” he asked gently.

A shaky breath left her lips. “When we got there, we found a woman’s body—tied under the undercarriage of a train.” She pressed her eyes shut, as though the memory was still raw. “She was... mangled. It was horrible. I can’t... I can’t wrap my mind

around someone who'd do that."

Finn inhaled slowly, anger stirring in his chest. "God. Amelia, I'm so sorry."

She nodded, not trusting her voice for a moment. Her eyes glistened with unspoken horror. "I just keep seeing her there, you know? And hearing Wendell's name in my head. He's taunting us, taunting me. Because I was the one who arrested him in the first place. Now he's... continuing this campaign of terror."

Finn set his plate aside on the table, leaning closer. "Is it definitely Wendell's doing?"

She let out a soft, humorless laugh. "He left that note for me. If we hadn't shown up, the train would have pulled away with her body still strapped under it. It's all so twisted."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

Gently, he wrapped an arm around her, feeling the tension in her frame. She stiffened a moment, then exhaled, letting the closeness settle her. “You think it was a message?” he prompted.

She tilted her head back, eyes shadowed by the candlelight. “Yes. He’s always about messaging. But I don’t know what it means yet—whether it’s a direct warning or some personal revenge play. Until we identify the woman, we can’t decode the significance. But with Wendell, there’s always significance. Always a purpose, even if it’s warped beyond reason.”

Finn stroked a hand over her cheek, brushing aside a stray strand of hair. Her skin felt cool under his fingers, but she leaned into the contact. “I know how you feel,” he murmured. “It’s so... senseless, the brutality of it.”

A small shudder went through her. “I try to keep it professional, to push aside the emotions, but there are days—like today—when it’s almost too much.”

He slid his other arm around her, hugging her gently. “It’s okay to feel it,” he said quietly. “You’re not a machine. You witness these horrors up close—of course it hurts.”

She closed her eyes, tears threatening to slip free. “I don’t want to break,” she whispered. “But sometimes I’m so scared... that if I don’t stop him, he’ll keep doing this, and it’ll get more personal. Maybe I’m already too involved.”

Finn pressed a soft kiss to her cheek, letting the warmth linger. His hand caressed her face, comforting her. “It’ll be all right. You’re strong, Amelia, and you have the entire



task force. You have me, too—even if they won't let me on the official detail."

She gave a brittle laugh. "Speaking of that, the lead on the task force would drop me in a heartbeat if he could. He hates that I have a personal vendetta against Wendell. Thinks it makes me emotional. But it's exactly that personal knowledge that might help us catch him."

Finn pulled back a fraction, meeting her gaze. "And he doesn't want more help from me?"

Her lips turned down. "No. He basically told me he wanted minimal outsiders. I wish you were there, though. I'd feel safer."

A pang stirred in Finn's chest. "I'm worried about you, too. Not being at your side... it drives me crazy. And with Wendell's unpredictability, I'd rather I was there if he decides to target you."

She squeezed his hand, gratitude shining in her eyes. "I wish you could be, but I'll watch my back. I promise."

For a moment, they let the hush envelop them, the candle flames flickering in the still air. Then Amelia cleared her throat, obviously trying to shift gears. "Anyway. Enough gloom, right? Tell me about your case." She attempted a teasing tone. "Should I be worried about this Doctor Eleanor Matthews you've been working with?"

A short burst of laughter escaped Finn. "Trust me, no. Eleanor doesn't even like me much. She's all business, and I suspect she finds my sense of humor deeply unprofessional."

Amelia smirked, tucking one leg under her. "But is she pretty?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Let's just say that even if she was Miss Universe, it wouldn't matter, because no one's turning my head from you."

A small flush crept across Amelia's cheeks, and she leaned in to kiss him briefly on the lips. "Oh God, Finn. Cheesy. But... Good answer," she winked.

He grinned, then his face grew serious again. "As for the case, it's... complicated. We have a string of murders staged like famous paintings, all connected to a gallery, but we can't prove who's behind it. Harrison Blackthorn, the gallery owner, is at the center of everything, yet we only have circumstantial evidence. We even arrested him temporarily, but his alibis checked out."

She cocked her head. "So what's the next step?"

Finn ran a hand through his hair, frustration evident. "I don't know. Eleanor and I came across the idea tonight that the real lead is that the paintings might be forgeries, or at least some of them. If so, there's a motive for people to keep quiet or kill those who discover the truth. But I'm stuck. The killer left behind staged crime scenes referencing Gainsborough, Constable... even a Medusa reference. And we still can't pin it on anyone."

Amelia reached out, resting a hand on his forearm. "Have you looked deeper into the forging operation itself? Like, who stands to gain from passing off fakes? That might be your angle. If there's an illegal art ring, the killer might be someone within that circle."

Finn's eyes lit. "Actually, that's a brilliant idea. Focus on the forgery pipeline, see if there's a known forger working with Blackthorn, or if certain shady dealers connect to all these victims." He let out a relieved laugh. "That's why you're the genius between us. I should have zeroed in on the forgers from the start."

She grinned faintly. “Well, maybe not the genius, but I do have my moments.”

They returned to their meal, Amelia finishing her spaghetti and praising his cooking. He cleared away the plates, setting them on the kitchen counter.

“Why don't I run you a bath?” Finn asked.

She shook her head. “Can we just curl up on the couch, watch something mindless for a couple hours?” she asked softly. “I want normal. I want to not think for a bit.”

Finn’s nodded. “Of course,” he said. “We’ll find the fluffiest show on streaming, or a sitcom. Something with zero dead bodies.”

She mustered a small laugh, relief in her eyes. Gathering the wine glasses, they moved back to the couch, switching on a low lamp by the side table. He plumped a cushion behind her, and she slid off her shoes, tucking her feet beneath her. He settled next to her, arm draped around her shoulders. The flicker of candlelight mixed with the television's glow.

For a few minutes, they sank into the sofa cushions, letting some random comedy program chatter away on the screen. Amelia closed her eyes occasionally, resting her head against Finn’s chest. A lull of contentment filled him, warmth at the simple closeness. He was about to say something—maybe a silly joke about the show—when her phone rang, a shrill reminder of reality intruding.

She stiffened and picked it up, reading the caller ID. “It's Clint from the Taskforce,” she muttered, locking eyes with Finn. “Must be news.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

He nodded for her to answer. She pressed the phone to her ear. “Winters,” she said.

The comedic laughter track from the TV contrasted starkly with her tense posture. Finn muted the volume. Watching her face, he saw a flicker of dread, then a tightening of her body. “Okay,” she said into the phone. “You’re sure?... Right. I understand. Keep me updated.”

She ended the call, placing the phone on the coffee table with a hollow-sounding click. Finn stroked her arm gently. “They identified the woman?”

A slow, pained nod. “Yes. She’s the sister of one of the prison guards—Shankland—who oversaw Wendell Reed’s transfer when he escaped. That’s how Wendell must have singled her out. A personal vendetta.”

Finn let out a low whistle, shock mingling with anger. “He’s targeting people linked to his captivity. He must be sending a message about the guard.”

Amelia ran a hand over her face. “I can’t fathom the cruelty. Her only crime was being related to Shankland. God.” She stared at the dark TV screen, reflection of her own troubled face partially visible.

Finn placed his hand on hers, lacing their fingers together. “I’m sorry, Amelia.

She took a shuddering breath, leaning closer into him. “Me too,” she murmured. “But if this is how Wendell operates, then it’s bigger than just me. We have to stop him.”

Finn nodded solemnly. “We will. One step at a time.”

They shared a silent moment, broken only by the distant hum of the TV's static. Then Finn reached for the remote, switching the set off entirely. The candlelight threw warm shapes on Amelia's features, highlighting the resolve in her eyes despite her weariness.

"You want to turn in?" he asked quietly. "It's been a long day."

She squeezed his hand. "Yes, please. Tomorrow's not going to be any easier. But... tonight has helped."

He offered a faint smile, kissing her temple. "Come on, let's go."

He helped her off the couch, blowing out the candles in the living area. They stepped toward the bedroom, arms around each other for support. For a fleeting instant, the hush of the cottage felt almost normal, a peaceful sanctuary against the encroaching darkness outside.

But both of them knew that dawn would bring fresh battles. Wendell Reed's monstrous cruelty, the twisted art-murders, the potential for more innocent victims—none of that vanished with the night. Even so, for a few more hours at least, they had each other's warmth and comfort, a small island of solace amid the storm.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Amelia woke to the soft, pale light of early morning filtering through the cottage's small windows. Outside, she could hear a low hum of birdsong, but it still felt chilly—spring hadn't truly taken hold. She slipped out of bed quietly so as not to disturb Finn, only to find he wasn't in bed at all. The covers on his side were thrown back, and faint sounds of movement drifted from the cottage's kitchen area. A pang of relief passed through her as she realized he must have woken before her—she'd been so exhausted last night.

She stretched, rolling her shoulders, then carefully brushed her hair into a neat ponytail. Her reflection in the small mirror showed tired eyes, the result of too many restless nights worrying about Wendell Reed and his every brutal move. But there was no time to dwell on that; she had a scheduled call. Slipping on a comfortable sweater and jeans, she made her way out into the open living space.

The cottage was always inviting in the morning, with beams across the low ceiling and a snug dining nook where a small wooden table stood against the wall. She found Finn in the adjoining kitchen area, hair damp from a shower, rummaging through a cupboard for something. He wore a crisp shirt and dark trousers, a little more formal than usual, likely an outfit for another day spent with Doctor Eleanor Matthews and the art murder investigation.

“You’re up,” he said, turning toward Amelia with a grin. His blond hair was still beaded with water at the tips.

She smiled, gave a quick nod, while reading a text. Then, she stepped into the dining nook to set up her laptop on the small table. “McNeil has organized an interview. I have a call with Shankland in about ten minutes,” she explained. “He’s—” She paused, swallowing. “He’s the prison guard whose sister Wendell murdered.”

A shadow flickered across Finn's expression. He set down a mug he was holding. “Right,” he said quietly. “You sure you're up for this?”

Amelia managed a small smile. “I have to be.” She untangled her laptop charger and plugged it in. “Shankland was told about his sister during the night. He wants to speak to me personally—maybe share any details that might help us track Wendell.”

Finn moved to her side, resting a hand lightly on her shoulder. “If it gets overwhelming, call me in. Or... well, I’ll be leaving soon, but maybe just message me.”

She set the laptop on the table, trying to ignore her nerves. “Sure. Let’s see what he’s willing to say.”

He leaned closer, narrowing his eyes at her hair. “You just woke up. Your hair’s all neat already?”

She laughed, a soft sound. “I brushed it, unlike you. You look half like you’ve been dunked in a fountain.”

Finn smirked and ran a hand through his damp hair. “I’m going for the businessman by day, surfer by night look,” he joked, slipping on a pair of sunglasses that had been resting on the windowsill. “What do you think?”

Her smile widened. She reached up, ruffling the wet strands. “I think it’s still wet. And you’re about as far from a surfer as Great Amwell is from Malibu.”

He chuckled, then gently rested his hand against her cheek. “Will you be okay? Talking to Shankland, dealing with all this again?”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

She nodded, exhaling. "I will be. I've done worse. But I appreciate you worrying." She stood on tiptoe and kissed him lightly on the lips. "Thank you."

A faint flush colored his cheeks as he set down the sunglasses, apparently deciding the comedic effect wasn't worth it. "Of course. I'm about to head out anyway. Another day of Doctor Matthews rolling her eyes at my jokes."

Amelia shot him a sympathetic grin. "Try not to wind her up too much. I can guess she's not the type to see humor in dire circumstances."

Finn shrugged. "I'll do my best. We'll see if I survive. But it's more art references, more potential forgeries, more to unravel."

She finished adjusting her laptop and checking the internet connection. The clock on the screen read 08:59. One minute to the call. She glanced toward the window that overlooked the front lane. "Don't you need to be off soon?"

Finn joined her, peering out the blinds. A small, unmarked police car sat on the opposite curb, the silhouette of an officer visible inside. "Rob must've arranged for someone to keep an eye on you. Good," Finn said under his breath. "But I still hate leaving you like this."

Amelia placed a gentle hand on his arm. "We both have jobs to do, Finn. I'll manage. And yes, having an officer outside does help." She turned to face him. "Go before you're late."

They exchanged another soft kiss. His warmth lingered a second longer before he



grabbed his coat from a hook near the door. “See you tonight,” he promised, stepping out onto the cottage porch. She watched him wave to the officer in the car, then the cottage door closed behind him, leaving her alone with her unsettled thoughts.

Amelia took a steadying breath, dropping into one of the chairs at the dining table. The laptop glowed softly, waiting. She checked the time again—09:01 now—and stared at her reflection on the dark screen. A pang of anxiety flared. Shankland had lost his sister in a vicious, unimaginable way. Wendell’s brutality was personal—aimed at anyone he deemed responsible for his imprisonment. What if I’m next? She inhaled, shaking the thought aside. Focus. This call might glean crucial intel.

A blinking icon at the corner of the screen signaled a message: “Ready?” from the messenger app. Her pulse kicked up a notch. She typed a short response: “Yes. Let’s talk.”

Then she hit the call button. The app rang twice, and the screen flickered before revealing a tired-looking man in a casual polo shirt. He had thinning hair and faint gray around the temples—Robert Shankland, the same guard who’d escorted Wendell Reed during that ill-fated transfer. Amelia recognized the lines of stress in his brow, the drawn look of someone living in fear.

“Robert Shankland?” she asked gently, leaning forward to appear reassuring on camera.

He nodded, shifting in what appeared to be a small, cluttered living room. “Yes,” he replied. His voice sounded hoarse, and his eyes darted about as though expecting something else to happen behind him. “You’re... Inspector Amelia Winters, right? The one that caught Reed the first time around?”

“Yes,” she confirmed softly. “I’m so sorry for your loss. The entire police force

extends its condolences regarding your sister.”

A tremor flickered across his face. “I still can’t—still can’t believe she’s gone.” His voice cracked on the last word. “She never had anything to do with Wendell, you know? She was just my sister. I loved her.”

Amelia’s throat tightened. “Wendell Reed has shown he’s willing to hurt anyone connected to those who oversaw his capture or detention.” She glanced away briefly, remembering the scene of that poor woman. “Do you have any idea why he targeted her specifically?”

Robert shook his head, eyes wet. “It’s because—he... he used to make these threats. But I never believed... I never believed he’d do something like this. I thought it was just talk.”

Amelia’s heart squeezed. “He threatened your family?”

“Yes,” Robert confirmed with a shaky sigh. “He threatened to visit my daughters, if you want to know the truth. So I refused to cave in. The day he escaped, I was one of the guards that loaded him onto the train. I wish I’d gone with him. He stole my key... It still haunts me. Now that he’s free, he’s punishing me. My sister... oh God.”

Amelia frowned at the trembling camera feed. “Are you safe right now? Is there a police detail with you?”

Robert sniffed, nodding. “Yeah, some officers are stationed outside. We—I keep the blinds closed. My wife’s at her sister’s house with our girls. I can’t... can’t risk them staying here.”

She softened her tone. “I understand. We can organize official witness protection for your whole family, Robert. Move you somewhere, Wendell can’t find you. Would that

help?"

"Yes," he breathed, voice ragged. "Please. Anything. I just don't want anything happening to my kids."

Amelia mustered a small smile. "All right. I'll speak to my superiors, see what we can do. In the meantime, stay put with the officers. We'll keep you informed, too."

Just then, the sound of raised voices muffled through Robert's microphone. He turned his head, alarm etching his features. "Wait—there's shouting outside."

Amelia leaned forward, heart lurching. "What's happening? Robert, talk to me."

He shot the camera a frightened look. "I—I don't know." The feed jostled as he apparently stood, carrying the laptop or phone with him. The living room's background blurred. "Maybe the officers are confronting someone."

Suddenly, a door in the background swung open. A uniformed policeman stepped into the frame, breathless. "Mr. Shankland, sorry to intrude, but this was delivered at the perimeter just now." He held out a plain envelope.

Robert's eyes widened. "Delivered? By who?"

"The man was gone before we could question him," the officer said, looking uneasy. "We have men searching the area. I'm sorry, sir."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

With shaking hands, Robert tore open the envelope. A photograph slid out, dropping halfway to the floor before he snatched it. The camera angle on Amelia's screen allowed her a glimpse of a blurred image. Robert let out a choked cry.

"Robert?" Amelia's voice shook. "What is it?"

