

Love or art? Love of money? Veteran New York PI Humph Barstal discovers that the motive for a cunning theft of irreplaceable paintings from the nation's biggest gallery can be driven by both.

Rebecca, the Puerto Rican you put on the cover of the last book, plays an even bigger role in this story. On the case, they even voyage to Cuba because she speaks Spanish. She is integral in solving the case.

Artistic License

WAYNE CLARK

Artistic License

Wayne Clark



Artistic License

Wayne Clark

Published by Wayne Clark YUL/NYC

ISBN: 978-1-7780739-7-7

Cover and book design: Nell Chitty

Copyright © Wayne Clark 2024.

All rights reserved.

Except for review purposes, this document shall not be transmitted, copied, modified, duplicated or reproduced, in full or in part, in any manner without the written authorization of the author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner.

Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Also in the NY PI Series:

One Murder Too Many

Busted on Broadway

Artistic License

Other novels
by Wayne Clark:

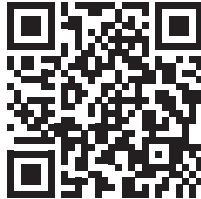
he & She

That Woman

Hollywood via Orchard Street

Vinegar Hill Blues

wayne-clark.com





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Barry Clark and Anishella Jean-Baptiste for their encouragement and insightful assistance.





CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	1
CHAPTER 2	7
CHAPTER 3	13
CHAPTER 4	19
CHAPTER 5	23
CHAPTER 6	31
CHAPTER 7	39
CHAPTER 8	49
CHAPTER 9	55
CHAPTER 10	61
CHAPTER 11	71
CHAPTER 12	77
CHAPTER 13	83
CHAPTER 14	89
CHAPTER 15	95
CHAPTER 16	101
CHAPTER 17	107
CHAPTER 18	113

CHAPTER 19	119
CHAPTER 20	125
CHAPTER 21	129
CHAPTER 22	137
CHAPTER 23	143
CHAPTER 24	149
CHAPTER 25	155
CHAPTER 26	161
CHAPTER 27	167
CHAPTER 28	177
CHAPTER 29	183
CHAPTER 30	191
CHAPTER 31	197
CHAPTER 32	203
CHAPTER 33	209
CHAPTER 34	217
CHAPTER 35	223
CHAPTER 36	229



CHAPTER 1

HUMPH wasn't sure where to turn, but two women, the ones he most loved in this world, had strong opinions about what he should do at various, often unpredictable, times in his life. He could handle conflict when it involved scoundrels, murderers, rapists, ruffians and anarchists, but not women. Two women were coming to visit him that evening.

It had been a tough day. Humph was not Jewish. He wasn't anything, really. He didn't need some book to tell him that the world is a better place if you treat people decently. However, his parents were Jews. They raised him on the suffocatingly overpopulated Lower East Side. Although they tried to educate Humph in the Jewish faith, they stressed even more strongly that in the life he was about to enter as a young man, he should come to his own conclusions about what is right.

And that is exactly what Humph did in his thirty-six years. His parents' advice had served him well. He had no patience whatsoever for the pretentious do-gooders and righteous Christians who blamed the ills of the gargantuan metropolis on faults of faith and place of birth. Many immigrants were Christians, but they weren't, in the minds of the self-righteous, Americans—and would never be. The source of discontent and rebellion in the city always lay elsewhere than with themselves.

This morning, the head cook at the diner across the street, a bad cook but a kind and delightfully animated Lebanese man, told him that a friend of Humph's had been threatened by a bunch of guys in suits and girls in black dresses, buttoned up to their sour-faced chins. They were berating Humph's friend for being a Jewish denier of Jesus. Humph knew the truth. His friend had been asked to beg for his congregation's forgiveness and relinquish his role as rabbi. He had taken up residence with a well-known local prostitute and impregnated her. These were hard times, the members said, and his example would not lead them to the light. Humph's friend acquiesced. That was several months prior.

This morning, Humph accepted the coffee but declined breakfast. The chef gave him the address.

When Humph got there, a walk-up on Grand, the former rabbi was curled up on the floor. Humph knelt beside him. His face and chest were covered with bruises, Christian bruises, his friend said.

"Where is your friend?" Humph asked, referring to the pregnant partner.

"She fled when she saw what they did to me."

Humph started pumping him with questions, asking for anything that might identify the attackers.

By the time Humph finished, the former rabbi, an educated man who'd never hurt a soul, was in tears. His life was in ruin. However, Humph had the information he

needed. There had been other such attacks reported in the papers. Humph had an encyclopedic memory for that sort of crime.

By mid-afternoon, he had tracked down the organization, a branch of a Midtown church organization. Humph pretended to be a Christian sympathizer of their cause. The words came easily because he'd heard the venom so often. He was welcomed with open arms. He suspected they loved the idea of having a physical giant as an ally.

Humph was briefly unsure how to proceed. Then he said to himself, "Just be honest."

"I live on Henry Street. There's a Jewish temple a few blocks away. There's a rabbi who preaches against Christians. But that's not all. He is a sinner himself. He keeps company with prostitutes."

Humph said his faith demanded he seek retribution against this man.

"I will not sleep in peace until I have cleansed my neighborhood of this kind of evil."

One of the apparent leaders said, "You are in luck, brother." He proceeded to give Humph the name and address of the member assigned to eradicate the problem.

"May God bless you," said Humph.

When Humph tracked the man down, only three blocks from his own place, he found him sipping tea with a woman who held her head so high Humph thought she must be in pain.

Humph introduced himself. He explained where he obtained their address and on what pretense.

Without hesitation, the man said that they had certainly done God's will in punishing that man, that supposed rabbi.

Humph stared at him, expressionless. He turned to look at the severe-mouthed woman across the table.

"I would love to talk to you," Humph said. "I know of other infidels in the neighborhood. Could you give me a

moment? I have a cab waiting outside. I want to send him away.”

They agreed. Humph left and made his phone call.

When Humph returned several minutes later, he announced that the police were on their way to arrest them both.

“Perhaps if you figure out what you’ve done wrong while in jail, you might become truly church-worthy.”

Humph eventually returned to the diner. He reported that he had an ambulance pick up their rabbi friend who needed hospital treatment and added, almost in passing, that he had the two assailants arrested for assault and attempted murder. The chef offered the daily special, a stew of some sort, freshly made. Humph glared at him. The chef fidgeted.

“I’m joking,” Humph said. “I’m starved.”

After soaking up the last bit of stew with a piece of bread, Humph rose. He raised his right hand in thanks and left.

When he got home, the bed beckoned.

Hours later, his doorbell rang. Instantly, he remembered the girls had announced their intention to visit.

One of the women involved this time was his stepdaughter, Eve, a Broadway actress, singer and dancer. She wasn’t a star, but she now worked regularly on a stage she’d never dreamed she would ever perform upon. The other was Rebecca, his de facto wife. Rebecca was Puerto Rican and black. Humph would have loved her if she were green. They hadn’t actually married because they couldn’t decide where to live.

Rebecca wanted Humph to move in with her. She liked her place because it overlooked the park at Tompkins Square. The city had added benches and done some landscaping to make its parks more attractive. It was a project championed by Robert Moses, a celebrity urban planner who was usually busy tearing up homes to build highways.

Humph lived in Chinatown, on Henry Street. He had lived there for years. He loved the bustle below his window, peddlers calling out their wares, and pickpockets slithering through the crowd hoping to purloin a tourist's billfold. And he loved being just steps from a news kiosk, so close he could almost make out the tabloid headlines from his second-story window. Those headlines often referred to cases he was investigating. Since he had no case at the moment, those headlines kept his hopes alive.

He and Rebecca often discussed the problem about where to live, but Rebecca wasn't the type to yell, so Humph felt safe in putting the problem on the back-burner. That strategy succeeded for about a month until now. As for Eve, she was always respectful of the man she had regarded as her actual father since she was a teenager, when her mother died. Despite her youth at the time, she knew that a part of Humph had died too. However, her singer's voice could yell when needed. It was no accident that she and Rebecca arrived at Humph's door together at an inconvenient hour.

Humph's inner clock told him it was late—very late.

"Good morning, girls," Humph said, opening the door for them.

As they entered, he pulled out his pocket watch in a dramatic fashion.

"So sorry. I see it's not yet past midnight, ladies. I therefore wish you good evening." The sarcasm was barely detectable.

Eve stopped inches in front of him, not in the slightest intimidated by the fact that he stood almost a foot taller and weighed at least a hundred pounds more.

"Time to talk, Dad. I'll make it easy." Eve pointed toward a chair, the one he usually sat at the head of the kitchen table that was the main piece of furniture in the apartment apart from his bed.

Humph obeyed, and the two women, in what seemed almost a choreographed move, sat facing him from each side of the table.

“You can move into Rebecca’s place and she can move in here. It has to happen now, Dad. Save your marriage. You have no choice.” Eve didn’t raise her voice, but her skill as an actress added a commanding edge to her tone.

Humph looked at Rebecca. Her eyes were deadly serious, not angry, just serious.

He didn’t open his mouth for at least a minute.

Rebecca held up her hand. “Give me a few minutes to think.” With that, she got up and walked around the tiny apartment, which she already knew by heart. That wasn’t hard. It was small. She also looked at the ugly cupboards and the old stove, pretty well everything. Eve understood what she was figuring out. Could they afford to make the place livable for a woman?

When she sat down again, she came right out and said she could only move there if some improvements were made. “Do we have the money?”

Eve, a woman for whom drama was a living, loved the turn of events.

“Yeah, Dad, one big case, and you could afford anything.”

“Maybe, maybe not, and besides, I haven’t had a big case in six months.”

“I might be able to help you,” Eve said.

She didn’t give any more details.

“You look like you could use some sleep.” Standing behind her dad, she hugged him.

The two women were gone by the time Humph opened his eyes.

Humph wasted no time getting into bed. In the morning, he would investigate Eve’s tip.



CHAPTER 2

“YOU son of a bitch!”

Humph had just knocked on the door of the wealthy woman who was supposedly willing to do anything to get back at her philandering husband.

Before knocking, he heard two plates crash against the other side of the door in such rapid succession that they must have been thrown almost simultaneously, perhaps with one hand followed furiously by the other, hardly a gesture an old woman would be capable of.

As Humph waited for the plate-crashing to stop, a man appeared beside him. He said he was the building manager.

“This has been going on for almost an hour,” he said. “Only rich tenants would have enough Chinaware to maintain an hour-long bombardment.” Humph smiled.

He liked the man.

The man pressed the apartment buzzer and held his finger on it until he got an answer from inside.

“What?” The word was shouted. It was a man’s voice.

“Madame Hamersly,” the manager said. “Do you need assistance?” There was no immediate reply but footsteps could be heard. The manager looked at Humph and explained that her name was Hamersly-Jones, Jones being her husband. “Some time ago, she instructed me to never utter the name ‘Jones’ again.” He added that the apartment lease was in her name, apparently for tax reasons, and he therefore had to comply with her wishes.

Finally, the door opened. Mrs. Hamersly was seated on an off-white sofa. She wore a pale-blue dress, not unlike the Delft Blue in the China she’d been using to attack Mr. Jones. The floor by the door looked as if it had been struck by a World War I mortar shell. Humph took one step inside and heard the China fragments crunch underfoot. He stopped, raising his eyes to the woman he half-hoped would become his client.

“We have an appointment,” he said. He spoke quietly but his tone was matter-of-fact. From the corner of his eye, he saw Mr. Jones—or did he still refer to himself as Hamersly-Jones?—do an about-face and, peering down the hallway to his left, summon the maid to clean up the mess. There was no reply and he subsequently marched down the hall calling her name. Later, Humph learned that the maid was sitting on her bed, clutching her knees in fear. A moment later, Mr. Jones stormed out of the apartment. Apparently, thought Humph, he was too well-bred to slam the door. A moment later, the maid appeared. She walked quickly to the sofa and sat by Mrs. Hamersly, who had motioned her to do so.

“Tea, coffee, Mr. Humph?”

Over the next half hour, while the maid noisily swept up what must have been an entire dinner setting for six,

Humph learned Mr. Jones detested his wife and, in fact, had said as much within earshot of more than a few people, sometimes staring at her as he said so. Mrs. Hamersly said she had no idea where the venom came from or anything else other than the fact that it had been poisoning him for years. She suspected that she had become disposable in his eyes when her doctor had confirmed she was going through early menopause.

Several years before, in a case both Rebecca and Eve helped him solve, Humph encountered another rich couple who was just as bitter as the Hamersly-Joneses. The woman in that case ended up in Bellevue, happily playing piano all day and imagining that ragtime creator Scott Joplin was listening from his grave. He had also been a patient there until syphilis played his final note on earth.

This case, on top of the one several years back, made Humph wonder whether this was the best time to be weighing the pros and cons of getting officially married and moving in together.

“Mr. Humph, sir?” Mrs. Hamersly had grown alarmed by Humph’s vacant stare out the window.

Humph recovered like a soldier snapping to attention.

“Sorry, ma’am. Your plight reminded me of an old case, one that didn’t end happily.”

“That makes me think you are very likely the man for the job. My husband and I share no happiness to say goodbye to. That has been the case ever since we stopped having relations. That was years ago.”

“What changed?”

She went further back in time to explain that they were separately well-off before wedding bells rang, but it always rankled that her means were “much more substantive than his”.

She said he was one of the shallowest individuals she’d ever known.

That, too, echoed a comment the woman made in the

old case: Was shallowness a male defect?

Mrs. Hamersly continued:

“He was an architect, which I first found very attractive. He therefore must have been a creative sort, or so I’d imagined. Then, after twenty years, I realized he must be the only architect in New York City with absolutely no imagination—no imagination in relationships, no imagination in bed.”

Mrs. Hamersly interrupted her maid to ask for a sherry.

Humph waited until she’d taken a sip, then said, point blank:

“I must tell you, to be perfectly frank,” began Humph, “that this is the second case I’ve dealt with where a very wealthy woman feels threatened by her husband, who she says diminishes her in every possible way. In the first case, I learned that the wealthy woman had reason to complain. What I want to say is that I don’t deal with petty marital disputes. I need evidence of criminal misbehavior, to put it politely.”

“I assure you, sir, that this is much more serious than a marital dispute. But allow me to give you all the background in order that you may decide for yourself. Would you care for a drink, Mr. Humph, to facilitate your patience in the event I babble on?”

Her politeness, as well as her ability to recount trying circumstances without hysteria, impressed Humph. He was beginning to find her almost charming.

“Such background is essential to have. Thank you. But what created the war between the two of you?”

“Well, as silly as this might sound, Mr. Humph, the worst part in the early days was that he had no imagination when it came to art. Look at my walls. I purchased all of these paintings, but only after falling in love with them. They say who I am, if that makes any sense. However, I suspect my so-called better half preferred to worship the early masterpieces because the world agreed on what were

the masterpieces. He hid behind their centuries of judgment. He could safely pretend he had arrived independently at the same conclusion. In reality, he despised later works because he didn't understand their appeal and had no idea what was good or bad."

Humph shook his head, more in confusion than disbelief about her priorities in marriage. It was one of those thoughts that flash through the mind like the sudden appearance and disappearance of a firefly. What did his new partnership, his being part of a couple, have in store for his future?

"Mrs. Hamersly, can we forget your cherished art world for a moment? When did your husband decide you were his enemy?"

The answer was short and simple—blunt, in fact.

"When he fabricated a story that he always wanted children but I was no longer able to bear children. He wanted a divorce, and with that divorce, he wanted half my financial holdings on the grounds that I betrayed him by having early menopause. I'm only thirty-nine years of age. Could I have predicted that?"

"That's absurd!" exclaimed Humph.

"Patently," she said. "And a divorce lawyer told him so. He was trying to claim that his family was old and the family fortune established over generations was meant to be passed on to future generations. What hooley! Never before or during our marriage did he ever mention children. Something tells me he would regard a child like a modern painting, indecipherable, valueless."

Her vehemence was convincing.

Mrs. Hamersly sighed deeply, then sat up absurdly straight, bosom leading the charge.

"It was then, when his lawyer said his grounds for divorce were baloney, that he went out of his way to conquer every eligible woman of standing in the city, and more than a few without standing. Furthermore, I know as a fact that he

even slipped money to newspaper photographers to capture photos of his dalliances.”

She sank back into the sofa. Her maid stroked her left hand.

“What say you, Mr. Humph?” She said it like her last whisper on earth.

Once again, Humph realized, he was aghast at how the privileged class lived. This was not the first case that gave him entrée into that world, but he was learning now that he could still be taken aback.

Mrs. Hamersly broke the silence by quietly adding that she had decided to shield all her assets from her husband’s reach, especially the paintings, which now comprised the bulk of her worth. She also owned the twenty-second-floor apartment outright. She had even obtained a restraining order against him, which he’d breached that very day.

“If you’re finished, Mr. Humph, I would like to call the police and lay charges.”

Humph held up his hand.

“I need any details you might have about the people, the ladies, he frequented to humiliate you. I will need to track them down to establish events and timelines, that sort of thing.”

An hour later, his notebook had only one virgin page left. He wished his new client the best and warned her to prevent Mr. Jones from gaining entry to the apartment.

“Call the police instead of opening the door.”

When he got home, Humph called Rebecca.

“How important is art to you?”



CHAPTER 3

AFTER the interview with his new client, Humph made his way downtown to 7th Street. He continued east to Avenue B and Rebecca's place. Rebecca's neighborhood was barely a twenty-minute walk almost due north of his. It was peaceful. It wasn't intense like his. Maybe he could get used to it. His cases provided enough excitement, he reasoned. As he neared Y, the former cop part of him switched on. He saw two people he would have kept an eye on for a while, one who looked like he was casing tenements, the other a young man who was too interested in the people walking by. Judging by his clothes, he definitely didn't live in the same building the stoop he sat on was attached to. But Humph was no longer a cop. A moment later, he arrived at Rebecca's place. Would it be his as well someday?

Now that he knew he had a case to investigate—for a client who had more money than she knew what to do with, as long as her husband never got his fingers on it—Humph could breathe deeply in the face of the challenge presented by Eve and Rebecca. As he walked, he kept an eye open for news kiosks and diners, the signposts of civilization in Humph's way of thinking. The sighting of either one would probably have sealed the deal right then and there before he arrived at her place. He'd agree to move. However, he found neither.

Rebecca almost knocked him over with her greeting. Humph was not expecting that reaction, especially after the assault the night before when Eve and Rebecca laid siege to his intentions.

She brought a smile to his confused countenance. When they were together, she was the orchestra conductor. As they talked, her face would zoom in close to his, or with a flick of her hands, her body would step back from him. When they first met, her dominance made him uncomfortable, but with time her personality had the effect of a message, mentally and physically. He knew people regarded him as a huge physical presence. For a reason he would never understand, it felt good to be in the sway of a woman like Rebecca. It felt like, at six-foot-two and two hundred twenty pounds, he was being taken by the hand like a child and led somewhere that might turn out to be magical.

When Rebecca sat him in a chair facing her small sofa, he asked how she was. She dismissed the question immediately.

"What do you want to say, Humph?"

He considered his words for an awkward amount of time.

"Is art important to you? I mean, paintings and things?"

Rebecca broke out laughing.

She reached out and took his left hand.

"Immensely important, Humph."

His heart almost stopped beating.

Since he was obviously incapable of saying what he meant, Rebecca volunteered that she could not do her job without understanding art. She was a make-up artist, but on Broadway that meant a lot more than what a high-society woman might want for a soirée with their social equals.

"I create new faces. I could give you a new face, dear. Interested?"

"No way, beautiful. God didn't mean for me to be someone else."

Rebecca explained that it wasn't about becoming someone else. It was the same as changing your clothes before a party.

"One night, you wear black. The next, you wear beige. It's still you underneath. Have some fun, Humph. No one in my world is going to judge you. If your cop friends have a problem, the problem is theirs."

Humph did not give her the agreement she was hoping for. He began describing his case.

"I've got a rich lady who is being threatened in all sorts of ways by a rich bastard who's after her money. A big part of her money is in art. In fact, she says most of her worth is hanging on her walls. Her husband already has money, but he has never had to work for money. He wants to become even richer by screwing a fellow member of high society. He knows he's entitled. He thinks that gives him the power to crush a mere woman, even though she's entitled as well. After all, she's just a woman."

Humph then said he was adrift at sea when art was an issue. He had a feeling this case would require him to learn to stay afloat in those waters. He didn't know why but Mrs. Hamersly said her husband's artistic ignorance was what destroyed their marriage.

"Can people care about art that much, Rebecca?"

"I'd say it is certainly possible, although for myself, I'd prefer a good man to a Monet."

Humph didn't get her joke.

Rebecca stepped around the chair and sat on Humph's lap. Humph had switched the conversation from art and where they would reside to his current case. Rebecca knew him well enough to know that would remain his focus until the case was solved.

What didn't make sense to Humph or Rebecca was the fact that the case was of no importance. Yes, it was too bad the lady was being screwed around by a rich reprobate. But to his knowledge at the moment, there was no crime involved. Society was under no threat.

Humph suddenly felt down despite the beautiful woman on his lap.

"Hey, you big lug, what did Eve tell you? This case means money. You need money. That's how almost everyone lives. Money equals being able to breathe."

Humph exhaled and hugged her. He knew he could be an idiot at times. He had lived alone all his adult years. It was only the brief time he'd known Eve's mother that he had even imagined himself living with someone else, having to explain his moods and thoughts. In his reveries, it wasn't a problem. In his new reality, he knew he had a lot to learn.

Despite all he'd seen in life, Humph was not a true cynic. But that's the appearance he gave. Rebecca, on the other hand, had a light inside her. A natural optimism turned on that light. She was not a quitter in any facet of her life, no matter the odds.

Humph suddenly realized that she was casting that light at this very moment. It was time to act.

"I was thinking, Rebecca. The case I went to investigate today was just like a case I had maybe six years ago—couples with all the money in the world who hated each other more than poor people ever could. I couldn't help wondering whether all marriages could end like that. I'm not a kid, but how could I know? It's a road I've never walked."

Rebecca knew she had just heard the real Humph. Unless he was reciting events in a case, he rarely put that many words together, words that were entirely introspective.

She kissed his cheek and lightly ran her fingers through his hair. Before she could speak, he sat up straight, almost causing her to lose her balance on his lap.

“I’ll move here, Rebecca. I’ve decided. I’ve been thinking about it all day. If we become rich, we’ll pay someone to open a newsstand, and we’ll buy a diner for someone else to run.”

Rebecca all but smothered the big man with kisses. Not only had he shown his introspective side, but he had just revealed that he was a romantic.

Finally, Rebecca stood. She went to the phonograph and put on a record. It was Latin music, soft and fluid.

She held out her arms. Humph didn’t hesitate to take her hands in his.



CHAPTER 4

AT supper that night, Rebecca brought the subject back to art.

“I’ve been taking lessons for a long time. I belong to an artist co-op on Cherry Street, not all that far from your place, or rather, your old place on Henry.”

“How come you never mentioned it?”

“Simple,” Rebecca replied. “You would have used it as an argument for me to move into your place because your place was so much closer to the co-op.”

“Damned right I would have,” he said it with mock frustration, but Rebecca saw a hint of a smile in his eyes. Humph realized that being able to joke about the subject just hours after making his decision to move away from Henry Street meant that deep down inside he was at peace with the decision.

Rebecca got up and brought in the main dish: fish fillets baked in beer and served in a Puerto Rican stovetop sauce.

“Back home, you know, in Puerto Rico, we use this recipe for a fish called *chillo*, but you can’t get it here.”

After only two mouthfuls, Humph knew he had something else to add to his list of reasons for moving.

As they ate, Rebecca told Humph about the co-op, mostly about how she loved the idea of people—artists—without much money, chipping in to pay rent and to buy artist materials so they could all learn their craft.

“On their own, very few of them would be able to rent a place with the lighting they needed, let alone the paints and brushes and all the other materials a painter requires. In fact, I’m one of the very few to have a regular job. At best, without the co-op, most of them would be confined to charcoal drawings on paper they found on the street.”

Rebecca then launched into how Franklin Delano Roosevelt singlehandedly was keeping American art alive through the Depression.

Humph raised both hands. “Whoa, my dear. I have read about his program, and I have seen murals across the city that FDR’s plan paid for. The newspapers have published photos. What do they call the president’s efforts in this Depression? The Real Deal, I think. The man’s a genius.”

Rebecca raised her glass. Humph raised his to complete the wordless toast.

Humph asked for a second helping of fish. As Rebecca took his plate to the kitchen, he called after her.

“Do your painter friends at the co-op ever hear stories about illegal art sales, about abnormalities at auctions?”

She called back that she’d be a minute. She wanted to warm up the sauce a bit.

Five minutes later, a fresh serving of fish was on the table.

“I haven’t eaten like this in ages. Maybe diners on Henry Street are overrated.”

“You’re never too old to see the light,” Rebecca replied.

Humph ate in happy silence for a few minutes. Rebecca didn't want to interrupt his reverie.

When Humph placed the knife and fork and his plate, Rebecca answered his question.

"As a matter of fact, yes. It wasn't about something that happened here. It was an art theft in Paris. A tiny painting from the 1700s by a guy named Antoine Watteau's called, if you forgive my French, *l'Indifferent*, was stolen from a wall in the Louvre."

Rebecca said that most of the painters at the co-op thought it impossible to steal anything from the Louvre. A couple said the case was intriguing. How did the thief do it? Why did the cops have absolutely no clue? Surely, one said, the Paris cops know all the major art thieves. Finally, a gaunt-faced artist who'd been working at the co-op for years suggested that the theft worked only because it was committed by a nobody in either the art world or the criminal world.

"Makes sense," said Humph. "What's the name of your artist friend, the guy at the co-op who presented that theory?"

"All I know is his first name: Renaldo. He's not Latino. He just wants to use that name as a painter name. Why, I don't know."

"What do you know about him?"

"He's nice as can be and he has some talent. He has actually sold paintings, privately and to galleries. I don't remember which ones."

Humph pushed his plate to the center of the table and said he'd like to talk to her painter friend.

"Why?" asked Rebecca.

"I want to know as much as I can about the art world in this city. I read some time ago that prices in the past ten years have gotten insane. Paintings that sold for two thousand dollars in 1930 now sell for more than sixty thousand dollars. Can you imagine?"

“No wonder people steal art,” Rebecca said. “Who could afford to buy it?”

She now had Humph’s full attention.

Humph asked if she knew of any cases of theft in the city. She replied, “I don’t, but the guy I mentioned from the co-op says it’s been known to happen.”

