

OUR GREATER SELVES

“The world is a masquerade. Face, dress and voice, all are false. All wish to appear what they are not, all deceive and do not even know themselves.” – Francisco Goya *Los Caprichos*

Prologue

I still remember the feeling of the painting. It was lighter than I'd expected, the wood panel no heavier than a slim paperback and smooth with age. The paint itself felt like it was embossed on the surface, just barely perceptible bumps, and the varnish was silky. My breath, though, was ragged and rough. My jaw tight. I kept trying to swallow and get more air. The alarm had stopped but my ears still rang. The low light from the emergency exit signs made it hard to see. With the flashlight I could make out how bright the paint was under the frame. I remembered the colors from when she still hung on the wall, the reds and greens faded to brown and khaki, her skin a yellowing shade of olive-ivory. Now the oils were brilliant in the thin beam of light, and what we were doing hit me in the gut. Here, I held this thing that was more than five hundred years old – older than the room I was in, than the city where I stood, than the country where I was born, and I wrenched off the frame, clutching a screwdriver and forcing the painting onto the floor, onto the chamois. I was touching this thing that people never get to hold, that no one would ever see again. It was horrible, but also a moment of contact with something bigger than I will ever be. It felt almost like prayer.

And then she disappeared. I flipped her over with her fine hair, the delicate corkscrew curls framing her face and her dolorous expression, her eyes so sad. I pressed her onto the cloth and the legend on the back stared up. *Virtutem Forma Decorat*. The quiet was so loud, I could hear everything – the blood in my ears, the breath of the man next to me, all the while sensing and smelling his fear. I paused, my wrists weak.

He said in a coarse whisper, “Tams, Tamsen, get a move on.”

Thinking of it makes me nauseous even today, sixteen years later. This was what Philip and I did. We stood in the darkened galleries of the National Gallery of Art and we stole paintings.

Our crime was the biggest art heist in the US, bigger even than the one at the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum two years earlier. We stole the only Leonardo portrait in North America, not to mention a Manet, Frans Hals, Rogier van der Weyden and a fake Vermeer. That one was never discovered. For a week we overshadowed the presidential campaign, even interrupting coverage of the Republican national convention and disrupting George Bush Sr.’s hoped-for bounce. We contributed to Clinton’s election, you could say. Our theft made the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. CNN broadcast an hour-long special report. Articles about Philip and his secret life ran in the *Washington Post*. *The New York Times* piece went under the

sensational headline: SEX AND HIJINKS IN THE MUSEUM. It ran on August 30, 1992, with a Washington, DC dateline.

The story of how National Gallery of Art chief curator, Philip Crompton-Booth fooled museum guards has emerged slowly over the last two weeks. Police now believe that he used prostitutes as a cover for his crime. With their help he stole at least four major paintings from the museum including Leonardo's renowned portrait of Ginevra de' Benci, a hallmark of the collection.

Police and the FBI remain unsure about how Mr. Crompton-Booth actually removed the paintings. Dan Dougherty of the FBI's Fine Art Recovery Division says, "We're looking to his accomplices for answers. We're particularly interested in a Tamsen Souter who also may be going under the name of Theresa Rouvel."

Police think she might hold the key to the whereabouts of the stolen work, and the National Gallery has put up a reward of \$10,000 for any information that leads to her as well as a reward of \$1 million for the works themselves. Little is currently known of Ms. Souter's background, but she was part of a prostitution ring in the District. Her madam, Amery Wong, is also wanted for questioning.

The theft came to light when an anonymous Upper East Side art dealer came forward after being approached by Mr. Crompton-Booth with a stolen painting. The work was

simultaneously on display in the blockbuster, “Rembrandt the Portraits,” which has been temporarily closed to visitors. Terrance Hughes, the museum’s spokesman, explains, “With a collection of nearly 500,000 paintings, tracking down any suspicious works can take years, but we have some idea of where to look. He was in storage a week before, so we know where to start.”

Fifteen days ago, Mr. Crompton-Booth was caught by the FBI at his house. The National Gallery’s new director Trevor Sykes says, “Such a precipitous fall. He did much for the museum, helping establish our scholarship program and Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts.”

Diana Freeland of the Art Loss Register explains, “It takes an insider to pull off a crime like this, and it would have been impossible when construction was complete.”

Both she and the FBI believe organized crime was involved in the heist. According to Ms. Freeland, criminal syndicates are behind most art theft, and investigators are examining every connection in Mr. Crompton-Booth’s past, particularly to prostitution, where the mob historically has a strong presence.

Ms. Freeland says, “The art is like money; it’s used to fund other illegal activities, and now after the fall of the Berlin Wall and perestroika, the Russian and Eastern European criminal gangs are getting involved.” She says she expects the work to be recovered but possibly not for decades. “Rarely do we see it go to a Dr. No type collector, that image is just a myth. Unlike a

crime like murder, here the more time that elapses, the closer we get to the work. The process can take years but in the underworld, you'll get someone making a plea, or we find the paintings as relationships change, alliances and allegiances sour or develop. Art investigation is a long game."

Ms. Freeland explains that stealing work is much easier than holding up a bank, and the net proceeds are higher despite the fact that in the criminal underworld each painting is only worth a fraction of its market value. "Still Crompton-Booth's audacity is akin to a doctor committing murder," she says. "It's as if he's violated the art world's version of the Hippocratic oath."