His voice wavered, tears streaming down his cheeks. "It's—Rachel... my sister. A photo of her, tied up, gagged. It must've been taken before—" He broke off, sobbing openly now.

Amelia felt nausea twist in her stomach. "I understand." She forced her voice to remain steady. "Is there... is there writing or a note with it?"

Robert turned the photo around. The camera revealed smears of dark crimson letters scrawled on the back. A single phrase: "FAMILY HOLIDAY."

"It's... in blood," Robert choked out, barely coherent. "He's mocking me. Telling me... telling me he did this as a message."

Amelia clenched her jaw, anger and pity tangling. "Robert, I am so sorry. We—I promise you, we will do everything to bring Wendell to justice. Your sister deserves that."

Shankland let the photo slip from his trembling fingers. "He's a monster. A pure monster. I—I don't know what to do anymore."

Her heart clenched at the utter hopelessness in his voice. "Stay with the police detail,

Robert. Please. I'll contact the task force right away about witness protection. We'll get you somewhere safe, get justice for your sister."

He nodded, trying to wipe his tears away. "Thank you," he whispered. His gaze flicked off-screen as more commotion sounded—likely the officer telling him they needed to secure the evidence. "I—I have to go."

The call ended abruptly, the screen fading to black. Amelia sat there, laptop still open, her mind reeling. For a few seconds, she simply stared at her own reflection in the blank display. The cottage around her felt suddenly cold despite the gentle morning sun outside.

Slowly, she closed the laptop and rose. Her pulse pounded in her ears, adrenaline and sorrow battling inside. She moved to the window, drawing aside the curtain to peer into the cottage's small garden. The ground was damp, tiny shoots of green just barely poking up, and the early spring air remained chill. No vibrant blossoms yet—just dull buds not quite ready to face the world.

She wondered bleakly if summer would come at all, and whether warmth and life could reassert themselves while Wendell Reed roamed free. His brutal acts defied comprehension, and each new discovery seemed more horrifying than the last. And now, the only thing she could do was pass the information up the chain, keep pressing. Because if Wendell was out there, and he'd fixated on her or anyone else, who knew what his next move would be?

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Finn stood in the cramped conference room at Constabulary HQ, waiting for the kettle to finish boiling. The corner "kitchen" setup—complete with a battered kettle, mismatched mugs, and a tiny counter—was as unglamorous as it got, but it would have to do. Though Finn tried to avoid even looking at the sticky-looking

microwave. The overhead light clicked for a moment, reflecting off the scuffed floor where older stains hinted at countless spills over the years.

Seated at the worn table, Eleanor Matthews flipped through files regarding the bizarre, art-themed murders. She looked perfectly groomed in her neatly pressed blouse and jacket, though her posture seemed rigid. He couldn't help noticing she wasn't as calm as she tried to appear.

Finally, the kettle clicked off with a dull snap. Finn poured himself some instant coffee and waved a mug in Eleanor's direction. "Coffee?"

She looked up, the tension in her eyes momentarily softened by a small grin. "Thank you, but I'm more of a tea girl," she replied, a touch subdued.

Finn smirked. "Right, British tastes, sorry—should have guessed. Next time, I'll dig up some Earl Grey."

Eleanor's smile wavered, not quite reaching her eyes. "Yes... next time." She returned her attention to a stack of witness statements, leafing through them quickly.

Sipping his coffee, Finn joined her at the table. Just then, Rob stepped in through the open door, a grin tugging at his lips. "Morning, you two. Thought I'd see how it's going before I get sucked into a briefing. Need me to keep the paparazzi off your backs or something?"

Finn grinned, setting his mug down. "We'll let you know. I think the only cameras we're dealing with right now are security cams at the Blackthorn Gallery—and they're not exactly paparazzi."

"Don't joke," Rob teased back. "I bet the press would love to run a story on these staged art murders if they found out the details."

Eleanor stiffened, gaze flicking to Rob. “We need to avoid leaks at all cost. The killer... might escalate if they see media attention.” She tapped the corner of a file, clearly uneasy.

“Agreed,” Rob said. “So, what’s on today’s agenda?”

Finn exchanged a glance with Eleanor. “We’ve got a new angle,” he explained. “We’re suspecting forgeries might tie into these killings. Harrison Blackthorn’s gallery might have more going on than meets the eye. So we plan to look deeper into how these forgeries got there.”

Eleanor nodded. “And who might’ve produced them. If the paintings themselves were forged, someone was paid or coerced to do it.” She paused, then shrugged. “It’s a possibility we can’t ignore.”

Rob leaned against the table, arms folded. “So you’re diving into the seedier side of the London art world, then? Sounds like fun.” He shot Finn a wry look.

Finn laughed briefly. “I wouldn’t call it fun, exactly. More like stepping into a nest of potential liars, con artists, and black-market dealers.”

Rob grinned. “So your natural habitat.” He playfully jabbed at Finn’s shoulder, then sobered. “Just don’t get lost in the labyrinth. This killer’s cunning, so keep your wits about you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

“That’s the plan,” Finn assured him. He turned to Eleanor. “You said you know a name that might help?”

She pressed her lips together. “Yes. Leopold Dawson. He’s... well, he’s intimately connected to both legitimate and illegitimate aspects of art dealing. He has a reputation for facilitating shady transactions for the right price.”

Rob whistled softly. “I’ve heard the name in passing. Not a small fish, then?”

“Not at all,” Eleanor confirmed. “He’s often tapped for ‘off the books’ deals, which suggests he knows forgers or at least can point us to them. If some of those forged works ended up in Blackthorn’s orbit, Leopold might have arranged it.”

Finn caught the hesitancy in her voice. “Eleanor’s not exactly thrilled about approaching him,” he pointed out, a note of concern creeping into his tone.

Rob’s gaze flicked between them. “Is that because he’s dangerous?”

Eleanor half shrugged. “You could say so. He’s a strange mix of art expert and gangster. He’ll try to keep things uncomplicated, but if we corner him, he’ll find ways to retaliate. That could be in terms of your reputation, but he is surrounded by people much worse than he is, and they can get violent if they need to. His influence runs deep in the art community and beyond.”

Finn arched an eyebrow. “I gather you’ve had past dealings with him, then?”

She cast her gaze downward. “A few. On behalf of museums who needed to trace



dubious works, or to confirm provenance. He's slippery, persuasive, and has a wide network of questionable contacts. If we push too hard, we risk him shutting down completely, or turning on us." She paused, looking up at both men. "We need to handle this carefully. Leopold Dawson isn't some petty crook. He can be very dangerous if we don't do this right."

Finn exhaled. "We'll be careful, I promise. But we still have to try. He might know exactly who forged those paintings, and by extension, who's fueling these murders."

Eleanor nodded. "Yes, he might."

Rob observed Eleanor's clear discomfort, pressing his lips together. "All right, well, do what you have to. Just keep me posted. I can't spare too many officers for backup, but if you need a plainclothes tail, let me know."

"Thanks, Rob," Finn said. "I'll keep that in mind." He winked. "But you know me—I handle myself well in the underbelly."

Rob barked a short laugh. "Yeah, can't argue. Anyway, I have to run." He glanced at Eleanor, noting the tension in her shoulders. "Eleanor, everything good? You look uneasy?"

She forced a small smile, shaking her head. "I'm fine, Rob. Really."

Rob's gaze snapped to Finn, eyebrows raised as if to ask, Are you sure? Finn responded with a casual shrug. "All dandy here," he insisted. "We were just finalizing our approach."

"Glad to hear it," Rob said, lingering a second longer. "I wouldn't want Dr. Matthews to feel unwelcome. She's an asset. I'd hate to see her put off."

Eleanor gave a tight nod. "I appreciate your concern, Rob. But I'm perfectly capable of—"

"Of course," Rob cut in gently. "If you need anything, let me know." With that, he tapped the door frame, stepping out. "Be safe."

Finn noticed the way Eleanor's face flickered with a complex mix of relief and something else—perhaps guilt or uncertainty—as Rob departed. He kept quiet until the door clicked shut. Then he cleared his throat, turning to her.

"You sure you're all right?" he asked. "You seemed, I don't know... anxious when discussing Leopold. Or when Rob mentioned you looked upset."

She inhaled, gathering the files from the table. "I'm just nervous about dealing with Dawson. That's all. He can be vindictive if crossed."

Finn didn't push further. "Understood. Let's proceed carefully, then. But we can't ignore that he might be our best lead on the forgeries—and maybe on the killer."

"Agreed," she said, hugging the files to her chest. "Let's get going."

Finn looped his jacket over his arm, stepping aside for Eleanor to exit. She glanced around once more, as if unsure. Then she moved to the door. As her hand touched the handle, it opened abruptly—Rob reappearing with a sheepish grin. Finn had the distinct feeling he had been listening in.

"You don't need to spy on us," Finn said with a laugh.

"Forgot a file," he muttered, rifling through a stack on the side table.

Eleanor quickly stepped back, letting Rob pass. "We're going right now."

Rob gave her a concerned look. “You’re sure everything’s okay? You look—”

She cut him off with a polite smile. “I’m fine, truly. We just want to get this over with.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

Rob eyed Finn, who spread his hands in a who me? gesture. "If you're worried, don't worry, the Doc is in good hands."

Rob nodded, though doubt flickered in his gaze. "All right, just making sure. I don't want any tension scaring away our star consultant." He offered Eleanor a half-smile.

She returned the smile, though it appeared forced. "Thank you, Rob. We'll be back soon."

Rob ducked out again, leaving them in the corridor. It was very strange to Finn that he seemed intent on double-checking everything was okay with Eleanor. Once he was gone, Finn couldn't help but notice the subtle slump of relief in Eleanor's posture. Something between her and Rob clearly danced beneath the surface, but Finn pushed it aside for now.

"Let's go," Eleanor said briskly. "The quicker we talk to Dawson, the sooner we might make progress."

Finn nodded, hooking the files under his arm. "Yep. Dawson it is."

They walked side by side through the police station halls, the morning sun spilling through glass-paned doors at the far end. Uniformed officers bustled about, a chorus of phones ringing and distant conversations forming the station's daily background noise. As they stepped outside into the crisp air, Finn inhaled deeply, glancing up at a sky streaked with pale clouds.

"We should take my car," he suggested, leading the way across the lot. "Unless you

prefer driving?”

She waved dismissively. “No, you drive. I’d rather not focus on anything except what I’ll say if Dawson tries to manipulate us.”

Finn shot her a curious glance while unlocking his vehicle. “He’s that good, huh?”

Eleanor paused by the passenger door, frown deepening. “Yes. He can be charming, cunning. And if he realizes we suspect him or his associates of forging valuable works... he might spin a web of half-truths to send us on wild goose chases.”

Finn considered that as he slid behind the wheel. “So we stay sharp, ask direct questions, don’t let him steer the conversation. Understood.”

She nodded, fastening her seat belt. “Exactly. And if he does start playing games, let me handle it. I know his tactics.”

Finn started the engine, glancing sideways. “As long as you know what you’re doing, I’ll follow your lead. But you did say he’s dangerous.”

Eleanor exhaled a slow breath. “He is. We have to be ready for him to threaten or bluff. Just—if I give you a sign, I might need you to push back. Because he’ll be less likely to cooperate if he thinks I’m the only one strong-arming him.”

Finn cracked a wry grin and put his sunglasses on.

Putting the car into gear, he eased out of the parking space. The station’s modest building receded behind them as they headed onto the main road and towards an encounter with the nefarious Leopold Dawson.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Finn led the way down a narrow, dimly lit staircase into the basement of a London bar he'd never heard of—no sign out front, just a single door guarded by a bulky figure who, after a glance at Eleanor, stepped aside without a word. Immediately, a haze of stale smoke assaulted Finn's senses, mixing with the stench of spilled spirits. The establishment clearly didn't care about Britain's indoor smoking bans.

He paused near the bottom of the steps, scanning the small, low-ceilinged room. Yellowish lamps glowed overhead, giving everything a sickly cast. Leather-upholstered booths lined the walls, and a handful of men in suits or half-unbuttoned shirts sat at tiny round tables, nursing drinks. A couple of them glanced over, sizing him up. Finn felt them marking him as an outsider.

He leaned close to Eleanor, his voice subdued. "This place doesn't exactly do subtle, does it? And I'm guessing they aren't sticklers for the rules."

Eleanor's expression was cool, but tension pinched her mouth. "None of these people are," she said curtly. She scanned the room quickly, as though memorizing every face. "Leopold's men frequent this place."

"How do you know? And how come the guy on the door didn't even ask who you were?" Finn asked.

"Please, Finn. Don't ask me."

Finn nodded, letting her take the lead for now, though he worried why it was that she seemed to suddenly fit in so well to the city's underbelly. She wore a smart jacket and blouse—professional attire that clashed starkly with the smoky, clandestine atmosphere. Even so, her posture radiated an uneasy confidence, a discomfort with returning to a world she'd worked hard to leave behind.

Almost at once, a man in his early fifties strode toward them—dressed in a gray suit

that had seen better days, with a flamboyant tie. His face was broad, creased with deep laugh lines, and his hair was slicked back. A broad grin lit up his features when he saw Eleanor.

“Ellie!” he said, arms wide. He pulled her into a hug, ignoring her stiffening. “I can’t believe it’s been, what, four years?”

Finn’s eyebrows rose. Ellie? He could practically feel the tension rolling off Eleanor. She cleared her throat, forcing a polite smile. “Hello, Mickey. It has been... quite a while.”

Mickey held her at arm’s length, grinning with a wistful look. “You look just like your dad, you know that?”

A flash of discomfort flitted across Eleanor’s face. “I get that a lot,” she said briefly, then gestured to Finn. “This is Finn Wright. He’s—”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

“A detective,” Mickey cut in, eyes narrowing. “I’ve seen this fella on the news. That’s what I heard. We don’t really like that word in here.”

Finn felt multiple gazes from the bar shift onto him. He lifted a hand, smiling disarmingly. “If it’s any consolation, I’m not the biggest fan of the word myself. I’m more of a consultant detective. And I’d prefer not to cause trouble.”

Mickey stared him down for a moment, then snorted. “Heh. You’re with Ellie, so you must be fine. But you’d best keep that detective business under wraps.” Turning back to Eleanor, Mickey’s grin returned. “Leopold will be thrilled you came to see him, Ellie. He’s back in the room there with his card buddies.” He gave Finn a once-over. “And you sure this fella can be trusted?”

Eleanor straightened. “Yes, Mickey. He can be trusted. We just need a word with Leopold, that’s all.”

Mickey studied Finn for another beat before shrugging. “Your call, Ellie.” He stepped aside, gesturing for them to move through a curtained archway at the back. “Follow me. Watch your step—some folks in this place don’t take kindly to outsiders.”

Finn glanced around, seeing a couple of men puffing cigarettes at a corner table, eyes flicking his way. He nodded at them, but they didn’t respond, just stared. Charming crowd, he thought dryly.

Mickey led them down a short hallway, every inch of it reeking of stale smoke and liquor until they emerged into a larger back room. A single hanging lamp illuminated a round card table where four men sat, jackets off, glasses of whiskey at hand. Clouds



of cigarette smoke curled in the air. One man—Leopold Dawson, presumably—rose when they entered.

Leopold was in his seventies, tall but hunched with age, hair a wispy silver combed neatly back. He wore a tailored suit, fine lines in the fabric hinting it was expensive. He had an air of casual authority, his gray eyes sharp beneath bushy eyebrows. The other three men at the table glanced up, noticing the newcomers.

Leopold smiled, revealing surprisingly white teeth. “Ellie! My dear, it’s been ages, doll.” He extended his arms, and, with visible reluctance, Eleanor stepped into a brief hug.

“Leopold,” she said quietly, voice touched by something between nostalgia and regret. “You’re looking well.”

He turned to the other gamblers, waving a hand in introduction. “Gentlemen, this is Harold Matthews’s daughter. I told you about Harry, didn’t I? One of the best men I ever knew.”

The men around the table rose, each offering Eleanor a handshake and murmured condolences for her father’s passing. “Harry was a diamond,” one muttered, eyes warm with memory. “Sorry to hear he went.”

Eleanor nodded politely, her cheeks coloring at the memory. “He was... quite a character,” she allowed.

After a few more nods and greetings, Leopold turned his attention to Finn, eyes narrowing. “Now, who’s this tall fellow? Tall enough to be a copper, I’d reckon. Are you a copper?”