Rebecca returned to the kitchen to make coffee. Humph’s mind was chugging away like a freight train hitting sixty miles per hour.

Mrs. Hamersly said her art collection represented most of her wealth. Her husband knew that. She was denying him possession of it under any circumstance. He was not legally part of her life. But, it occurred to Humph as he used his napkin to wipe his lips a second time, what if she were dead? They weren’t legally divorced. Surely he could waltz over her grave and take possession of her apartment and belongings. What kind of lawyer did she have? Why wouldn’t he have insisted on her getting a divorce?

Humph made a note to ask her that very question the next time he saw her.

After coffee, Humph rose and started to move toward the door.

“Where are you going?” asked Rebecca with a grin.

Humph didn’t pick up on the grin.

“I have to get up early tomorrow—two people to see, the rich lady and your painter friend from the co-op.”

A silence followed, during which Rebecca never withdrew her gaze.

Finally, it dawned on Humph. He laughed.

“I guess I live here now.” He tossed his hat back to the rack and missed. Rebecca picked it up.

“Come on,” she said, heading to the bedroom.



CHAPTER 5

HUMPH phoned Mrs. Hamersly's place and was told that she was indisposed, no reason given.

"Please call by tomorrow," he was told.

He then walked to his old stomping grounds on Henry Street. For old time's sake, he bought two tabloids at the kiosk below his old window, which was still technically his, but there was already an APT TO RENT sign on the main door of the building. He crossed the street to the gloomy diner and ordered coffee and toast. Within minutes, he realized the love affair was over. The diner, this one at least, had no redeeming features.

Next stop was Cherry Street, a part lined with tenements built in the last century by men seeking profit from places that offered no sanitation, water or heat. They knew the massive surge of immigrants to the city had to

live somewhere. Why not offer the only thing they could afford?

Humph knew the squalor of the Lower East Side as well as anyone, having been raised there. Most of its tenements were toxic. Countless people died from just breathing the poisonous air or drinking the stagnant wastewater.

Humph's understanding of the horror of their lives destroyed the view of America he originally had. At first, that knowledge left a huge hole in him. In time, it became one of those things you learn once you become an adult and your childhood illusions go *poof*, banished forever.

The building Rebecca described was a three-story tenement, which of course meant no elevator. The co-op had to be on the top floor to get the light the artists needed. As he doggedly mounted the stairs, the smells brought back memories. They weren't appetizing.

As he passed the door of an apartment on the second floor, Humph paused to lean in for a peek. The whole floor of the building was probably only about twenty-five-feet wide. Each floor had four tiny units with goodness knows how many people. Humph could see as far as the bedroom, the middle room. A double bed barely fit. People probably slept in shifts. The main living area was in shambles, but that didn't mean the tenants were sloppy. There simply weren't cupboards for so many people. The floor was the cupboard in many cases.

Humph knew buildings like this were more sanitary than they were in the previous century when typhoid was a frequent visitor. But it was no way for anyone to live, he thought.

He also wondered how an artist's workshop could be squeezed into apartments like this. On the third floor, he paused to catch his breath, which he was not eager to do because of the stench. There was a handwritten sign that read "Artists welcome". Humph knocked—no answer. After a moment, he let himself in.

To his surprise, the entire floor was devoid of walls. With the exception of what was probably a bathroom, it was a single 100-by-25-foot room. He was guessing, but he thought that was a standard size for lots in this part of town. The ceiling must have been about fourteen feet above. The upper half of the north-facing wall was comprised of windows. All the easels, probably twenty of them, faced north. Only two were occupied. The room was all but silent.

Humph didn't want to disturb the two painters. He walked toward them as silently as he could and stopped fifteen feet away. He hoped one of them would simply sense his presence.

Finally, one spoke.

"Shit!"

He had dropped his brush and was now trying to remove specks of dirt from the floor.

The man, who looked about sixty, stared at Humph for a second, then complained he have to wash "the damn thing".

To do so, he went to the little room Humph had noticed when he arrived.

Hearing the commotion, the other painter turned to Humph.

"Can I help you, my good man?" His eyes were smiling, and his smile was sincere.

"Maybe yes, maybe no," replied Humph, also smiling. He stepped toward the painter and held out his hand. The painter's hand disappeared in his.

As the other painter returned, Humph was explaining that his wife belonged to the co-op. When he named her, both men eagerly said they knew her.

Humph explained that he was a private investigator.

"At the moment, I'm just fishing. Don't know much at all about art, unlike my Rebecca. However, I have just started looking into a case, a marriage of two very wealthy

people who are fighting tooth and nail over a ton of valuable paintings. One, the woman, loves and knows art. As for the husband, she says, he pretends to be an art lover but in reality knows nothing about it. I'm trying to figure out why the husband wants the art, which belongs to his wife, by the way. He's already wealthy. I've met him only once and wouldn't trust him with my Yankee baseball cards."

The two painters seemed to welcome the challenge.

The older man said he thought the husband realized that he could increase his wealth by selling the paintings. "The prices galleries pay and the prices auction houses get nowadays are absurdly high. There is no stock investment in the world that offers such a high return."

The younger man said that idea beat his logically.

"However, I'll mention mine anyway. Maybe he wants the paintings so he can have a fake provenance created and see what he can get at auction. A newly discovered work by a well-known artist would attract rich collectors from around the world. Mind you, he'd have to know where to find forgers and dishonest art experts to produce the needed documents."

"You've both been exceedingly helpful. Before I go, though, can I ask one question? You guys both mentioned it. The word was 'provenance'."

The young painter laughed.

"All it means is the records or documents authenticating something like a painting or the history of its ownership."

As was his custom when his mind was working to unravel new cases, Humph planned to walk home. When he left the Cherry Street building and set out on his walk, he was thinking he was headed to Henry Street, just two streets north. A block later, he remembered he now lived on Avenue B at 7th. A couple of blocks after that realization, Humph decided for no particular reason to veer a bit west to the Bowery and bang on Duffy's door. He hadn't seen the inimitable Irishman in weeks, partly because he had no case

intriguing enough to dangle in front of Duffy's infallible nose for criminal undertakings, and partly because Duffy himself felt like an outsider now that Humph and Rebecca were together. Duffy, a secret romantic, had gotten to know Rebecca a few years back when he awoke from a drunken stupor and saw her sitting on the floor of his apartment, cradling the head of a dying mobster in her lap. "What a woman!" he thought.

Duffy loved telling anecdotes when he was in his cups. Humph was certain he must have told the one about the exotic Broadway make-up artist and the dying mobster a million times.

To Humph's surprise, Duffy answered the door immediately. That meant that he didn't get drunk the night before and was perhaps even feeling social.

Indeed, the greeting was warm.

"What's afoot, partner?"

"Who are you this morning?" Humph asked. "Your question suggested the very English Sherlock Holmes, the 'afoot' part and 'partner' suggested Will Rogers, our very own cowboy-comedian. I must say, Duff, that neither portion of your greeting was very Irish. What's going on with you?"

Duffy, at best five-foot-seven in height, delivered a roundhouse punch to his guest's gut. Humph laughed, put his arm around Duff's shoulders and led him to the sofa. Humph sat in an easy chair facing Duffy.

"Coffee?" Humph suggested.

"My good man, it's too late in the day for that shite." He got up and went to the kitchen. He returned with two questionably clean glasses and a virgin bottle of Irish whiskey.

To himself, Humph whispered, "There goes my day."

"What do you know about art?" Humph asked while raising his glass to toast their reunion.

"Who is Art?"

Most people would have taken that response to mean he knew nothing about art, but Humph knew Duff too well. He didn't care what anyone thought of him. If appearing ignorant got him the information he wanted in a case, he was more than willing to play the clown.

"Background, please," said Duff, becoming uncharacteristically polite.

Humph told him about the insanely rich woman who used fine art as wallpaper and about her insanely greedy husband who wanted her art, not her.

"I believe her life is in danger. I need to investigate her husband. That should be straightforward. But I also need to investigate the art world. "

He went on to explain that this woman was doing everything possible to legally protect her art. He said he'd met her and believed she truly loved her collection. She also, said Humph, considered her husband an unprincipled pretender who thrived on greed disguised as love of art.

"The dear woman's only mistake is not having gotten a divorce years before. She has a protection order against her husband, which he casually ignored the night I met him. But that wouldn't keep the art from him in the case of her death. A divorce would."

Humph added that he was deeply worried about her.

"Possession of the woman's art collection would add at least a million to his personal worth."

Duffy poured them both another glass.

"I asked whether you knew anything about art because I don't. I can't believe dear hubby wants to simply adorn his own walls with his windfall. He doesn't even like the art his wife had. Instinct tells me he wants to use it to illegally make a fortune. But I don't know where to look for clues to his intentions. How does art theft work?"

Duff had some theories based on cases he'd worked years before as an NYPD detective. But in the end, it became clear that Humph had to get an education about art. He'd

have to start visiting galleries, get introduced to the movers and shakers in that world, and maybe even spend some time talking to artists, ones who wanted not only fame but also wealth.

Humph took in Duff's suggestions. As he pondered them, he realized he had the perfect teacher about the art world. Rebecca.

"Are you thinking about a certain Puerto Rican?" Duff asked.

"Who?" Humph answered, getting to his feet.

Duffy walked him to the door.

"Good to see you, old friend."

Humph lightly punched his shoulder.

"Keep me up to date about your case, Humph. In my damned retirement, I'm running out of things worth thinking about."

Humph had known him since the time they both were NYPD cops. When Humph had become a PI, he called on Duffy for advice in almost all of his big cases. Duffy's unorthodox working methods often infuriated his superiors, but Humph appreciated his way of working. The Irishman was street smart, experienced, connected and, most of all, tenacious. Unlike his friend, Humph was almost always polite, but he shared Duffy's disdain for bureaucracy and stuffed shirts.

When Humph got home, his new home, he found it vacant. It took a second for that to sink in. Rebecca had a full-time job as a Broadway make-up artist who also contributed to set design. Her days were often long, which didn't bother her in the slightest. She loved her life. She'd come a long way since leaving Puerto Rico.

Humph only hoped she could find the time to introduce him to the world of art.



CHAPTER 6

TWO mornings later, Humph woke up to a phone call. It was Detective Henry Higgins.

“Humph,” said the flat but clearly Scottish accent. “You’re implicated in a murder.”

“Higgins? What the hell are you talking about? And I warn you, you’re talking to a man who hasn’t had his morning coffee.”

Higgins laughed. “Are you telling me that lovely make-up person of yours doesn’t make you coffee?”

“Detective, you are truly pushing my limits.” In answer to that infuriating question, Humph replied firmly, “Yes, she does, but it’s a Latin thing, something called café con leche, more milk than caffeine. How can they be so excitable without a full hit of caffeine?”

Higgins laughed.

“Your business card was found on the person of a supremely wealthy woman who at some point overnight was bludgeoned with a seventeenth-century, double-sided axe. Care to explain?”

“On my way,” Humph said. His answer was more of a growl than a statement.

Once at the station, Humph told the chief of detectives about his interview the day before, underlining the fact that he told the victim to secure an order preventing her husband from entering her apartment building, let alone her apartment. Whether she did so or not, he didn’t know.

“You assume it was her husband, a certain Mr. Jones, who did the dirty deed?”

Humph grasped his point. “It could have been someone else, theoretically. But what I know as a fact, and what I witnessed yesterday, was that Mr. Jones hated her, openly swore he’d steal her wealth and swore he would not be denied.” He added, however, that Mr. Jones had left the apartment of his own accord.

“What,” Higgins asked, “would he gain by her death?”

“I don’t know, to be honest. She told me she’d done things like put their apartment in her name. I got the impression she had done, or was planning to do, the same with her other assets. As well as the paintings, she owned a good number of properties in the city. Is it easy to create a blanket interdiction against someone?”

“We can find out,” said Higgins.

A constable walked in.

“Young man,” said Higgins. “You are not supposed to be on the detective floor. If you are here offering to bring us coffee, please bring one for my colleague.” The constable started to protest that he had business there, but the detective dismissed him. “Bring my friend the coffee, and I might hear you out.”

Humph nodded his appreciation.

When the young man returned with the coffee, he apologized to the detective. "I'm just doing what the desk sarge told me to do, sir."

"What was that?"

"To say that another clue has been discovered at the murder scene. Detective Arness has requested your presence at the murder scene."

The detective thanked him in a kind voice.

"Wanna join me, Humph?"

Humph was on his feet before the detective finished the sentence.

En route in a black police sedan, a Dodge Series 30, to the crime scene, Humph said they might be better off heading to the addresses of the girls the profligate Mr. Jones frequented.

"I spent two hours with the victim yesterday. Jones left in a huff while I was there. The victim vowed to take legal action but did not express any immediate fear for her life. I think it is possible that the easy solution, namely Mr. Jones, may be mistaken."

The first girl was found on East 23rd Street. She lived in the basement. She was bereft of make-up and wore a simple, drab, boyish dress moderately fashionable ten years ago.

Higgins had one of his men interview her. She seemed painfully shy. There was nothing about her or her room to suggest sexuality. She professed absolute ignorance about what they were asking.

"All I want is to find someone to buy me lunch."

Humph gave her a dollar bill.

"This doesn't make any sense," he said to Higgins.

Higgins gave his driver the second address provided by the victim.

It was on 42nd Street, near Ninth Avenue.

On the second floor of the four-story building, a young woman answered their firm knock.

She was more than attractive and more than likely involved with Mr. Jones.

But she said her husband was a lawyer and was the only one who would answer any questions.

“What is your husband’s name?” asked Higgins.

“Jones,” said the woman, not bothering to offer a first name.

“Where can we reach him?”

“How should I know?” the woman replied. There was a defiance in her manner that Humph wanted to conquer.

“You, lady,” he said condescendingly, “we know all about the relations you have with your supposed lawyer. However, if you knew him even a little, you would know that he’s not a lawyer. He’s an architect. So quit the act. You’re not ready for Broadway. OK?”

“Screw you all!” she shouted before turning her back. She faced the window, four stories from freedom.

“Not worth thinking about,” said Humph. “Come here, dear.”

Higgins was watching every moment. His mouth dropped open, almost aghast, when the woman did as Humph asked. She stood before him, inches away. He put his big right hand on her shoulder.

“Let’s work this out,” he said.

She was put in the police wagon.

Back at the station, Humph asked Higgins if he could ask an old friend to interrogate the woman. Higgins was clearly about to say no. “Why bother? They have lots of good detectives,” Humph included.

“It’s just a feeling. What do they call it? An intuition,” said Humph.

Higgins acquiesced. The next morning, Karena Melchinskaya, the Women’s Bureau cop who uncovered Eve’s whereabouts after the gang kidnapping years ago, and a woman Humph once wanted to marry, walked into the precinct.

She was now a lieutenant, a fact Higgins acknowledged immediately.

“Your presence is greatly appreciated.”

It was Humph who provided the background regarding the dead woman and her bastard husband. He didn’t pull punches since he had been witness to the relationship.

He also told Karena about the dead woman’s claim that her despicable husband’s plans to spite her involved some prostitutes. She even provided their names, having hired a detective to investigate him. Humph had gone to see the fellow private and confirmed what Mrs. Hamersly claimed.

Karena simply nodded and followed the constable who led her to the interrogation room. As she walked away, Humph felt the pang of loss. She was special. If only she hadn’t been a cop as well.

By end of day, Karena had succeeded in breaking the young woman.

Her confession was not what anyone had expected.

“It was an artist who killed that woman,” Karena said. “His name was Rafael Ortega. He is Venezuelan. He has been living here for two years. He met the victim at a gallery exhibition for some new artist Ortega claimed to know personally. The woman claims she knew the victim, Mrs. Hamersly. She said Ortega asked a lot of questions about her, her habits, her address. He said he was just curious because as an artist he needed a sponsor, a patron. He was new to the country and had no contacts.”

She said the reason he killed Mrs. Hamersly was that a man he had met at that very exhibition promised him fame if he did one simple thing for him. The man’s name was Jones.

“Our girl swears that is the truth. She knows no more except that the Venezuelan artist has disappeared and that he used to work at an artist co-op on the Lower East Side, maybe in the Village.”

“What an extraordinary case,” said Higgins. “And to think we’ve only just now opened our investigation.”

The room was silent for a moment. Cigarettes got lit, throats got cleared, behinds shifted to get more comfortable on small wooden chairs.

It was Humph's voice that broke the silence. He looked at Higgins and said, "Just as we decided not to immediately conclude that Jones was our man, I think we should do likewise with this artist. Let's say Jones commissioned him to murder his wife. It would make sense if Jones then sent him into hiding. After all, if the artist got caught, Jones would have a very short future."

"So," replied Higgins, "we have to do a deep dive into the life of our Mr. Jones."

Humph said he had yet to learn much about him. Digging out his notebook, he recited an assortment of facts. Jones had studied art at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Humph was told by someone there, who remembered Jones well, that after graduating, barely, he applied to the top-of-the-line architectural firms and got turned down, one after the other.

"His drafting skills left a lot to be desired. How can you sell your design to a client if the client can't picture the finished product? You can't. Finally, Jones got on with an old firm called McKim, Mead & White. Jones later told me he was perfectly happy there because it was renowned for its Beaux-Arts style. 'None of this soulless modern crap,' Jones said, dismissing out of hand some rather impressive creations—the Empire State Building, among others."

"That last comment is interesting," Humph said. "Our murder victim told me he was so unsure of his own taste in art that he relied on old works the critics now agreed upon. She said he hid behind the opinion of others."

"She was sure the same applied to his own architectural designs. Her taste was much more contemporary. He may have coveted her art collection, but a good part of it is too modern for his taste, if he has any."

Humph flipped through the last pages of his notebook.

“Not much to add so far except that he hung out with a lot of Wall Street boys. The PI, the other PI,” Humph said, smiling, “got the impression from a couple of Jones’s colleagues that the architect was more interested in designing a fortune than buildings. They found his preoccupation with wealth strange since he already was well-off.”



CHAPTER 7

AFTER a week with no news from Higgins, Duffy or the reporter, Humph settled peacefully into life as a married man. Rebecca was working long days on a new Broadway show, happy to be part of the set design team now that she'd finished providing her suggestions for costuming. Her role on Broadway was expanding like a balloon in the hands of a big windbag. She prayed that it wouldn't burst before her current show came to be a year or two from now.

Because her life was so full as of late, she felt no need to bug Humph about actually getting married. Each day living with him reaffirmed the choice she'd made.

However, her dear friend, Eve, who was the self-appointed guardian of Humph's happiness, was more impatient. Humph had told Rebecca that he and Eve met recently at a diner one morning for breakfast. "She did all

the talking,” Humph said. “All she wanted to talk about was our wedding plans. I told her we were going to tie the knot, but we had no actual plans at the moment.” He added that Eve jumped on his admission to say that any woman would love a man all the more if he took it upon himself to hasten the wedding.

Rebecca smiled on hearing that. She loved Eve. She was a pretty young woman, sweet and loving, and now an accomplished performer on Broadway. But she was also 20 percent bulldozer.

“Poor Humph,” she said when he finished describing the diner meeting. Then she asked a question of her own: “Well?”

She was glad she didn’t have to broach the subject of marriage. Eve did it for her.

Humph was speechless at first. When he spoke, it was a repetition of something he’d said at the beginning of the case. He’d said he couldn’t think about getting married until after the case was resolved. That’s just the way he was—one-track mind.

Rebecca said she was OK with that but wanted him to know she was thinking about it. She’d even talked to a priest at a church in East Harlem, the Church of the Holy Rosary. She said she didn’t attend mass there very often, but she felt somehow at home in the neighborhood. “It would mean something to me to get married there.”

Humph couldn’t argue because he was as non-religious as can be. He also wouldn’t know where to start searching for a church of any denomination.

“How about we start with the church?” asked Rebecca. “We can plan the rest as time goes on.”

Humph kissed her.

“Agreed, my beautiful wife.”

The compromise was perfection itself, he thought. Steps toward marriage were now officially going ahead, and he was still free to devote all his time to his case.

That evening, while Humph napped, Rebecca phoned Eve, who had the night off. When she heard the news, she was delighted. Humph still listened to her.

The next morning, Humph decided to pester Duffy about the great European forger.

“No further sightings, Humph.”

“How about the broker who sets up scams for Jones?”

Humph could hear the ice being added to Duffy’s drink. *Plunk, plunk, plunk.* He dropped them in slowly, thinking it would add to Humph’s anticipation of his answer.

“Well, there, sir, we have some possible progress. I discovered that there is an association of New York gallery owners. They meet every now and then over champagne and canapés, or whatever those ridiculous little French munchies are. They have a little newsletter that they type up and mail to members. A lady friend of mine—she lives in Chelsea—thought I might be interested.”

“Why would she think that?” asked Humph.

“Pillow talk. You know how it goes.”

“So, what good does this newsletter do us?”

“Not much,” said Duffy. “But it let me learn what they talk about. Remember, these are gallery owners. But do they talk about attracting people to their galleries, or encourage artists to display their work at their places? No. They mostly talk about increasing profits by manipulating, if that’s the right word, paintings already on the market. Our broker friend even wrote a little article outlining . . . let me stop and find it.”

When he returned, Humph learned that the Wall Street broker was more than aware of issues of provenance. He was aware, somehow, of a number of pieces of art whose provenance was questionable, especially among art owners who wanted to offer their art to galleries to sell but had acquired those works without papers, artist-to-buyer sale, artist-to-forger sale, or artist-to-gallery-owner sale.

“In other words, you or me. With the right connections,

we could play this game and pocket a wad of whiskey money.”

“I need to talk to Higgins right away,” said Humph.

“Already have,” said Duffy. “He’s putting a tail on the broker. He works for a brokerage called Barrington & Barrington.”

As he returned home, Humph couldn’t escape the conclusion that Duffy got more leads sleeping around the city with lusty bar patrons than he did by following standard police investigative procedures. That man should never retire, he told himself.

He wanted to give Higgins some time, so he waited a whole day before returning to the precinct station to pick his brain.

The visit didn’t go the way he’d planned. Higgins wasn’t there.

“He’s gone abroad.” The constable who passed on the message was strangely proud of his use of the word “abroad”.

“You mean he’s in England?”

“Yes, sir,” said the constable. “How did you guess? I wasn’t supposed to say where he was.”

“Don’t worry, young man. You did fine. I have magical powers of divination.”

“Of what, sir? Divi . . .?”

Humph was left to wonder whether Higgins crossed the ocean for personal reasons, to see family or to pursue the investigation they were working on. Why hadn’t Higgins let him know?

He’d be gone for at least two weeks, probably more.

That evening, Rebecca came to the rescue.

“Your broker guy? He’s got a young lady on the side. He’s married as can be. Two kids even. But for the past year his favorite bed is in Soho. Guess what his lady does for a living.”

“How did you learn all this?”

“Simple. She’s a member of the same co-op he belongs to. She came in yesterday looking for Ortega. She didn’t ask me in particular. She just said out loud, ‘Where’s Raphael?’

“No one knew. He’s been gone for days.”

“So, she’s a painter, too?” Humph asked.

“Apparently,” said Rebecca. “As she headed for the stairs, I stepped in front of her. I said, ‘Talk?’

“We went down to the street and found a bench. At first, she clearly didn’t want to say a word. Then I said that the police told me Ortega’s in big trouble. He’s in custody. I told her she didn’t want to be associated with him. She stared at me for the longest time. If a guy did that, I would have run for the hills, but there were layers to her stare, distrust and fear.”

Humph stared at her, then started beaming.

“You’re a natural PI!”

They hugged and ended up tumbling onto the floor. Humph, supporting his weight on his knees and elbows, kissed her and said she had an assignment, an official one, not one that she concocted on her own.

“I want you to confirm that the other painter from your co-op, the nice one, works at the Met and then actually contact him there, where he can’t deny anything. I don’t care how long it takes. I know your days are full-to-bursting. He knows Ortega. They’re both Spanish-speaking. Ortega took over his apartment, Victor let him have it. One way or the other, he’s got to know something more about Ortega’s comings and goings before the murder of Mrs. Jones.”

Rebecca was thrilled to be included in the big man’s world. They made love minutes later. Supper never reached the table.

For two weeks, Humph had been trying to find out who Jones really was. To Humph, it was amazing how rich, prominent people could hide their true natures and identities. It was as if all you had to do was puff yourself up, affect a cultivated accent, demonstrate composure in all

circumstances, smile when the press requested a photo and show up at the funerals of New York's blue bloods. Do all that, and you were one of them, an unassailable member of the inner circle, a power-broker by default.

Humph told all this to Rebecca. She sensed a vehemence she'd never seen before. He clearly hated his prey, but he didn't know how to nail him. That's what was burning inside Humph, a kind of hatred. Hatred wasn't in his nature. Why was this case so different?

Was it because he respected Mrs. Hamersly, the wife Jones had killed? There was no evidence that he committed the deed, but Humph had seen the hate in his eyes on the night they were introduced. He had also seen the passion for the good things in life that animated his now-dead wife. As a couple, they were opposites: good and evil.

And how much of his frustration was due to the resentment he had always felt toward all rich people? He knew that was a weakness of his. As a detective, he had learned a long time ago that prejudice of any kind blinds an investigator.

Rebecca didn't try to make Humph talk it out. She just made sure she was present every moment, nonthreatening and beautiful. She followed Humph's eyes. She knew he saw her despite his inner focus.

Finally, after a week of unproductive thinking, Humph returned to the co-op. He was relieved the younger of the two painters he had met was there. He offered to buy him lunch.

The young man took him to a hole-in-the-wall deli. The woman serving from behind a counter had a thick accent. Because of his time with Karena, the cop, he recognized it as Ukrainian. When he mentioned her accent as being Ukrainian, she smiled. Humph explained that one of his favorite collaborators was Ukrainian.

His new painter friend recommended the pelmeni, meat dumplings.

“Ask for an assortment,” he said. “They use all kinds of meats, if you want.”

Humph did and fell in love again with Ukraine.

“Damn,” he said to the painter, “no one would ever even notice that this place was here.”

“Sometimes, that’s the best way to live in New York—no offense, but away from cops and religious nuts and street hoods.”

Humph had to agree.

After eating, Humph told him of his frustration. He couldn’t find a way to implicate the husband in the murder. The Venezuelan artist story seemed absurd. Besides, no one ever seemed to have heard of him.

“To me,” said Humph, “this seems like a well-orchestrated, well-funded cover-up.” He said he didn’t think the Venezuelan killer even existed. The woman who swore he did had been paid off.

