

Chips

The warehouse is dark and cavernous. Its open bay reminds me of the belly of a whale, but on a much larger scale. The smell of rust, metal, and decay permeates the building, as we walk deeper into the shadows. Massive storage containers are stacked haphazardly and some have even fallen over. It seems as if we're the only humans alive in a post-apocalyptic world.

"This might be the beginning of the end." If William is really taking me to see the stolen artwork, it would be the highlight of my career. I would be famous for having recovered a half billion dollars in lost works by Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Manet. I could barely keep my excitement in check. "The museum director was devastated when it was all ripped away in the dead of night."

"Yeah, I saw that broad on T.V. afterwards. Nice figure for such an uptight lady."

I look at him sideways- trying to figure out if he's pulling my leg. "How do I know you even have the real stuff? It's been seven years since the robbery and the Feds haven't heard a peep about their location."

"You'll see in just a minute." He stops in front of a storage container that reminded me of those giant boxes you see on freighters- the one's that usually appeared on the news for hiding drugs or trafficked women. I'd written enough stories to know these containers can disappear before a warrant can be issued. The lock hits the floor and William lifts the handle to crack the door open. "You coming?"

"It's darker than the inside of a cow. How am I supposed to see anything?"

"Here," he says, as he passes me a flashlight. "Hold this and stand back."

I press the rubber button and a faint light comes on. I slap the flashlight against my palm and watch William disappear and reappear in strobes through the darkness. He walks to a crate

and reaches inside. He pulls out a large tube and feels around with his fingers. They latch onto something and my pulse races when I realize he's unfurling a painting. I take a few steps closer and am halted by his words.

"Stop. I didn't say you could come here."

"What do you mean? How am I supposed to determine if it's a genuine Rembrandt if you won't let me inspect it?"

"You can see from there. Just use the light. Look, right here is Rembrandt's signature."

I bring the beam of light to where he's pointing and my heart stops. I can't tell for sure which painting it is, but I do know it has all the ear markings of an 18th century piece of art. The old paint had the right craquelure, yellowing, and dirt layer of that time. The canvas faintly smelled of decrepitude. Its tattered edges draw my attention and disgust for the robbers floods me. I take another step closer.

"Remember our deal. You only get the artwork back once I have my immunity."

I stop in my tracks. "I can't guarantee you that until I know for certain that you have an authentic Rembrandt and the rest of the collection."

He flicks his wrist and wraps the painting back up. With its disappearance, the air in the storage container felt hot and stifling. As if the painting had brought me back to life and was now robbing me of oxygen in its wake. I might have just cost myself the story of the century.

"You can't have the painting, but how about some paint chips to prove I have what I say I do?"

Thank god. "Yes, I can make that work. Though, it's going to take some time."

"Don't take too long," he says, as he puts the tube back in the crate and walks back to me. "Let's go."

“What about the paint chips?”

“You’ll get ‘em after I lock this door, now move it.”

I scurry past the rusted door and wince as my elbow knocks into metal. He yanks the door shut and resets the latch before locking the handle. He reaches in his pocket and pulls out a vial. “Here. Test it.” He puts the vial in my palm and says, “my lawyer told me that I have some time before trial, so use it wisely.”

I look at the tube in my hand and squint to see in the dark. I bring the flashlight up and inspect the clear capsule inside. These are cigarette ashes. What is this? This is ridiculous, no one is ever going to get any information out of this. I look up to see William is gone. As I make my way out of the building, a faint echo rings out.

“Don’t fuck with me, Tom. I know where you live.”