Finn forced a friendly smile. “Name’s Finn Wright. I’m a consultant with the Home

Office. Not an officer, exactly—”

Leopold barked a short laugh. “Consultant detective, is that it? Hmph. Not good enough for a badge at the Met, or what?” His grin had an edge to it.

Eleanor stepped in, voice firm but respectful. “He’s with me. And the only reason we’re here is because people are being murdered—three so far. They’ve been staged like famous paintings, and all of them connect back to the Blackthorn Gallery somehow. We believe forgeries might be at the heart of this, as each murder scene mimics a forged painting.”

Leopold's gaze didn't waver. "Murders. Forgeries. None of that is my business, Ellie. It shouldn't be yours, either."

She pressed her lips together. “I know you prefer to stay out of trouble, but... My reputation’s on the line. I’m attached to this case. I need help to stop any more deaths.”

A flicker of something akin to concern crossed Leopold’s face. He sighed heavily. “You always did have a stubborn streak, like your father,” he muttered. “Fine, come with me. We’ll talk somewhere quieter.” He motioned to the others, who resumed their card game with no fuss.

Leopold led Finn and Eleanor across the room to a narrow door that opened into a small study. A single overhead lamp illuminated a wooden desk cluttered with old ledgers, empty whiskey glasses, and a battered globe that sat in the corner. Once inside, Leopold closed the door behind them, muffling the laughter and clink of glasses from the card table.

"So," Leopold said, hands resting on the desk's edge, "tell me about these murders. And keep it brief. I'm not a gossip, and I won't be dragged into giving depositions."

Eleanor took a breath, crossing her arms. “Three victims, each killed and posed to resemble a famous painting. I identified them: The Cornfield, The Blue Boy, and something reminiscent of Rubens’s Medusa. All had potential ties to the Blackthorn Gallery. We suspect a ring of forgeries is the real motive—someone’s either silencing those who discovered the fakes, or covering up something bigger.”

Finn nodded, stepping in. “That’s why we’re after information on who might’ve created these forgeries. We think each victim may have recognized a painting was fake or learned something about the ring. We believe you, Mr. Dawson, might know who in London’s art underworld has that kind of skill.”

Leopold’s mouth twitched. “You think I’m about to snitch?” He shot a sidelong glance at Eleanor. “You know, Ellie, in my world, snitching is a dirty word.” He winked in Finn’s direction. “Especially to a detective, consultant or otherwise.”

Finn tensed. “We’re just trying to prevent another murder.”

“Were any of the victims, women?” Leopold asked.

“Yes,” Finn replied, starkly. “Victoria Palmer was 73.”

Leopold gave a small, humorless laugh. “Damn shame. That’s not on. Killing women is frowned upon even in my circles. But I appreciate your predicament.” He opened a drawer, pulled out a notepad, and scribbled something. He ripped the page free and held it between two fingers. “All right, Ellie. For the sake of Victoria and your father, I’ll give you what I know, but that’s it.”

Eleanor reached out, and he handed her the scrap of paper. She glanced at it but didn’t read it aloud. Finn tried to peer over her shoulder, but she was too quick to fold it away.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

“That's the name and address of a company that supplies security for expensive antiques when they're getting moved around,” Leopold said. “All I'll say is you might find your answer there.”

“Thank you, Leopold,” Eleanor replied, sounding sincere.

“You can come back here any time, Ellie,” Leopold said, leaning back against the desk. “But not with your detective friend.” He aimed a dry smirk at Finn. “Sorry, pal. It's nothing personal. But the clientele here... they're very choosy about who they drink with.”

Finn shrugged, attempting a conciliatory grin. “Shame. I enjoy a card game now and then.”

Leopold let out a sharp laugh. “Every single person at that table cheats, Mr. Wright. You wouldn't stand a chance.” Then his smile faded, replaced by a grim seriousness. “Besides, this isn't your world. Best keep out if you value your safety.”

Eleanor exhaled slowly. “I appreciate the tip, Leopold. Truly.”

He gave her a brief nod, then tugged her into a surprisingly gentle hug. “Your dad was a good man. I promised him I'd keep an eye on you, but that's hard to do when you don't return calls.” There was a flicker of genuine hurt in his voice. “If you ever need help, Ellie, call me next time—don't wait until there are bodies on the ground.”

She swallowed, nodding. “I'm sorry. I needed to step away from... Dad's world.”

Leopold patted her shoulder. "I get it. If I were a younger man, maybe I'd have done the same thing, known what I know now. But we're all victims of fate, ain't we? Now, let's get you out of here. I have a reputation to maintain." He motioned for them to follow.

They returned to the card room, where the men around the table looked up briefly but said nothing. Leopold waved to Mickey, who was leaning against the wall with a half-empty pint in hand. "Mickey, see them out. And keep an eye on them. Make sure no one decides to... cause trouble."

Mickey knocked back the rest of his drink, set the glass aside, and grinned at Eleanor. "Right you are, boss." He gestured for Finn and Eleanor to follow him. As they stepped back into the bar's main area, cigarette smoke curled heavily in the air.

Mickey led them through the scattered patrons, then angled toward the stairwell. On the way, he smiled, turning to Eleanor. "I can't get over it. I can see your dad in you so much. What a bloke he was, eh? Best bare-knuckle fighter I ever saw, and never lost his cool in a tight spot. Real legend."

Eleanor forced a small nod. "Yes, well... I knew a different side of him, Mickey." Her tone was carefully neutral, but Finn sensed her embarrassment.

Mickey didn't notice, rummaging in his memories. "I remember once in Dublin, your old man took on four men double his size. Took 'em down like it was nothing! Eh, good times. The all or nothin' days."

Eleanor tensed, her posture rigid. Finn gently placed a hand on her elbow to guide her up the steps, letting her know she wasn't alone. She shot him a grateful glance.

At the top of the staircase, near the exit, Mickey turned. "Don't be a stranger, Ellie. You ever need anything, you know where to find me—or Leopold."

She offered a tight smile. “Thanks, Mickey.”

They emerged onto a quiet side street, numb against London’s skyline. The bar’s unmarked door closed behind them, the sounds of music and laughter sealed away. Amelia gave a discreet shiver—part from the cold, part from relief.

Finn exhaled. “Well, that was... an interesting glimpse of your father’s world. You okay?”

She shrugged, face shadowed by a streetlamp’s glow. “It doesn’t matter. I just—I wasn’t proud of what my father did or the people he associated with. But I guess it’s part of me, too.”

Finn paused, letting a wave of empathy wash over him. “For what it’s worth, I grew up in a small Florida town where everyone saw me as that kid from the wrong side of the tracks. But I don’t believe in the sins of our fathers. You’re a good person, Eleanor. You’ve achieved plenty—hold your head high.”

Something in her eyes softened. “Thank you,” she murmured. She withdrew the folded paper from her pocket. “Let’s see what Leopold gave me.” She handed it to Finn.

He opened it under the wan glow of a streetlamp, reading a scribbled note: a name and address. Possibly a warehouse location. He whistled. “So, a security firm outside London... that’s where we might find this forger, or at least their operation?”

Eleanor nodded. “Apparently.”

He stepped aside as she started down the street. “Up for a drive, Dr. Matthews?” he teased lightly.

She managed a genuine smile this time. “Delightful, Mr. Wright. Lead the way.”

And so they walked off together, the smoky bar behind them, gray day skies settling in overhead. Despite the tension, they had a lead at last—one that might unravel the killer's connection to the forged paintings. If this forger truly was the key to stopping any more grisly murders, Finn and Eleanor would brave any seedy place to find them.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Finn pulled into the industrial estate in his red Corvette just after lunch, the Spring sun glinting off the car's hood as he turned down a lane flanked by wide warehouse buildings. The sky above was gray, and a light chill crept through the air. Next to him, Eleanor flipped through a notebook filled with scribbles about the case.

“This is the place,” Finn murmured, bringing the Corvette to a halt in a small parking area near a chain-link fence. Beyond the fence, rows of industrial units stretched in neat lines. Forklifts beeped in the distance, and workers in high-visibility jackets moved pallets around.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

Eleanor shut her notebook. “All right. So we’re looking for the Globe Secure Transport warehouse? That’s the name Leopold gave us?”

Finn nodded. “It should be here somewhere, according to the address.” He pointed to a large building down the row, a simple gray rectangle with a white sign stenciled on the metal siding. “I figure the forgeries might be made or swapped in there, if Leopold’s tip was correct.”

Eleanor drew a breath. “And your plan is to walk up to the warehouse manager, show him your consultant badge, and say ‘Let us in because we suspect you’re trafficking forged paintings’?”

Finn grinned, unbuckling his seat belt. “Plan A, yes. But I’ve got a Plan B in mind if that fails.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Which is...?”

He opened the car door, stepping out into the crisp air. “Sneaking around, of course.”

Eleanor followed, shutting the door behind her. “That sounds like a terrible idea.”

Finn shrugged, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Bad ideas are often where good ideas start.”

“That’s not how ideas work,” she muttered, casting an exasperated look.

Finn let out a short laugh. “Maybe not in the rational world, but it’s how they work in



my head.”

They walked across the asphalt toward the main loading bay of Globe Secure Transport, passing a few parked lorries and a forklift humming near the side. A high fence ringed the property, and signs warned of restricted access, authorized personnel only.

After showing IDs at a small booth by the entrance, they found themselves directed to a warehouse supervisor standing near a pair of large steel doors. The supervisor—an imposing figure in a security uniform—eyed them warily as they approached.

"Afternoon," Finn said, flashing his Home Office consultant badge. "I'm Finn Wright, and this is Dr. Matthews. We're working for the Home Office, assisting the Police on a murder investigation connected to forged paintings. We'd like to talk to whoever is in charge and have a look around, if possible."

The supervisor kept his stance broad, crossing his arms. "Forged paintings? We handle legitimate shipping and storage of high-value art, nothing forged here."

Eleanor stepped in. "We believe some items in your care may be connected to multiple murders. It's crucial we have a look."

The supervisor's expression hardened. "I'm sorry, but you can't just walk in. Our clients pay us to maintain the strictest security. Unless you have a warrant from a judge, you're not getting anywhere near the inventory."

Finn exchanged a glance with Eleanor. Plan A was clearly hitting a wall. "We can get a warrant," he said, meeting the supervisor's gaze.

"Fine," the supervisor said, "come back with one. Until then, I can't let you in. Gerard would kill me." He turned on his heel, walking away.

Eleanor sighed under her breath, stepping back to Finn's side. "That went well."

"Nothing we didn't expect," Finn replied with a shrug. "I wonder who Gerard is? Shall we move to Plan B?"

She folded her arms. "I'm not thrilled about sneaking around a high-security warehouse. You realize we could land in serious legal trouble."

A faint grin touched Finn's lips. "We also could discover who's forging paintings and killing people, or at least how they're swapping them. Worth a little risk, don't you think?"

Eleanor huffed. "I suppose it's your call. Lead the way."

They retreated across the asphalt, away from the supervisor's line of sight, watching the warehouse from behind a stack of wooden pallets. Two large loading dock doors stood open, and a truck rumbled up to one of them, reversing into position. Workers bustled around with trolleys, loading or unloading crates.

Finn studied the scene, noticing a white truck pulling in from the gate. Its rear was covered by a canvas tarp. It inched toward the second loading dock. "See that truck? Perfect. Let's hop on. It'll drive right in, and we can slip off inside."

Eleanor blanched. "You're insane."

"Very possibly." He turned to her with a wry smile. "But this is how we get results. Just... wait here, okay?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not standing alone in some industrial estate with suspicious employees gawking at me. If you're hopping onto a moving truck, I'm coming too."

Before he could protest, she darted forward, timing her steps so she wouldn't be spotted by the forklift drivers or the supervisor. Finn cursed under his breath and hurried after her. The truck slowed as it neared the dock, and the driver seemed occupied with reversing. Finn grabbed the tailgate, hoisting himself up quickly, and Eleanor followed, scrambling onto the rear ledge.

They ducked under the heavy canvas flap, settling into the dim interior, whispering frantically.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

“I said wait,” Finn hissed. “Now we’re both stuck in here.”

Eleanor glared, her voice low. “I’m not letting you hog the glory if this leads to cracking the case. And I’m not loitering in a shady lot by myself.”

Finn couldn’t help a small chuckle, despite his irritation. “Fine. Stay quiet.”

They crouched among wooden crates and a few strapped-down pallets, the smell of packing materials thick in the enclosed space. Through a small gap in the tarp, Finn watched as the truck trundled forward, eventually passing under the warehouse’s overhead door. Dim overhead lights gave a flickering view of the interior. He heard muffled voices outside—a foreman barking orders, a couple of workers calling out instructions. Then the engine shut off, and footsteps receded.

After a moment of tense stillness, Finn peered through the gap. “No one’s around,” he whispered. “Let’s go.”

They slipped off the tailgate, dropping onto the concrete floor. Rows of shelving units rose on all sides, stacked with crates labeled ART HANDLING—FRAGILE or displaying cryptic inventory codes. The warehouse smelled of dust, varnish, and the faint hint of chemicals.

Eleanor sidled next to him, eyes roving over the crates. “What exactly are we looking for?”

Finn paused. “I thought you would know. You’re the art expert.”

Her brow shot up. “I thought you would know—being the policeman.”

He flashed a tight grin. “Consultant policeman... Eh, detective. Let’s check for any evidence these crates are fakes or contain suspicious items. If you spot something obviously forged, that’s our lead.”

She sighed but nodded. They crept between metal racks, trying to stay hidden whenever they heard approaching footsteps or idle chatter from workers. At one point, a forklift rumbled past, forcing them to duck behind a wooden crate until it clattered away.

Eventually, they approached a side aisle where a single guard patrolled, carrying a small tablet and a holstered baton. He turned unexpectedly, catching sight of movement. “Hey!” he barked.

Finn reacted on instinct, rushing him before he could draw his baton. He grabbed the man’s wrist, twisted it, and looped an arm around the guard’s neck in a swift choke hold. The guard struggled for a second, but Finn maintained the hold until the man slumped unconscious. Gently, Finn lowered him to the ground, mindful of not causing any permanent injury.

Eleanor, eyes wide, hissed, “Good God, Finn, did you kill him?”

He checked the guard’s pulse quickly. “Nah, he’s just taking a nice nap. Let’s move before someone comes.”

“They’ll sue you for that!” Eleanor whispered.

“Not if I find something.”

They stepped over the fallen guard, weaving deeper into the warehouse. Their hearts

pounded, every shadow or echo making them flinch. At length, they found an area cordoned off with more racks—each containing large wooden crates that read ART / BLACKTHORN GALLERY CONSIGNMENT. Several crates were open, presumably mid-inspection.

Finn leaned closer to peer into one. “Look, paintings.”

Eleanor joined him, carefully lifting the corner of protective cloth. Beneath, four or five framed canvases rested. She examined them in the fluorescent glow. Her eyes scanned the brushstrokes, the coloration.

“These are forgeries,” she announced softly, placing a hand on one frame. “I can tell by the uniform cracking pattern on the paint—too artificial, as if it’s been chemically aged. Also, the coloration is slightly off for the historical period. The technique’s close, but not quite right.”

Finn exhaled. “So real paintings were supposed to be in this consignment, but the ones inside are fake. That means at some point, the genuine articles get swapped out.”

Eleanor nodded, her face grim. “Yes. If these are the fakes, that means the real paintings were probably taken out. The forger or someone here sells them on the black market for a huge profit.”

Finn tapped his phone screen. “We need to call this in. This is exactly what we needed—proof the warehouse is part of the forgery pipeline. Let’s take some photographs for evidence.” He began to take some photographs, Eleanor doing the same.

A sudden sharp blow crashed across the back of his head. Pain exploded in his skull, and his vision blurred. He caught a glimpse of Eleanor’s startled scream, her hands flying to her mouth, before darkness pulsed at the edges of his vision. The floor

rushed up to meet him, and he felt rough hands dragging him across concrete. Consciousness slipped in and out, the pounding ache in his head overwhelming all sense of time or place.

When Finn's mind finally cleared, he was upright, arms strapped behind him, ankles bound to the legs of a chair. A dull overhead bulb cast harsh light across a small, windowless room. A throbbing pain radiated from the back of his skull, making him wince. Then he noticed Eleanor, tied in a similar chair beside him, her face taut with fear.

"Eleanor," he croaked, throat dry. "Are you okay?"

She tugged at the ropes on her wrists. "Apart from being tied up in a warehouse, I'm peachy," she whispered, voice laced with sarcasm.