The painter said nothing.

Finally, Humph had to admit that the husband had what seemed to be a solid alibi. He was with an escort who wanted to be paid in jewels, authentic stones only. She was a stunning woman by all accounts but also one with a jeweler’s eye. She was said to be Belgian.

“What better place to learn about jewels?” Humph said. The painter looked puzzled.

“The little country is the world’s diamond capital,” Humph explained.

“Happy to try to help you out, but you’re talking to a guy who grew up in Coney Island. I have no idea of what you’re talking about.”

“No matter,” said Humph. “All that matters is that I find a link between the husband and an art expert, or a forger, or a gallery owner.”

Before parting ways, Humph asked if the painter knew the one Rebecca had described, the gaunt gentleman, aged perhaps in his early forties. He was the man who

had suggested the famous Louvre theft was possible only if it were an inside job. It was a long shot, but Humph had immediately made a mental note to investigate the man when Rebecca mentioned him. When you're getting nowhere on a case, grasp at straws, he believed. Experience had proven him right several times.

The young painter said he knew who Humph meant. "His name's Victor Garcia, but he paints under the name of Renaldo."

"Ah, yes. That's the one my Rebecca mentioned. What do you know about him?"

"Garcia was working and living there when I started," said the young painter. He said Garcia was "nice enough" but often seemed preoccupied. "I got the impression he wasn't thinking about what he had on the easel in front of him. It was a bit like he had another life to worry about. I mean, he wasn't old, but he didn't look all that healthy to me. But I have to say, I like his work a lot, and whenever I asked him a question about technique or whatever, he always seemed enthusiastic about helping me."

"When does he work here?" Humph asked.

The young man said that Garcia had no schedule. He lived in the building.

"The co-op owns this place, at least the top three floors. The rent is dirt cheap.

"Apartment 4," the man added, "in case you were about to ask me."

Humph walked home feeling he'd made some progress. His immediate question was, if the killer and this man were the same person, why the switch in names, from Garcia to Ortega? Were they both Venezuelan? Were they actually two different people who just happened to be Latino and artists?

Humph didn't stop at apartment 4 before leaving because he wanted to question Rebecca more about what she had observed about this Ortega fellow.

He walked by his old place on Henry Street and bought a paper. The headline read: "Germany Invades Poland". Humph felt a chill run down his spine. America was just escaping the devastation wrought by the Great Depression. Was it now going to go to war? He knew the country didn't want to get involved in a European conflict, but he also knew FDR saw a bigger picture, one in which the United States would have no choice but to take up arms. Most people he knew would say he was being alarmist. Most of them, Humph knew, hadn't grown up with European Jews as parents. Every day, he remembered, in one way or another, they expressed thanks for living in a country where, unlike Europe, war wasn't a fact of life, one that couldn't be ignored by wishful thinking.

As he walked, he decided that if Rebecca was home already, they would go out for supper, to a club where the orchestra made even a galoot like him escort his lady to the dance floor. Humph had learned there wasn't much to worry about in such situations. Rebecca would take over from there.

Rebecca walked through the door ten minutes after Humph did. He sprung to his feet and announced what they were going to do that evening. There would be no argument, he said with a smile. He knew she would love the idea.

"Well, then, Mr. Macho, allow me to change." As she headed to the bedroom, Humph could hear her softly singing some Spanish song. Damn it, why wasn't he learning the language? Double damn it, he thought, more and more of his cases involved Spanish speakers. He grew up with the majority of immigrants being German or Italian, but that was changing.

Thirty minutes later, Rebecca returned. She wore a floor-length lace gown. It was barely beige, light beige on brown, the skin that Humph so loved.

"My God, it's gorgeous. When? Where did you get it? It must be worth a fortune."

Rebecca loved the compliment but had to admit that she hadn't paid a cent for it.

"It was a costume used in a Broadway show four or five years ago. The actress didn't claim it. She probably had all the evening wear she needed. She was a big-time kind of performer."

Humph found the gown so seductive he was on the verge of suggesting they simply stay home.

Rebecca held up her left arm, crooked, inviting Humph to take it and lead her out the door.

They went to Harlem, to a club they'd entered during their last major case. It was on Broadway, just below 145th Street. It had become "the place to go to" in the years since. If you weren't Latino, you'd have trouble getting behind the doorman. Rebecca solved that problem with one smile.

Humph had no idea how to dance to salsa, though he admitted the music was kind of infectious.

"First," said Rebecca, "we drink. When we feel like we're floating with the music, the dance floor becomes ours." She said it with a laugh and her usual, huge smile.

"Make mine a double," said Humph.

As the hours passed, Humph, a Lower East Side guy, realized he was in a new world. On cases, he'd been to Harlem many a time, but he'd never lost himself there. Tonight he was lost, and happy as hell about it.

When they finally left the club, it was hard to tell who was hanging onto whom. They were both almost blotto. Fortunately, the nearest subway stop was downhill from the club. Humph felt young for the first time in years.



CHAPTER 8

HUMPH forgot to ask Rebecca if she thought it was possible that Victor Garcia and Rafael Ortega were the same person.

The following day, Humph started late again. So did Rebecca. She said it was fun to be delinquent together.

Humph returned to the co-op. Since Garcia lived there, did that make the co-op an artist colony, workshop plus accommodation? It probably did because the Venezuelan wasn't the only artist living there. Artist colony was not a term he knew, although he'd heard of a famous one on West 67th.

Humph knocked gently on the door of apartment 4.

The man who answered was not what Humph had expected. He was muscular, not shallow chested, as Rebecca had described him. His hair was black and thick.

There was nothing in his regard to suggest the sensitivity of an artist, not that looks really meant anything.

Humph asked to speak to Garcia.

"There's no Garcia here." Even as he uttered that short reply, he was shutting the door.

Humph hurried back upstairs in search of the young painter he had lunch with. He was at the sink washing brushes.

The young man was clearly taken aback by the expression on Humph's face.

"Talk," ordered Humph. "Where is Garcia? Who is the brute in apartment 4? Don't tell me he's an artist."

Humph hovered at least a foot above the artist and was countless pounds heavier.

The artist couldn't speak. He pointed his hand to the stairs. Humph understood. Humph started descending. The painter was behind him.

Once on the sidewalk, Humph ordered:

"Talk."

"Take me somewhere safe. Ortega apparently has friends all over the place."

The boy was clearly scared.

It wasn't really close, but to make him feel secure, Humph took him first to the nearest Canal Street station. They left the station and walked over to Lafayette Street. They found a bench.

"Sit," said Humph.

The young man finally said the gun in apartment 4 was not Garcia. His real name was Rafael Ortega.

"Garcia has disappeared, or at least it seems that way. He used to be here every couple days. I haven't seen him in a couple of weeks. Ortega told all of us to keep our mouths shut. If anyone showed up looking for him, we were told to say he was a painter and that he'd been a co-op member for years. The guy is scary."

Humph was suddenly glad he hadn't sent Rebecca to do some investigating at the co-op. She said she wanted to go back later in the week but promised to discretely nose around while working casually on her sketch. She swore she wasn't going to press anyone for information.

What Humph wanted most of all at the moment was to meet the guy Rebecca mentioned originally, the one who'd sold a few paintings, had talent, was "nice enough" but was often preoccupied and, most puzzling of all, no longer appeared to live in his very own apartment on the floor below the studio.

"Where should I start looking for him? Who might know? Do I ask about Victor Garcia or Ronaldo?"

The painter shrugged his shoulders.

"I have no clue," he said. "As for the name Ronaldo, you could ask a couple gallery owners. If you can hold on, I could go back to the co-op and ask the guys if they remember which galleries had his paintings up for exhibit. Those places might know him by either name."

Humph nodded. The young man returned two hours later with a scrap of paper on which the artist had written the gallery names.

Humph thanked him warmly and headed to the first gallery on the list. The owner said he called him Victor. But he added that he hadn't heard from him in ages. At the second place, the owner said he needed to get in touch with him because someone had bought his painting. He didn't know whether to make the check out to Victor or Ronaldo. Humph said he'd be returning to the co-op shortly and would ask Victor what name should be used. He was careful to not let on that something was amiss with Victor.

Neither gallery owner had the slightest idea where Victor could be. They didn't know any of his friends or hangouts other than the co-op.

Both gallery owners appeared to like the artist, which helped convince Humph further that he was not Rafael

Ortega.

At the first gallery, the one that still had Victor's painting on the wall, Victor had a chance to study the artwork. Humph explained to the owner that he knew next to nothing about art. The owner obliged by explaining that the painting clearly belonged to what was known as the American scene category. He said the style embraced both what he called American regionalism and urban art. The latter, he said, was often political in some way or another and was known as social realism.

"Whether rural or urban," he said, "both depict American life as it is today. It's now a full-fledged art movement, and a lot of Americans are turning their backs on the modernism that dominates Europe. The American scene is, in a way, actually anti-modernism. It's a whole-hearted American style."

Humph, who had an infallible memory for people's names when collecting evidence, didn't trust himself with the names of art categories. He wrote them down in his notebook and asked the gallery owner to check whether he got them right.

The owner laughed and assured Humph he'd be an art connoisseur in no time at all. Humph couldn't wait to tell Rebecca what the gallery owner had said about him.

With no other leads for the moment, Humph decided to head home via the precinct in the hope that Higgins had learned something valuable.

On the way to the police station in Chinatown, Humph paused to read a headline in the New York World-Telegram. France, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada had declared war on Germany in retaliation for the invasion of Poland. He bought the paper and sat on a bench. He needed to get off his feet. The news left him full of apprehension. It made what he was doing seem so small, so unimportant. In a smaller section at the bottom right of page 1, there was a story that said the U.S. could now sell arms and war materials to the United

Kingdom and France.

A radio broadcast the night before had described how Americans from coast to coast were announcing their opposition to any American involvement in this new, strictly European war.

"It has nothing to do with us!" exclaimed one man from Oklahoma, interviewed in front of the state legislature. Several of the demonstrators wielded pitch forks, said the radio reporter. "Who," he asked, "were they thinking of fighting? FDR?"

That made Humph even more upset. In his mind, FDR was America's savior, the man who freed the nation from the Depression and enacted countless programs to make America come back to life, including his program to singlehandedly promote the country's creative genius. It was working wonders, as he was beginning to discover in his current investigation. The late Mrs. Hamersly, the gallery owner he had just talked to, and comments Rebecca frequently made added up to a reborn America.

Upon hearing that radio report, Humph regretted now being too old to join the Army.

Thinking about it as he sat on the bench under an elm tree, Humph wished he had a flask full of Scotch or Duffy's Irish whiskey. As a cop and now in supposed retirement, Duff always carried one. He considered it as professionally important as handcuffs and a gun.

When Humph got to the second-floor office of Detective Henry Higgins, he had no expectations. The war news had stolen his focus.

Higgins wasn't at his desk. A constable told him he was in a meeting with the big wigs.

When he finally showed up, he said about the meeting:

"As always. A bloody waste of time."

Humph updated him on the fact that he now had good reason to believe that the two Venezuelan painters were not the same person and that one of them, Victor

Garcia, the one Rebecca knew, had been missing for days. His supposed stand-in, a scary man who had taken up residence in Garcia's apartment below the workshop, had disappeared as well, by all accounts. None of the artists in the co-op claimed to know anything about him other than the fact that his eyes were cold and he never touched a paintbrush during his stay.

Humph told Higgins about the sale made by the co-op resident, Victor Garcia, the one Rebecca had met and the one who had disappeared after the arrival of Rafael Ortega, the other Venezuelan in the case. Neither gallery owner had ever seen or heard of Ortega.

"I'm not sure where to stick my nose next," said Humph. "I was kind of hoping your boys had discovered something to implicate Mr. Hamersly Jones."

Higgins assured Humph that his detectives had been snooping around.

"They said it was true that Jones had a number of Wall Street buddies. We interviewed some of them and learned that Jones had been inquiring about large-scale investments. He wanted to invest for quick returns so he could finance other projects. However, no one knew what those projects were."

Humph said that would make perfect sense if Jones were expecting an influx of cash.

"True enough, Humph. Let me add that we talked to his bosses at the architecture firm. None of his projects were about to be offered for sale, so clearly his job was not a source of substantial new income."

It all pointed to Mrs. Hamersly's money and her art collection.

That confirmed that Mr. Jones, the architect who disliked new American art, was definitely a suspect.

As Humph headed homeward, his thoughts of war had vanished.



CHAPTER 9

“DON’T be mad at me, Humph!”

Humph stopped dead in his tracks, his suit coat in his right hand, ready to dump on the sofa. His face was dumbfounded.

“Why in the hell would I be? What have you done, Rebecca?”

His puzzled expression turned to alarm.

“I went to the co-op today.”

“So did I.”

“Apparently I arrived just after you left.”

“Why the hell did you go there after I warned you that this Ortega guy was bad news?” Humph was now clearly upset.

She reminded him that she had promised not to snoop too hard. She would simply appear to be saying hi to artist friends and working on her own painting, transitioning from pencil sketch to oil.

“This is not a game, Rebecca. Remember how our victim’s life ended . . . a blow from a two-sided axe.”

When he calmed down, he took her hands in his and asked if she had discovered anything useful.

“Of course I did. I wouldn’t be so excited otherwise!”

Rebecca’s eyes could so easily burrow through his skull. Humph was glad she didn’t see him as an enemy of some kind. She loved him, and he knew it.

“What did you discover, Rebecca?”

“Our missing artist, the skinny artist named Victor Garcia, is alive.”

“And . . . ?” said Humph, edging closer to her.

“He’s left the loft and is now working for the Met.”

“The Met?”

“Yes, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the biggest museum in America.”

Humph looked blank.

After thirty seconds of absurd silence, Rebecca put a hand on each of Humph’s cheeks and said:

“As a life-long New Yorker, surely you’ve passed 1000 Fifth Avenue, at 82nd Street? The building is immense.”

Humph sat back in his chair, lost in thought.

“Well?!” said Rebecca.

“Of course I know it. Never been inside, but I know it.”

Rebecca then explained that Victor was suddenly working full time with the Met as an apprentice in preservation—repair and restoration guy. “The museum has more than a whole floor dedicated to just that. Some studios are for working on paintings, others are for valuable old objects, statues and jeweled clothing or furnishings, stuff like that. Our guy would work on only paintings.

They call people like him art conservators. Fancy title, isn't it?" Rebecca said with a giggle. "Especially considering how scruffy he always looked at the co-op."

"Why would they hire him?"

"Apparently he had been working part time as an intern for a couple of years. He must be showing promise if a place like the Met took him on full time as an apprentice. Apparently, you really have to know everything about art—materials, techniques, history, you name it," Rebecca said. "Just like in the theater. Some of our craftspeople are true masters."

Humph asked where the painter was now living, but Rebecca said no one at the co-op knew.

"So much for finding out what the deal was with that tough guy who took over the apartment," Humph said. "He was so off-putting, to put it mildly. I've just forgotten his name."

"Rafael Ortega," said Rebecca. "The one who apparently murdered Mrs. Hamersly at the request of our dear Mr. Jones, according to your old girlfriend, Karen." Again, Humph could see the glint of teasing in her eye.

They hadn't eaten supper yet, but Rebecca could see that Humph was too intent on the case to eat. Instead of cooking, she opened a bottle of wine. They sat on the sofa, trying to figure out the next step in the investigation.

"It's pretty clear the murderous Venezuelan, as opposed to the artistic Venezuelan, is in hiding," said Humph. "What I wonder is whether Mr. Jones has other uses for him, in which case Jones would know the fellow's whereabouts or somebody else who does. I'd so love getting together with Duffy and giving the Ortega the third degree, not only to get a confession but to point the finger at Jones."

The next day, Humph paid a visit to the Met. He just wanted to be able to picture the layout of the place. Not having a name for the Met employee with the scruffy exterior, he doubted he would be allowed access to the

conservation and repair studios. On the way up Fifth Avenue on a double-decker bus, it occurred to Humph there could be tours of the museum. Surely they would include behind-the-scenes parts, like the studios and workshops where the restoration work was done. Even if he didn't spot his man from the humble co-op downtown, he would cease to be an utter ignoramus about the field he was investigating. It wasn't that Humph minded what others thought of him. It was just that he was too intelligent and well-read a man to be content with not knowing things that were obviously of enormous importance to others. It was his city, and it behooved him to understand what made it tick.

He was in luck. There was a tour. And, as he had hoped, it showed the inner workings of one of the world's most amazing cultural achievements. By the end, he was glad he'd worn comfortable walking shoes.

Instead of finding mostly paintings, he found ancient artifacts from the museum's own digs in Egypt and works from every great civilization. The restorers—men and, very occasionally, women—were craftsmen, metal workers, woodworkers, painters, sculptors and scientists. For ages, the only place in all of New York where an art owner or gallery could get restoration or preservation work done was at the Met, a service the museum had built up since 1870. Of the hundreds upon hundreds of Met workers he saw, he couldn't find his scruffy young man. However, he made a note of where the restorer's studio for painters could be found.

As he walked back out onto the street, Humph loved the fact that he hadn't wasted his time in the slightest that morning.

It was now time to see two people. One was Gerald Franklin, his longtime friend at the New York World-Telegram newspaper.

The other person Humph wanted to buttonhole that day was Detective Higgins, to ask if he'd learned anything about Jones.

The New York World-Telegram, on Park Row, was renowned for something called “yellow journalism”. That didn’t stop the paper from snagging some of the city’s best reporters. One of them was Gerald Franklin. He and Humph had become friends way back when Franklin was just a cub reporter and Humph was a cop. Franklin was always respectful at crime scenes, and Humph eventually gave him access to insider information. The reporter was grateful. His star had risen, just like his paycheck, thanks to Humph.

In the past, Franklin had been able to point him toward people who knew things most people didn’t. They’d saved him more than a little time in solving cases. On a case years before, Graham had been so intrigued by the story Humph was working on that he made him a reporter for the paper and even got him a New York World-Telegram press card in order to get first dibs on his story. In the end, the paper got the story, but it turned out that Humph didn’t know how to type. He had to dictate it to one of the paper’s rewrite men.

Humph flashed his old press card and immediately got access to the newsroom. Looking around the room, he didn’t see Franklin. He stopped a copyboy who was in midflight on his way to the pneumatic tubes that sucked stories to the composing room.

“Where’s Franklin?” Humph had to raise his voice because newsrooms, full of reporters, editors and teletype machines, and occasionally drunks, were not quiet places.

The boy looked about nervously after having been confronted by this hulking visitor.

Not finding Franklin, the boy begged Humph for five minutes to complete his errand.

“I’ll find Mr. Graham right after, sir!” And off he went.

“How do people think in places like this?” Humph wondered. Then he admitted to himself that it all was rather exciting.

Humph was looking for the copy boy who hadn't shown up within the five minutes he'd asked for. Instead, Humph felt a tap on his shoulder. Turning, his nose was inches from the newspaperman's.

Gerald now had an office. He took Humph there, explaining that he was now assistant managing editor.

"Congratulations, my friend. But does that mean, now that you're no longer city editor, that you don't know what the hell is going on in our city?"

"If you don't watch out, Humph, I'll yank your press card."

The two men laughed and extended their hands.

Humph quickly summarized the case he was working on, a society woman and art collector murdered brutally, and a vindictive husband who was supposed to be barred from coming anywhere near her.

"But there's no direct evidence suggesting he is responsible for the dirty deed. We have a statement by someone apparently in the know, a prostitute who says hubby ordered the killing to get his wife's art. She says he hired a Venezuelan hitman to do the job. We can't find him."

"Humph," Graham said, "I'm in love . . . in love with your story, or rather, your case. It just sounds like a mystery novel."

"Excellent," said Humph. "How can you help me?"



CHAPTER 10

WHEN Gerald Franklin arrived at Humph's new apartment on Tompkins Square, Duffy was already there, trying to regale Rebecca with tales of Irish daring-do in nineteenth-century New York in what was known then as the Five Points. Rebecca finally raised her hand in a "whoa" sign.

"I wasn't around in those, what did you say, 'Good old days', but my people, who were smart enough to settle far north of here, always told me that the Five Points were the most disgusting, disease-ridden incubators of drunken stupors, senseless violence, theft, murder, perversion . . . Feel free to stop me, Duff, before I find more adjectives."

The lovely thing about Rebecca was that she expressed her vehemence with a calmly placed mental incision designed to cripple the most absurd of comments. Humph,

despite being Duffy's best friend, couldn't stop himself from applauding the put-down.

The charming thing about Duffy was that he laughed, too. Who knew when he was serious or not? What Humph did know was that his friend admired people who stood up to him.

Graham and Duffy had previously engaged in a trial by fire—neither remembered over what. All that counted was that Graham proved himself to not be “one of those execrable Brit pantywaists”. He was awarded the Irish whiskey seal of approval, a lifetime award, the Irishman explained.

Humph couldn't help but notice that Duffy was happy, enlivened and emboldened by the mere fact of being out of his rooms. Had his life slowed down that much with age and inebriation? Humph hoped not. Thank God for Rebecca, he thought. She reminded him that he could still be turned on by a lovely woman with a sparkle in her eye.

Eventually the fun and games stopped, and the booze mellowed everyone except Humph. Like Duffy, he had a formidable capacity for booze, but tonight, his case was all that mattered.

Graham spoke up at last.

“Humph, we might have something of use, but I don't know for sure.”

“Talk, my friend.”

Graham said since Humph's appearance at the paper, he had by chance ended up chatting with one of the paper's court reporters. After Graham outlined Humph's case, the reporter interrupted to say there was a guy, a Spanish-speaking guy, arraigned the other day in criminal court.

“He'd been busted for kidnapping,” said the reporter. “Kidnapping a girl from the Upper East Side.”

“Pursue it tooth and nail,” said Graham.

Humph jumped in.

“Can I join you after the indictment?”

“For sure,” said the reporter. “That is, if I can quote you afterward.”

Humph was about to object when Graham flashed a signal to let it go.

Graham then pulled out his notepad and asked Humph to give him all the details about the murdered society woman, her husband, Humph’s own interview with her before her death and, most important of all, it seemed for some reason, details about the little art co-op.

After everyone left, Humph found himself thinking that a good reporter would probably make a good cop.

“Except,” said Rebecca after hearing Humph’s thought, “the reporter would probably write things the police would rather he didn’t say. For example,” she said, “that the police have no other suspect than a homeless immigrant who has no knowledge whatsoever about the world of art.”

Humph knew she was right.

Next stop, Humph said, the Scotsman, Detective Higgins, an American but a man as defiantly proud of his origins as Duffy, the professional Irishman.

What a pair, Humph had thought more than once.

It was late when he woke up the next day. To Humph, it seemed the session with the detective had already played out in his mind. Preposterous dream nonsense, he thought as he sipped his first coffee. Rebecca sat down next to him.

“You were a bucking bronco all night, or at least most of it.”

He said nothing.

Finally, Rebecca, asked:

“Why are you so upset?”

She moved her chair closer to him and took his hand.

“Because, yes, the Venezuelan guy, Ortega, is probably our murderer, but Jones is the mastermind, of the murder and probably a whole lot of other corruption. He’s probably aiming to get wealthier by conning the art world, and at the moment we can’t do a damn thing about it.”

As he made his way to the precinct station where Higgins presided over a handful of detectives, Humph realized he wasn't expecting anything groundbreaking from the meeting.

To his surprise, the instant he arrived on the second floor, the usually unexcitable detective sprung from his chair and hailed the detective. "Humph, Humph, Humph. What timing!

"Your Mr. Jones has skipped town, or rather, the country. He boarded a steamer for Cuba two nights ago, according to the architecture company he works for. He said he'd been talking with a potentially big client who insisted that the design of his building would have to suggest the airiness, warmth and sunshine of Latin America. I'm quoting there from the detective's notebook."

"When's he due back?"

"An open-ended trip, said his boss."

Humph suspected that he'd have to pull teeth.

"Which makes you suspect what, detective?"

"Obviously he feels the heat is on, Humph. He's fled New York. For the moment or forever, I don't know. But whichever is the case, it makes it more tempting than ever to believe he's our man."

Humph let Higgins enjoy his moment. When the detective returned to his chair, Humph reminded him that they still had to prove Jones ordered and paid for the hit.

"Of course," said Higgins. "We just have to encourage the unpleasant Señor Ortega to *hablar* a little. Since he's now facing a kidnapping charge—we've got him dead to rights—he might think confessing to a murder charge might miraculously offer him some wiggle room, a life sentence, perhaps, instead of the ultimate sentence, the one that would leave him squirming under a hangman's noose. I'm sure the idea won't occur to him, but I'm going to have one of our boys make the suggestion to him or, if he's got one, his lawyer."

He explained that the girl Ortega kidnapped for ransom was the teenaged daughter of a politician, a Democrat. In broken English, he sent a note to the politician, a state senator. He asked for ten thousand dollars. Higgins explained that Ortega's undoing was that he knew nothing about New York politics. Since the father of the girl was a Democrat, he had the full support of Tammany Hall.

Humph had certainly heard of them, as had everyone living in the city or the state—that is, everyone except Ortega. Tammany Hall was profoundly corrupt and the dominant political force in New York. It was so powerful that it had the goods on most senior politicians and didn't hesitate to use that power for the good of Democrats and Irishmen.

The kidnapping had taken place in Lower Manhattan, on 18th Street, just a couple of blocks from the Tammany Hall headquarters at Union Square. A blanket was thrown over the girl's head by two men who tossed her in the back seat of a car whose motor was already running. In minutes, the kidnappers were speeding along Canal Street and entering the Holland Tunnel, headed for New Jersey, another jurisdiction, one that didn't communicate with New York police.

The senator lived on recently fashionable Sutton Place. He had been expecting his daughter that evening. When she didn't show up on time, he didn't phone the police. Instead he phoned Union Square. He started by explaining to a Tammany Hall cohort that he was perhaps being alarmist because his girl hadn't arrived for supper. Because he was a longtime Democrat, a spokesman assured him that they'd look into the matter immediately. That translated as a call to the chief of police for the entire city.

"Long story short," said Higgins, "every New York cop was assigned to the missing girl. Murder cases, rapes, you name it—they all had to be dropped because some politician's daughter was late for supper."

Humph knew Higgins wasn't being insensitive to the girl's plight. He was simply saying how much he hated political interference in police business.

"Anyway, apparently some passerby saw the abduction and got the car's plate number. He was somewhat inebriated, but he said he spent as much time as possible playing Dick Tracy. He even wrote down the license plate number so his memory wouldn't fail him. It turned out that the comic pages came to the rescue. Three hours later, I got a call from headquarters that Newark police had our man and the girl. Even the mayor of New York couldn't have elicited that efficiency."