The door creaked open. A stocky, thickset man strode in, accompanied by two henchmen. He wore a cheap suit, shaved head glistening in the overhead glare. His movements exuded confidence as he stood before Finn and Eleanor, hands on his hips.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded, eyes flicking between them.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

Finn's head still swam, but he forced a steady tone. "Finn Wright, Police— sort of."

The man stepped closer, snorting. "Sort of?" He snatched the ID badge from Finn's jacket pocket, scanning it. "Consultant detective with the Home Office, I see. Not a real cop, then." He tossed the badge aside. "I know when someone's lying. Did you come alone? Did you alert your buddies?"

Eleanor opened her mouth to speak, but Finn cut in. "Plenty of people know we're here."

The man's lip curled. "I doubt that. I can tell when someone's lying to me. And if they don't know, it makes my job easier." He turned to his henchmen. "Lock them up, then take them for a long walk off a short pier or something. I don't want to see these two again."

Finn's stomach clenched. "Wait—"

The man ignored him, glancing at Eleanor. "Your friend here stuck his nose where it doesn't belong. That's going to cost him. And you."

One henchman smirked, cracking knuckles. "Yes, boss."

"Actually, call Frankie Govan, he'll take care of this so nothing can be traced," the stocky man said.

He then glared at Finn. "Enjoy your last moments, detective." With that, he spun on his heel and marched out, the henchmen following. The door slammed shut, leaving



Finn and Eleanor in the oppressive silence.

Eleanor stared at Finn, her eyes wide. “He said... we’re not going to be seen again. That means—”

“That we might end up sleeping with the fishes,” Finn finished grimly. “I’d guess they plan to do it quietly. Maybe load us in a crate and dump us, or—”

Eleanor closed her eyes, fighting panic. “What do we do?”

He tested the ropes binding his wrists. They were thick, but maybe not unbreakable. “We improvise,” he murmured, adopting a determined glint in his eyes. “We’re not done yet. I might be able to get my hand out.”

Outside, footsteps echoed. They had precious little time. Finn wriggled against the ropes, heart hammering. If they couldn’t escape soon, they would never see daylight again, never solve the forging ring, never stop the killer. He clenched his jaw, willing to do whatever it took to get free.

With a strained grin to Eleanor, he muttered, “Don’t worry. We’ll find a way. Bad ideas lead to good ideas, remember?”

She gave a shaky laugh. “You’re insane, Finn.”

He nodded. “Absolutely. Let’s hope that works in our favor.”

And as the dim overhead light flickered, Finn knew that whoever Frankie was, when he arrived, it would mean the end for Eleanor and him.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Amelia stared at her computer screen, scanning yet another set of names—former prison guards, retired solicitors, ex-police officers, and anyone else who'd once interacted with Wendell Reed during his incarceration. She'd been at it for hours, her eyes dry and neck stiff. The Hertfordshire Constabulary office felt too warm, the early spring sun heating the windows and turning the place into a stuffy cave.

It was mid-afternoon, and she was running on caffeine and nerves. She'd been digging into a theory: Wendell had escaped prison not just for his own freedom but with a methodical plan to punish anyone who'd played a part in his capture or detention. He'd murdered Robert Shankland's sister already—a savage, personal strike. She feared he might do worse if he had a whole list of names. And while the logical part of her mind said she was top of that list, she refused to let her fear dictate her every move.

A knock on her office door broke her concentration. She looked up to see Rob enter, a weary look on his face. He settled into the chair opposite her desk with a sigh, his uniform jacket rumpled as though he'd been at the station since dawn.

“You all right, Amelia?” Rob asked, resting his hands on his knees. “Heard about the train station discovery. Must have been rough.”

Amelia leaned back in her chair, pressing a hand to her temple. “Yeah, it was upsetting. Doesn't matter how many times you see something like that, it never gets easier. And Wendell's clearly targeting Shankland now, or at least that's how it looks.” She gestured at the endless files on her screen. “But I'm working on figuring out who else he might hold a grudge against. There's a long list of possibilities.”

Rob nodded. “I imagine. He's made it personal with you, too.”

Her stomach tightened. “Yeah. The personal detail you assigned me is outside as we speak.” She sighed. “They keep their distance, just watchful—like you

instructed.It's... all I can really ask them to do."

"Good," Rob said."I don't want you alone if Wendell's escalated to killing relatives of prison guards, especially after that body under the train.It's horrifying.We've managed to keep it out of the press for now, but that won't last for long."

Amelia shoved her hair behind her ear."I spoke to Shankland.He's devastated.He was the guard who oversaw Wendell's transfer the night he escaped, and now his family's paying the price."

Rob nodded gravely."Yeah, it's monstrous.But listen, Amelia—there's something unofficial I need to tell you.Inspector McNeil—the one heading the Wendell Reed task force—has been asking why you're still on that team.He's raising concerns about personal involvement, conflict of interest, all that."

She pressed her lips together, not surprised in the slightest."Figures he'd want me off.I knew I wasn't exactly his favorite.Think he wants me out for good?"

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

“Possibly,” Rob admitted. “If the Home Office decides you’re a liability, they might pull you. So tread carefully.”

Amelia rubbed at her temples. “I will. But I can’t just stop. I’d rather be actively searching for Wendell than waiting for him to make the next move.” Her voice hardened. “I won’t let him keep the advantage.”

Rob gave a faint shrug, conceding her point. “Just remember: he’s hunting you as much as you’re hunting him, so don’t do anything reckless.”

She forced a small nod, refocusing her gaze on the files open on her monitor. “Yeah. I’ll keep that in mind.” Then, after a beat, she asked, “By the way, any word on how Dr. Eleanor Matthews is getting on with Finn? Last I heard, they were working the art forgery murders, right?”

Rob half-laughed. “I think Finn rubs her the wrong way—keeps cracking jokes, and she’s not the joking type. But so far, they’re making progress. At least, that’s what Finn claims.”

A flicker of emotion tightened Amelia’s chest. “Finn does love his jokes, even the bad ones. I just hope she’s fair with him.”

Rob arched a brow. “Slight hint of jealousy there?”

She scoffed, though she felt a twinge of truth in his teasing. “Not at all. Just curious how they’re getting on.” She drummed her fingers on the desk. “It’s only temporary, right?”

“Right,” Rob assured her. “She was brought in because of her niche art expertise. Once the case wraps, that’s it. Finn’s not forming a permanent duo with her.”

A wave of relief washed through Amelia, though she tried not to show it. “Makes sense. Anyway, thanks for the update.”

“No problem.” Rob glanced at his watch and then saw Amelia still looked concerned. “Is something else on your mind?”

Amelia’s brow knitted. “Hmm?” Then she remembered. “Oh—yeah, I tried calling Finn earlier. Twice, actually. No answer. His phone went straight to voicemail.”

Rob frowned, leaning forward. “That’s unlike him. He must be otherwise detained. Maybe he’s stuck in a no-signal zone?”

She let out a concerned breath. “I don’t know. Something feels off. He almost never switches it off entirely.”

A knot formed in Rob’s forehead. “Let me see if I can reach Eleanor. If their phones are both off, that’s... suspicious.”

He pulled out his mobile and dialed a number. Silence. After half a minute, he shook his head. “No luck. Also voicemail. Where were they last, do you know?”

Amelia sat up straighter, alarm creeping in. “I’m not sure, but I know they were digging deeper into the forgery angle. Maybe they decided to chase down a lead involving organized crime or something. If that’s the case...”

Rob winced. “We both know how that can end. Wendell might not be the only dangerous person out there—there could be criminals protecting the forging pipeline. They might have run into trouble.”

Amelia's heart pounded. "You think Wendell got to them?"

He grimaced. "I'm sure it will be fine." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I wish he drove a normal police car so we could track him. But that old Corvette is untraceable."

Amelia drummed her fingers nervously. "We could get a cell phone ping from the phone company. Or we can try traffic camera feeds—he probably had to drive somewhere."

Rob nodded decisively. "Yes, let's do that. Check the traffic cams for that red Corvette. Might be the best shot."

Amelia beckoned him around to her computer. Rob leaned over her shoulder as she tapped into the system, bringing up a database used by local traffic authorities. She input the license plate info. A minute later, the screen blinked with a single result—Finn's car spotted entering an industrial estate outside London around midday.

Rob's voice tightened. "An industrial estate. That's... not a coincidence."

Amelia sprang from her chair, grabbing her jacket. "I'm calling a rapid response team right now. If they're in trouble—"

Rob held up a hand. "Wait. Let's think carefully. If Finn and Eleanor are snooping around forgeries, that might be exactly where they are—some warehouse connected to the forging operation. We don't want to barge in with sirens if they're being stealthy. We could blow their cover. Or worse."

She halted, frustration warring with logic. "So what do you suggest?"

"I say we bring a discreet team—low profile. Not a full-blown SWAT presence unless

it's necessary. We'll keep the perimeter but try not to spook anyone inside. Then we can move in if we see signs of trouble." He eyed Amelia's worried expression. "And yes, I'm coming with you."

She grabbed her car keys, relief mingling with her fear. "All right. Let's go. I can't sit here doing nothing."

Rob reached for his jacket, and Amelia almost ran out of the door.

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Amelia parked her black sedan at the edge of the sprawling industrial estate, a place of stark corrugated warehouses and long rows of loading docks. It was mid-afternoon, and the March sun hung low behind thick gray clouds, casting a pale light over the endless concrete. She switched off the engine and looked over at Rob in the passenger seat.

“This is it,” Amelia said, her heart already thudding with anticipation. “The address that traffic cam showed Finn’s Corvette heading into.”

Rob nodded, leaning forward to get a better view through the windshield. Rows of warehouses lined a fenced perimeter. Machinery whirled somewhere in the distance, and forklifts buzzed back and forth. Everything looked ordinary on the surface—but Amelia’s gut told her Finn and Eleanor were here somewhere, and they might be in danger.

They got out of the car and approached the main gate, noticing a small security post. A heavyset guard in a uniform gave them a cursory glance, but it was the man in a high-visibility vest near a loading bay who caught Amelia’s eye. He was talking to another staffer, gesturing at some paperwork.

Amelia walked right up to him, Rob following. “Excuse me,” she said, displaying her Police badge. “I’m Inspector Winters, and this is Chief Constable Collins. We’re looking for two colleagues of ours—Finn Wright and Dr. Eleanor Matthews. Have you seen them here?”



The supervisor's eyes flicked between Amelia and Rob, then he forced a neutral expression. "No. Haven't seen anyone by those names."

Amelia narrowed her gaze. She sensed tension in his stance, the way he avoided meeting her eye. "You sure?"

He shrugged. "We get a lot of deliveries and visitors, but I'd remember names like that. Sorry, Inspector."

From the corner of her eye, Amelia noticed a stocky man sitting on a metal crate, casually smoking a cigar. He met her gaze without flinching, exhaling smoke in a lazy swirl. The directness of his stare made her uneasy. She took a half-step past the supervisor, trying to see if there was anything behind him that indicated Finn's presence.

"Sorry, you can't go in," the supervisor said, sidestepping to block her. "Private property, restricted access."

Amelia ignored him, striding toward the cigar-smoking man. "Hello," she said, letting her tone carry authority. "I'm Inspector Winters. You are?"

He flicked ash to the ground, unfazed by her approach. "Gerard," he said. No last name.

Amelia lifted an eyebrow. "Gerard...?"

"Just Gerard." He took another pull of the cigar, blowing the smoke away from her. "What do you want, Inspector?"

Amelia raised her badge again. "We're looking for two colleagues, a man and a woman. Finn Wright, tall, blond hair. Eleanor Matthews, average height, blond hair as

well. Have they been here?"

Gerard's eyes glinted with thinly veiled annoyance. "No. And we don't appreciate the police dropping in, harassing us when we're just trying to run a business."

She studied him, hearing the subtle challenge in his voice. "Why do you think I'm harassing you? I just asked a question."

Gerard flicked a bit of ash. "Because you lot come around all the time, poking your nose in. We're tired of it." He glanced at the supervisor. "If you have no warrant, you can't step foot in our warehouse. Company policy."

Rob stepped beside Amelia, crossing his arms. "We'll see about that," he said, voice steady.

Gerard shrugged, grinding the cigar stub under his heel. "Hope you find your friends." Then he gave a mirthless grin, adding, "But without a warrant, you're not getting in that building." He turned and disappeared through a side door, leaving the supervisor blocking Amelia and Rob's path.

Scowling, Amelia backed away, motioning for Rob to follow. They retreated out of earshot, the supervisor glaring after them. Once they were near a row of parked vehicles, Rob lowered his voice. "They're lying, right?"

Amelia nodded, frustration knotting her chest. "I'm sure of it. That supervisor was too defensive, and Gerard basically told us to clear off. Something's up."

Rob tried dialing his phone. "Still no response from Eleanor," he muttered after it rang and went to voicemail. He pocketed it, worry creasing his face. "I don't like this, Amelia. They might be inside, and these creeps are stonewalling us. But then, I don't see Finn's Corvette anywhere."

“They could have hidden it,” Amelia replied.

Amelia noticed Rob’s overt worry. He usually kept his emotions in check, but the fact he was so concerned about Eleanor told her something was going on beneath the surface. She let it pass without comment, focusing on the immediate problem. “So what’s next?”

Rob inhaled slowly, scanning the warehouse. “We do it by the book. Stake out the place for a bit, gather intel, get some checks run on the business. If we barge in, we could lose any advantage or put Finn and Eleanor at risk.”

Amelia pressed her lips together, wanting to charge in. But she nodded grudgingly. “Fine. Let’s run a background search and watch for suspicious movement. Meanwhile, I’ll keep calling Finn’s phone.”

They headed back to her sedan, where they settled in. Amelia started the engine, but only to keep the heat on. The spring air still had a chill. She angled the rearview mirror to watch the warehouse gate. For the next couple of hours, they observed employees coming and going, trucks pulling up, drivers exchanging paperwork. The normal hum of commerce, but with an underlying tension that made Amelia’s skin prickle.

Inside the car, they tried to keep their minds off the worst possibilities. Rob asked, “How are things going with Finn these days?”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

Amelia gave a short laugh. “Honestly? We rarely see each other except for fleeting moments. Different cases, different schedules. I just wish we could have a normal day. But that’ll come once we catch Wendell Reed, I guess.”

Rob’s eyes flicked to the warehouse. “It’s tough, balancing personal and professional like that. But hey, I’m sure you’ll get time eventually.”

She turned to him with a faint smile. “So, how are things with you, Sir? Are you seeing anyone?”

He gave a mischievous grin. “Might have something in the works. Too early to say, but let’s just say not all my nights are spent alone.”

Amelia teased, “I’ll take that as a ‘yes, but hush hush’?”

Rob laughed. “Precisely. Let’s leave it at that.”

Suddenly, Amelia tensed. Through her binoculars, she saw a black sedan pull up to the warehouse’s main entrance. Two men got out—one was thickset with a shaved head, the other tall and wiry. They walked inside without hesitation, a quick nod from the supervisor at the gate. “Rob, look at that,” she said, handing him the binoculars. “I recognize the tall one—Frankie Govan. A known enforcer in London’s underworld.”

Rob frowned, focusing the lenses. “You’re sure?”

She nodded grimly. “I’ve run across his name in intel briefs. Rumor is, he’s more than just muscle. He’s an assassin for certain syndicates. If he’s here, that can’t be good.”

Rob cursed under his breath, grabbing the radio."Let me see if he's got warrants." Moments later, a voice crackled back, confirming that Frankie Govan was wanted on an outstanding warrant for failing to appear in court.

Amelia flashed Rob a fierce look."That's reason enough to go in there. Legally, I mean."

Rob nodded."We'll call for backup, get the team to—"

Before he could finish, a loud bang cracked through the air, echoing across the industrial lot. Amelia's heart lurched. A second bang followed.

Rob reached for the door handle."Gunshots?"

But Amelia was already leaping out of the car, adrenaline surging."I'm not waiting," she shouted, racing toward the warehouse."Finn and Eleanor could be in there!"

"Wait, Amelia!" Rob yelled, but she ignored him.

Heart pounding, she sprinted across the asphalt, straight to the supervisor who moved to block her path again. With a swift motion, she grabbed his outstretched arm, pivoted, and hurled him over her shoulder. He crashed to the ground with a grunt.

"Stay down," she snapped. She spotted a metal door and barreled through it, heading into the warehouse's dim interior. Rob was just behind her.

Inside, crates and racks loomed. Overhead lights buzzed. More startled staff tried to bar her way—henchmen, no doubt. Rob slid in beside her, intercepting one man who lunged with a crowbar. A brief scuffle ended with Rob disarming him, while Amelia ducked a punch from another. She landed a sharp elbow to the gut, sending the attacker sprawling.

Amelia heard Finn's voice from somewhere deeper inside.

"No!" he shouted, desperation in his tone.

She and Rob exchanged looks, then darted forward, weaving around crates. Another henchman rushed at them, but Rob tackled him, pinning him with a swift maneuver. They reached a large storage room at the end, where flickering fluorescent lights revealed a chaotic scene.

Finn stood in the center, grappling with a tall, broad-shouldered man—Frankie Govan. A smoking gun lay partly in Frankie's hand as the two struggled, fists tangling in each other's shirts. Off to the side, Eleanor was crouched, apparently just freed from some ropes. She was flanking them, looking for an opening to help.

Amelia stepped forward. "You're under arrest!" she shouted. But Frankie twisted, shoving Finn sideways and then grabbed the gun on the floor. In a blur, Amelia lunged, slamming her shoulder into Frankie's arm. The shot went wild, ricocheting off a metal crate. Rob dived forward, locking Frankie's arm in place, and together they pried the gun away, it falling back to the ground.

Eleanor scrambled up, snatching the weapon from the floor. Her eyes flicked to Amelia, relief warring with fury. "Thank God you're here."

Finn clutched his side, wincing, but clearly still in the fight. He kicked the gun further away. Then another figure stormed in—Gerard, the stocky man from earlier. He froze upon seeing Frankie subdued and stared at Amelia, Finn, and Rob in fury.

Finn now picked up the gun and pointed it directly at Gerard. "I'm American through and through and was the crack shot in my FBI class. Don't make me prove it."

Gerard's eyes narrowed, but he realized he was outnumbered. He slowly raised his

hands, scowling.

Finn moved in, chest heaving. "This is over." He turned to Amelia, meeting her gaze. "Took you long enough," he joked, a half-grin on his bruised face.

Eleanor stood behind him, gun pointed at Frankie as he lay pinned on the floor. She glanced at Amelia, breath uneven. "We owe you."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

Amelia let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding. "We heard gunshots. We had to come." She flicked her eyes to Rob, who was cuffing Frankie. "I assume we'll need backup now?"

Rob nodded, snapping the cuffs. "Definitely. We'll secure these guys, get them all arrested on any outstanding charges. And get you two to a medic."

Amelia rubbed the back of her neck, relief flooding her system. "Time to call in the cavalry, then," she said, glancing between Finn and Eleanor to ensure they were relatively okay. "Let's get everyone out of this place before anything else happens."

Finn smiled—tired but unbowed. "I think we can agree on that."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A cool wind swept along the deserted lane, stirring old leaves across the cracked pavement. Under the faint glow of a single lamp post, a lone figure stood—motionless at first, ears straining for any sound in the darkness. Vehicles rumbled in the distance on a main road, but here, the quiet reigned, broken only by the hiss of the wind. The figure—the killer—shifted from foot to foot, glancing up and down the lane, ensuring there were no witnesses.

A rusted metal gate squeaked, and footsteps approached. Another silhouette emerged from the deeper shadows, taller and broader, a suspicious shape that carried itself with uncertainty. In one hand, the newcomer held a battered rucksack. The killer noted the tense lines of the newcomer's posture and felt an echo of unease. This whole process—buying contraband from criminals—was risky. If anyone from law



enforcement pieced it together, the killer's identity would soon be blown. Still, it had to be done.

The newcomer coughed once, a low rasp. "You're late," the voice said.

The killer drew a breath, steadying a racing heart. "Traffic," the killer answered quietly, voice kept low. The attempt at calm belied the coiling tension within. No matter how carefully these meetings were arranged, there was always a risk.

The newcomer stepped closer, letting the weak light catch part of a face etched with scars. "Whatever. Let's do this quick." He held up the rucksack. "Everything's here."

A swirl of wind tugged at the rucksack's edges, threatening to expose whatever was inside. The killer fished a folded envelope from a jacket pocket. "Money first," the killer said. "No games."

The newcomer snorted. "You assume I'd cheat you? You're the one who insisted on meeting me in this godforsaken place." But greed lit the newcomer's eyes, and he extended a calloused hand. The killer placed the envelope in it. The newcomer counted the bills, face illuminated in flickers by the lamp's wan glow. Satisfied, he tucked them away. "All right. Here." He opened the rucksack partially, letting the killer see the glint of metal components and the corner of a canister labeled with chemical warnings.

The killer reached out, careful not to tear or shift anything too abruptly. "Chemicals... electrical parts..." a whispered confirmation. "All accounted for?"

The newcomer nodded curtly. "As you ordered. Enough to do something real nasty if you know how to handle it."

A shudder of excitement tinged with dread rippled through the killer's mind. This was

it: the final piece needed for the next stage. Yet fear gnawed at the edges, because working with such volatile compounds came with a real risk of self-destruction. The killer forced a nod. “Good.”

Tension thickened in the air. The newcomer shifted restlessly. “We done, then?”

A pause lingered. The killer thought of the chance that this criminal might talk, might brag about supplying these items, might lead the authorities straight to them. The killer had come too far to allow any loose ends. A flick of indecision sparked. Taking another life was a step beyond the plan, but no risk could remain. Slowly, the killer stepped back, adjusting the rucksack. “Yes,” the killer said softly, setting it down momentarily.

The newcomer grunted, prepared to leave. “Then we’re square,” he muttered, already turning.

But the killer’s hand moved with lethal swiftness, sliding a small blade from a hidden sheath. In one fluid motion, the killer lunged, slashing across the newcomer’s throat. A choked gasp escaped him, and his eyes widened with shock. Blood spattered the lane’s asphalt. His hands fluttered to his throat, trying to staunch the gushing wound.

The killer’s heart thundered, every nerve crackling. Swiftly, the killer clamped a hand over the victim’s mouth, muffling the dying gurgles. The man struggled for a moment, life draining from him. Then he collapsed in a silent sprawl, blood pooling around his limp form.

For a long second, the killer stared at the body, mind reeling with a mixture of necessity and disgust. This was another life taken—unplanned but essential. The killer swallowed hard, scanning the gloom. No one had witnessed the strike. Good.

Glancing left and right, the killer spotted a manhole cover partially hidden near the

curb. A swirl of water below indicated a sewer line. Perfect. The killer wiped the blade on the victim's jacket, then slipped it back into the hidden sheath. Breathing ragged, the killer gripped the body under the arms. With a heave, the killer dragged it toward the manhole. It took a couple of tries to lift the heavy iron cover enough to push it aside. The stench rose from the dark tunnel, making the killer's stomach churn.

"Hhh—" a final strangled sound left the dying man's throat, but he was too far gone to struggle. With a last surge of effort, the killer shoved the body down into the sewer. It landed with a disgusting splash. The killer winced. The echo of that splash would haunt the killer's mind for days, but there was no time to dwell on it.

The killer replaced the manhole cover, wiping gloved hands on a rag from the jacket pocket. The lane grew quiet again, save for the killer's racing heartbeat. Slowly, the killer picked up the rucksack, ensuring no trace of blood remained on it. Then, a final glance up and down the lane. Nobody stirred in the dim corners.

Exhaling in short, nervous bursts, the killer strode away, footsteps echoing on the cracked pavement. At the lane's end, a battered car waited, engine still warm. The killer climbed in, throwing the rucksack in the passenger seat. A quick check of the side mirror confirmed no sign of pursuit. Then the car rumbled off into the night, leaving the alley and its grisly secret behind.

The ride to the abandoned building took a solid hour, weaving through back roads and deserted byways. Early evening now, the sky had darkened further, and a raw wind rattled the car's loose windows. The killer peered into the rear-view mirror every few minutes, expecting headlights or suspicious movement. But the roads stayed empty. The killer's paranoia lingered, because this was by far the most dangerous step yet—constructing a bomb.

Eventually, the car crunched along a narrow track lined with overgrown trees. The headlights revealed the crumbling outline of an old brick structure, ivy covering half

the walls. The killer parked near a half-collapsed archway. Stepping out, the killer took a moment to scan the surroundings: twisted tree limbs swaying overhead, leaves rustling. No lights in the distance. Satisfied no one followed, the killer grabbed the rucksack and slipped through a warped wooden door into the building's interior.

Inside, the air smelled musty, thick with rotting leaves that had drifted through broken windows. The killer's footsteps echoed on the concrete floor. A few steps in, the killer arrived at a small room lit by a single battery-powered lamp. A makeshift desk—really just a plank of wood on cinder blocks—stood at the center, littered with tools, wires, and half-assembled contraptions. This was the killer's secret workshop, hidden from prying eyes.

The killer set the rucksack down carefully, heart pounding anew at what lay ahead. This is it, the killer thought. No turning back once this is done. The chemicals and electrical parts inside that bag could blow up half the building if used improperly. A trembling breath parted the killer's lips. One small mistake, and it would be over.

Unzipping the rucksack, the killer pulled out a couple of small canisters. They bore hazard symbols, bright and ominous. Next came a spool of wire, a few circuit boards, a battery pack, and an assortment of small fuses. The killer arranged them on the makeshift desk, mind running through the carefully memorized instructions. The plan was to build something discrete but powerful—enough to cause destruction on command, a new “masterpiece” in the killer's twisted pattern.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

A bead of sweat slipped down the killer's temple. Each piece was laid out systematically, the killer double-checking labels. No part could be misused. A deep breath, then the killer began.

First, the killer assembled the circuit: a basic trigger mechanism combined with an improvised timer. The wires were spliced with care, each connection twisted in place, then soldered swiftly under a battery-powered iron. The metal smell mingled with the building's moldy odor. Meanwhile, the chemicals in their canisters waited to be poured into the bomb's main housing.

A jolt of fear gripped the killer's stomach. The risk of a premature detonation loomed large. But the memory of the corpses the killer had left behind—and the next plan for an even more “spectacular piece of art”—drove the killer onward.

The killer carefully opened one of the canisters, the acrid chemical stinging the killer's nose. Teeth gritted, the killer poured a measured quantity into a small sealed compartment lined with foil. Another few steps followed, each requiring intense focus. One slip, and the killer would be the final victim of this twisted operation.

Finally, the killer paused. The device was almost complete: a squat, square contraption, no bigger than a shoe box. Wires snaked around the interior, fuses in place. The killer reached for the last piece—a small switch rigged to the battery and the timer. This moment was the most dangerous. Inching the switch into position, the killer flicked it with a trembling finger. The circuit engaged with a faint hum, and a tiny LED glowed a steady green.

Relief surged. It works. The killer's heart hammered, knees nearly weak. For a second,

the killer imagined a flash of self-immolation if anything had shorted or sparked. But no—this bomb was stable, for now. The killer exhaled sharply, a twisted grin forming. If it all went off as planned, the next inspired death in the killer's series of art-inspired murders would be truly explosive.

With careful, almost reverent motions, the killer slid the bomb into a small cardboard box. Tape sealed it shut, and plain brown paper wrapped around the outside. The killer drew out a marker and wrote a name on the top—just a single word, the identity of the next target. The name remained known only to the killer, a secret weapon in this grand scheme of bloody artistry.

Rising from the makeshift desk, the killer surveyed the workshop. Tools lay scattered amid circuit diagrams and chemical residue. The killer quickly gathered anything incriminating—notes, leftover wire, empty chemical canisters—and shoved them into a plastic bin. Couldn't leave evidence behind. Then the killer paused at the threshold of the small room, scanning the darkness again. Still no sign of intrusion. Perfect.

The killer gently lifted the wrapped box from the table, cradling it like a precious object. Another wave of caution swept through them. If the device jostled or triggered incorrectly... But the design was sound. The killer had tested smaller versions. This was the final testament.

Stepping outside into the chill dusk, the killer paused once more, glancing around the twisted trees enveloping the old building. Shadows stretched across the weeds. Everything seemed still, quiet. No footprints but the killer's. Satisfied, the killer walked swiftly to the waiting car. The trunk opened with a creak, and the killer set the bomb inside, wedged between some blankets to keep it secure.

The wind rustled overhead, a few droplets of cold March rain beginning to fall. The killer looked back at the abandoned building—an apt lair for the preparation of a monstrous plan. Then the killer climbed into the driver's seat, started the engine, and

reversed down the narrow track. The headlights carved a path through the encroaching darkness.

As the killer sped away, my mind buzzed with the thrill of what came next. Another painting in a macabre series, this time set to be more spectacular than any staged corpse. The killer pictured the big day, the flash of fire, the echoes of screams. Yes, the killer thought, inhaling a shuddery breath—the next artwork would be the most explosive piece yet.

And no one would see it coming in time.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Finn trudged down the corridor of Constabulary HQ, an ache still pulsing at the back of his skull. It was mid-afternoon, and daylight filtered through the high windows, casting a dull glow on the polished linoleum floors. He kept one hand tucked into his pocket while the other adjusted the collar of his jacket. Every step jarred the faint bruise on his head, but he tried to ignore it—he had no time to be laid up.

Beside him, Amelia walked with a brisk pace that matched his. She was the picture of steady resolve, though her gaze flickered to him with concern. “Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked softly, voice tinged with worry. “That was a nasty knock you took in the warehouse. You could have a concussion.”

Finn managed a crooked grin. “I’m fine. Had worse. Got to focus on stopping the next murder.”

Amelia pressed her lips together. “You should at least see a doctor. Just to be safe.”

He shook his head. “No time for that. The killer’s still out there planning something. And from what we’ve seen, it’s going to be big. If I lie in a hospital bed,

we lose precious hours.”

She exhaled a breath. “All right, but at least promise me if you feel dizzy or nauseous, you’ll stop. You’re no good to anyone if you pass out mid-investigation.”

Finn dipped his chin in a small nod. “I can manage. Thanks, though.” He glanced at the thick file Amelia carried. “You planning to sit in on Gerard’s interview?”

“Yeah, if you don’t mind,” Amelia replied, hugging the file to her chest. “Thought I might be of some use here.”

Finn grinned. “I’d appreciate the help. We’re hoping Gerard cracks about the forgeries. Maybe he’ll slip up, mention the killer’s identity, or at least reveal who’s forging these paintings.”

Amelia gave a determined nod. “Then let’s do it.”

They reached a set of double doors leading to the interview rooms. A brief hush enveloped them—the hallmark of the deeper recesses of a police station where tense interrogations and confessions happened daily. There, in the hallway outside Room 3, Eleanor stood waiting, arms folded, her face unreadable.

Amelia approached her first. “Hey, Eleanor. How are you... after everything?”

Eleanor looked up, brushing a stray lock of blond hair behind her ear. “Mostly relieved. I wanted to thank you,” she said quietly, her eyes flicking to Amelia with a sincerity that softened her usually guarded expression. “You saved us back there.”

Amelia offered a faint smile. “All in a day’s work. But I’m glad I arrived in time.” She handed the file to Finn for a moment, then faced Eleanor fully. “I hear you’re about to interview Gerard with Finn?”



Finn nodded. “Yes, we’re going to see if he’ll talk about the forging ring.” He glanced between the two women. “Actually, Amelia was offering to sit in with us. The more, the merrier.” He tried to keep his tone light, though the stakes weighed heavily on all of them.

Eleanor’s face fell briefly, her lips tightening. “Oh... I thought it might just be me and Finn.” Then she caught herself, forcing a slight smile. “But if you want in, that’s fine too.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

Amelia sensed a flicker of disappointment in Eleanor's eyes. She held up a conciliatory hand. "Not in place of you—just with you. We can tackle him together, the three of us. I'm sure you both already have your dynamic."

Eleanor's posture eased. "That... yes. That sounds good." She seemed on the verge of saying something else when Amelia's phone rang, the shrill tone echoing down the corridor.

Amelia pulled it out quickly. "Winters," she answered, stepping aside. A short pause, then her eyes widened. "He's been sighted? Where?" Another pause, and she let out a sharp exhale. "On my way."

She hung up, turning to Finn. "They've just spotted Wendell Reed near Loughton. I need to go—could be our only chance to apprehend him."

Finn gently squeezed her hand, a moment of silent support. "Stay safe. If you corner him, don't take risks." He locked eyes with her, fighting the urge to demand she wait for extra backup. But he knew Amelia well enough—she'd never slow her pursuit of Reed.