Higgins said they need to finish interviewing the kidnapped girl and investigate other leads, one of which suggested that Jones may have been running some kind of Ponzi scheme before setting sail for Cuba.

When Humph returned to the pavement outside the station, his mood was immeasurably better than when entering his old place of work.

Two days later, late in the afternoon, he got a call from his friend at the New York World-Telegram.

"Your Mr. Ortega is not the man you claimed he was. My reporter was able to attempt to interview him in jail. He got very little out of him but says the guy is quaking in his boots. We need to go back with an interpreter. He really doesn't speak much English. I don't know how Jones explained the assignment to kill Mrs. Jones."

Several days later, the reporter informed Humph that, no, he hadn't been allowed to interview Ortega again, but he had learned that this very afternoon, a probate lawyer was going to argue, on Jones's behalf, the validity of his claim for his late wife's art collection.

When Humph got to the courthouse two hours later, and half an hour before the docket would be called, he tracked down the lawyer for Mrs. Jones, the victim.

“I don’t know what information would help you the most, but I have some facts about the murder and my suspicions, which are also the NYPD’s suspicions. How can I help? In my mind, Jones is the man who ordered the murder. We know of no other possibility.”

The lawyer, skinny to the extent that Humph wondered how he carried his bulging briefcase, was slow to answer. Finally, he said the only assistance Humph could provide would be to testify to the violence Jones demonstrated while he was there, the violence that the victim claimed was commonplace, and frequent enough for her to get a restraining order.

“Maybe we can win the case on emotion, compassion, rather than only legal facts.” The fact that Mrs. Jones had no will, and therefore no executor of her estate, didn’t help their case. The judge’s opinion would determine the outcome.

However, the lawyer’s comment made Humph think that the little bespectacled man with a big name, Philip Addington-Hamilton, had a soul, which meant he wouldn’t take the easy way out and argue on simply factual grounds, which would guarantee defeat.

Humph moved closer to him in the hallway just outside the courtroom. A moment later, the little lawyer extended his hand to Humph.

Humph had agreed to the lawyer’s request that he testify about what he had witnessed, namely Jones’s behavior toward his wife.

“However,” said Humph before they entered the courtroom, “are you aware that Mr. Jones has left New York? Perhaps it would be more accurate to say he may have fled New York. Can this case proceed in his absence?”

The lawyer said he was unaware of the disappearance of Mr. Jones.

“Let’s see what the lawyer for Mr. Jones has to say about it.”

The little lawyer had spunk, Humph realized. Mrs. Audrey Hamersly chose well.

The probate court judge first addressed the plaintiff's lawyer. Before answering, he made a ridiculous show of checking his briefcase, then putting his head on a swivel to look about the courtroom.

"I regret to say that my client appears to be absent."

The judge replied:

"Sir, it would be much more accurate to say he is absent. He doesn't appear to be anything. Can you tell us why he is absent?"

The lawyer tossed his briefcase on the table, apparently resigned to having been made a fool of by his client.

"I have no idea, Your Honor. None."

At that point, Mr. Philip Addington-Hamilton stood and requested permission to speak. Humph, sitting next to him, noticed the lawyer's shoes. The heels seemed unusually high.

"Go ahead," said the judge. "Anything that might fill the vacuum created by the absence of Mr. Jones would be appreciated."

"I have recently learned that Mr. Jones has left the city, or perhaps fled. I would like to call Mr. Humphrey Barstal to the witness stand. His name is not among the list of witnesses. He introduced himself to me a very short while ago."

Having been a cop for many years, it was not Humph's first time giving testimony.

The little lawyer first asked him to state his professional occupation and related background as an NYPD cop. He then asked how Humph became familiar with the case involving Mrs. Hamersly's art collection.

Humph explained that he had approached her as a private investigator after hearing that she was in fear of being duped out of her art collection and perhaps even

violence against herself at the hands of her estranged husband, Mr. Jones, or someone representing him.

“And,” said the lawyer, “what made you think there was any truth to her concerns?”

“I have 20/20 vision, sir. I stood closer to Mr. Jones than I am to his honor, here. I saw him berate his former wife in violent terms over the art collection, which I’m told is extremely valuable and which, in his mind, was shared property. A fight ensued during which Mrs. Hamersly, a diminutive woman, tried to force him to leave by hurling a great deal of crockery at his head.”

At that point, the judge asked if the Hamersly-Joneses were formally divorced.

“No,” replied Humph, speaking up before the lawyer had a chance to. “She was in the process of starting divorce proceedings. Because he hadn’t been served with divorce papers, in Mr. Jones’s mind, that meant he automatically could lay claim to some of her art.”

“Not an unreasonable argument,” said the judge.

“If I may continue,” said Humph, “they detested each other. They lived utterly separate lives and, at least in my mind, Your Honor, Mrs. Hamersly’s argument as to why Mr. Jones should not have access to her art was that not only was he not fond of art in general, but he also detests the period of art represented by most of her paintings. His claim was nothing but a money grab.”

The judge pondered Humph’s testimony.

“Be that as it may, it doesn’t change the fact that he was still legally her husband and therefore had certain rights to her possessions in the event of her demise.”

As soon as the judge said that, Humph raised his big right hand like a schoolboy trying to attract the teacher’s attention.

The judge nodded at him.

“I have no proof, nor does the NYPD, but we are investigating Mr. Jones. We have already talked to people

who know him, his nature, his greed. Yes, several people talked of his greed. I can't speak for the New York Police Department, but I assure you they firmly believe that Mr. Jones has fled the country, to Cuba to be specific."

The little lawyer's face betrayed the hint of a smile.

"Your Honor! Your Honor!" interrupted the lawyer for Mr. Jones. "This is scarcely better than gossip."

The judge raised his hand before the lawyer could go on. "Sit," he said.

"I am using my discretionary powers to conclude that there's something to what the detective has said. However, I cannot rule until Mr. Jones returns to New York. If it's in handcuffs, then you can rest assured that my ruling will be against him."

Once back in the corridor, the little lawyer shook Humph's hand with two of his own. Almost singlehandedly, Humph had all but won his case in defense of Mrs. Hamersly's estate. Humph assured him he would keep him apprised of any developments regarding Mr. Jones.

An hour later, Humph had returned to Tompkins Square. To his immense disappointment, Rebecca was not there. He wanted to celebrate his day. It wasn't a huge victory, but it was important. And he was eager to admit to Rebecca that "Silent Sam", which was how she had taken to describing him, was a fine actor who, based on today's performance, should get a shot at Broadway, her world.



CHAPTER 11

WHILE Humph was giving a Tony-Award-winning performance in probate court, Duffy was taking matters into his own hands. With Higgins's permission, he tracked down the escort frequented by Jones. At first she tried slamming her door shut, but Duffy resorted to theatrics just as Humph had.

"Oh, my dear, dear lass, I humbly beg you for a moment of your time." In doing so, he turned his accent up a notch or two, almost making the request poetic.

She opened the door a crack.

"What about?"

"I come calling with regard to the esteemed Mr. Jones, a mutual acquaintance, you might say."

She didn't budge for at least a minute. Finally, she opened the door a little wider. She didn't formally tell Duffy to enter, but he took advantage of the opening.

Uninvited, he sat down in an easy chair. She walked to the kitchen and returned to the small living room with a large knife. She sat down on the sofa and placed the knife on it as well, in plain view for Duffy to contemplate.

Duffy decided then and there to drop the rich Irish accent. She meant business, and she would learn that he did as well.

"In your interrogation by police, you betrayed knowledge of a certain Rafael Ortega. Namely, the fact, in your opinion, that he killed Mrs. Hamersly. You also admitted that you know Mr. Jones, apparently well enough to state that he did not murder or order the murder of his wife. Since we originally got your name from a detective hired by the late Mrs. Hamersly, we learned that you have known Mr. Jones since well prior to the murder. We suspect you know him intimately, and more importantly, you're abreast of his various dealings, specifically his Ponzi scheme aimed at picking the pockets of legitimate, law-abiding investors."

She didn't reply.

"And, you are undoubtedly wondering, what we know that would put you, as the Yanks say, in cahoots with Mr. Jones and his Ponzi enterprise."

Again, no reply.

"While my former employer, the NYPD, has told me of the connection, they have not approved me to reveal the exact details linking you and Jones. They will do so when they're ready to charge Mr. Jones as well as you. Be assured, that will happen."

The escort changed position on the sofa, turning her back on the knife.

"What do you want to know exactly?" She still had enough composure to make it sound like Duffy was trying her patience, that he was keeping her from business matters.

But Duffy knew he'd cracked her shell.

"Do you know what a Ponzi scheme is?"

To his surprise, she gave a precise definition.

"Why would you know that?"

"We know the answer to that."

"How long has Mr. Jones been running that investment enterprise? A year?"

"No. It began at least four years ago, which is when he first invited me to help him find investors."

"And how would you do that? I mean, attract investors?"

"By attracting their penises."

She was certainly stunning enough to do that, thought Duffy.

"How would that work, milady?"

"Simple. Jones would identify a guy with the wherewithal to invest, someone he knew about, investment history and all that, and someone he suspected wasn't as lily white as he pretended to be—a cheating husband, for example. They're not hard to find."

"And?"

"And we'd set up a meeting at a bar or restaurant between Jones and the sucker. I'd be invited as Jones's casual companion for the evening. I'd make it look as if I were bored with the money talk. Jones would go for a piss at some point, that being my cue to reel in the mark. It rarely failed. Once he was compromised, Jones would strongly insist he invest in Jones's company. Jones would use his well-known expertise to assure his client of all-but-guaranteed returns. 'You'll make money at twice the rate of top-performing stocks on Wall Street. As I said, guaranteed.'"

It was Duffy's turn to be silent for a while.

"You're obviously a bright beauty, my dear. Do you think you might be able to remember the names of some of the marks you seduced?"

She did. When Duffy closed his notebook, she asked if she was liable to arrest.

“Considering your cooperation, I can’t rightly say that you are. But stay in town, and if someone from the NYPD comes a-knockin’, hide your knife.”

After the interview, Duffy bought a brace of bottles—Irish whiskey, of course. He tried to phone Humph, but there was no answer. He promised himself he would imbibe before relaying his new evidence to someone. He phoned the police department. After a five-minute wait, he was put through to Detective Higgins.

Higgins was so excited by the development, he ended the conversation by saying, “I wish I had a hundred detectives like you. What is it that your friend, Humph, calls you? Sod? Irish bogger? Whatever, Duffy. I salute you.”

Holding his one and a half bottles like babies, he headed for Tompkins Square. He couldn’t wait for Humph to poopoo his new evidence.

When he arrived, Humph opened the door. He said nothing. Eve was there. She and Rebecca sat at the table in deep discussion.

He tried to whisper that he had news. Humph silenced him with his finger to his lips.

The two of them sat together on the sofa.

In the corner, near the radio and record player, Rebecca and Eve huddled. Each held the other with one hand. Their heads were so close it looked like they were about to kiss each other’s cheeks.

Across the room, the two detectives were jabbing each other with fingers. One, Duffy, wanted news, context. The other, Humph, wanted silence.

Finally, the two women separated. Eve faced Humph with a big smile.

“Dad,” she said in a theatrical voice, betraying her excitement, “I’m getting married!”

Humph was struck dumb. He slowly rose to a standing

position but seemed incapable of taking a step.

“Who? When?”

Eve hurried across the room and embraced him.

“I’ve got to run. Rehearsal. I’m late as it is.”

With that, Eve embraced Rebecca and darted out the door.

As Rebecca turned from the doorway to face him, he spread his arms wide, beseeching her to explain.

“That’s for Eve to tell you,” Rebecca said, gently pulling his arms down to his side. “In the meantime, now that Eve has brought up the subject of marriage . . .” She didn’t finish her sentence but instead leaned against his chest. Involuntarily, his arms embraced her.

“Any more thoughts in your busy schedule as to when we’re going to get married?”

Humph felt he was being swamped by a tidal wave of marriage talk.

Duffy came to his rescue. “Sit, my unstrung amigo. Let me pour you an Irish restorative.”

Before the two detectives had consumed the restoratives, it was Rebecca’s turn to leave for work. She blew Humph a kiss from the door.

When Humph finally started breathing normally, Duffy began describing his meeting with Jones’s escort-accomplice. Relishing his interrogation success that afternoon, he left out no detail. Humph was impressed, too. They were finally getting a clear picture of Jones.

While they talked, Higgins phoned to ask if Duffy was there. Humph passed the phone to his friend, interrupting Duffy as he poured another drink.

“That’s great news, boss. Thanks for letting me know.”

Duffy finished topping off his drink and returned to the sofa.

“What?” said Humph.

“Higgy is assigning detectives to interview each of the

investors who got sucked in by Jones and his lady friend. He'll keep us posted."

Humph said they should set up a PI company, Duffy, himself and Higgins.

Duffy laughed.

"This monstrous city would be crime-free in no time. They might even make a comic book of us—*The Super Solvers Adventures*, or something like that."

"Back to reality, Duff. This investigation has a lot of branches. The investment fraud side is in good hands with Higgins and his boys. The newspaper guy is keeping an eye on our possible murderer and kidnapper. That leaves us with a tough nut to crack, an art theft and forgery network for which we have little or no evidence. Hopefully, the Higgins guys will be curious enough to look at the firm Jones is part of, the one run by a well-known Wall Street financier. His hands have to be dirty as a coal miner's.

"I have no evidence for this, but what if this guy, the one with all the connections with rich people, is acting as some kind of art adviser for some of them, finding out what they're looking to buy or unload? Ever since you told me about the renowned European forger, Borasco, or some name like that, I've been thinking of what kind of operation he'd be interested in. It would have to be big-time, one offering a great return on his forgery skills. That's when I imagined him being part of a team run by the big-league investment banker. Have you any news about how Borasco is settling into our art-rich metropolis?"

"I was so focused on that leggy accomplice of Mr. Jones that I forgot about Borasco. His legs don't compare," Duffy said. Getting up and taking one of the bottles he'd brought, he gave Humph a casual salute and left.



CHAPTER 12

EVE phoned Humph the next day to say the guy she was going to marry was another Broadway actor who had a role in the play she was rehearsing right now. Instead of describing him and their wedding plans, she kept talking about the show.

“You won’t believe this, Dad, but it’s one by the biggest names in all of show business. Jerome Kern wrote the lyrics and Oscar Hammerstein the words. These are the guys who did *Show Boat*, for heaven’s sake.”

Humph had heard of it. Everyone had. He was duly impressed.

“I think we’re planning to open in November or December. They’re working us like slaves, but it’s worth it if it hits big.”

“Is Rebecca involved?” Humph asked.

Eve said she was called in at the outset to offer some design advice, but she wasn’t part of the team now.

“OK, that’s wonderful, Eve. But entr’acte. Forget the show. Tell me about your guy.”

“He’s from New Jersey . . .”

Humph could resist saying:

“Fine. Tell me some good things about him.”

“He’s as tall as you are. He’s loving. He exaggerates a lot of the time, but I love that because life is good only if you get excited by it. He’s two years younger, so he won’t run out of gas before I do, if you know what I mean.”

“Move on, Eve. Is he well-off?”

“Heavens, no. He’s in show business.”

“When can I meet him?”

Eve paused a long time.

“Frankly, I don’t know, Dad. I don’t even know when I can see you next. Shows this big are insane. Everything’s life or death, at least until it’s basically in the shape we’ll put on stage for the critics.”

Humph lied and said he understood.

Eve lied and said she’d call him once a week with the latest news.

The next day, Duff called.

“Do we have a break in the case?”

“No, no, my friend. I’m just trying to make a joke—one that’s based on absolute truth. Can I try it out on you?”

Humph knew there was never anything stopping him.

“There was a big art robbery in Forrest Hills, out in Queens where, as you know, there’s lots of money.

“Well, just last week, a hoity-toity real estate executive reported that four of his most valuable paintings had been stolen. He swore his doors had been locked and that nothing else was stolen. The only out-of-place thing was a brandy snifter on his coffee table. It had been drained to

the last drop.

"The cops investigated," Duff continued. "Because he was a big wig, they assured him over and over that they'd get to the bottom of the case. Because the painters involved were such important ones, they even alerted Interpol in Vienna. That's where their headquarters are. The whole world's been alerted.

"Then, a week later, our local cops get notified that a pawnshop in Long Island City had phoned to say some humble gent whose hands were shaking showed up. He had four paintings, old ones, he wanted to pawn. I asked how much he wanted. He said, 'For all four?' 'Yes,' I said. Now, with his hands shaking even more, he asked: 'Is a thousand dollars too much?' Gotta tell ya, these paintings are worth tens of thousands. You'd better get down here. I have his address."

"So?" said Humph.

"It turns out that, you know, as they say about mystery novels, the butler did it. Well, believe it or not, it was the rich guy's lifelong butler who absconded with the paintings. The reason: the rich guy refused him a ten-dollar-a-month raise after twenty-two years of service. Can you believe that? I wish he had gotten away with it."

Humph had to laugh as well. So many times, he thought, the people he arrested weren't bad people, but they got thrown in the tank with truly bad people and got branded for life with a record that meant that forever, the only job openings would be criminal endeavors.

"Anything else, Duff?"

"Not really. Just wanted to tell you a story that would make up for the comics, which you can't read anymore now that you haven't got a newsstand a block away."

"There's truth in what you say, Duff."

"Oh, wait. There's one more thing of potential interest to New York's tallest detective."

"Go on."

“That big-shot real estate exec who got robbed by his butler, you remember?”

“Of course I do, Duff.”

“Well, during the course of their investigation, the cops looked at a whole bunch of documents hoping to find a clue. None of the clues had anything to do with the robbery, but they showed a list of his investments. One of them was none other than the head of Mr. Jones’s company, Mr. Norman Barrington.”

Humph was delighted with Duffy’s finding.

“Do you mean you were so eager to tell me your butler-did-it joke that you almost forgot to tell me about Barrington?”

“Can’t truly say. I find the noggin works in unpredictable ways in old age.”

“So does boozing.”

“I take offense to that, sir.”

Humph asked if Duffy had told Higgins, and if so, what Higgins had said.

“Best you talk to him. Your suspicion about booze was perhaps correct, Humph. I need a couple of hours of shut-eye, as the cowboys say. By the way, how come there are so few Irish cowboys in Hollywood?”

“Good night, Duff.”

“It’s not night, Humph.”

“For you it is. Sleep well.”

Two days later, Humph decided, just for the fun of it, to go to the library on Grand Street to see if his favorite librarian was there. Now that he was all but engaged to Rebecca, there was no romantic interest, but he enjoyed the almost intense attention of the librarian, a woman now in her fifties. When he last visited, he took out a book, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. As he checked it out, the librarian said, “You’re quite the intellectual, aren’t you, deary?”

He had more success than he had expected. There were more Irish cowboys in Hollywood than you could count on one hand.

He headed straight for Duff's Bowery flat.

"No Irish cowboys in Hollywood, Duff?"

Duff sensed he was in for an education.

"For starters," said Humph, triumphantly, "how about Billy the Kid? You know what his real name was? It was the fine Irish moniker of Henry McCarty. I have more, plenty more, thanks to your local library, which I suspect you never visit."

"Billy the Kid, one of my heroes. Irish, you say?"

"Even spoke Irish Gaelic."

"I'm going to start carrying a six-gun at my waist, partner."

"God help New York," Humph replied.



CHAPTER 13

HUMPH was awakened by the phone. Rebecca was in bed next to him. She didn't react to the call—dead to the world. What had her evening been about?

Humph managed to sit up and, using his knees as feet, navigate his bulk over her. As he got a foot down on the floor and started to stand, his right arm hit a lamp, and it crashed to the floor.

“What the hell . . .”

Humph placed his hand on the side of her face. He gave it a little caress. She closed her eyes and pulled up the covers.

Humph got to the phone by what must have been the tenth persistent ring. It could only be Duffy.

“Duffy, Duffy!”

"You bet, Humph. It's me, the friend you never talk to anymore."

"That qualifies as BS in Gaelic or any other language. Why are you calling so late? Don't you know your calls now wake up two people, not just me?"

Duffy's tone softened. "Didn't think of that. Old habits, you know."

"So what's the emergency?"

"No emergency. Just an interesting observation."

"A damn observation? You're not making me feel better, Duffy."

"Well, perhaps you don't know because you were unreachable all day, but our ever-intuitive Detective Higgins called up yours truly to sniff around the Wall Street broker whose name came up when you were looking for associates of Mr. Jones."

"And . . .?" said Humph, with an edge to his voice that told Duffy he'd damn well have something interesting to add.

"I tried to go to his office, right down on Broad Street where you'd expect him to be. But a secretary, mean-spirited as can be, refused me entry. She even insisted I leave the floor. She must be one of the few women in this world who hate the Irish."

"On with it, Duff. The clock is ticking on this call."

"So, not having much choice, I go downstairs and light a smoke. I lean against the broker's building while I inhale the pleasure of being back in the saddle, as it were, on a case."

"I'm happy for you, you annoying sod," said Humph. "But just the facts, please, and in a hurry."

"Well," said Duffy, "just as I put out my cig, who do I see on the other side of the street but a scoundrel from the other side of the ocean—a man I respect greatly for his talents. Unfortunately, he's a man sought by police all over Europe. You know, don't you, Humph, that I still have

contacts in the old country?”

“God damn it, Duffy, will your story end before sunrise?”

“OK, Humph. Be that way. You’re getting old. What’s the word? Oh yeah. Cantankerous.”

“Now!” said Humph.

“Well, now that you put it that way, urgent-like, I’ll tell you. The name of the man I saw clear as day was none other than Benji Borasco. Benjamin Borasco.”

Duffy remained silent for an enervating minute.

“Who is this guy?”

“Your ignorance astounds me at times, Humph. He’s England’s premiere forger of art documents.”

“What’s he doing here?”

“The silliest question I’ve ever heard, Humph.”

“Duff, if you were foolish enough to be here at this moment, I’d wring your neck like a scrawny Kansas chicken.”

Humph then heard Duffy chuckle.

“OK, Humphster. The tantalizing clue of the day is that Mr. Borasco—a totally fictitious name, by the by—only travels when summoned for a job. He wouldn’t take his arse from London to Bath without a proposition.”

“Bath? Shower? What are you talking about?”

“It’s a city—lovely place really, just ninety minutes by train from London. Not much longer than it takes to go from Upper Manhattan to Coney Island.”

Humph was so annoyed at being denied sleep that he now wanted to hear the rest of his friend’s spiel to find out if his time had been wasted.

“Summoned for what, by whom?” Humph asked.

“Can’t tell you that, Humph. But the fact that he showed up on Broad Street across from the office of the broker we think is executing the wishes of our beloved Mr. Jones, I think that’s worth its weight in grog.”

Humph sighed, beaten.

"You're right. I'll see you tomorrow." With that, he simply hung up.

Before going to Duffy's place the next morning, Humph phoned Detective Higgins.

"What about this Ponzi scheme Jones was supposed to be involved in?"

"You don't say good morning anymore?"

"Sorry, I left my Scottish manners in bed. Duffy phoned me in the middle of the night, and I couldn't find his 'shut-up button'."

"You have my sympathies. I slept very well, thank you."

"Borasco. What's up with this guy?"

"How can I put it?" Higgins said. "He's bad news for New York's art world, for galleries and collectors alike, from what I've learned. I even called Scotland Yard when I heard this guy was in town. He's wanted internationally."

"Why is he so hard to nail?"

Higgins explained that he had a million and two identities, at least that many safe houses, and was a master of disguises, masks included.

"Overly dramatic in my opinion, but apparently it works. One detective even told me the guy was so good at disguises, he could appear on London's West End, their Broadway, and no one would know he wasn't who he claimed to be."

"But Duffy saw him without make-up," said Humph.

"No one would know him here," said Higgins. "He works in England, France, Spain. He goes to those countries like, what is it called? A yo-yo, yes, up and down, north to south and back. No one ever knows he was there until he is long gone. He's a legend."

"And what about his thefts?" Humph asked.

"He doesn't steal. That's one of the reasons no one has ever tracked him down. No stolen goods, no evidence. He's nothing but a forger."

“What does he forge?”

The answer placed Humph smack dab in the middle of their investigation.

“Art authentication documents. Something they call provenance, the details about the painting, its ownership history, among other things.”

“So,” said Humph, “if I were a famous artist who painted a portrait of you, and somebody said it was owned by a certain person, you’re saying a forger could create a false provenance document and state that the work belonged to someone else. If the person who bought my work sold it, the money for my painting would not go to him but to the name on the provenance document.”

“You got it,” said Higgins.

He explained that the task now was to paint a picture of the Jones gang.

“Preferably, I’d like to have the full picture before Jones returns to the States.”

While with each investigative step, Humph realized how little he knew about the art world, the case intrigued him more and more. Humph relished complexity. The obvious bored him.



CHAPTER 14

WHEN Rebecca returned to Tompkins Square the next night, she knew she had news that would cheer up Humph, who admitted to being depressed by the absence of Higgins.

She found him asleep. He smelled of booze, probably Duffy's booze. Humph rarely drank alone.

When he woke up around eight o'clock, he muttered hello and headed to the kitchen. He returned with a heel of bread.

Rebecca waited while he slowly munched.

When she heard him finally breathe deeply, she related the story of her day.

"I went to the Met today."

No response.

"I went to the basement."

Humph sat up straight on the sofa.

"I told the attendant that I was a Broadway designer and that there was something I needed to see and verify as authentic.

"She let me in to the conservator's room.

"It took me a while, but guess who I found? My painting buddy from the co-op. This time his shirt was clean. His pants didn't sag. He was presentable as can be. The scruffy shirt was gone."

"And?"

"He didn't see me. He was bent over dabbing a painting with something I didn't recognize. I didn't want to interrupt him. Anyway, we couldn't have chatted there."

Humph said she did well.

"I have a feeling that knowing where that gentleman is may turn out to be important. Not sure why, but I do."

Once again, Duffy made a late-night phone call. Because Humph had been napping before Rebecca got home, he could assure his friend that he wasn't going to bite his head off again.

Duffy said he'd spent the day sniffing around Wall Street again.

"I've never invested a cent in my life, Humph, but Wall Street smells irresistible to a copper. Suits galore and greed galore, a surefire recipe for shady dealings."

"Eloquently put, to be sure, Duff. To the point, please."