Amelia's grip tightened. "I'll be careful," she promised. "Knock Gerard around a bit for me, all right?" With a final nod to Eleanor, she spun on her heel and strode briskly down the hall, disappearing past the double doors.

A beat of silence lingered. Finn exhaled, still feeling the faint sting in his head, but also anxious about Amelia's chase. He forced himself to refocus. "Shall we?" he said, gesturing at the interview room door.

Eleanor squared her shoulders. “Yes, let’s see if Gerard wants to talk about the forgeries.”

Inside Interview Room 3, the walls were a dull beige, and a large mirror glinted on one side—obviously the observation window for any watchers. A small metal table and three chairs occupied the center of the room. Gerard Philips, the stocky man who seemed to be pulling the strings at the warehouse, sat with his arms crossed. A solicitor in a neat gray suit perched beside him, carefully reading some documents.

Finn and Eleanor entered, the door clicking shut behind them. Finn stepped forward, placing a slim file on the table. “Gerard Philips, just to keep everything official considering we have already met under the worst of circumstances, I’m Finn Wright, consultant detective working with the Met. This is Dr. Eleanor Matthews, who’s assisting us on an ongoing murder investigation.”

Gerard flicked his gaze between them, a spark of defiance in his eyes. “You’re the ones who crashed our warehouse and assaulted my men. Makes sense you’re not real police—just some half measure.”

Eleanor shot Finn a warning look but kept her voice steady. “We’re authorized by the Home Office. You know that. So, let’s not waste time with insults. You’re in hot water after trying to have us killed.”

Finn took a seat across from Gerard, motioning for Eleanor to sit beside him. The solicitor folded his arms, glaring. “My client is here under protest,” the solicitor said. “We’ll be making a formal complaint about your conduct at the warehouse and assaulting his men.”

Finn leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “That’s your right. But let’s talk about the reason we were there in the first place: forged paintings stored on your premises. We found a crate containing fakes. Care to explain?”

Gerard smirked, adjusting the collar of his shirt. “Don’t know anything about that. I run a legitimate shipping business.”

Eleanor let out a calm breath. “Gerard, we’re aware your warehouse has ties to an illicit operation forging and swapping out genuine artworks. We also have reason to believe these forgeries tie into three murders—where victims were posed to replicate famous paintings.”

The solicitor cleared his throat. “This is speculation. Unless you have conclusive evidence, my client denies any wrongdoing.”

Finn’s voice turned steely. “We do have evidence. We have the forgeries at the warehouse, and your veiled threats, followed up by Frankie Govan trying to shoot us. Enough to charge you with attempted murder, at least. You attacked us with lethal force. You’re going away for years.”

Gerard’s eyes narrowed. “I never told anyone to shoot you. If some guard got overzealous, that’s not my fault.”

“Right,” Finn said, letting the sarcasm drip. “You specifically requested Frankie Govan to tie up loose ends.”

The solicitor bristled. “We’ll see about that. My client will not be answering any further questions. It’s highly irregular that his accusers should be the interviewers. We demand the interview be processed by someone who isn’t directly involved.”

Finn exhaled through his nose. “I see. So no discussion about who’s forging these paintings? Who’s behind the operation? Because let me remind you: if we link these forgeries to homicide, you’re an accessory.”

Eleanor spoke up, voice controlled but urgent. “Gerard, people have been murdered in

connection with these fakes.If you withhold information, you're complicit.The Crown might offer a reduced sentence if you cooperate.But if you stay silent and more people die, the consequences could be severe."

"We can give you a deal if you give us information," Finn said.

Gerard's jaw tightened.He shot the solicitor a look.The solicitor said blandly, "Let me speak with my client in private."

Finn looked between them, then at Eleanor.He nodded."Fine.Five minutes."He and Eleanor stood, stepping out into the corridor, letting the door close.

In the hallway, Eleanor inhaled sharply."He's stonewalling us.If he doesn't name the forger, we're back to square one.But his solicitor knows he's going down one way or another."

Finn rubbed the back of his neck, the bruise flaring a little."Let's hope he's not just bluffing.If these murders keep escalating, we need a name—someone forging these classics, someone with access to the real paintings.It might be how the killer is picking targets."

Eleanor's expression darkened."Yes.And if we can't get that info from Gerard, we have no leads.Unless Blackthorn or someone else flips."

Finn set a hand on the doorknob."Let's give them their five minutes.After that, we'll see if the threat of prison time breaks him."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

They lingered, the corridor bustling with officers passing by. Voices drifted from other rooms—suspects, victims, all manner of police business. Time stretched painfully, each second a reminder that the killer could be finalizing the next murder.

Finally, Finn checked his watch. “All right,” he said softly, turning back to the interview room door. “Let’s do this.”

They re-entered the room. Gerard's solicitor stood beside his client, arms folded. “We're prepared to cooperate,” he said, though his tone suggested reluctance. “But only if the Crown offers a deal regarding charges. If we deliver names, we want a lesser sentence.”

Finn resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “We can discuss that with the CPS. Right now, we need to know who’s forging these paintings. That’s our priority.”

Gerard swallowed, then let out a slow breath. “Fine. I’ll give you what I know. But trust me, it’s not just one guy or gal. There’s a whole ring of them—at least twenty artists working in secret studios. They replicate artworks to near perfection, then swap them out under cover of legitimate shipping. All above my pay grade, but I get a cut for letting them store the crates in my warehouse.”

Eleanor’s jaw clenched, absorbing the revelation. “Twenty forgers? That’s a huge operation. We need names.”

The solicitor gestured. “They’ll have them as soon as the deal is signed. We’re not turning them over for free.”

Finn narrowed his eyes. “We’ll see about that. But we’ll start drafting the paperwork with the prosecutors. In the meantime, you’ll remain in custody. Understood?”

Gerard nodded, eyes flicking away.

Sighing, Finn closed the file on the table. “All right. We’ll make arrangements. Let’s go, Eleanor.”

They exited the interview room, leaving Gerard and his solicitor behind. Once in the corridor, Finn shut the door gently, relief and frustration mingling in his chest. “So we’ll have to wait a day or so for them to finalize an agreement,” he muttered, rubbing his temples.

Eleanor offered a grim nod. “Yes. Meanwhile, we don’t know if the person who’s orchestrating these murders is potentially one of those twenty forgers. The killer might be someone else connected to the ring, or a victim of it. Someone who bought an expensive dud, for example, or some middleman who never got paid for being involved and wants revenge.”

Finn paused by a bulletin board lined with mugshots. “I had a thought: maybe it’s not the forgers themselves killing people. Possibly, it’s someone who discovered the truth about the forgeries, or was involved in verifying them, or ironically trying to hide them. Revenge or fear of exposure, something along those lines.”

Eleanor’s eyes flickered with realization. “True. But who else might be involved in the process besides the shippers and the forgers? Who...” She toyed with the end of her sleeve. “Hang on! We’re looking at this the wrong way round. Who are the victims? Victoria Palmer was specifically asked to authenticate The Cornfield. She found something off—remember they argued? Was she killed because she knew the painting was fake?”

Finn snapped his fingers, epiphany sparking. “Yes! And the second victim, Edmund Garner, also had dealings with the gallery. Townsend, the third victim, too. Could be all of them discovered the paintings were forgeries at some point. And the killer needed them silenced.”

Eleanor frowned. “But who else authenticated the paintings? It can’t just be Victoria Palmer in every case.”

“Exactly.” Finn yanked out his phone, pressing speed dial for the Blackthorn Gallery. “Let’s see if we can confirm who handled authentication for some of the other works we’ve found. If it’s the same person that worked on the paintings connected to the case, that’s a direct lead.”

Eleanor nodded. “Yes. That’s a good angle.”

After a couple rings, a male voice answered. “Blackthorn Gallery, David Smythe speaking.”

“David, it’s Finn Wright, the consultant working with the Met on the murder case,” Finn said, glancing at Eleanor. “I need to know: for the paintings suspected of being fakes, who authenticated them besides Victoria Palmer? Do you keep records of that?”

David’s voice wavered. “Um, yes, we do keep records, but we can’t release—”

“Murders, David,” Finn cut him off firmly. “We’re dealing with a serial killer. Either help us, or we’ll get a warrant. Who’s the authenticator?”

A flustered pause. “Okay, okay. I see... We had a second authenticator for two of the suspicious paintings—Ely Abrams. He’s an independent specialist the gallery sometimes hires.”



Finn shot Eleanor a triumphant look. “Thank you, David. Text me his contact details. This might be critical.”

David hesitated. “Sure, I’ll do it now. Good luck.”

Finn ended the call, exhaling. “We’ve got a name: Ely Abrams. Another authenticator, possibly the one who verified or flagged these paintings as forgeries. He might be a target, or he might have answers.”

Eleanor’s eyes sparked with renewed purpose. “Then let’s find Ely Abrams.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Finn eyed the patchy dark sky, a tapestry of slate-gray clouds, as he and Eleanor Matthews left their parked car on a narrow Tottenham street in North London. The oncoming night tinted the air with a faded hue; the lingering chill of March made everything seem colder than it was. Across the road, a row of old brick houses stood in neat lines—some well-kept, some in states of decline. In front of the third house, paint peeled around the windows, and a leaning fence swayed in the occasional gust of wind.

“This is it,” Finn said quietly, checking the address on a small notepad he carried. “Ely Abrams’s place.” A wave of anxious energy pulsed through him.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

Eleanor nodded at his side, hands in her jacket pockets. She looked every bit the refined art expert she was, but tension lined her posture. "I hope he can tell us something useful," she murmured.

"And give us something concrete on Harrison Blackthorn," Finn muttered, stepping onto the front path. The yard was small, the grass unkempt. A battered sign by the door read A.R.A.M.S. in faded letters, perhaps leftover from some freelance business venture. "Ready?"

Eleanor gave a brisk nod. "Let's see if he's home."

Finn rapped on the door, three firm knocks. No answer. He tried again, louder, then leaned an ear to the wood. Silence, except for a faint groan of the house settling. He glanced at Eleanor, who shook her head.

"One more try," she said. "Ely, it's Dr. Matthews and Finn Wright from the Home Office! We just want to talk! We're not here to arrest you," she called through the door. Nothing but the whisper of wind responded.

Finn tested the knob—locked. He peered through the nearest window, cupping his hand around the glass to block reflections. The interior looked dim and cluttered with scattered boxes. "We might try around back," he suggested.

They circled the house, stepping gingerly over broken paving stones. In the small backyard, an aging wooden fence sagged, and a shed door hung ajar. The back door to the house itself was slightly open, as though someone had left in a hurry or was too nervous to fully secure it.

“This is suspicious,” Eleanor breathed. She eased the door open further. The hinge squeaked in protest. “Ely?” she called, carefully stepping inside. The musty aroma of old carpet and stale air enveloped them.

Finn followed, flicking on a small flashlight from his coat. They stood in what appeared to be a cramped kitchen. A half-eaten sandwich lay on a plate next to the sink, the bread gone hard, as if abandoned days ago. A sense of disquiet rippled up Finn’s spine. “He left in a hurry,” he said softly. “Or he’s still here, just... unwilling to show himself.”

They moved into a narrow hallway lined with dusty family photos and abstract prints. The place was in disarray—cupboard doors half-open, a couple of cardboard boxes near the stairs as if someone had started packing. “Ely?” Finn called again. “We just want to talk about the paintings. No trouble.”

Eleanor checked a side room—empty, with a desk piled high in battered art books. “Nothing,” she whispered, voice echoing faintly.

Finn’s flashlight caught a glimpse of a folded ladder descending from a ceiling hatch near the upstairs landing. His pulse ticked up a notch. “Looks like an attic entrance,” he said, gesturing. “Let’s see if he’s up there.”

Eleanor nodded, trailing him up the stairs. The second-floor landing was dim, only a dusty light fixture overhead providing a weak glow. The pull-down hatch looked unremarkable except for a faint scuff, as though it’d been used recently. Finn gently pulled on the cord. It creaked open, dust raining down in a soft cloud.

“Ely?” he called upward, shining his flashlight into the darkness. “We’re coming up. Don’t panic.”

He climbed first, the ladder shaky but holding his weight. At the top, he aimed the

beam around the low-ceilinged attic.Boxes lay scattered, cobwebs draped across beams.He noticed a faint movement in the far corner.The shape jerked at the light's touch.

Eleanor popped her head through the hatch behind him.“Ely?”

A muffled gasp.Then, from behind an old chest of drawers, a slim figure emerged—Ely Abrams.He looked disheveled: rumpled shirt, hair matted with sweat, eyes wild with panic.Clutched in one hand was a small flashlight, its beam flickering.The other hand trembled as if he expected an attack.

“Stay back!”Ely rasped.His voice cracked.“Who are you?”

Finn raised both hands, the flashlight angled away from Ely's face."Finn Wright—consultant detective.This is Dr.Eleanor Matthews.We're part of the team working on the Victoria Palmer case.We're here about the forged paintings.We're not arresting you, okay?We just need your help."

Ely's shoulders slumped, relief battling with terror.“H-How did you find me?”

Eleanor stepped carefully off the ladder and onto the attic floor.“You're the only person who can verify the entire set of forgeries that ended up at the Blackthorn Gallery.I guess you're hiding, given the recent murders?”

Ely swallowed hard, nodding.“It's not safe,” he whispered.“Harrison... he threatened me.”He wiped a shaky hand over his face.“I... I had no choice.”

"Threatened you how?"Finn asked gently, stepping closer."We know about the fakes.We suspect the murders are connected to them, and the killer knows about the forgeries.People who discovered the forgeries ended up dead.You might be in danger, too, having lied about the paintings being legit."

Ely closed his eyes, voice trembling. "I signed off on those paintings under duress. Harrison Blackthorn told me if I didn't authenticate them as genuine, he'd ruin me. Or worse. He claims he has powerful connections that would rough me up." A bitter laugh slipped out. "I believed him."

Eleanor inhaled slowly. "So that's how The Cornfield, The Blue Boy, and The Medusa were passed off as real. You used your professional reputation to rubber-stamp them?"

Ely nodded, shame twisting his features. "Yes. Every time an expensive piece of art is to be displayed in an exhibition, it must be verified as the real deal. I'm not proud that I lied. Once I realized the extent of the operation, I tried to back out. But then people started turning up dead. I panicked. I... I've been hiding here for days." His eyes darted around the attic, as though expecting an intruder. "But it's no use. He'll find me eventually."

"How many more forgeries are there?" Eleanor asked.

"I don't know... Many..."

"This is art fraud on an unprecedented level," Eleanor said in a low voice.

Finn exchanged a glance with Eleanor. This was bigger and more dangerous than they'd feared. "Ely, we can protect you," Finn said quietly. "If you'll give us a statement about Harrison's threats and the details of what he forced you to do, we can help. We think the murderer might be close to him. We need any information you have."

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Ely's breath quivered. "I only know that, initially, for that exhibition, one set of masterpiece forgeries was made, maybe half a dozen. They were swapped out in secret and displayed in the gallery, while the real ones were sold privately. But there's one more from that set—still in Harrison's possession." He paused, eyes flicking to Eleanor. "It's a Jan Griffier piece. The Great Fire of London. He kept it in his private office, away from prying eyes."

Eleanor's eyebrows rose. "The Great Fire of London? That painting is quite famous, known for depicting the city ablaze in 1666. Are you sure he has a forgery of it?"

Ely gave a hollow nod. "Yes. I recognized immediately what was going on with it. I only did a quick check, but it's definitely not the original. He told me Mary Whitmore was the only other person who knew about it. She's his assistant, or something more, I'm not sure. She asked me to keep quiet. She looked scared, too. I think she's in on it."

Finn's mind raced. Another painting possibly connected to the killer's pattern. If the killer used each forged painting as inspiration for a murder, that meant whoever was next might be staged like someone from the Great Fire scene. The thought churned his stomach. "We have to stop this. You said Mary Whitmore knows about the forgery. Where is she now?"

Ely shrugged helplessly. "No idea. She's often at the gallery or doing personal errands for Harrison. She might even know more about the forging ring, about who physically produced them. I just know she's aware it's a fake."

Eleanor took a step forward, voice gentle. "Listen, Ely. We need your testimony, your knowledge. If we can prove Harrison threatened you, we can unravel his entire

operation. Let us get you into protective custody.”

Ely sagged, tears glinting in his eyes. “You can’t guarantee my safety. Harrison’s people are everywhere.”

Finn placed a steady hand on Ely’s shoulder. “We can’t guarantee anything, but we won’t let you face this alone. We can arrange secure lodging. The Home Office can protect crucial witnesses, especially in a murder investigation.”

Silence hovered, broken only by the scuttling of something in the eaves. Ely swallowed and finally nodded. “All right,” he whispered. “If it stops more people from dying, I’ll talk. Just... keep me safe.”

Eleanor exhaled relief. “We will. Thank you.”

Ely looked down at the dusty attic floor, overwhelmed. “The Jan Griffier forgery is definitely in Harrison’s office, behind a locked display case. Mary was worried someone would find out. She confided in me once, said she feared losing her job or worse. She also mentioned that the real painting was apparently sold off to some collector overseas.”

Finn jotted notes in a small pad. “We’ll see about verifying that. In the meantime, gather what you need here. We’ll put you under watch.”

Ely gave a shaky nod, brushing dust off his shirt. “All right. Let’s... let’s get out of this place.”

Downstairs, they helped Ely pack a small bag of essentials. The tension in the house felt suffocating, as though each window might conceal watchers. Eventually, they stepped out into the cold late-afternoon light. Finn used his phone to call for a support vehicle from the constabulary, someone to pick Ely up discreetly. While waiting, they

hovered near the battered fence.

When the unmarked police car arrived, two plainclothes officers emerged, nodding at Finn in recognition. The hand-off was quick. One officer offered Ely an encouraging pat on the arm, then ushered him into the backseat. Ely forced a thin smile at Finn and Eleanor through the half-lowered window.

“I’ll do what I can,” Ely said, voice quavering. “You just catch whoever’s behind these murders.”

“We will,” Finn promised, stepping back. The car pulled away, leaving him and Eleanor on the sidewalk, the wind scuttling dried leaves around their feet.

Eleanor breathed out, relief mingling with a fresh wave of urgency. “So the Great Fire of London forgery is the most recent piece we know about. If this killer is replicating each painting in a gruesome murder, that might be the stage for their next crime. But there could be many more forgeries he’ll use as the basis for more death.”

Finn nodded, tucking his phone into his jacket. “And Mary Whitmore is the only other person who knows, according to Ely. If Harrison suspects she might reveal the truth, Mary could be next on the killer’s list. We have to find her.”

Eleanor pressed her lips together, glancing at the sky. The sky was almost completely. “Time isn’t on our side. Whoever’s staging these murders has escalated quickly—three victims in short succession. We can’t risk a fourth.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Finn could feel a chill creeping in as he pulled his coat tighter around him. It was late evening, and the day’s light had fully slipped into darkness, save for the neon glow of passing traffic and streetlamps reflecting off the black asphalt. His breath came in



visible puffs. Next to him, Eleanor walked briskly, her heels tapping urgently on the sidewalk.

They approached the Blackthorn Gallery with foreboding. The glass facade that usually displayed bright posters and artistic spotlights had been dimmed—shadows dominated the interior, suggesting that only minimal security lighting was on. A single lamp illuminated the door, painting the entrance in stark relief against the gloom.

Finn paused at the entrance, hand on the door's brass handle. "Ready?" he asked softly, his breath misting the glass.

Eleanor gave a tense nod, pressing her lips together. "Do we approach Mary or Harrison first?"

"Mary," Finn answered. "She has an emotional connection to Harrison, which has probably been used to manipulate her, and I feel like if we push, she might crack."

Finn exhaled, mind flashing to the conversation with Amelia earlier that day—Amelia had gone off hunting Wendell Reed, leaving Finn and Eleanor to handle the forging ring's suspects. Now, the evidence pointed straight to Mary Whitmore. Their last few days of investigating had led to this moment: confronting Mary about Ely Abram's confession tying her and Harrison to the forging ring, and possibly the murders.

He turned the handle. It gave, and the door slid open with surprising ease—unlocked. A fresh wave of apprehension curled in his stomach. "Strange that they wouldn't lock up," he murmured, stepping into the hushed reception area.

The gallery's main lobby lay dim, just a few overhead lights casting elongated shadows on the polished floors. Rows of sculptures and modern art pieces loomed in

half-silhouette. The hush was heavy, as though the building were holding its breath.

“Mary?” Eleanor called quietly, her voice carrying through the emptiness.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

Somewhere in the back offices, a faint light glimmered. Finn inclined his head in that direction. “She’s likely in her office. Let’s keep it calm until we know her reaction.”

They wove through the gallery’s main hall, past a large photograph exhibit. The usual hustle—tourists, art lovers, staff—was nowhere to be seen. Their footsteps echoed, an unsettling sound in the deserted space.

At last, they found a small corridor leading to a set of offices. A nameplate on one door read “Mary Whitmore, Assistant Curator.” A narrow strip of light shone from beneath. Finn exchanged a glance with Eleanor, then raised his knuckles to rap on the door.

“Come in?” a voice said hesitantly from inside.

Finn opened the door. The room was cramped, dominated by filing cabinets and stacked portfolios. At a small desk, Mary Whitmore sat poring over paperwork under a single desk lamp. She looked up, startled, as Finn and Eleanor stepped in.

Her eyes widened in recognition. “Mr. Wright? Dr. Matthews? What—why are you here so late?”

She rose slowly, smoothing her blouse as though to maintain composure. Finn noticed the tremor in her hands. He advanced, letting the door click shut behind them. “Mary Whitmore, we need to talk about your involvement in the forgeries.”

Mary’s lips parted, a flicker of fear crossing her face. “I—I don’t know what you mean,” she stammered.

Eleanor kept her tone level. “We have reason to believe you were aware of certain forged paintings passing through Blackthorn Gallery. And we suspect you had a role in covering them up.”

Mary swallowed hard, eyes darting from Finn to Eleanor. “I... yes, I suspected some paintings weren’t authentic. But I’m not involved in anything, I swear.”

“Ely Abrams says you knew quite a bit about the entire fiasco,” Finn added.

Mary’s bottom lip quivered.

Finn approached the desk, fists clenched at his sides. “I’d hate to think you had anything to do with the murders as well, but if you did, I will find out.”

Mary went pale. “That’s not true. I never killed anyone!” Her voice pitched with panic.

But Finn had fallen silent. His eyes were wide as he glared directly at her.

“What... What are you looking at?” she asked.

Finn pointed to the painting hanging on the wall behind her.

Finn’s gaze locked onto the canvas pinned to the office wall. He stepped closer, shining a small flashlight over its surface. The painting depicted a vaguely pastoral scene, though the style seemed amateur. What caught his attention was the dried, straw-like grass embedded in the brushstrokes.

He recognized that grass. “Eleanor,” he said, voice tense. “This grass—it looks identical to the type braided into Daniel Townsend’s hair to recreate Medusa’s snakes. The same shape, color, dryness level. It looks like an exact match!”

Eleanor, hovering behind him, peered over his shoulder. She'd witnessed Townsend's grisly crime scene. "You're right..."

Finn turned slowly, expression grim. "Mary, how do you explain that? Did you make it!?"

Mary pressed her back against the desk. "It's from that painting's creator. He used real grass for texture. It was a gift! I had no reason to suspect it matched Daniel Townsend's murder scene. You have to believe me."

Eleanor studied the brushstrokes. "Whose work is it?"

Mary swallowed hard, eyes damp. "David Smythe's. He gave it to me a few days ago as a sort of 'personal project.' He said it symbolized something about artists losing themselves in other—" She broke off, voice trembling.

Finn felt a chill run through him. "David Smythe? I spoke to him today. He gave us Ely Abram's name." Finn couldn't quite believe it. David seemed so unassuming. So helpful and quiet.

"Has David ever given you reason to believe that he might resent people involved with the forgeries?" Finn asked.

Mary nodded fervently. "Yes, but I'm sure he wouldn't... He's... fixated on real art vs. fake art. He can't stand forgeries, hates everything about them." She seemed to sag as though relieved to finally share what she knew. "He's an art puritan—someone who believes in absolute authenticity."

Eleanor caught Finn's eye. "If David's giving Mary paintings that incorporate the same grass from Townsend's murder, that suggests he might be the real killer."

“And he might be even making a statement,” Finn mused, darkly. “Like you could be his final victim, Mary.”

Mary’s voice trembled. “He used to rant about ‘burning the forgeries if he could.’ I never thought he’d become... violent.”

Finn scowled. “Where is David now?”

Mary shook her head. “I—I don’t know. He left earlier, said he had errands. But he was furious about Harrison’s forgeries. He’s been furious for weeks.”

Eleanor exhaled, anger flaring. “So we may have pegged the wrong suspect when we suspected you, Mary. But you still participated in covering up the forgeries. We can’t ignore that.”

Mary nodded tearfully. “I know. But I swear, I’m not the murderer. If David’s behind the killings, please stop him. Stop him from hurting anyone else.”

Finn motioned for her to stay put. “We’re going to find Harrison right now. There’s enough to arrest him for forging paintings, blackmail, and more. Maybe we can glean David’s whereabouts from him. Meanwhile, Mary, you’re under arrest for involvement in the forgeries until we sort this out.”

Mary looked ready to protest, but before she could, Eleanor stepped forward, placing a gentle hand on her arm. “We’ll sort it out. But for your own safety, you’re not free to roam. If David is the killer, you might be in danger, or you might be implicated further. You understand?”

Mary grimaced, nodding. “Yes,” she whispered.

Finn signaled for her to stand. “Come with us. We’ll keep you in custody. But first, let’s deal with Harrison.”

Leading Mary out of the small office, they traversed a corridor that opened into the gallery's main wing. The overhead lights had dimmed further with the approach of night. Each step echoed across the marble floor, painting a tense soundscape.

They turned a corner where a sign read "Private Offices—Harrison Blackthorn, Director." A single light glowed beneath the closed door. Finn's pulse quickened; here was the heart of the forging operation, and possibly the next piece in the killer's plan. He signaled for Mary to stay back, while he and Eleanor approached.

The door was slightly ajar. Inside, they heard faint rustling sounds. Finn exchanged a glance with Eleanor, preparing for a confrontation. They stepped in quietly, finding Harrison behind his ornate wooden desk. He wore a sleek suit, tie loosened as though he'd been working late. On the desk in front of him, a plain cardboard package sat partially unwrapped. Harrison looked up sharply, noting Mary trailing behind Finn and Eleanor.

"What the devil is this?" he demanded, eyes raking over Mary in confusion. "What are you all doing here at this hour?"

Finn advanced, calm but firm. "Harrison Blackthorn, we're placing you under arrest for your involvement in art forgeries, fraud, and potentially for abetting murder." He drew out a pair of handcuffs.

Harrison's face flushed. "Are you insane? You have no right—"

Eleanor cut him off, voice cool. "We have more than enough grounds to bring you in, Harrison. We know about the forged Jan Griffier piece in your private office, about your threats to Ely Abrams."

A flicker of shock passed over Harrison's face. "Ely told you?" His eyes darted to Mary, who stood pale and trembling behind Finn. "And you, Mary, you betrayed



me?”

Mary couldn't muster a reply; she only shrank back as Harrison's eyes blazed with anger.

Finn circled around the desk, noting a half-open parcel. Plain brown paper half torn away. A chill of warning etched through his soul. Something was off. “What's in that package, Harrison?” he demanded.

Harrison lifted it warily. “I don't know. It was waiting for me when I got here,” he snapped, ripping more of the wrapping. “Some kind of worthless—”

Suddenly, Finn's heart lurched in alarm. He spotted a faint LED beneath the partially removed paper. Finn had seen such improvised devices before.

“No!” he shouted, lunging forward with outstretched hands.

But it was too late. Harrison had already flipped the remainder of the wrapper aside, revealing a small contraption wired with a battery and chemicals. In a single second of awful silence, the LED blinked from green to red. Finn crashed into Harrison, trying to knock the package away.

A thunderous boom erupted, drowning all sense of time. A bright flash of fire and force tore through the office, blasting the desk into shards and sending Finn hurtling backward. Deafening ringing filled his ears, the shock wave hammering his chest.

He barely registered shards of glass and wood raining around him. The room spun in chaos—light, noise, and debris swirling in a moment that felt both infinite and instantaneous. He heard Eleanor's scream, muffled by the detonation. Mary's cry somewhere off to the side. Smoke churned in the air, acrid and suffocating. Fire alarms shrilled, echoing distantly in the roar.

The shock of impact slammed Finn against the wall, pain jolting through his back. He fought to focus, vision blurred by swirling dust and flickering flames. His last coherent thought as the explosion's aftermath crackled around him was raw, desperate fear. Another painting had come to life in the worst way possible, the great fire of London—and now, trapped in this fiery blast, they were all at the killer's mercy.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Finn woke to a world of swirling smoke and throbbing pain. The roar of flames sounded muffled, as though he were underwater. Every breath tasted of ash, each gulp of air scorching his throat. Spots of bright, dancing embers clouded his vision. Slowly, he forced his eyes to focus on the chaos unfolding around him.

Something burned only a few feet away—a wooden bookcase, spitting orange sparks. The acrid stench of chemicals stung Finn's nose, and he realized it must be the remnants of that bomb-laced package. His ears still rang from the blast. The shattered remains of Harrison's office lay strewn in every direction—splintered furniture, twisted metal from what used to be a desk lamp, charred shreds of paper fluttering like wounded birds through the haze. Harrison himself had all but been vaporized by the blast.

He tried to rise, but his ribs felt like someone had hammered them. Groaning, he pushed onto his elbows. "Eleanor?" he called, voice raw, searching frantically through the shifting smoke for any sign of her. A second later, her form emerged, doubled over, coughing as she stumbled closer.

"I'm here," Eleanor managed, hand pressed to her side. Her jacket had a tear at the sleeve, but otherwise, she appeared intact. "Finn, are you—?"

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

A rasping laugh cut through the roar of the flames, drawing both their gazes to the gaping hole where the office door used to be. David Smythe stood there, half-illuminated by the blazing wreckage behind him. His face was smeared with soot and half-twisted in a manic grin, as though the chaos around him was cause for celebration.

Finn recognized him instantly as the quiet staffer from the gallery—one who had seemed so innocuous, so overshadowed. Now, that mild facade had vanished. David lifted both arms, beckoning as if presenting a grand stage. “Behold,” he said hoarsely, stepping forward. “Isn’t it beautiful? The Great Fire of London... come to life.”

Finn’s pulse hammered, realization jolting him. David was the killer. The final painting—The Great Fire of London—and he was re-creating it right here in the gallery. Finn tried to steady his breathing. “David,” he croaked, “you set this bomb? To kill Harrison? Why?”

David’s eyes gleamed with a fanatic light. “Because forgeries are a disease. This place—Harrison’s gallery—polluted everything with lies. I had to cleanse it with truth, with flames.” He spread his hands, as if conducting an orchestra of destruction. “Art must be pure, or it is worthless.”

“Is that why you murdered the others?” Finn asked. “Because they knew the forgeries existed and did nothing about it?”

“Exactly!” David roared.

Eleanor started to move, but David’s gaze snapped to her. “Don’t even try,” he

snarled. Then, in a flash, he lunged across the broken remains of a coffee table and grabbed her arm. Eleanor cried out, struggling, but David's grip was surprisingly strong for someone who'd just survived an explosion.

"No!" Finn shouted, fighting a wave of dizziness. He tried to scramble to his feet, only to gasp as pain shot through his shoulder. The roof overhead groaned ominously, flames licking at the edges of rafters.

David pulled Eleanor close, his face contorting in a twisted smile. "The Great Fire of London, 1666—an entire city consumed. Tonight, we re-enact it on a smaller scale, but with a real audience." He gestured to the flames devouring the office walls. "We'll let them all burn, just like the forgeries. The perfect installation piece—the gallery workers become the art!"

Eleanor attempted to yank free, but David held tight. "You're insane," she hissed, coughing as smoke filled her lungs. "People have died because of you!"

"Art demands sacrifice," David growled. "Victoria, Edmund, Townsend—they all decided their fates when they knew great pieces of art were being faked, and they did nothing! They had to go. I thought I was going to end with Harrison. Now, you'll join them in my grand finale. You are an expert, just like the others! You have probably seen countless forgeries and done nothing in your career!"

"Never..." Eleanor whispered.

A sudden figure appeared through the drifting smoke—Mary Whitmore, battered and bruised, tears staining her ash-smeared cheeks. She stood at the threshold of the office, eyes wide with horror. "David," she called, voice cracking. "Stop this! You've done enough harm!"

David's jaw tightened, a flicker of rage crossing his features. "You're part of the rot,

Mary—covering up forgeries, lying to the world about 'authentic art.' Don't you see? This is your punishment, too. You loved Harrison, now he's just a puff of red paint, smeared around his gallery!"