Duffy explained that he'd been nosing around stock brokerages for a couple of days now. He knew "a secretary or two" on Broad Street. He also knew an ex-cop now working as a security guard at one of the biggest of the brokerages. And he also read the papers.

Humph needed no convincing. In the many years they'd worked together, sober or not, Humph proved himself to never be anything less than thorough in his investigations. Humph let him continue.

"I have a name you should commit to your formidable memory, Humph. Norman Barrington. He is the chairman of Barrington & Barrington. By sheer luck, I stumbled onto the fact that there is only one Barrington at the firm, so he's certainly willing to pretend his company is of more consequence than it perhaps is. Even more interesting for our purposes, one of my secretary dollies offered me a peek at the company letterhead. On the board is none other than Graham Jones, M.Arch I. Before you ask, she explained that degree stood for something like Master of Architecture Level 1."

Duffy said the secretary had seen Jones on several occasions.

"Something tells me, Duffy, that you haven't reached the climax of your story."

"You know me too well, little guy."

He proceeded to say that she and the security guard he'd mentioned had been witness to visits by irate clients. Neither understood much of what they overheard, but these guys wanted to withdraw their investment pronto. The ex-copper said one particular word caught his ear because he always thought it was a funny term, that it wasn't a real word. That word was "Ponzi".

"Need I say more, Humph?"

"I could hug you right now!" Humph was elated. In the absence of Higgins, the investigation had taken a major leap forward. If Jones was arm-in-arm with Barrington, they were both likely criminals. If Jones was indeed a criminal, the link between him and Ortega was probable.

"You're too damn conservative by a mile," Duff replied. "I smell blood in the water. You smell maybes and maybe-nots."

Finally, thought Humph, the investigation had a focus. As for Duffy's passion, Humph shared it, but he was too careful an investigator to reveal it to Duff right now.

"I'll be knocking on your door before noon tomorrow,"

Humph announced.

Before going to the Bowery, Humph walked a couple of blocks north and over to the Tompkins Square Library on 10th Street, a three-story building that had been there for decades, like a drawstring meant to keep the community together.

As he stepped inside, he asked where he could find literature about something called a Ponzi scheme. The librarian didn't hesitate for a microsecond. Three shelves over, she removed a stack of newspaper files entitled "P".

"You'll find Ponzi inside, sir."

Humph found a chair at a table. To himself, he said, "If I hadn't met Rebecca, I would have looked for a librarian to marry."

In the files he found examples of Ponzi schemes inflicted on New York investors. He also learned how they worked in surprising detail.

In essence, he learned Barrington had set up a fraudulent investing scam promising high returns with little risk to investors, who were sure to get substantial early returns. The reality was that their investments were never made. Their supposedly handsome early returns came from money from new investors, duped just as they were.

One of the articles in the librarian's file said this scheme was unsustainable because the number of new investors must constantly increase to keep the scheme going. Once new investors stopped joining, the scheme collapsed.

Humph closed the thick volume and left it on the table. He smiled at the librarian who was now managing the reception desk.

He was ready for Duffy.

When he met with the Irishman an hour later, he learned exactly what the suckers were enthusiastically investing in: armament suppliers.

"We're not at war and not going to war, Duff. Who in their right minds would invest in the manufacture of arms?"

I don't even think we have the capacity to do that. After the Great War, we said to hell with all that. Never again."

Duff patted him on the shoulder.

"I understand your pacifist faith. I really do, despite being a person who has a desire for vengeance against a whole lot of people, most of them in Merry Old England. Decades and decades of oppression. Something not to be forgiven, ever."

Humph had known the Irishman long enough to not argue with his views about England.

"But," Duffy finally said, "Americans, and I include myself among them, have a skill for sniffing out ways to make money. While most of us stick out our chest and say 'never again' to the idea of getting involved beyond the territorial-water limit in anything, the news headlines are making it clear that hell will soon be on our doorstep. We can't legally supply guns and ammo to our allies, but private businessmen are a devious bunch. And from what I read, England and France are not about to complain about who is bringing cake to the party."

Humph had to admit that maybe Duff was right. Not only had the Nazis just invaded Poland, but he'd also learned that the Japanese had captured Shanghai and claimed Chinese territories as their own. They'd been nibbling away at China for more than two years. The world was shrinking. Power was determining geographic territory.

Duff's response had the ring of truth.

"But our papers don't talk about it. Our heads are in the sand."

He stood to pour Humph another drink.

"Humph, I wasn't born here. I come from what you would think of as a tiny country, owned by a tiny kingdom run by fuddy-duddies who talked with potatoes in their yap holes. Despite their claims to sophistication, they were as ignorant as Irish potato farmers. When they visit Hitler to negotiate some kind of peace, they'll be mealy-mouthed.

You can't sweet-talk a madman. He'll play them like a fiddle fest."

Humph interrupted.

"He already has. Two days after Hitler invaded Poland, Chamberlain came home with his tail between his legs. Hitler had made a fool of him. They were at war, just a few days ago."

"Exactly," said Duffy, "why smart American businessmen are gearing up to produce arms, planes, whatever. Only our wonderful president, he doesn't know. These capitalist bastards are doing exactly what he wants. Our Mr. Barrington has positioned himself as the man who can help Americans, rich or poor, profit from the war."

"Son of a bitch," said Humph.

Politics were too complicated. So was business. Humph wanted to be home with Rebecca. He wanted to lie with her and think there were bad guys and good guys, and he could easily tell the difference. He knew Rebecca saw the world the same way.

Finally, Humph said they had to round up the investors who had been screwed and get statements from them that showed how they were approached, how they invested and how they were screwed.

What they had to do now was somehow track the things Jones had done, not just to promote fraudulent stock investments but to run some kind of network that murdered people and maybe did a lot more. Was it all for art, or did he have other irons in the fire?

Duffy agreed, then added:

"I think he has a connection with my favorite English forger. If that turns out to be true, he's up to his neck in bogus art sales."

Humph had never thought of that possibility, but as soon as Duffy said it, more and more of the puzzle began sliding into place.

"No proof yet," said Duff, "but as they say on the radio, stay tuned."



CHAPTER 15

IT took several weeks, but Higgins's crew of detectives managed to track down seven investors in Barrington & Barrington's Ponzi scheme. There were untold others. Their names became known to police thanks to Duffy. He seemed to be on a chatting basis with a number of secretaries in banks and investment houses, as well as some in companies who sold things that were not quite legal. Sometimes the secretaries asked for a fee in return, while others, for any number of reasons, hated their bosses and were happy to do them harm.

The hardest-hit investor in the Ponzi scheme was a corporate lawyer named Joseph McGinty. He admitted readily to believing one way or the other that America would find itself at war, or at least funding the European war, so he was eager to profit from it.

“War would threaten my own folks, my family, in Ireland. I’m not just thinking of America when I invest in armaments,” he told police. Humph and Duffy had the transcripts of the interviews with investors. They also saw that McGinty had many other investments and had done exceedingly well at sidestepping the crash of ‘29.

“He is no amateur, that fellow,” said Duffy.

“So how did he get taken in by Barrington’s scheme?” said Humph.

Duffy was quick to suggest that the lawyer was motivated by one of two things, or a bit of both.

“I think it’s obvious he opened his wallet either out of patriotism for homeland and/or good old American greed. I lean toward the latter.”

Humph couldn’t argue that possibility. Humph was glad Duffy didn’t allow himself to be blinded by the roots he and McGinty shared and ascribe his more-than-sizable investment to altruistic concern for Ireland.

The police interview notes went on to say it was Graham Jones himself who had first approached McGinty. He hooked McGinty one night over Cognac at an exclusive men’s-only bar in the financial district. It was humorously called Fat Cat.

“Our Mr. Jones,” Duffy read, “described a supposedly unique investment opportunity, and I quote, ‘for investors of experience and substance’—those are the very words Jones used—to profit from the insight of one of Wall Street’s finest money men, none other than Norman Barrington, who was achieving remarkable results through his private investment fund. Barrington invested his clients’ money for them. His encyclopedic insider’s knowledge could most profitably be put to use if he, Barrington, had free rein to invest where he thought best. The dividends paid to his clients were guaranteed to snuff out any concerns they might have.

“And,” concluded Duffy, “not a single investor ever

expressed concern. Their profits were more than double anything they'd seen before."

Humph and Duff read through the other statements given to police. They told much the same story. But the best information came at the very end. The Higgins team went to Barrington's business and requested to see a list of investments made on behalf of their clients. They were told the money was invested privately, and the company was not obliged to reveal its activities. That was true, and that was also a red flag.

"What has to happen now," wrote Higgins in his conclusion, "is that one or more investors in this mysterious Barrington fund will try to withdraw their money or transfer it to companies actually listed on the stock exchange. How Barrington responds to such requests will tell us whether he's defrauding people."

For Humph, who never once in his life considered investing money in stocks, and as someone who felt vindicated in that position by the 1929 Crash, this Barrington business was heady stuff. He was also amazed at how Duffy, a common man if there ever was one, seemed to be at ease with the mechanisms of what he considered to be financial prestidigitation.

Barrington was safe for the moment. Duffy said he had some other matters to investigate, notably the Brit forger, Borasco. "Just to sniff around, you know," he said. Humph was happy to hear that. Duffy was deadly when it came to simply snooping around. How he did it, Humph couldn't say.

As for himself, he longed for a face-to-face sit-down with Eve about her planned marriage, but Broadway was an unforgiving mistress when it came to mounting a show that could spell fortune or disaster for investors. There was that word again, "investors". Maybe the world did revolve around money as Duffy said.

While Duffy planned to sniff around, presumably targeting Borasco and, who knew, perhaps other Barrington

players, Humph felt he had nowhere to go for the moment. The supposed Venezuelan artist, Ortega, was in jail, Jones was supposedly in Cuba and Jones's mistress had spilled the beans. That left Borasco as Duffy's cherished wrong-doer.

When Humph got home, three tabloids and one broadsheet in hand, he poured a drink and picked up the phone. He did the unthinkable. He sent a telegram to Eve.

"Can you negotiate three hours off? Please? Dad."

Shortly afterward, he cursed the fact that his Tompkins Square address did not include a diner within a minute-long walk. He went out anyway. For no reason, he wandered east to Avenue C. Within two blocks, just below 8th Street, he found a restaurant. It wasn't really a diner, but it seemed humble enough in Humph's mind. He hated places that pretended to be highfalutin when the only thing that was superior about the place was price. Twenty minutes later, he calmed down. Before him was a plate that once contained a generous serving of pork chops and beans. As a bonus, the bill was bearable. Maybe he hadn't moved to the desert after all.

That evening, when his desert princess arrived, Humph was eager to tell her of the progress in the case. The news spelled two different things. For him, it meant progress in the case. For Rebecca, it meant she was getting closer to marriage.

Over their late supper, light but spicy, Humph talked nonstop about the progress they were making on the case. To herself, Rebecca wondered whether there was another human being on earth for whom she'd be that patient.

When he seemed to have finished, she said:

"I have discovered the address of our former scruffy-looking painter at the co-op and now a painting-restoration employee at the Met."

Humph dropped his fork on the plate and stared at her wide-eyed.

"In God's name, how?"

Rebecca smiled, the kind of smile that seductively said, "I'll tell you when I'm good and ready."

She wasn't really going to draw out the answer, but she wanted to pretend to do so to perhaps make sure Humph understood she was not a spectator but an integral part of his investigation. It wasn't as if he were diminishing her contributions because she was a woman. She knew him well enough to know that wasn't true. The problem, in her mind, was that he got so intense when investigating a crime that no one, neither she nor the NYPD, ranked very high as potential solutions. Humph the bachelor had been alone for so long that he knew only one way to investigate. What he saw with his own eyes was the only truth he could count on.

The silence was so long that Humph actually squirmed in his seat. Finally, he asked:

"It's a nice night. How about a walk?"

Rebecca smiled. She had won.

They walked into the park in silence.

"A lovely fall night," said Humph eventually.

Rebecca held his arm a little more tightly but said nothing. With men, she had discovered, silence had more power than words. You can't argue silence. You can't macho-subdue silence. And you can always just walk away.

But with Humph, there was never any reason to walk away. He was always what he said he was. He felt no need whatsoever to promote himself. He was what he was.

Rebecca liked that because she always knew who she was dealing with. His silence, his reticence, was almost sexy.

When they got back home, Humph's broad shoulders slumped. Rebecca knew instantly that he was not aroused. He needed affection more than anything. Half an hour later, Humph tossed her on her back. The night was hers.



CHAPTER 16

SEVERAL days later, before Duffy got back to him about his Borasco investigation, Humph read about two thefts from art galleries, small ones. One was in Greenwich Village, the other in the East 70s.

Humph reached Duffy by phone late that afternoon to see if he knew about the thefts. He didn't.

"Then you and I might benefit from a consultation with Higgins," said Humph. "I'll phone him now to find out if he's there and if we'll be welcome tomorrow."

It took a while to reach Higgins, but forty-five minutes later, they connected. Higgins told him to come by around 11 a.m. Humph relayed the rendezvous time to Duffy.

When Humph returned home, he found a telegram waiting. Rebecca had left work early and was home to sign for it.

It read:

“Would love to, Dad. But I simply can’t get free. Will let you know.”

Humph was glad to at least get a reply. As he accepted a glass of Scotch from Rebecca, he couldn’t help thinking that there was something obscene about loving family members living in the same city communicating by telegram instead of face to face, or at least by phone.

The next day, Humph had to wait twenty minutes in Higgins’s office waiting for Duffy. He knew his friend simply didn’t believe in mornings, even if he wasn’t hungover. When he finally appeared, he noticed the impatience on Humph’s face. He knew Higgins probably felt the same way.

Before sitting down, Duffy said, “I thought I’d come early.” Seeing the stares he got in return, he added: “You did say 11:30, didn’t ya?”

Higgins and Humph didn’t bother to correct him. Experience had taught them that Duffy always had an answer.

“Both robberies have a few things in common,” said Higgins. “Both took place at small galleries with little security. In each case, the nature of the paintings that were stolen was very similar. Both gallery owners said the pieces fell within some category called American scene painting. Don’t ask me to describe it. The main thing is that their prices are usually a lot lower than European paintings.”

Duffy interrupted.

“How did the thieves pull it off?”

“From what the gallery owners could determine,” said Higgins, “they must have visited the gallery during open hours some time before, probably not long before.

“They detached the paintings and left them neatly stacked against a wall in a nearby corner with the painting surfaces facing the wall so as not to draw unwanted attention. Since none of the seven paintings stolen were large, they weren’t

readily noticeable on the floor. The owners suspect this was done not long before closing time.”

“And?” asked Humph, who felt he was learning something absolutely new.

“The robbers slipped in after closing and retrieved the paintings. The thieves, we later learned, arrived in a small truck with the words ‘Pete’s Plumbing’ on the side. It was reasonable to expect plumbing repairs to be done at night. Surprisingly, the door locks for each gallery were as ordinary as ones you’d use for a house in a safe neighborhood. Since the paintings had already been removed from the wall, each operation took mere minutes.”

Duff asked if there were any details that would suggest different people pulled off the two jobs.

Higgins shrugged his shoulders.

“It appears not.”

“Any likely suspects?” Humph asked.

“No,” answered Higgins. “Our art-theft files are few and very thin, to be honest. In my memory, I don’t recall any suggestion that gangs of art thieves were operating in the city.”

After a couple of minutes of silence, Duffy gently kicked Humph’s left ankle. Getting his attention, Duffy looked Humph right in the eye, intensely.

He then turned to Higgins and announced with bluster that both Humph and Higgins were accustomed to investigating the world of art.

“My investigations are preliminary in nature, gentlemen,” said Duffy, “but day by day, I’m finding more and more evidence that there are master art thieves and forgers dipping their toes into New York’s art world. So, despair not. You have provided invaluable assistance to Humph and I.”

Once outside the precinct, Humph couldn’t resist asking:

“You’re as sober as a tree, so where did all that bluster and blarney come from?”

Duffy laughed and suggested a visit to his favorite Bowery bar. He loved the place, mostly because it was within easy staggering distance from his place.

Humph felt buoyed by Duff's assurances that an art-theft ring was walking into a police noose.

The bar was packed and noisy, a mix of jovial conversation and argumentative, drunken pontificating about life and death matters, mostly the Yankees. No one, at least of the voices Humph could make out, gave a damn about the expanding war in Europe. This was a neighborhood of twenty-five-cent rooms and thirty-cent haircuts and shaves, hot towel included. Europe was a long way away.

Not long after they arrived, two guys vacated their bar stools. The barkeep signaled frantically to Duffy, pointing to the stools with one hand and using his other as a stop sign for anyone else thinking of taking them. Being a boozier had its privileges. Humph took the stool at the end of the bar, Duffy the one to his left. The end seat afforded more elbow room for a man of Humph's bulk.

Duffy confided to Humph that if he could nail Borasco, the king of European art provenance forgers, he'd retire happy.

"But you don't even know if he's involved in any art scams in New York."

"He wouldn't be here if he wasn't. Movie stars don't spend time in Nowhere, Nebraska, where they'll get zero publicity out of it. Great criminals only go where the money and infamy are. Since I know he's here, I know he's looking for a big hit. Our Jones-Barrington case is the only one that stinks enough to be worth trying to connect to Borasco. Our dear Detective Higgins, being a Brit—sorry, Higgy, a Scot—knows of Borasco. Without anything concrete at the moment, he can't afford to assign detectives to follow him. Worse, Jones is out of the country. That leaves you and me, Humph."

A couple of drinks later, Humph announced he was going to do a crash course in the New York art world by getting Rebecca to visit galleries with him. As soon as he said that, he remembered that the night before she had told him that she had discovered where the skinny artist from the co-op lived now, adding that he was working at the Met.

“Gotta run, Duff.”

He had just realized he’d forgotten to press Rebecca for details about the skinny artist’s whereabouts.

When he got home, Rebecca wasn’t there. Humph made himself coffee to sober up before she arrived.

In the meantime, less-than-sober Duffy phoned.

“Where are you calling from?” Humph shouted. “I can hardly make you out with all that noise in the background.”

“The bar. Just drinkin’ and a-thinkin’.”

“Any conclusions?” Humph asked.

“Question, Humph. Do you think Jones might have heard about our murder investigation while in Cuba? Could his escort lady be keeping him up to date based on our questioning of her? What if he is no longer there? Where could he be, and why? If he’s not in Cuba, as far as his architecture firm is concerned, he should be. Maybe he has quit his job there. Maybe the possibility of soon making a lot of money through the Ponzi scheme and perhaps the possibility of being awarded his dead wife’s art collection has convinced him he’d be better off on his own.”

Just at that moment, Rebecca walked in.

“Gotta go,” said Humph. Eager to talk to Rebecca about the skinny painter, he hung up abruptly.



CHAPTER 17

OVER breakfast the next morning, Rebecca said that Eve had received his telegram.

“She was wringing her hands, Humph. She feels guilty as hell not visiting you, but she’s a prisoner of rehearsals. Even when she’s home, she can only think about getting her role just right. She wants this part with all her heart. It’s a Jerome Kern-Oscar Hammerstein show, for heaven’s sake. You don’t get bigger than that, Humph. Having that show on her resumé guarantees her Broadway future.”

Humph understood that Rebecca was Eve’s best ambassador, not just because she and Eve had hit it off from the beginning, but because Rebecca was a Broadway pro. She understood the emotions and the mind-numbing challenges performers faced.

“But she has time to get married?” There was anger in Humph’s voice. Or was it sadness, Rebecca wondered.

A waitress appeared, apologized for the delay, and took their orders.

Humph and Rebecca didn’t speak until their breakfasts arrived.

To Rebecca’s surprise, after seeing how upset Humph was, he changed subjects.

“So what’s the story about our scrawny painter?”

With a forkful of scrambled eggs near her mouth, Rebecca paused and let out a sigh of relief at the turn of the conversation.

“Well, Humph, dear, for starters, our painter is doing his best to disappear. Ortega scared him beyond measure.”

She said Ortega just showed up one day speaking Spanish with a Venezuelan accent.

“He said he was a long way from home and the familiar accent was nice to hear.” Apparently Ortega said he was a painter, too. He was looking for a place to work.

“Our guy told Ortega about the co-op and his own apartment there just one floor below. At Ortega’s request, he showed him the apartment. Ortega thanked him and left. He returned the next day with the money that was necessary to join the co-op and rent a flat. Our guy, Victor, wasn’t there that day. Nevertheless, Ortega went down to the apartment. Victor spent that night with a girlfriend. The next day, Victor arrived and tried to enter his apartment. It was locked, and his key didn’t work. It turns out that Ortega had changed the lock. Ortega finally let Victor into what, twenty-four hours before, had been his apartment. Ortega proceeded to beat the crap out of him. With his knees on Victor’s chest, Ortega told him in no uncertain terms that the apartment belonged to him now. ‘So you’re going to fuck off, *compañero*.’ Our guy was so afraid that he fled. He never returned. He stayed with this girlfriend until he got the job at the Met. It turns out he had been

working there for five months as an unpaid apprentice restorer. I guess he was good at it because they hired him.”

Rebecca’s account cleared up some loose ends.

“So, where does Victor live?”

“In Washington Heights, on 172nd Street. It’s a tiny apartment in a five-floor walk-up. His painter’s name, the one he signs his works with, is Arturo. That’s the name he uses on his mailbox in the entrance. He told me he’s happy there. He feels safe from discovery by Ortega and most people in the building spoke Spanish. Ortega became a nightmare for him.”

“We know Ortega is a cold-blooded murderer. Your interview confirms that. Do you think he’d talk to me?”

Rebecca thought about it for a moment.

“Yes, if I came to translate. He speaks English, sort of. But he has to think about what he’s saying if it’s in English. In Spanish, words just spill out.”

“It’s a date, beautiful,” Humph said, taking her hand.

Two days later, after Rebecca set it up, Humph met Victor at his apartment. Victor and Rebecca seemed to talk forever before Rebecca switched to English.

“I just had to explain who you are, your past, your reputation. He even asked if you resented Latinos.”

“Did you explain, Rebecca, that I’ve chosen the most beautiful Latina in New York as my wife?”

“No. Because you keep putting off marrying me.” She said that with a laugh. Humph had no reply.

Humph turned to Victor. He thanked him for seeing him.

He explained that Ortega had been arrested and was still in police custody. He said that it is believed, but not yet proved, that he murdered a society lady who possessed a huge art collection.

“We think that he did that at the request of the woman’s ex-husband, a wealthy man in his own right who wanted her art collection. They were getting divorced, but he still

felt he had a right to it. Once she was dead, he figured there were no obstacles between him and the art collection.”

In Spanish, Rebecca asked if he fully understood what Humph had said.

Victor nodded.

A staring match ensued.

Finally, Humph said:

“¿Hay algo más?”

Rebecca’s mouth dropped open.

Humph had asked in Spanish, “Is there something else?”

In Spanish, Victor said:

“This is just something I think I understood just before Ortega dragged me into my old apartment. This white guy showed up in the studio. He went right to Ortega and said, ‘It’ll be the Met.’ Then he left.”

“What will be the Met?” asked Humph.

Victor said he had no idea what they meant.

“But,” he said a minute later, “there’s only one Met in New York. They have to be planning to hit the museum, no?”

He said that at the time he thought nothing of it, but now that he was working at the Met, he could only think they were planning some kind of robbery. He said they mentioned the Met in front of him because they thought there was no connection between him and the venerated museum.

Humph rose and shook Victor’s hand.

Rebecca added that they couldn’t begin to tell him how much good his statement would do.

Humph asked if they could remain in contact. Victor gave the phone number of the super.

“She has been more than kind to me.”

After returning to the street, Rebecca said, “So, when are you going to marry me?”

In such a situation, Humph could hear his Jewish parents exclaiming, “Oy veh!”

Humph stopped in his tracks. He remained silent as he stared at the sky. He told himself he’d have to find a Spanish equivalent.

Rebecca took his hand and led him to the subway.

Just before their stop, Rebecca asked where he learned that tidbit of Spanish, the “algo más” phrase.

“I’m trying to read in Spanish. Last year I found a dime novel published in Mexico. I came across it at a yard sale in Brooklyn. I can’t even remember what it was called. But it wasn’t long, and it was in Spanish.”

“I can’t imagine you at a garage sale,” Rebecca said. “You never buy anything for yourself. You always get your books from the library.”

“I was just passing by on my way to interview someone about a case. I just happened to notice an old police uniform for sale. Maybe the homeowner was a former cop. I would likely enjoy meeting him. Turned out he was a cop, but he had passed away that year. His daughter told me she couldn’t bear having the reminder hanging in her cupboard. Just as she was telling me that, I spotted a pile of books. End of story.”

“That must have been just after we met, right?”

“Coincidence,” insisted Humph.

“Regardless, Humph, I’m flattered that you’re learning Spanish.”

“You’re welcome,” Humph said, rapid-fire and seemingly from the side of a barely opened mouth.

“Entonces, ¿cuándo nos casamos?”

“You’re relentless, Rebecca—a good quality for a detective, a scary one for a wife-to-be. If I understood right, you just asked again when we’re getting married. Answer, the same as before: when this case is over.”

“Once again, I’m impressed by your Spanish. What else are you hiding in that monster brain of yours?”

“Our stop, Rebecca.” The screeching of the train wheels was like a referee’s whistle signaling a time-out for their conversation, or as Humph would put it, the interrogation.

When they got to the street, Humph said they should sit down and start planning his art education.

“I’m thinking a crash course is needed,” he added.



CHAPTER 18

REBECCA dragged Humph from gallery to gallery. Humph was astounded by how many there were. He commented on that to a gallery assistant Rebecca introduced him to on their tour. The man said the exploding gallery scene was hardly surprising because the city's art scene had never been healthier, not just for paintings but also for sculptures, murals, "name it".

The assistant asked a front-desk secretary to prepare coffee for the two detectives. Rebecca turned slightly toward Humph and shined an imaginary police badge over her left breast.

"During the height of the Depression," the assistant said, "it seemed like art was the last thing on anyone's mind. Then our president announced a program called the Public Works of Art Project. Government programs

often promise solutions but seldom deliver. However, this was an exception. I read recently that in 1934, in just four months, the program brought about the hiring of almost four thousand artists and produced almost sixteen thousand paintings, prints, crafts, murals and sculptures for government buildings around the country. That, in turn, rejuvenated the art world as a whole. Think about those numbers. Unreal. Artists had jobs. They got paid decent, market prices for their works.”

Humph was impressed. It meant even disasters like the Depression could be fought.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I imagine that before FDR stepped in, art thieves in New York had slim pickings.”