Mary, trembling, took a hesitant step forward. "I never wanted people hurt. You're twisted, David. This isn't what real art is about—this is murder."

With a snarl, David shoved her aside. She stumbled backward, crashing into a fallen display stand. The clang of metal echoed through the inferno. Finn seized that moment to lunge forward. Every muscle in his body protested, but adrenaline-fueled him. He grabbed David's shoulder, yanking him away from Eleanor.

David spun, eyes wild. He shoved Finn, and they both staggered sideways, slipping on shards of glass. Sparks rained from the ceiling as a chunk of blazing plaster fell, narrowly missing them. Finn clenched his fists. "You're done, David," he gasped, ignoring the throbbing in his side. "This exhibition is over."

David lunged with surprising ferocity. The two men collided in a flurry of fists and elbows, each blow muffled by the roar of the fire. In the background, Mary dragged herself upright, coughing violently. Eleanor pressed against a scorched wall, trying not to inhale too much smoke.

Finn managed to land a punch to David's gut. David doubled over but recovered quickly, ramming his shoulder into Finn's chest. The impact hurled Finn into the remains of a bookshelf, pain lancing through his spine. He forced himself up again, no time to register the agony. David advanced, panting like a wounded animal.

"You... should've... died... in that blast," he spat, voice raw.

"Sorry... to disappoint," Finn managed, swinging a piece of broken timber at David's legs. David jumped back, nearly losing his footing on fallen debris. The entire gallery

seemed ready to collapse—sparks showered from above, and flames crackled greedily along the door frame

Suddenly, a massive beam overhead groaned. With a splintering crash, it plummeted, taking half the ceiling panel with it. David let out a startled cry as it slammed down, trapping him beneath a hail of burning wood. He screamed, arms flailing. Finn froze, watching in horrified awe.

“Help!” David shrieked, pinned by the wreckage. Flames licked up around his legs, and the heat forced Finn to recoil. For a split second, he considered pulling David free. But the debris was already ablaze, spitting fiery tongues. Attempting a rescue would be suicide. He tried, but the scorching heat beat him back.

David locked eyes with Finn one last time, a mixture of terror and rage twisting his features. “Not like this...” he choked out, voice breaking as the fire consumed him. His scream ended in a hideous crackle, and he vanished beneath the roiling flames.

Finn stood paralyzed by shock. Then Eleanor’s voice snapped him from the daze. “Finn, watch out!” she yelled, as a portion of the adjacent wall collapsed outward, sending embers flying. He instinctively shielded his face with an arm. Another burning support beam toppled across the space, the searing heat wafting over them.

Eleanor grabbed Finn’s arm. “We have to get out of here!”

But just then, a large chunk of debris rained down from the ceiling. Finn pushed Eleanor out of the way. It caught him on the shoulder, knocking him sideways. White-hot agony flared. He collapsed to one knee, head spinning. The smoke was too thick to see more than a few feet.

Mary rushed to help, her face streaked with soot. She tried to lift the fallen debris, but

it was heavier than expected. Eleanor joined, and together they heaved it aside, freeing Finn's arm.

He coughed, lungs burning, trying to stay conscious. The swirling smoke made each breath a struggle. "C-can't..." he stammered, legs shaking.

Eleanor slung his uninjured arm around her shoulders. Mary did the same on the other side. "Yes, you can," Eleanor insisted, voice firm despite her own trembling. "We're not losing you."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

Staggering, they inched toward the only visible exit—a side corridor leading to the main gallery. Flames leapt across the threshold, but a quick glimpse revealed partial clearance..

Mary gritted her teeth. “He must have deactivated the sprinkler system. It’s all on fire. We need an alternate route.”

Eleanor shook her head, scanning desperately. “No time. The main entrance might be blocked, and Harrison’s office is behind us... c’mon!”

Together, they navigated the corridor, ducking past collapsed frames and gutted display cases. The heat intensified, sweat pouring down Finn’s forehead, stinging his eyes. He tried not to focus on the pain in his shoulder or the taste of blood in his mouth.

The corridor finally opened to the main gallery hall. Tall sculptures stood draped in flames, and thick black smoke clung to the ceiling. They kept low, half-crawling, half-limping, guided by flickering emergency lights.

“Almost there,” Mary croaked, coughing uncontrollably. “The front doors—this way!”

A massive chunk of burning ceiling crashed down, blocking the direct path. Sparks erupted in all directions, forcing them to veer left. The gallery’s glass entrance loomed a short distance away, though half the windows were spider-webbed with cracks from the explosion’s shock wave



They took a final run for it. The glass slid open an inch—perhaps the mechanism had partially broken. Finn pressed an elbow into the gap, pain shooting through him, but managed to pry it aside. Searing smoke spilled out into the night as they stumbled onto the pavement, coughing in the relative safety of the cool evening air.

They collapsed onto the ground, the concrete oddly cool beneath them. Eleanor dropped to her knees, pressing a shaky hand to Finn's chest, checking for signs of major injury. Mary gasped for breath, tears streaming from the combination of relief and trauma.

Finn blinked spots from his eyes, still dizzy from smoke inhalation. The sound of crackling fire behind them was deafening. Alarm bells rang out in the distance, and he glimpsed flickers of red and blue from approaching emergency vehicles.

Sinking onto his back, Finn forced a wheezy nod. The killer was gone—David had perished in his own twisted inferno. Finn didn't want to see anyone go out like that. The Great Fire of London had indeed been re-enacted, but they had survived. He tried to speak but ended in a fit of coughing.

Eleanor brushed soot from her face, leaning over him. "Stay still," she muttered, voice tight with concern. "You're injured, and the paramedics are coming."

Mary, still on her hands and knees, turned to the sound of sirens. "I'm sorry," she whispered, though it wasn't clear if it was directed at Finn, at the gallery behind them, or at the memory of all that had happened.

Finn closed his eyes, letting the swirl of night air soothe his burned lungs. In the distance, the fire brigade screeched to a halt, hoses unspooling, water jets blasting at the blazing gallery. Shouts and commands merged with the roar of the flames, forming an orchestra of chaos.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Finn stood just beyond the remnants of the Blackthorn Gallery, the night air surprisingly cold against his face. The acrid scent of burnt wood and chemicals hung thick around him. Behind him, firefighters sprayed powerful jets of water at the smoldering skeleton of the once-elegant building. Ambulances and police cars crowded the street, their flashing lights dancing across the broken glass littering the pavement.

Although the immediate danger had passed, Finn's heart still hammered with adrenaline. Smoke stung his eyes as he watched paramedics finishing up with the last of the injured—a few gallery staff who'd managed to escape. He himself stood with one foot braced, unsteady from the debris that had clipped him when the ceiling collapsed. His head still rang from the explosion that had torn the place apart just minutes ago. He pressed a hand gingerly to his bruised ribs, wincing at the tenderness.

A gentle voice pulled him from his daze. "Finn?"

He turned, blinking. Amelia hurried toward him, her expression taut with concern. She wove between two uniformed officers, ignoring their attempts to stop her from entering the cordoned-off area. Spotting him at last, she rushed up and touched his shoulder. Even in the harsh red-and-blue flicker of the emergency lights, Finn could see the relief flooding her features.

"Amelia..." he breathed, letting out a shaky exhale he hadn't realized he was holding.

She reached up, brushing a smear of soot from his cheek. "Are you all right? I heard about the explosion on the radio."

Finn nodded, feeling an ache in his side as he shifted. "Yeah, but we got out in one piece... mostly." He forced a small smile. "One of the gallery staff was the killer. He

built a bomb...You're okay?Did you find Wendell Reed?"

Amelia's lips curved in a fleeting smile."No, we couldn't find him.As soon as I heard about the fire, I came here."

He studied her face, the swirl of fatigue and worry in her eyes."Glad you're safe," he said softly, resting a hand on top of hers."Maybe we should try a different career.We could go to Florida, where I grew up, and give tours on the swamps?"

Amelia laughed."I don't think I'm a swamp kind of a girl.And you'd hate not chasing down criminals."

"True," he said, wincing.

She nodded, eyes flicking to the battered ambulance a few feet away."Finn, you want me to get one of the paramedics?"

He shook his head, wincing at the movement."Already did a once-over.Bruises probably cracked a rib, but nothing that requires an immediate trip to the hospital."

Amelia pursed her lips."At least promise me you'll see a doctor in the morning?"

Finn let out a tight laugh."I promise to do my best."

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

“So it was a staff member all along?” Amelia asked.

“David Smythe,” Finn said. “There was a forgery ring working through the gallery. He decided to punish anyone who knew about it and did nothing. He thought it was a betrayal of what art should be.”

Her face fell. “And he's dead?”

Finn nodded grimly. “He pinned me under debris, tried to re-enact that painting in real flames. The building collapsed around him. There was no saving him. I...I couldn't get near him...”

Amelia's grip on his hand tightened. “I'm sorry.” She paused, lips parting as she glanced over Finn's shoulder. “Where's Eleanor?”

“She must be around,” Finn said. “I wouldn't have made it out if it wasn't for her.”

He turned, following her gaze. Through the drifting smoke, Eleanor stood near a line of orange traffic cones, arms folded across her soot-smudged jacket. Her expression was distant, as though replaying the horror in her mind. She was scanning the scene for glimpses of paramedics or officers, but her gaze snapped to Amelia at once. She approached the two of them, leaving a swirl of ash in her wake.

“There you are,” Amelia said, stepping forward. A wave of gratitude crossed her face. “Eleanor, thank you for saving Finn. You saved his life more than once tonight. He's a handful at the best of times, but in a flaming building, I can only imagine.”

A weary laugh escaped Eleanor's lips. "It's the least I could do," she said simply. "After you saved us at the warehouse. Wouldn't want you to be without your boyfriend." She smiled.

Finn nodded in agreement. "Amelia's right, Eleanor. I owe you. If you hadn't pulled me out from under that beam, I'd still be stuck inside."

Eleanor lowered her eyes, a slight blush touching her cheeks. "You'd have done the same for me, I'm sure."

In the flickering emergency lights, Finn could see Mary Whitmore hunched near an ambulance, speaking quietly with a pair of uniformed officers. Her face was streaked with soot and tears. She looked their way, as though wanting to approach but too hesitant, burdened by guilt for her role in the forgery scandal. Finn filed it away as something to handle soon—Mary needed to be processed by the police for her part in the forgeries, but at least she wasn't the murderer. And Finn would vouch for how she tried to stop the madness inside of the gallery in the end.

Before he could say anything else, a familiar voice carried over the noise. "So this is where the party's at."

Rob strode up, his shoes crunching on broken glass. He wore a rumpled suit jacket, clearly having rushed from another location. Relief mingled with exasperation in his tone. "You three have to stop leaving me out of the big fireworks."

Finn suppressed an ironic chuckle, remembering all the times Rob had arrived just after the chaos ended. "Wish it was less dramatic, trust me. You're not missing much besides smoke inhalation and a nasty cough."

Rob turned his attention to Eleanor. "How are you holding up? I heard you had a front-row seat to David Smythe's meltdown?"

She drew a slow breath. “I’m... all right. I just want to get out of here. Maybe get a shower and some fresh air that doesn’t reek of burning buildings.”

Rob nodded solemnly, then switched back to professional mode. “I’ll need your statements,” he said, looking at both Finn and Eleanor. “We need a formal account for the record—David Smythe’s involvement, the forgeries, the bomb.”

Eleanor cleared her throat, glancing away. “Yes, that’s fine. But can we do it tomorrow? I can barely think straight right now, and you can see the state Finn’s in.”

Rob’s features softened. “Of course. Tomorrow. I just wanted to let you know. If you’re free in the morning, we’ll get it on file.”

Eleanor nodded, exhaustion etched into her face. “Yes... I’d like to go home.” Her voice quivered slightly on the last word.

Rob tilted his head. “I can give you a ride if you want. You shouldn’t have to deal with public transport or a taxi in your condition. You sure your place is okay?”

Eleanor pursed her lips, shaking her head. “My place is across town, and I’m wiped. Yours is closer, if memory serves.” She paused, summoning some courage. “If it’s not too much trouble... maybe I could stay at your place tonight?”

A flicker of surprise, then a gentle smile crossed Rob’s face. He cast a sideways glance at Finn and Amelia—aware they were listening—but found both of them watching with wide, happy smiles. “Of course. That’s no trouble at all.”

The hush that followed was brief but loaded, as if they’d all recognized a subtle shift. Then Amelia’s lips moved into a teasing grin, and Finn coughed pointedly, exchanging an amused look with her. The tension broke into a soft laugh on Finn’s part, muffled by a wince at his bruised ribs.

Rob shot them a mock scowl, though his eyes gleamed with warmth. “Not a word from either of you. I don’t have to tell you a thing.”

Amelia laughed under her breath, stepping closer to Finn to slip an arm around his waist. He leaned on her gratefully. “We wouldn’t dream of prying,” she said. “Just... nice to see everyone’s safe, right?”

Eleanor tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, still smudged with soot. “Yes, safe—relatively. But I definitely need a bath and some rest.” She glanced at Finn. “Take care of yourself, okay? It was... Interesting being your partner for a few days.”

Finn nodded, holding out his hand to her. She accepted, and they shook firmly—a gesture of respect and thanks. “You’d make a great cop, Eleanor. You take care.”

She broke contact, stepping back. Rob placed a supportive hand on her shoulder, and together they began to walk away, weaving through the throng of emergency responders and officers. The flicker of ambulance lights highlighted the slight slump in Eleanor’s shoulders, but also Rob’s quiet reassurance.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:36 am*

As they disappeared into the swirling activity, Finn exhaled a long breath, turning to Amelia. The air still carried the tang of smoke and char, but at least the worst was over. "So, I guess that's it," he murmured.

Amelia's gaze was gentle. "Yes. The spree is done. Just wish I'd caught Wendell as well."

Finn sighed. "Right. Another day, another manhunt." Then his voice softened. "But for now, can we just take a moment? I'm exhausted. How does pizza sound?"

"Sounds good."

She gave him a faint smile, leaning her head against his shoulder.

He let her guide him away from the chaos, her presence a steady warmth against the cold drizzle that had begun to fall. He glanced over his shoulder—firefighters still battling stubborn embers, more officers cordoning off the site. Another case closed, at least on the killer's front. The forging ring might unravel further, but the murderer's brush with The Great Fire of London had ended in the flames.

With that sobering thought, he let Amelia lead him to an ambulance, the future uncertain but at least for this moment, calm. They were alive, together. That was enough to hold onto, if only for one quiet night before the next storm.

## EPILOGUE

Wendell Reed paced slowly through the basement of a decrepit, long-abandoned



building. Faint moonlight filtered through a dust-coated window well, painting the cracked concrete floor in pale streaks. The air smelled of mildew, and every step kicked up a swirl of damp grit. Once or twice, a rat skittered in a corner, but Wendell hardly noticed. He had more pressing matters on his mind.

A battered wooden table stood at the center of the room, its surface cluttered with yellowed documents, photocopied files, and scribbled notes. Wendell ran a gloved fingertip across one sheet: the name Amelia Winters was typed in bold, followed by a brief mention of familial ties. He traced the lines of text carefully, letting each revelation sink in.

“She doesn’t know,” he muttered under his breath, voice echoing in the stillness. The file hinted at something Amelia had no clue about—a half-brother existing somewhere in the world, an older child from a secret relationship her mother had never discussed. Wendell’s lips twisted into a mirthless smile.

In the faint glow, he flipped another page, eyes narrowing at references to medical records, a birth certificate with the father’s name missing, but the mother’s name—Amelia’s mother—clearly legible. So that was the link. Amelia had a sibling, unbeknownst to her.

A bitter satisfaction rose in his chest. If Amelia thought she’d left Wendell’s threats behind—she was wrong. The personal torment he had planned for her stretched further than she could imagine. He imagined the look on her face when she discovered the truth, only to learn that her half-brother—someone she never even realized existed—had met a tragic end at Wendell’s hands.

He set the papers down, inhaling the staleness of the basement. No one would find him here, at least not soon. Already, the authorities thought they had him cornered somewhere else, focusing on his last known associates. They had no idea how far his web of vengeance extended.

No one witnessed his departure. The half-brother's fate—like so many secrets—was poised to become yet another weapon in Wendell's ongoing vendetta against Amelia Winters. And the seeds of that final torment were planted, waiting to ripen into destruction.