The assistant laughed.

“Right you are, but somehow the best of them sniffed out the revival, and before long, it was business as usual. New York is the place to be for both artists and thieves.”

Before Humph and Rebecca left the gallery, the assistant gave them a name, a Frenchman who had once worked at Le Louvre and now worked as a security consultant with New York’s most prestigious galleries.

“He knows as well as anyone how the best of the thieves pull off their thefts. Paris or New York, they work the same way.”

As they left the gallery, elated by what they’d learned, Rebecca had to scurry off to work.

“We’ll talk tonight. Can’t wait,” she said.

Humph watched her literally run east to the next subway stop. He could still run, but it was hard to call his version truly running. Rebecca qualified for the 440.

Duffy’s place was closer than home. Humph walked until he found a phone.

No answer. Humph sat on the sidewalk, his feet on the street. Why was he suddenly so fatigued? It was Rebecca who had done the running, not him. After he relaxed a little, Humph realized the tension was coming from Eve’s

silence. He realized he was still actually angry about the silence. He then modified the anger to hurt. She was making one of the biggest, maybe *the* biggest decisions in her life, and she was leaving her father on the sidelines.

When his breathing returned to normal, he shot to his feet with new resolve. At a rate that Rebecca would have been proud of, he made a beeline to Duffy's place.

When he arrived, the door was ajar. On full alert, he stepped quietly inside. The place was in shambles, more so than normal. He picked through the mess and found nothing to indicate what had taken place other than signs of a fight. The coffee table in front of the sofa was in two pieces. The radio was on the floor with a shattered dial. But there was no blood on the sofa, on the floor. Duff's precious collection of Irish whiskey bottles was intact. The attackers weren't Irish. How, Humph wondered, could anyone overcome the little Irish dervish without blood being spilled? Had Duff won the battle and fled his apartment, gone to the police, perhaps?

Humph gingerly stepped into the bedroom, careful not to disturb possible clues.

The room was a mess, obviously created by someone frantically searching for something and tossing aside every object that was in the way.

Finally, under a book entitled *How England Betrayed Ireland* was a small notebook. In it, he saw Duffy's latest entry.

"292, E. 37th. Borasco has protection."

Humph flipped backward in the notebook.

"Spotted sus. This morning, 10.59. Alone. Waited 4 hrs. No visitors."

It was clear that Duffy had been hot on the trail of Borasco. What he apparently failed to notice was that there were eyes on his every move—Borasco's thugs.

Would they kill him outright? Would they take him to Borasco to drill for information about police operations?

Would they sit by while Borasco, their boss, and Duffy traded barbs about living among the Brits, sort of a nostalgia session despite the two being on opposite sides of the fence that stood between good and bad?

By the sounds of what Duffy had told him, Humph knew that Borasco was probably secure enough and sophisticated enough to enjoy such a session. He was in complete control. His ever-attentive brutes were proof of that.

Humph couldn't help but wonder how big a gang Borasco had. Did he travel with them or recruit locally?

Humph was at a dead end. He didn't know much about what Duffy had on Borasco. He had no option but to go directly to Higgins for help.

Higgins wasn't at the precinct. Humph had to leave a detailed message for him, dictated to a young detective.

"Tell your boss to call me as soon as he reads this."

When Rebecca returned home just after six, she found Humph on the floor of the living room, cradling a half-empty bottle of Irish whiskey. This was not like him. No matter how much he drank, he had always managed to pass out with a semblance of decorum, on a bed, on a sofa, but never the floor.

All she could do was wait. Around eight, the phone rang. Higgins.

"Hi, dear. I need to speak to Humph immediately."

"He can't come to the phone, detective."

"Is he there?"

"Kinda."

"Drunk?"

"Yeah."

There was a long silence.

Finally, Rebecca said she'd never seen him do this.

"Do what?"

"Pass out on the floor holding a bottle."

Getting no response, she added:

“Sure, he drinks, and he can drink a whole lot. But he’s always somehow in control. Always.”

“I’m on my way,” Higgins said, hanging up without waiting for a reply.

He arrived an hour later, with another detective in tow.

“Signs of life?”

“Yes. Sort of. I don’t know.”

Higgins sat on the floor next to Humph.

“Ah, what was that?” he said suddenly.

“A snore,” Rebecca said, obviously relieved.

Higgins said, with apologies, that they couldn’t wait for him to wake up on his own.

He knelt over Humph’s body, then lightly patted his cheeks. Humph uttered a low-pitched grunt in protest.

“Humph!” Higgins almost yelled the name, hoping that the besotted detective would hear his urgency.

Humph rolled on his side, causing Higgins to tumble onto the floor.

One eye opened. Slowly, Humph found a focus in the room. Of all people, it was Higgins.

“Rebecca,” he called.

Immediately she knelt down and cradled his head.

“Humph, talk to me.” Higgins’s voice had an urgency Humph somehow recognized. Both eyes opened.

Both Rebecca and Higgins helped him sit upright. Rebecca lightly kissed his left cheek while caressing his right. Humph leaned against her while trying to focus on Higgins.

Humph suddenly leaned forward and cleared his throat violently. Both Rebecca and Higgins instinctively leaned away from his body. To their relief, he didn’t vomit. They could see his chest start to heave. He was coming to.

About fifteen minutes later, Higgins and Rebecca could see that Humph’s eyes were focusing. Gently, they started

pressing him for details about what had happened to cause him to sit on the floor with a big bottle of whiskey.

At first, the answers were slow in coming, mostly just phrases, not full sentences.

Humph looked at Higgins and raised his left arm. He wanted help getting to his feet. Higgins led him to the sofa, seating him at one end, giving him support from the back and side. While Humph was getting settled, Rebecca was in the kitchen preparing coffee.

“Duffy,” said Humph, “he can handle himself. But there was something, something about the way his place was torn up. I don’t know, but I got the feeling that they killed him. It was like a premonition. I felt I had let him down. We should have been snooping around Borasco as a team.”

Humph had grown fluent by the time the coffee arrived. Rebecca sat beside him, holding his left hand, leaving his right free to gesticulate.

“I have to find out what happened, whether he’s still alive. Borasco’s guys aren’t amateurs.”

Higgins admitted he wouldn’t know where to start. He’d been waiting for days for a report from Duffy.

“I do,” said Humph, almost spilling the coffee he’d been reaching for on a small table just to the right of the sofa.

“I’ll follow Duffy’s lead, but this time I’m going to forget about Borasco and track his bully boys. If Duffy is still alive and being held prisoner, they would be the ones babysitting him.”



CHAPTER 19

THE next day, Humph made his way to Borasco's hideaway. But he didn't pick a spot with a direct view of the flat. Instead he stayed back and tried to spot Borasco's muscle as they watched over his place, looking for threats.

After about twenty minutes and several changes in position, Humph spotted them. They were both sitting on the hood of a black BMW 335. He'd never seen one before but had read about the brand-new, Art Deco-like design in a car magazine. The Lower East Side was not where he would ever have expected to see such a car.

Obviously, the two goons didn't think anyone would remark upon the unlikelihood of two guys who looked like they did, bulging muscles destroying the lines of their suits, sitting on a luxury car's hood. But Humph did. He set himself up on a second-floor balcony across the street.

He had already spoken to the super and the tenant. He had permission to be there. The tenant even brought him a Coke. Humph looked like he belonged.

On the fourth day, Humph sat on the steps leading up to the main door. Tenants had already gotten used to his presence. They exchanged hellos frequently, or little waves of the hand. If the muscle spotted him again, they would see nothing to be alarmed about.

On this morning, however, Humph had arrived in an unmarked police car. It was parked within hailing distance. The plan was simple: today they were going to follow the goons to wherever they lived. After three days of watching, Humph was desperate. How many times can your mind stare at a friend's face while you ask over and over again whether he's alive or dead?

It turned out that Borasco's guys lived just three blocks away. They went on foot. One of them bought a bottle on the way. Why had they left so early? It was still morning. Did that mean that Borasco was going out and their surveillance wasn't needed?

Humph decided that was the most likely scenario. He told the cop to wait to see if Borasco would come out, and if he did, to follow him, reporting to Higgins when he had the chance.

"Under no circumstances try to bust the guy. He'll have some kind of protection. We only need to watch him and see what he might be up to."

The cop gave Humph an informal salute as Humph started walking north, trying to catch up with the two thugs.

When he got to the apartment building they entered, Humph realized that if he were still an NYPD cop, he would be expected to phone the precinct and let them decide how to proceed. They would probably have sent a team of guys to bust in and cuff the goons.

Humph knew absolutely that they'd do that. And for that reason, as he'd often done during his days in blue,

he decided to do the opposite.

Humph waited for several long minutes before seeing them. His long legs and his anxiety about Duffy propelled him ahead of Borasco's soldiers. Finally, hidden by rare Lower East Side shrubbery, he spotted them carrying three bags of food. He knew it was food because he could make out a restaurant's name on the bags. Why three?

Humph held his impatience in check before entering the building. He asked an older woman, a tenant, whether she knew what apartment two new tenants had moved into. He told her they were "big, big guys". She answered, "2B, sir.. One floor up and at the end of the hall." Her accent was Eastern European—of Jewish origin like him?

He quietly made his way down the hall to 2B. Within just a minute, he heard Duffy's voice. He was alive. As Humph tried to silently return to the stairs to leave, one of the hoods came out of the apartment and spotted him. He yelled for his partner.

By the time the two of them burst through the door to the street, Humph was already on the street.

In no more than thirty seconds, they spotted Humph and overtook him. They tackled him to the ground. With the handle of a gun, they knocked him out. When he woke up, he saw that he was in an alley leading to the East River. His wrists were tied behind his back. His ankles were bound. He was utterly helpless.

A light rain started to fall, but Humph got no reprieve. For an eternity, questions were thrown at him, accompanied by slaps to his face from a man sitting on his chest. Finally, getting nothing, they set to taking turns beating him with their fists. His last recollection was the sound of a tugboat on the river.

When Humph regained consciousness, the sun had set. He was bound so tightly he couldn't budge an inch. He tried to call out, but the pain was excruciating. He knew his jaw must have been broken. Fortunately the rain had

stopped. He began to shiver. A fall night next to the river wasn't Miami.

When the police arrived, two patrolmen, he had drifted back into sleep. One of the patrolmen ran off to call for backup. Humph was bloody and bound. They weren't even sure if he was alive.

It was much later, in hospital, that one of the patrolmen who discovered him told Higgins he had found Humph's body thanks to a homeless man.

"He came out of nowhere on 2nd Avenue and poked my chest. I was ready to bop him with my baton, but before I could, he said, 'Officer, sir, will you buy me supper if I tell you about a murder?' He showed me where you were."

Humph wanted to ask whether the officer bought the beggar a meal, but his shattered jaw derailed him.

Humph was taken to the New York Presbyterian Hospital on East 68th. In the meantime, Higgins said his men tailing Borasco were drawing blanks. There was also no criminal activity in the neighborhood. Aware of Borasco's international exploits, Higgins said he had set up watches at New York's airports and the harbor.

While Humph was being tortured in the street, Duffy had been discovered. When the hoods ran out of their apartment to chase Humph, they left the apartment door wide open in their haste. Duffy dragged himself to the open door and the steps. His body collapsed, and he rolled down the stairs. A neighbor spotted him and called police. Not long afterward, Duffy was on his way to the emergency room at Bellevue. As well as having a broken jaw, nose and three ribs, his breathing was irregular. Higgins was told that was probably due to the pain caused by the broken ribs. Nevertheless, the prognosis was good. Days later, Duffy managed to ask to see Humph.

The answer he received did not help his recovery.

Humph, he was told, was in hospital with many of the same injuries.

“Did he try to find me?” Duffy asked. His words were barely intelligible.

“Precisely, Duffy,” said Higgins. “That’s why he got the crap beaten out of him. I hope someday to have a friend like him. You’re alive because of him. He’s alive because of a homeless man.”

There were the beginnings of tears in the Irishman’s eyes. Higgins knew not to indicate that he noticed them.

A week and a half later, Humph was sent home. Rebecca had visited every day. On her fourth visit, she got into a heated argument with an orderly who told her it was time to leave. The next day, she spoke to the head nurse and made her apologies.

“It’s like he’s my husband,” she tried to explain.

“But you’re not,” said the head nurse.

“What difference does it make?” Rebecca replied loudly. “He’s the man I love!”

The head nurse stared at her for a full minute. Then she nodded. “I understand.”

When Humph was released, Rebecca almost strangled him with her first hug. It was only his gasps for breath that alerted her. He was now an invalid, not her giant protector.

Once home, on Higgins’s advice, she didn’t pressure Humph about the case. It was tea and ice cream and soft, long hugs.

Two weeks later, Humph was up and about, like the old Humph, except he only wanted to know one thing. He didn’t want to discuss anything else. How did Borasco escape? How did his muscle escape?



CHAPTER 20

THERE was no ready answer to Humph's questions about the whereabouts of Borasco or his muscle. On reflection, Humph realized it wasn't surprising that the three of them had disappeared like smudged figures in a charcoal drawing left under a hot sun. Duffy told him their escape was proof that they were battling a well-organized and well-funded network.

"My money," said Duffy, "is on that investment banker, Norman Barrington, Mr. Ponzi himself, and to some extent his fleet-footed partner, Mr. Graham Jones."

Humph could only agree. Those two certainly had the wherewithal to put such valuable assets in a place of safety. They represented a potentially hugely profitable meal ticket in arranging and carrying out the theft of pricey art and magically finding new owners for them.

Along with Higgins, they were both astonished to learn that only a few days ago, a painting—one of the seven works stolen from two galleries on the same night—was sold at auction for a price well above the pre-theft price. An investigation at the auction house unearthed exactly the type of evidence they were looking for. The provenance of the painting auctioned off was not the same as the one provided by the gallery that had displayed it before the robbery. It was Borasco's handiwork without the slightest doubt. And the new provenance indicated that none other than Mr. N. Barrington was the new owner. Higgins was sure that Borasco and Barrington would share the profit, perhaps splitting the difference between the original price and the auction price. The difference was twenty-four thousand dollars, easily enough to encourage Borasco to continue working in New York.

"We need to get proof that Barrington's money was behind the theft or proof that he paid Borasco in some way. In fact, we need solid proof that he's guilty of anything, likewise Mr. Jones."

A few days later, Humph got a call from the lawyer who represented the late Mrs. Hamersly-Jones at the probate hearing where Humph had testified months before. They arranged a sit-down for the following week.

When Humph set out for the appointment a week later, a heavy rain was falling. The previous day had been beautiful, sunny, temperature in the mid-seventies, a delight for mid-October. But today was miserable, barely fifty degrees, damp as hell. But Humph's spirits were high. If he left today's session with the lawyer with the promise of progress in the case, he would be ecstatic. Neither Duffy nor Higgins had produced anything positive.

The lawyer looked delighted when he showed Humph to the chair in front of his big desk.

"Sir," he said, "it has come to my attention that several investors in Mr. Jones's investment account, or rather the account he runs on behalf of a certain Mr. Barrington, are

suing the two, Barrington and Jones, for refusing to allow them to withdraw their investments. Knowing that you are acquainted with Mr. Jones, and perhaps Mr. Barrington, the owner of the firm, I thought you might be interested in this development. I heard about this from another lawyer, one representing one of the investors suing. This is a civil action and therefore does not fall directly under police purview, but it carries a great deal of weight in favor of Mrs. Hamersly's case for denying her former husband access to her art in the will."

"In short," he said, "if I can show that Mr. Jones is a dishonest schemer, his claim to her wealth will be denied."

Humph couldn't believe his ears. This development could end up forcing Jones to vacate his position at Barrington's firm, even if he were found not guilty in the civil case. Goodness knows what it would do to the firm's reputation. Surely investors would turn their backs on Barrington.

"You might think this premature, but may I buy you lunch and a huge drink?"

The diminutive lawyer almost blushed.

"In my field of law, this sort of situation never arises. You make it sound as if I got you off a murder charge." He uttered what was close to a giggle. "Absolutely. I accept."

During lunch, with his glass now half empty, the lawyer revealed another case involving Jones.

"This architecture firm that employs him is suing him for theft of company property, to wit his designs for a building that reflects Latin-American sensibilities. It seems that Mr. Jones, traveling on company business, has been incommunicado for months. He has been unreachable, according to the company. In his absence, he has been removed from the payroll—in other words, fired."

The lawyer explained that although Jones created the drawings for the proposed building, they remained company property. The company wanted the drawings returned and the travel expenses repaid.

“I suspect, judging by the length of his absence, Mr. Jones will soon owe the company a very considerable amount.”

Humph ordered apple pie and ice cream. The lawyer, seeing the pleasure Humph got from his words, was content to happily nurse his monster drink.

Once home, Humph relayed the new developments to Higgins and Duffy.

“I would so love to talk with Jones,” said Higgins. “I’ll send someone over to the firm and get written confirmation of his firing and their intent to bring suit.”

As for Duffy, his immediate response was:

“Tell you what, Humph. Allow me to do you a favor, and ask me to take a cruise to the heavenly city of sin and sensuality, Havana, and bring the bastard home. I’ll lay him on your doorstep like a cat proudly depositing a bird it caught.”

Humph laughed and hung up. But Duff’s words had given him an idea.

Rebecca got home late again, but Humph didn’t mind. The meeting with the lawyer had made him see sunny skies on a depressing fall day.

His first words to her were:

“Would you like to go to Cuba with me?”



CHAPTER 21

REBECCA dropped her purse to the floor, then stood with her hands at her sides and examined Humph as if he were an exhibit in the American Museum of Natural History on Central Park West. Then she reached out tentatively and touched his right arm, then his left.

Humph didn't say a word.

"How much have you had to drink today?" she asked.

"Much less than normal," Humph replied, trying to hold back a smile.

Rebecca edged forward, her head just inches from his, her arms now half around him.

Finally, Humph said he wanted to go to Cuba.

"But you never leave New York. And you're not a fan of water. What's gotten into you?"

"I'm still not over my injuries. I have a lot of headaches, and my lungs won't let me run. I need to recuperate, preferably in the sun. It was Duffy's idea. Pick up the phone and ask him." The conversation was still muted and in slow motion.

Rebecca went to the phone. She called Duffy.

"Is this Dr. Duffy?"

"At your service, milady."

Rebecca could tell he was already alcoholically animated.

"Did you suggest that Humph take his ass to Cuba to recuperate?"

"Me? No. That would be too risky for his state of health. Also, my dear, he's needed here. I mean, you guys are almost married, right? That takes two to tango."

"Thank you, Duff."

Before she could hang up, Duffy asked why she'd called:

"Because, though he seems sober, he just said he was going to go to Cuba."

"Oh my. He must be delirious. But, but, but Rebecca. Maybe in madness there is brilliance. Ever think of that? In his delirium he has found a target for our investigation. Do you want to be the one to stop him? I think not."

"How do you do it, Duff? Nonsense on demand. Do you have a button that you just press to open the floodgates?"

"You have to be Irish to understand, my dear."

"Don't know now why I called you. Send you a kiss anyway."

Humph had been listening.

"So, in the opinion of Doc Duff, you're an invalid, in need of a cruise."

"I'm not going to argue with him," said Humph.

A long silence ensued. It was Humph who broke it.

"I think I omitted one thing. Would you accompany me?"

Rebecca said she'd dearly love to join him, but she couldn't possibly leave work right now.

“Let me work on that.”

Rebecca nodded.

After supper, Higgins phoned.

“That info you provided, you and the lawyer, your talk today. That’s a godsend. I’ve opened files on everyone involved, good guys and bad guys. The more the merrier. We’ll need to hit Barrington, and Borasco, from many angles, unless we catch them red-handed in a robbery or an act of fraud.”

Humph replied that he was delighted, as delighted as he was, about what the lawyer provided.

They chatted for a while about other elements of the case, ones his boys were starting to pin down, connections between Barrington, gallery owners and assorted “riff-raff”. By that, Humph was referring to thugs.

When Higgins seemed to have finished his report, Humph decided to present his idea.

“I’ve decided to go to Cuba in search of Jones.”

“Brilliant,” said Higgins. “But I can’t pay your way. We need to have Jones hooked for some kind of crime. The lawsuits haven’t been ruled on. And his firing by the architecture firm doesn’t amount to a crime. But yes, Humph, I’d dearly love to sit down with Jones face to face.”

Humph understood. He had anticipated that reaction and had an immediate response.

“Can you do me a huge favor? My plan is to take Rebecca to Cuba with me as an interpreter. I’ll need her to pursue our investigation there. Duffy came up with the idea that I should go there to recuperate from my injuries. Frankly, I would appreciate that. I haven’t been the same since. But she can’t leave work right now. Can you or one of your detectives accompany me to Rebecca’s job on Broadway and tell them that the NYPD needs her on a case, one that means a leave of absence to go to Cuba to take part in the investigation?”

The response was immediate.

“No problem. Tell me when and where.”

The next morning, the cop showed up at Tompkins Square. He joined Humph and Rebecca to head for Eighth Avenue just above Times Square where Rebecca worked. It was a rehearsal space used by countless Broadway shows called Fazil’s Times Square Studio. It was where Eve landed her job in *Very Warm for May*, the new Jerome Kern-Oscar Hammerstein show, trying desperately to be ready for opening night in November. It’s also where Rebecca conceived of and applied make-up for dancers, singers and actors for numerous shows. In recent years, Rebecca had been called on to consult on other design elements, such as sets.

When the three of them arrived, Rebecca led the way up a narrow, dark staircase to the third floor. As soon as she opened the door, Humph and the cop could hear music, accompanied by echo-like thumping on floors. Rebecca said there were fourteen rehearsal rooms.

“We love this place, even though some of us refer to it as ‘the snake pit’. It’s meant affectionately. You could have a Broadway show rehearsing in one room, tap dancers in another, Flamenco dancers, name it. And even dancers not connected to a show can find a room to practice in for just twenty-five cents a day. The whole community loves Fazil.”

After a few minutes, one of Fazil’s assistants arrived and gave Rebecca a kiss on both cheeks. When he heard Rebecca’s request, made after introducing Humph and the NYPD member, he looked alarmed.

“There’s so much work to do, Rebecca.” It was a simple statement but voiced as a plea.

Humph knew, from the crazy hours she kept, that Rebecca’s job was wide-ranging and always urgent.

Humph addressed the assistant, whose eyes hadn’t left Rebecca.

“Sir, let me explain the reason for Rebecca’s request.” He told him about Jones fleeing justice in Cuba and provided

background explaining why police believed there was a network of art thieves operating in New York.

“Rebecca has joined me on cases before in an unofficial capacity. Among her other talents, she’s a fine investigator. On top of that, I will need her Spanish in Havana. We hope to return in two weeks or so if things go well. Do you have someone who could replace Rebecca at the studio?”

The assistant thought for some time. Finally, wringing his hands, he said he had to talk to Fazil. With that, he hurried down the hall.

The hallway was starting to smell of cigarette and cigar smoke.

“A fine environment for hard physical work,” Humph remarked.

Rebecca laughed.

“Yes, it’s always smoky. And it’s always too cold or too hot, just the way a love relationship can be. Wouldn’t you agree, Humph?”

The cop was just lighting a cigarette but paused to wait for Humph’s response to Rebecca’s remark.

The assistant’s return got Humph off the hook. He was accompanied by a middle-aged woman.

“This is Vanessa,” said the assistant. “Rebecca, could you sit down with her in my office and explain what will be most urgent for her to handle in the next few weeks? If she feels she can handle it, Fazil says you have the green light.”

The cop and Humph sat on the hallway floor to wait. Humph at first resented sitting on the floor, but after realizing there were no options in a space reserved for performing artists, he started floating questions toward the cop. He seemed happy to have a chance to talk. Over the next half hour, Humph received a full update about goings-on at his old precinct. He enjoyed it so much he almost forgot about Rebecca.

Out of nowhere, he heard her voice.

“Cuba, here we come!” she said on her return to the

hallway, swaying her hips to music only she heard.

“Let’s hurry home and pack, Humph.”

“Whoa! I have to find out how much it’s going to cost, then go to my bank and see if I even have the money.”

“Go, go,” she said. “I’ll go home alone, like any other working day.” Humph leaned back, touched her arm and used a hand gesture to insist on a quick kiss as she turned to leave him. As they parted, he could hear her singing to herself.

Even before this morning’s meeting at Fazil’s, Humph had phoned around to find what shipping line could take them to Cuba. He decided on the New York & Cuba Mail Steamship Company, operated by the Ward Line. A phone call told him where they were located. It was at 1 Broadway, across from Bowling Green where he often parked himself on a bench, staring toward New York Harbor and thinking about life and, if he had any, cases he was investigating.

At the shipping line, Humph asked about fares to Cuba. For luxury accommodation, he’d have to hand over one hundred to two hundred dollars. Normally, for himself alone, he would have chosen steerage. However, there was no way he’d subject Rebecca to that. The ticket agent then informed him that shipping lines such as theirs offered an “improved” steerage accommodation. “We call it third class. It’s something relatively new. Not everyone offers it.”

The price was much more bearable. He excused himself, left the line and stepped out of the building. Again he found a bench. After thirty minutes of reflection, he got up and searched for a phone. He called the lawyer handling the Jones probate case.

“News?”

The lawyer said he had been trying to reach Humph by phone. “They’ve ruled in the favor of Mrs. Hamersly-Jones.” Mr. Jones, he said, had no claim to her wonderful art collection.

“So glad to hear it,” said Humph. “It’s not every day that we hear of justice being done.”

“Indeed, sir. But there’s another bonus in this for you, Mr. Humph. The ruling leaves us free to pay you what the later Audrey Hamersly referred to as an advance. You must move in high circles, detective. The advance amounts to no less than a thousand dollars. I have a check already prepared. Would you like to pick it up or have it delivered by mail?”

Humph went to the lawyer’s office and picked up the check. Once again, moved by the diminutive lawyer’s sense of right and wrong, Humph insisted on lunch together “with some of those drinks that lighten our burden in this world”.

By the time the late lunch was over and the two had parted like lifelong friends, it was too late for Humph to get to the bank with his small fortune.

Rebecca arrived just minutes after he had.

“I was free to leave because Vanessa is now me.”

“In that case, Vanessa . . .”

Rebecca slapped his thigh playfully.

“In that case, Rebecca, I have come into some money, and I now believe we can afford luxury, or semi-luxury, accommodation on a cruise ship that will take us slowly to Cuba and eventually return us.”

Rebecca let out a cannon-blast of Spanish and leapt onto his lap, pulling his face to hers.

On the way home from his lunch with the lawyer, Humph had devised a plan involving Rebecca. It was a plan he decided to label top-secret.



CHAPTER 22

THE next morning, not having to go to work, Rebecca slept in. Humph was out the door by nine. He deposited his check then hurried to the cruise line to ask for luxury accommodation for two, an open-ended return voyage. He was told his return voyage, being open-ended, would be subject to cabin availability.

“You might have to wait several days before departing back to New York.”

Humph had heard much about Havana. He didn’t think he’d mind a few additional days there. It was exotic. It was spirited. It was colorful. It was where rich Americans went to gamble and where rich Americans went to enjoy beautiful women desperate to make money to survive. It also wasn’t drab and cold like this October day in New York.

He bought the tickets. They ate up 20 percent of his advance from Mrs. Hamersly.

He decided to check in with Higgins, to tell him he would be headed south in search of Jones the following week.

Higgins was pleased about that but regretted to tell Humph that there had been three gallery robberies in the past two days.

“Same modus operandi in each case. But we still have no connection with Borasco.”

Higgins went on to say, to his surprise, he had learned that most galleries had no insurance on the artworks they displayed, next to no security.

“They’re sitting ducks, especially for a sophisticated European thief.”

Humph replied that he had some kind of premonition a few days ago, and it had stayed with him.

“I’ve got no evidence, and I know nothing about crime in the art world, but I keep thinking Borasco is robbing these little galleries in preparation for some big score. I have no idea what that would be.”

“Go on,” said Higgins.

“Well, these small robberies, if we can call them that, show no connection to Borasco for a reason. They’re designed that way. They’re designed to make us turn our backs on him and go after minnows in the art-theft world. He’s got a master plan. I swear.”

Higgins shrugged his shoulders. “You could be right, but what are we supposed to do in the meantime?”

Humph crossed his legs and slouched back in his chair. He stared at the floor.

Finally, he said, “If I were you, I’d let him gobble up artwork from small galleries. I wouldn’t reveal to the press that you suspect some mastermind. I’d keep watch on Borasco day and night, and Barrington. If you can, track his banking transactions. Intercept his mail, if you can.

Who knows? He might even hear from Jones.”

Higgins nodded.

“Is there any way I can entice you to return to the force, as a senior detective?”

Humph stood and shook his hand warmly.

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

He stepped out of the precinct station and headed to the Bowery. He had to update Duffy about Cuba.

Duffy was home and sober.

“In this unseasonably chilly weather, the idea of going to Havana with you and the missus warms the cockles of me heart.”

“Hold on, my friend. You’re not invited. I’m not saying we won’t need you eventually, but certainly not at first. It’s a trip for Rebecca and me. Our goal is to find Jones and get to the bottom of his game. I can’t imagine he’s holed up there with no money and no plans. He’s too clever a businessman for something like that. However, I confess I have no idea what we’re up against. I’m hoping Rebecca’s Spanish will smooth the way with any connections we might find with Jones.”

He added that he’d be staying in touch with Higgins.

“You’ve got the biggest job. You and Higgins have to get an eye on Borasco and read his mind. Use all your contacts, Duffy.”

Duffy nodded. He felt important again.

“But,” he said, looking at the floor, “it doesn’t seem fair that you get a painfully beautiful woman and the good weather, while I suffer in chilly solitude.”

Humph laughed, slapped his friend hard on the back and moved toward the door. “We embark six days from now.”

“Going by liner, are you?”

“Best way to go. I’d rather be on water than in the air.”

Duffy nodded.

“How I’d love to join you. How does your lady feel about a sea voyage?”

“What do you mean?” Humph answered, puzzled.

“It’s just interesting how water means different things to different people. To us Irish, it means escape—escape from starvation in exchange for hope in America. What way does Rebecca think about the ocean, I mean, with her being Black and all? I’ve talked to Blacks who would rather die than be mid-ocean. They all know someone who arrived in New York Harbor in chains.”

Humph said he’d never spoken of the issue with Rebecca.

“She’s elated at the idea of a cruise to Cuba.”

Duffy opened the door for Humph.

“Bon voyage, my friend. I want a full report on Cuban rum when you return. Samples would be appreciated for, you know, scientific purposes.”

Humph went to his bank to withdraw cash for the voyage. Tickets, pocket money, it all seemed to add up to so much. Then he remembered the overly generous down payment on his services left by Miss Audrey Hamersly. In her honor, in his thoughts, he always removed the Jones part of her name. Her ex-husband was a disgusting human being.

Then he remembered that during their one and only meeting, she had said she would attend immediately to drawing up a contract that would include partial and full payments depending on his successes. She even asked him to sign the as-yet mostly blank contract for services. In the end, Humph realized, he would be secure.

When he got home, Rebecca was packing their bags.

“What do I do with our warm coats?”

Humph poured them each a drink before answering. He sat on the bed where Rebecca had been stuffing suitcases. She had taken out their two biggest suitcases, but they were already beyond overflowing.

When he had downed his generously filled glass, Humph reached for the feeling he'd had on the way to the bank. He had every reason not to have to worry about expenses. Miss Hamersly would take care of them.

He cleared his throat to address Rebecca.

"Tell me if you agree. For at least two weeks, we would be free to imagine ourselves as part of the leisure class. We're traveling first class."

"So?"

"People who travel first class on ocean liners stow their finery in trunks, not suitcases. We won't even have to carry the trunk aboard."

Rebecca's packing worries disappeared, as did the furrowed brow that greeted Humph when he came home.

"Tomorrow we go trunk hunting, my dear."

Rebecca shoved the two suitcases onto the floor, dusting off her hands after doing so. "They'll stay there on the floor until we get a trunk."

After supper, they settled next to each other on the sofa and turned on the radio. They tuned in to a new show, *Hedda Hopper's Hollywood*, featuring the gossip columnist as host. Humph had little interest in celebrities, but Rebecca loved show business.

They were doing everything possible to live like a married couple. It had been a long internal battle, but Humph now felt surer than ever that it was time to take the step and make it official. Rebecca had stopped bugging him about when they'd get married. She sensed his happiness with her.

After the radio show, but before the two had gone to bed, Higgins phoned.

"Some odd characters were arrested at the Met this afternoon," he said. "They didn't rob anything but hung around a certain artist's paintings for an unusually long time, taking notes and talking in exaggerated whispers. A guard observed them. Like a lot of people, the guard

said afterward, they sat on a bench facing the paintings and appeared to study the works, but as they went from painting to painting, their movements seemed mechanical, rehearsed, if you will. This guard was amazingly observant,” Higgins said.

“When the security guard introduced himself and tried to start a conversation about the artist these guys had supposedly been admiring at that moment—I don’t know whether you knew, Humph, but many of the guards at the Met, and MoMA for that matter, become quite knowledgeable about the art they’re protecting—these three guys, when spoken to, didn’t even recognize the name of the artist whose painting they’d apparently been fascinated by. The guard left them after about ten minutes. His visit with them was long enough to annoy one of them who told the guard, ‘Get lost!’ The guard left but returned a few minutes later with two other guards. It was his turn to tell the three men to get lost and leave the museum. They did, causing no commotion.”

Immediately, Humph wondered out loud whether the trio might be connected to Borasco.

“Can’t rule it out,” answered Higgins. “At this point, though, we’re grasping at straws.”

After telling Rebecca the news, he phoned Duffy. The Irishman was in his cups, but Humph could almost hear his mind snapping to alert.

“Hate to agree with you since you decided to desert me while you and Rebecca galivant in Cuba, but this could lead places. It’s some kind of *modus operandi* that Borasco possibly uses to lay a foundation for a new heist.”

“Keep me posted if anything big breaks,” said Humph.

“How in all that’s holy do I do that?”

“Go to the shipping line with your message, and they’ll send it by Morse code.”

“Well, bon voyage and an f-ing S.O.S to you, buddy. Hope you get sunburnt.”



CHAPTER 23

ON the day of their departure for Cuba, even Humph admitted to a touch of excitement at the idea of spending four to five days aboard a luxury cruise ship. He also confessed to a touch of apprehension. He'd never been on water, not even aboard an East River ferry to Brooklyn. Subways were all he needed.

Having grown up in Puerto Rico, Rebecca had no fear of the water. One of her uncles came from a family of fishermen. For her sixteenth birthday, she was invited to climb aboard her uncle's boat to experience life as a crew member. In her honor, her uncle said they were going after a fish called tarpon, usually left for sport fishermen. However, he said the fish was magnificent, big—up to eight feet in length—and always put up a great fight.

"But what I most wanted to see," Rebecca told Humph,

“was a great barracuda. Even my uncle said they were scary and mighty. Though there are lots of them around Puerto Rico, in the reefs around the island, we didn’t see any.”

“You didn’t get seasick?”

“Not a chance. It was too exciting,” answered Rebecca.

How different they were, thought Humph, but with admiration for her spunk.

It was a beautiful, late fall morning when they boarded a taxi to go to Hell’s Kitchen in midtown to Pier 88, one of the piers used by Ward Shipping, now known as the Cuba Mail Line. Their ship, the Siboney, named after a town in Cuba, was already taking on passengers. While waiting for the line to move, Rebecca’s artistic eye made note of the dove-grey hull and black funnels with white markings.

Forty-five minutes later, their trunk had been taken to their cabin where a steward showed them its features. Rebecca said she suddenly felt like a queen because it was so well-appointed. After going to the washroom to freshen up, she announced she wanted to go out on deck to soak in the excitement most passengers felt. Mostly she wanted to watch the people gathered on the dock to bid bon voyage to friends and family leaving American shores like her and Humph.

Minutes before the gangway was wheeled away, Humph spotted the last person he expected to see. Using her hand to shield her eyes from the sun was Eve. He bellowed her name. She frantically waved both hands in recognition of the giant’s bass voice. Rebecca joined in. Eve blew them kisses. The ship’s thunderous horn silenced them all.

Humph could make out that Eve remained on the pier until the ship maneuvered out of sight.

Humph wondered why there had been no band on the dock to serenade their departure.

Once underway, he and Rebecca were holding hands as they made their way forward and watched Manhattan start to disappear as they entered New York Harbor. At this

point, there was a focus no one could resist. It was as if each passenger had his own private thoughts as they passed by the Statue of Liberty.

Finally, the ship heaved. It was Rebecca who informed Humph that the wave they had just felt meant their ship had entered the open sea, free of New York's peninsulas that had been blunting its might. They were truly Cuba-bound, she said.

They made their way to the starboard side of the ship. From there they could see a receding hint of the Manhattan skyline and an even fainter form that was the Statue of Liberty.

An announcement over the ship's loudspeaker said the lounge was now open.

More excited than he thought he'd be, Humph blurted out:

"Let's drink."

Rebecca pulled his head down and kissed him.

"Thank you, Humph."

"For what?"

"For hiring a Spanish interpreter."

Several hours later, over supper and after several drinks, including two Cuba-inspired concoctions that neither he nor Rebecca had ever heard of, Humph admitted to being entirely flummoxed by their case.

"Possible leads, yes we have them in abundance, yes we have many. But evidence of criminal activity by any of our suspects, we have no hope in hell of getting an arrest warrant for any of them."

Rebecca took his hand in hers.

"Come on, Humph. Not tonight."

She saw his body relax at her touch.

"Let's go on deck. It was a beautiful day in New York. Maybe there will be stars tonight."

The sound of the shipping piercing its way through the ocean was mesmerizing—above, a sky full of stars never

visible in the city. A moon was appearing. Humph held Rebecca tight with his right hand while his left clung to the rail. They didn't speak for the next half hour.

When they awoke the next morning, a steward inquired whether they wanted breakfast in their cabin or in the dining room. They chose the dining room. When they climbed to the deck, they found the sea agitated, like Humph's detective mind.

Although too hungry to discuss anything, Rebecca was astounded by how stubbornly single-minded Humph could be. He might as well have been staggering into a Bowery bar arguing with Duffy about how to proceed on a case.

The first twenty minutes of breakfast took place in silence. Then, as Humph lifted the last forkful of scrambled eggs to his mouth, the silence was broken. Humph had to swallow quickly and clear his throat to be intelligible.

"Rebecca, for no logical reason, I can't help but think we've had blinders on in this case. What if Borasco and the rich Wall Street broker have the reach to make their ring international? While they only tickle the surface of the New York art world with little robberies here and there at minor galleries, what if they're being financed by art thefts abroad, big-money ones? If so, that means that in New York they can play with us, like teasing a kitten with a dangling string."

Rebecca savored a bite of fresh fruit salad before answering, forcing Humph to put on the brakes.

"Well, Humph, all I can say is that this sumptuous voyage is headed in the right direction to test your theories. *Entonces*, we wait until we get to Cuba to investigate. Yes?"

Before Humph could reply, she added:

"What is this thing called shuffleboard? Let's try it out."

After their game, which Rebecca won, they found two deckchairs. They spent most of the afternoon on them with blankets, shutting their eyes against the sun. Humph later said he found the rhythmic motion of the sea like a child's

ride at Coney Island. Not long after, both fell asleep.

Over the next three days, with the temperature steadily increasing, Humph the detective had grown silent. Rebecca's love of the moment had taken control. It was a gentle control that led to afternoon love-making. It was a new world for Humph.

That evening, at supper, a shipboard announcement said there was clear sailing ahead, and they should reach Havana in just over twenty-four hours. For some, that was evidently good news. For others, like Rebecca, it wasn't. The voyage was like a dream to her, one she wanted to re-enter night after night.

As for Humph, he had become another person. No one born and bred in New York could survive the silence and never-ending massage of the sea without becoming unrecognizable. Rebecca was acutely aware of the change. She even entertained thoughts of suggesting they move to Puerto Rico.

As the ship entered the Havana harbor, Rebecca filed that idea away for another time. Humph stood at the rail as far forward as a passenger was allowed to go. He seemed to be hound-like, raising his head to sniff for clues.



CHAPTER 24

THE travel agent found them lodgings at Playa Mahahual—sea view, beach, everything a Yankee tourist could dream of. Humph wished he was closer to downtown. Rebecca said nothing and went for a swim.

Humph decided his best approach was to see the local police department. Perhaps if he presented his New York credentials, a letter from Higgins, his New York World-Telegram press pass, he'd get some cooperation.

No one was impressed.

Finally, Humph asked if he could return with a Spanish speaker from New York. After his request was translated by a crippled agent, they said, "Of course."

Humph returned to the hotel and found Rebecca at a bar right on the beach, talking with an old man. Humph took a seat at the far end of the bar. Rebecca and the old

man were talking animatedly in rapid-fire Spanish. Humph couldn't tell for sure, but the old guy seemed irritated or scared.

Minutes after Humph's arrival, the man departed. He had a pronounced limp.

Rebecca stood. She watched him leave then clearly scanned the beach as if looking for someone.

Humph called her name.

She looked suddenly surprised. Then she walked toward him.

"What's going on? I got nowhere with the local police today. And you?"

Rebecca said that she talked about local art thieves.

"He was willing to talk because I mentioned the name Borasco."

"How the hell would he know that name?"

Rebecca didn't answer right away.

"And how did you connect with this guy?"

"I went to a bar you told me about, the Santiago Café."

"You're out of your mind, Rebecca. You could get yourself killed in these places."

She moved next to Humph and hugged him.

"Women have an advantage. Men are stupid. Give them a bit of hip sway, and they forgive you for everything."

Humph couldn't help but smile. He knew he was equally vulnerable.

A day later, he received a telegram from Higgins that declared him to be an official representative of U.S. law enforcement.

Armed with the document, Humph returned to police headquarters.

This time he was ushered into the office of a chief superintendent.

"Welcome to Cuba, señor. Your concerns are our concerns. How can I help you?"

Humph laid out the case. “An American named Jones was guilty of art fraud and investment fraud. He fled the U.S. before prosecution. He was likely pursuing his criminal activities in Cuba.

“It is essential that we arrest him and return him to the United States.”

Humph then asked if they had any record of his presence in Cuba. The answer was not encouraging.

“We have no such record. This Señor Jones may very well be here, but we have had no reason to track him down, as you Americans say.”

Humph expected that kind of response. Local officials had not the slightest desire to cooperate “con los yanquis”.

It had been about twenty years since the country had broken away from Spain. Independence was the reason for living for almost every Cuban. Spain wasn’t welcome. Nor was the United States. It was hard to blame them, thought Humph.

Sometimes it was hard to be an American.

That evening, over a beachside supper, Humph expressed his frustration and confessed his conclusion about being an American.

She loved him for it. She loved the fact that she was an American citizen, but being an outsider, she observed uncountable incidents of racism and hypocrisy. It seemed so many “decent” Americans were blind to atrocities they permitted.

Humph nodded but said nothing more.

There were some things that couldn’t be explained, like a nation that professed the equality and freedom of all mankind while being the most racist country in the Western world.

Rebecca understood Humph’s dilemma. Being American should have been simple. It wasn’t.

The next day, Humph received a phone call. He didn’t understand a word of what the man was saying.

“Un momento, por favor.”

Rebecca took the phone.

When she hung up, she summarized the discussion.

“He said we have to meet tonight at a night club where we can seem invisible. He said he will find me. He said he had been following us. He knows what I look like.” Rebecca had already read an account of the place. It said it was “a place where the rhythm of conga drums and the sensuous moves of dancers electrified the audience”.

“Were you saying that,” Rebecca interrupted, “or just reading from a tourist pamphlet?” Her caller laughed.

Once again, Rebecca was drawn between investigation and the joy Cuban culture expressed.

The night was everything the pamphlet promised. They danced, they drank, they danced.

“You’re getting more Latino every time we take to the dance floor,” Rebecca said. That pleased Humph.

They said little as they returned to their small hotel off the Avenida de la República. There was a somehow-sweet breeze from the harbor. After just a block, it had refreshed Humph to the point where he pocketed his handkerchief.

At the hotel, the night clerk said they had received a telegram. Humph waited until they got to their room before reading it. It was from Duffy. Sitting on the bed, Humph read it aloud.

Duffy said a couple of days ago he followed one of Borasco’s thugs to a telegraph office. As soon as the thug left, Duffy showed his old police badge to the telegraph operator who sent the message. Duff said he asked what it said and where it was sent. The clerk passed Duffy the handwritten contents of the message, which the goon had pushed toward the operator and left behind once the message was sent. It read simply:

“Time to commence international relations.”

Most importantly, it was addressed to Graham Jones, care of Banco Español de la Isla de Cuba (Spanish Bank of

the Island of Cuba).

Rebecca was soon asleep at his side. For some time, Humph remained awake, thinking.

The next morning, the absence of music coming from the street and open windows answered one of Humph's questions about Havana and Spanish-speaking neighborhoods in New York: "Does it ever stop?" Apparently, the answer was "yes."

When Rebecca awoke, she mumbled two words: "Coffee?", "Café?" Half an hour later, they were installed in chairs on a terrasse that fronted a small cantina. Rebecca asked for something he didn't understand. For him, he mumbled, "Café con leche."

Humph announced his plan for the morning. Rebecca said she wanted to accompany him. If she couldn't help him, at least she'd see more of the city.

Humph explained that he very likely was going to need her translation skills. He was about to head to the bank to introduce himself as an assistant to Mr. Graham Jones.

Once there, he asked whether notification of the bank's deposit into Mr. Jones's account had been sent to him by mail. It had been. Humph then asked the address it had been sent to. It hadn't arrived at Mr. Jones's residence yet, and he wanted to make sure it had been sent to the correct place.

The bank clerk complied immediately, clearly believing Humph and Jones were business partners.

"Bingo!" said Humph as they descended the stairs leading to the bank's ornate doors. "Humph gave Rebecca a quick squeeze and announced they now had an address for Jones. Humph's biggest fear had been getting to Cuba and being unable to find him, even after weeks of searching, rendering the trip a waste of time and money. A moment later, he amended his conclusion: "Almost a waste." The happiness of the woman on his arm made the time and expense irrelevant.



CHAPTER 25

THREE days later, Humph spotted Jones outside what he knew to be his home. He loaded two large suitcases into a car, with a driver in uniform. Humph followed in a taxi he had hired for the day. The prices were not New York prices. Jones's vehicle snaked its way through several streets. Humph didn't know whether they were going north, south, east or west. After more turns, they were on some kind of highway.

"This is the way to the airport," the driver said. "It's about twelve miles southwest of the center of Havana, in another town called Boyeros. That's where the airport's name comes from, *señor*, Rancho Boyeros Airport. Rancho Boyeros is the name of the county where it was built."

When Humph had a question to ask, he did so in English. But his responses told the driver he understood

his Spanish explanations. Vainly, he wished Rebecca was with him.

The road to the airport was a two-lane highway with little traffic. Keeping an eye on Jones was easy. There was no need to sit close behind him.

Once inside the airport, however, Jones moved like someone who knew where he was going. A porter had taken on his bags and led the way to the departure point. Jones handed his ticket to the airline clerk. With a huge smile, she waved him through. He had presented his two large suitcases, but she shook her head “no” and motioned him forward to the waiting room.

All Cubans had been instructed that tourism was their future, especially Americans. The gringos were eager to invest in the country. They also loved high-stakes gambling. That meant jobs in a country that offered ordinary Cubans far too few.

Humph had no ticket, so he couldn't follow Jones. However, he got close enough to see which waiting room he went into. Cancun, Mexico. He wonder why on earth he would be going there.

By the time his driver returned him to his hotel, Humph still had no idea.

The first thought that came to his mind the next morning was that Jones was shipping something in those big suitcases. Could they be paintings, stolen paintings? Seeing no other immediate course of action, he registered another expense for the NYPD to pay. He could hardly bare to think of their reaction. Humph returned to the airport and bought an open-ended return ticket to Cancun. He would follow Jones day after day until he made another trip. It was a huge gamble in terms of expenses. He had no reason to believe Jones would make the one-and-a-half-hour trip to Cancun again.

Rebecca told him his bet was a good one. The local papers had just revealed another huge robbery of “irreplaceable

art” from the country’s most prestigious gallery, *El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes*, the National Museum of Fine Arts. That had been a week before their arrival in Cuba.

“Let’s just imagine that there is this skilled and daring group of art thieves, so daring that they rob the country’s most prestigious gallery twice in two weeks. That means the museum security is all but nonexistent, and it means the thieves are consummate pros. If Jones shipped the first lot within days, why wouldn’t we be justified in thinking that he’ll do the same with the second lot?”

Rebecca’s logic was irresistible.

Humph picked her up and put her down on a love seat at the end of the room.

“OK, my beautiful fortune teller, tell me one more thing. Why are these thieves getting their loot airlifted out of the country?”

“I’m not sure, but what if they think putting their loot up for auction in the U.S. will bring in unimaginably greater returns?”

It took Humph only seconds to realize Rebecca was right on the money.

Humph found the same taxi driver. He always parked in a street that included several hotels loved by tourists. Humph explained that he didn’t know when he’d need him but that it should be soon. They’d be going to the airport once again. Humph gave him an advance payment, large enough to keep him unavailable to other customers for the next two days.

“Your generosity makes me dream of going to the United States.”

Humph shook his hand to seal the deal.

Two days later, Humph rented a room that was dingy on the inside but gloriously tropical on the outside. When Rebecca saw it, she couldn’t help but wonder whether the stark contrast reflected the lives of most Cubans. Known as the Paris of the Caribbean for its exotic pleasures, beautiful

architecture and celebrity-filled night clubs, Havana had a dark side. Belaying the infectious street life and the welcoming nature of most of the city's inhabitants was profound poverty. Humph had read the population was increasingly turning toward the Cuban Communist Party.

"All this friction will spark a fire someday," said Humph.

"I hope they wait until we go back home," answered Rebecca. "I want to go home with beautiful memories."

The reason they rented the room within sight of Jones's home was that they had to be there when Jones took his paintings outside of Cuba. Because New York was not ready to charge him with anything, they hadn't issued a warrant for his arrest. Worse, Humph had learned, even if he could arrest Jones, they couldn't get him out of the country and back to the U.S. There was no extradition treaty between the two countries.

For financial reasons, Cuba wanted a warm relationship with the U.S., but the relationship was a complicated one. Cuba had achieved its independence from Spain only thirty-seven years prior, at a time when the U.S. already had a strong presence there. That independence remained in the memories of most Cuban adults. Their independence was hard-won, and they would fight any effort by another country to undermine it now.

"Our only hope, it seems," said Humph, "is that we nab Jones with the stolen art in another Latin American country, one that has an extradition treaty."

This time, though, they were out of luck, or more accurately, outsmarted. When Jones made his move, the bundle of art under his arm, he went to the airport. That was promising, but instead of taking a flight to another country, he was met by another American, a small man with a complexion that made it so he could conveniently be taken for a Latino.

Humph kept his eyes on him. Rebecca's eyes were glued to Jones. Jones soon returned to the taxi queue. Humph

waited twenty minutes before seeing Jones's contact board a flight to Cancun, Mexico. In barely two hours, the stolen art would be in Mexico. Since baggage was rarely checked, it found its way by car, motorcycle or plane to the States in no time. Humph had a sinking feeling that the movement of the art was a practiced, slick process. Jones remained untouchable. There was no way he'd risk putting a foot on the U.S. side of the board. American Customs was lax as well. If you had your plane ticket and boarding pass, you had nothing to worry about. But Jones wasn't stupid. He knew New York may have sent customs a notice to be on the outlook for him.

Though the Havana airport was only twelve miles from the city, Humph and Rebecca found it long. On the way, they decided to pay another week's rent on the small room near Jones's place, and without a word, they decided to head back to their hotel. A stroll on the beach, a tantalizing dinner menu and a drink under the stars would erase the day's disappointment.

As the evening ended and they returned to their room, the only couple on the elevator, Rebecca leaned into Humph and said, "I guess we can say, for a while at least, we're on vacation." Humph, knowing how preoccupied he could be with work, smiled and hugged her back. Rebecca interpreted that as a yes.

As she turned down the sheets and got undressed, Humph apologized and said there was just one more thing to do before retiring. He'd already taken off his pants, so Rebecca wasn't too alarmed. He return twenty minutes later, apologizing again.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"Telegrams. One to Humph, one to Higgins, one to the lawyer for the gentleman suing Jones. Just asking for updates on all fronts."

Rebecca's face moved within inches of Humph's. She stared intensely.

“What?” asked Humph. “Sent telegrams. That’s all. I swear.” He was alarmed by her intensity.

A long minute later, she dropped her gaze and turned away, a mini-second later breaking into a giggle.



CHAPTER 26

TWO days later, the lawyer replied:

“Developments: While we have filed a suit, I’ve been informed Barrington would now like to discuss out-of-court settlements. Wise move because if he loses his case to my clients, he will have not only to repay the money they invested, which is considerable, but he’ll have to pay damages that can amount to much more than that. My clients wish me to accept Barrington’s offer. Will investigate extradition protocols for Cuba. Regards.”

Then Higgins: “Based on your testimony, we have been able to obtain an indictment for our dear Mr. Jones on a charge of uttering threats and physically menacing his wife. That’s better than nothing since we can’t connect him to arranging her murder. Understand it’s not worth much, but I’ll issue a warrant for his arrest anyway. Bonne chance,

detective.”

Finally, five days later, Duff replied: “Don’t know whether it’s a small or grand breakthrough. I discovered, with the help of my European contacts, that two of Europe’s better-known art thieves set sail for the land of the free recently. One of my detective friends sent me a photo of one of them. Stupid-looking sod, if you ask me. Anyway, I was at dockside when the pair alighted on American soil. I’m sure they felt unseen in the crowd of departing passengers and those welcoming them. To my utter surprise, Borasco was one of them. As they say in the Westerns, ‘Them boys sure as shootin’ ain’t up to no good.’ Will update.”

Humph raced to the room. He was elated.

After he described the answers he got from America, Rebecca understood his elation, but her heart sank a little. This meant his mind wasn’t on the vacation of a lifetime.

For the moment, said Humph, totally oblivious to her inner reaction to the news, there wasn’t much they could do. “But we must remain vigilant.”

Rebecca looked puzzled.

“We’ve got to keep tailing Jones. If he meets some shady-looking characters . . .”

“We can’t judge art thieves by their appearance, Humph! Control yourself.”

Humph had to concede the point. He was speaking nonsense out of frustration at not being able to complete their Havana mission, to nail Jones. It also sounded to Rebecca as if he were grasping at straws to avoid spending their vacation at her side.

In more neutral tones, Humph said, “Do you think we should keep an eye on Jones to find out who he sees?”

Rebecca realized that they had an obligation to do whatever was possible in Havana to lasso a man wanted in America. She could do that without dispensing with her romantic ideas. Evidently, Humph couldn’t. However, she didn’t press the point. Life was too good at the moment.

She even felt her joints were loosening up under the Cuban sun and the nonstop musical accompaniment to day-to-day life. She could let her hips sway the way they used to in Puerto Rico. No one, except young men, would remark on it. After so many years in New York, her English was superb, but she found it immensely easier, and more fun, to respond to sexual catcalls in Spanish.

Obsessively, Humph had gone back to the little room he had rented near Jones's place. Day after day, there was nothing of interest. While there, he had developed a taste for several Cuban foods. Since he was almost always in a hurry, a New York attitude that was out of place in the Caribbean, his go-to meal was a Cuban sandwich with roast pork, ham and cheese and flavorings he couldn't identify. Steak-outs were better in Cuba.

Day after day, there was no activity whatsoever at Jones's residence. Had he skipped the country? No, he thought, why would he? He had a seemingly ready source of stolen, up-market paintings for delivery back home. Humph could only wonder how vast the Borasco network was.

Back at the hotel, more often than not, Rebecca met him at the door with a request to speak Spanish only. Humph knew he had no grounds to lay a serious protest, other than, "I'm too tired. Tomorrow, OK?"

Rebecca turned on a radio.

"Sleep and listen."

In the following days, Humph saw no possible leads, no contacts with the newly imported European thieves, no unusual behavior by Jones, no more news from New York. He realized suddenly that he was in Cuba on his own with a woman he loved.

What a stupid idiot he'd been. Damn, he could damn himself in Spanish now. How could he have forgotten the plan that had energized him in New York when the Cuba trip started becoming a possibility?

Could he try to talk about it to Rebecca that night? The more he thought about it, the more he needed a drink.

He made his way back to Avenida de la República. Before slipping down a side street to their hotel, Humph surrendered to a single, fading neon light above a bar whose entrance was five steps below street level. There were lots of bars in New York like that. You had to go to the bar and ask for a drink. You got it without a word being spoken. No one guided you to a table. You took what you could find. He hoped he would land at one where any other occupants there might be would have no desire to talk to a gringo.

He was in luck. Later on, he figured his size dissuaded anyone else from sitting there. He drank Scotch, marking him as a Yankee. The waiters and nearby customers probably figured he was angry, or perhaps just in a sour mood. Cubans didn't feel comfortable with that in a bar. But for Humph, that was just jim-dandy. He had some thinking to do.

When he got to the hotel, he was too tipsy to talk of love. Fortunately, Rebecca had given up on the evening. She was asleep on the sofa. Humph decided that discretion was the better part of valor and went to the bedroom. He fell asleep on top of the covers.

The next morning, he found Rebecca dressed in a flamboyant summer dress. She looked impossibly perky.

"I'm going to walk the length of the Avenida, just to see what there is to see. Did you know, Humph, there are jazz bands aplenty here? I'm thinking that would be a great way to start a day before the sun gets too hot. What say?"

Humph took in her effervescence, her beauty.

"God, yes!" His throat must have been raw for some reason because his words sounded more like a grunt. In truth, Humph suddenly realized, it was a plain old, good all-American hangover.

They breakfasted in a café frequented by celebrity tourists. On the wall were pictures of Ava Gardner and Frank Sinatra. "Where was Hemmingway?" wondered Humph, coming to.

“Do you swim?” Rebecca asked out of the blue.

“Well, I fell into the water once at Coney Island. I remember people on the beach laughing. Then someone grabbed me by the back of my neck and hauled me to shore. In reality, I was just a few yards out. Even my parents laughed at me. I’ve never gone near the water since.”

“OK, let’s forget swimming,” said Rebecca. “What about going fishing? You don’t need to do anything. You can if you want to, but you don’t have to cast a line. We’ll be safe. These guys here,” she said, waving her hand along the coast to their right, “they know what they’re doing.” After a pause, she added, “So do I. I grew up doing this.”

Humph couldn’t say no.

When they got to shore, Humph happily leapt to the dock. Rebecca tossed him the two fish she’d caught. He looked at them like they were from another planet.

With easy grace, Rebecca jumped next to him in full laughter. She took the fish.

“Why can’t you live in the world of natural things?”

“I’m OK with dogs and cats, domesticated beasts. But that’s the limit, for me at least. I know some people have really strange creatures as pets, but they bite and sting and suffocate people like you and me. That’s why we live in cities, no?”

After all, Rebecca decided, Humph had been brave. She didn’t understand his fears, but they didn’t matter in New York.

Back at the hotel, Rebecca took her fish to the kitchen. After careful inspection, they were accepted. They would be on tonight’s menu.

Rebecca insisted they dine there that evening.

It wasn’t until the next morning that Humph summoned the courage to pin Rebecca to a park bench, get down on his knee and propose. Rebecca answered with a kiss—a soft one. It was very soft. Humph barely felt it. When he had gone to his knee in front of her, his body had been as

tense as a man ready to plunge off a cliff. Rebecca sensed the absurd reaction.

“My beautiful man, why are you so petrified at the thought of marrying me? I love you. I want to be your partner. What’s so complicated?”

Rebecca offered her hands to help him to his feet. He rose up. Before reaching his full height, he took her in his arms and dragged her toward him as he descended onto a sofa. He was so big and so strong, she had no choice. She loved that feeling.

Humph threw his arms around her and kissed her more passionately than he’d ever done.

“You’re a dream come true, Rebecca. I never thought I would ever deserve someone like you.”

An hour later, they released each other. Rebecca asked the same question Humph was mulling.

“How do we get married here?”



CHAPTER 27

A day later in New York, Duffy's persistence paid off. The two goons appeared at Borasco's doorstep. They were let in by a middle-aged man Duffy didn't recognize, beyond the fact that he wasn't Borasco. An hour later, the goons reappeared. A car unknown to Duffy scooped them up. Duffy got the plate and phoned the precinct. "Follow. Follow!" Like a good reporter, he had long ago made it a habit to keep his eyes out for a pay phone close to the crime scene. Fifteen minutes later, a patrol car met him at the phone booth. The driver said the goons were already being followed. "I've got a radio in this baby. We'll be updated." Duffy took a pocket flask out of his jacket. The driver accepted a swig while making a hard right onto a major thoroughfare.

The pursuing cop cars were in luck because the guy driving the goons was evidently being careful not to draw attention by speeding or failing to stop at stop signs. The police didn't have to worry about those constraints.

In no time, they were in East Elmhurst, Queens. Without a doubt, the goons were headed to the airport, the Glenn H. Curtiss Airport. Since neither the cop nor Duffy had ever had any desire to fly, neither one was aware that Curtiss already had a place in aviation history, a pioneer and founder of the country's aircraft industry.

When they got to the airport, the biggest in New York, they saw the patrol cars that had been giving chase. They forced a driver who'd parked in the spot just in front of them to skedaddle and find another parking spot. Once inside, they hurried to the arrivals gate. The other cops were there and chatting with a customs agent. Seated nearby were the two goons, handcuffed. Duff noticed their ankles were also bound.

Not long after, one of the cops who had tracked down the goons nudged the other. A passenger from Havana, big-bellied and looking every inch a tourist, claimed two suitcases. One was obviously very light.

The custom's officers sprang into action and pointed him to a hallway leading to an inspection office. Duffy was in hot pursuit. At the door to the office, Humph once again flashed his expired cop ID and was welcomed in.

Before his eyes, he saw the two bags opened. In the small one, rolled up, was a handful of canvases. Since neither he nor the other officers knew anything about art, the paintings were set aside. Duffy suggested they call Higgins. "He'll find you an expert."

The passenger was grilled about the paintings. He claimed he had no knowledge of what was in the suitcase and added that he didn't know the first thing about art. He repeated several times that he came to America only to eat hotdogs and see the beauties in American cinema.

“Looking at this guy’s waistline,” said the cop who drove Duffy. “I can believe he came here for the hotdogs.” Duffy laughed and pulled out his flask again.

It took forever for the NYPD art expert to arrive from downtown Manhattan. When he got there and looked at the loot, he immediately phoned Higgins.

“Without any doubt, sir, these are the stolen paintings. The courier admitted just now that they were to be delivered to a Señor Borasco.”

He added that the man didn’t seem too intelligent, and it was unlikely that he was a player in this theft network. Nevertheless, Higgins told his boys to bring him in for further chitchat.

Duffy was part of the posse that delivered the Cuban to the precinct.

His first question to Higgins was:

“We know Borasco won’t be happy to learn that his bonbons from Cuba had gone astray. What do think he’ll do? The fact that he was the designated recipient of these paintings, can we charge him with anything?”

Higgins said it would be iffy in court.

“I dream of nailing him when he’s knee-deep in forging documents for a known theft. Let’s let him think he’s safe for the moment. I’m sure he’ll want to make up for this loss and, hopefully, do something foolish, something too daring by half.

“I just found out that what we confiscated, those paintings, they could have sold here for more than a hundred grand.”

Higgins then added that he suspected a certain Mr. Norman Barrington, at this very moment trying to buy his way out of a landslide of lawsuits for investment fraud, would be bitterly disappointed about their seizure of highly valued art from Havana. The sale in New York of those paintings would easily have extricated him from that costly quagmire.

They all threw out theories about how the network of art thieves was organized and how it worked.

“What we need,” said Duffy, “are the Cuban connections—faces, names, the works.”

“I agree,” said Higgins. “I won’t be happy until we have Mr. Jones in one of our cells.”

Later, on his way home, Duffy sent a telegram to Humph.

“We nailed the courier and the six paintings. Turns out they’re worth a fortune. They were supposed to be delivered to Borasco, but Higgins doubts we could convict him of anything based on that. But we now know there’s a solid link between Cuban art theft and our slimy boy. Higgy is frothing at the bit to get your Mr. Jones back here. On what charge, I don’t know. Anyway, we’ve dealt Barrington and Borasco mighty gut punches. I don’t know whether you ever sleep in that great city, but if you do, good night.”

The next morning, after retrieving the message, Humph was elated. He was already airborne at the realization he was about to marry Rebecca. Duffy’s telegram sent him to outer space.

He all but pulled Rebecca out of bed. It was not how she had pictured a post-proposal awakening.

“I’ll explain as we go,” said Humph. He was evidently in great spirits, which slightly becalmed Rebecca.

They hailed a cab and went to police headquarters.

With Rebecca translating, they were led to the office of the chief of detectives. His sparkling uniform made him look like a highly decorated military officer.

At first, he didn’t want to concede that there was a sophisticated art theft ring operating under his command, let alone one stealing paintings from the prestigious Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. For a good half hour, Rebecca revealed the evidence the New York police had compiled, starting with the courageous investigations of the gentleman beside her, namely Humph.

The captain excused himself. Evidently he had spoken with a number of his detectives because when he returned, he proudly stated that of course they were aware of suspicious activities by an assortment of known criminals.

"I assure you, *señorita*, that we are actively searching for all thieves we think might have the talent to carry out such a theft."

Humph had a question. Rebecca translated:

"Why would security be so lax at such a prestigious national treasure?"

The captain had been in the process of standing up and wishing them good day. He quickly resumed his chair, perhaps buying time to fabricate an answer.

He cleared his throat and lightly tapped the desk with his baton.

"I'll be honest with you," he announced. "We, and by 'we' I mean my police force and the administrators of the national museum, have always assumed that no one would be foolish enough to try robbing a national institution. We felt confident that they would assume the works of art were heavily guarded. Frankly, we were wrong. Though we have not found the thieves, I can assure you that appropriate security measures are already being implemented."

Humph and Rebecca were relieved by the sudden honesty and show of humility. They were no further ahead in their investigation but, for a brief moment, they felt inclined to believe that Havana police were not involved in the theft.

However, neither Humph nor Rebecca believed the Havana force had made the slightest effort in the case. As they strolled back to their hotel, Humph reminded Rebecca that Cubans were all still struggling against the effects of the Depression. Salary cuts and business closings were crippling workers. The railroads had declared a national strike, and anti-government demonstrations were common. All salaries were being cut except those of soldiers. Cuban

cops were not offered the same exception. In a few short blocks, Humph had resumed thinking the cops could certainly have assisted in the theft.

Back at the hotel, after bathing and changing their clothes for outfits more fitting for a ninety-degree day, they got comfortable under giant umbrellas on the beach and ordered margaritas.

“Sweating depletes body salts,” said Humph, explaining his choice of drink. The salt-rimmed glasses would restore them, he said. Rebecca didn’t know whether to take his reasoning seriously. She personally felt no need to restore herself from their outing, but she decided to take no chances and finished her drink in short order. Humph looked surprised. Rebecca simply said, “Thank you, Dr. Humph. I think I’ll have another.”

By the time they each had downed two margaritas, the subject had switched to matrimony.

“There’s something I’ve been worried about,” Humph announced.

“You’re Catholic. I’m nothing. Will a priest marry us?”

Rebecca said she hadn’t thought about it.

“We’ll have to find a priest and ask him.”

Humph agreed. Back in the hotel’s lobby, they asked a clerk where the closest church was.

The clerk, suspecting the question about churches was a reflection of the couple’s desire to explore Havana, directed them to Iglesia de la Reina. He said it was a Gothic-inspired masterpiece with soaring spires. “You will find it well worth the trip.” Little did he know the purpose of their visit.

They had to wait fifteen minutes until the priest appeared. The church offered cool shade. Humph could have waited longer.

Rebecca had genuflected and made the sign of the cross when she entered. Humph took his place on a pew, the second from the front.

As Rebecca and the priest talked, she turned and pointed to Humph. The priest waved him forward to join them.

Rebecca told the priest they wanted to marry, but her husband-to-be was not of the faith. The priest bid Humph welcome to his church, then asked Rebecca whether Humph was ready to convert to Catholicism.

"We don't have time," Rebecca answered. "We are on vacation."

The priest pondered the situation for several minutes.

"My child, I'm afraid my answer has to be no."

Without hesitation, Rebecca replied:

"Father, what if I taught him the Catechism in Spanish?"

The priest looked at Humph and then at Rebecca.

"By your own admission," the priest said, "you don't have time for your fiancé to truly convert. Why don't you wait until your return home? My answer remains no."

Back outside, Rebecca hurried to explain the priest's verdict.

"I assumed as much," said Humph. "What now?"

They took a taxi back to the hotel. They talked for a long while in their room. At one point, Rebecca went downstairs to the lobby and then the formal dining room. She spotted a young woman from the kitchen staff. Because it wasn't yet evening, she didn't look too busy. Rebecca stopped her and begged her for a minute of her time. She was greeted with a big smile.

Immediately, the woman suggested civil marriage. To Rebecca's surprise, she learned that only about a third of marriages in Cuba were done through the church.

"You will have fees to pay, but that's all," she said. "Even if your fiancé were Catholic, you would have to extend your stay here for weeks. Banns would have to be posted for fifteen days and read in church in front of the congregation."

"No, we can't stay that long," Rebecca said. "So, a civil marriage it will be."

The kitchen worker was happy to have offered a solution. “May I ask where you’re from?” With her usual pride, Rebecca said, “Puerto Rico.” The young woman smiled broadly and said she thought she had detected a slight accent. Good luck, señorita.”

Rebecca thanked her, then asked, “Out of curiosity, are you married?”

The woman said no.

“This is not a good time to get married and start a family. Men can’t get jobs. It would be impossible for them to support a family.”

“I hope better times come soon,” said Rebecca. It was only on the way back to her room that Rebecca remembered that, according to Humph, world war was on its way. There would be no “better times” for a long while.

It wasn’t the majestic ceremony Rebecca had imagined as a girl, but walking arm in arm with Humph across a tree-lined square that faced the elegant two-story city hall fronted by stout Gothic columns, Rebecca felt that this was plenty enough for memories. However, as they entered City Hall, she suddenly worried whether her legs would carry her the rest of the way. They were trembling.

“I’m floating, Humph. Hold on tight,” she whispered without looking up at him. He squeezed her a little more tightly.

“This is new to me, too, beautiful. Remember, this is our moment. Just you and me. We’ll be officially a couple in no time at all.”

They were ushered into a small office where, had they been Cubans, they would have been asked by a notary to sign various legal documents pertaining to property and wealth. For Humph and Rebecca, a single signature made their marriage official. Twenty minutes later, they retraced their steps out of City Hall with a piece of paper in hand. It proclaimed that they were man and wife.

They crossed the street into the park. Humph held up his hand indicating he wanted her to wait a moment. Rebecca looked puzzled. After fumbling from pocket to pocket, Humph extracted a small blue box. He opened it slowly before Rebecca's eyes. Still clutching the wedding license, Rebecca threw herself at her husband. He had given her a wedding ring. When she let go of him, Humph took the ring out of the box and placed it on the fourth finger of her left hand. Rebecca pulled his head down to her face. They kissed for a full minute.

"When did you get the ring, Humph?"

"In New York. Not long after you and Eve ganged up on me, telling me I should marry you. I've been carrying it around ever since. I didn't want to leave it in the apartment in case you found it while cleaning."

Back at the hotel, Rebecca began packing for the return voyage. The last item she packed was their *Certificación de Matrimonio* from the civil status registry.



CHAPTER 28

WHEN the Siboney docked five days later and deposited its passengers where it had picked them up on the outward-bound cruise, there was a small welcoming party. There was no band playing, although passengers seemed to find many people ashore to wave at.

Rebecca and Humph spotted no acquaintances. It didn't matter because they were both in the middle of their dream.

Suddenly, over the hum of a busy port, came the sounds of bagpipe. Curious about the intrusion of a sound rarely ever heard before in New York Harbor, the crowd was urged to move away from the gangplank to allow passengers to disembark in comfort. The bagpipes wailed on.

It was Rebecca who first spotted the source.

“You’re not going to believe this, Humph. We are being serenaded by none other than our dour Scottish acquaintance and colleague.”

Humph leaned over the railing and looked hard.

“My God!” he exclaimed. “It’s Detective Higgins in a kilt.”

It was only then that the newlyweds spotted a small group of celebrants, headed by Duffy. It was as if his cheers of welcome were trying to drown out the Scotsman’s pipes.

Humph and Rebecca had been hoping to quickly and quietly return to Tompkins Square to cuddle up on the sofa in a soft reintroduction to normalcy, albeit as a married couple.

A half an hour later, there was a knock on the door. Humph was suddenly face to face with a plastered Irishman. Behind him, his bagpipe towering over the Irishman, was a Scotsman, Detective Higgins. His cheeks were redder than usual. Behind them, three other cops known to Humph and, barely visible from the doorway, the long-absent Eve. She was holding a cluster of balloons.

After they’d all squeezed into the apartment, Humph stood and raised his hands high.

“Thank you, all of you. We’re happy to be home and with our friends. But there are things I don’t understand. First of all, Detective Higgins, what’s with the bagpipe serenade?”

“In my homeland, we are free to celebrate holy matrimony anyway we please. But until the pipes are played, you are not officially married.”

“I thank you profoundly for the honor you have bestowed upon us,” said Humph with a big smile. “If only I knew a few words of Gaelic to properly thank you.”

Duffy piped up. “Humph, allow me to express your fine sentiment for you, in real Gaelic, Irish Gaelic.”

Higgins interrupted Duffy with a smile and some rapid gobbledygook that Higgins later said was Scottish Gaelic.

“Roughly translated, I told Duffy to pipe down and continue his fine efforts to get besotted. To his credit, Duffy replied that he enjoyed the pun about piping down—you know, bagpipe humor and all that.”

Suddenly, Eve pushed her way next to Humph.

“Dad, you did it!”

“Did what, Eve?”

“You got married, just like Rebecca and I told you to do.”

“Did I have a choice?”

Before Humph could respond, “No,” Eve had darted to Rebecca’s side. The two embraced, almost shrieking with pleasure at seeing each other again. Because of her Broadway show, about to open in a few days, Eve had been absent from Rebecca’s life almost as long as she had been from Humph’s. Rebecca wanted details about the show. Was the cast confident they had a winner? Were some of them terrified? How had the out-of-town testing gone?

“Later for all that, Rebecca. Marriage. Details, details. Honeymoon, details, details.”

There was no putting her off. No one dared interrupt the pair. At one point, Rebecca got off the sofa and put on a record. Salsa. Eve joined her after turning up the volume.

The party was on.

Duffy took Higgins by the shoulders and urgently demanded the senior detective find a cart of fine female dance partners for the men in blue. “Despite your kilt, sir, you don’t qualify.”

Higgins turned to Humph. “Please, please find this Irishman a drink!”

It was well past midnight when the music ceased and the men had left. Only Humph, Rebecca and Eve remained.

Humph landed heavily on the sofa next to Eve. He put his hand on hers and got out the words, “Tell me about the show,” before Rebecca interrupted. “Eve has other news, not so happy.”

With her two arms wrapped around Humph's left, she announced that she was no longer engaged. All she had ever told him about the guy she wanted to marry was that he was an actor in the same show, that he was tall like Humph and that he was from New Jersey.

"I told you, Dad, that he loved to laugh and clown around. He was determined to enjoy life. I loved that about him. Then, while you guys were away in Cuba, I discovered he had been loving life with a dancer on another show, one that was already open. She apparently was fond of doing matinee performances for him alone. Maybe it would have happened if I hadn't been rehearsing day and night. I don't even know where he found the time."

Humph held her in silence for a long while. Then, gently stroking her face, he said simply: "There'll be others, Eve. You're a real catch."

In a small voice, still holding on to Humph, Eve said:

"On with the show and all that, right?"

"Kinda," said Humph.

A few days later, Rebecca rushed home, excited.

"Sit, my love, and listen. To celebrate being back home with a ring on the fourth finger of her left hand, I went to the artist co-op. I felt like trying to draw some Cuba impressions that I might want to paint later on. While I was in front of my easel, guess who came up behind me and gently tapped my shoulder."

Humph didn't shrug. He just stared at her and waited.

"You're no fun. We could have made a game of guessing."

Humph laughed. "OK, my love." With shoulders raised almost painfully high and arms extended wide, he exclaimed, "In heaven's name, who, pray tell, tapped your shoulder?"

"Much better, Humph. None other than Victor Garcia."

"The guy with the skinny—"

Rebecca interrupted. "Chest. Yes, that guy. He said he's been coming to the co-op almost daily to find me."

She said Garcia wanted to tell her that he had been approached at the Met by a man he didn't know, someone with a British accent. He said he had some artworks that might need what's called "sealing".

Seeing the blank look on Humph's face, she explained that, "Over time, oil paintings can deteriorate because of things like dirt, dust and environmental conditions like light. Restoration helps remove these damaging things, preventing more deterioration and ensuring the painting looks great for a long time. It takes a real expert to do that. The Met has people like that. After cleaning and repairing the painting, they varnish and seal it."

Rebecca explained that the guy with the British accent wanted to know if his paintings needed that kind of treatment. He said that a couple of weeks later, he returned with a single painting. Victor said it was obviously an outstanding work of art. The Englishman then asked Victor to show him some of the other paintings he was scheduled to work on, paintings already hanging in the Met.

"Victor said it was obvious the Englishman recognized two of the paintings," Rebecca said. "He described them as beautiful and worth a small fortune. Victor accepted the job of treating the Englishman's painting as a freelance job, one that paid a heady sum. He would work on them at the Met during slack hours or late in the evening after the museum was closed to the public."

She said Victor completed the job, exercising supreme care in the hope of landing future jobs. But before calling the Englishman, Victor decided to get in touch with Rebecca.

"He had suspicions," Rebecca said. "He said the painting was real, no doubt. But who really owned it?"

"Borascio." That was Humph's first word after Rebecca's revelation.

He asked if she could get free tomorrow morning so the two of them could visit Higgins and explain the development.

“With pleasure. I think Victor has done us a huge favor. Maybe it’s the lead we’ve been looking for.”

Humph hugged her. “You sound more like a detective every day.”



CHAPTER 29

HIGGINS was delighted with Rebecca's report. Not a second after he had heard it, he asked if she could contact "this Victor Garcia fellow" and ask if they could see the painting before he notified Borasco that it was ready.

Victor acquiesced.

"Come to the museum. I'll show it to you immediately, but don't wait in case Borasco starts on insisting on its return."

An hour later, a police photographer arrived at the Met with Humph, Rebecca and an NYPD detective. A day later, the photo of the painting was sent to Havana police with the request that it be taken to the director of the art museum to verify whether it was one of the stolen works. A week later, Higgins had his reply.

“Confirmed,” he told Humph on the phone. “Borasco has the stolen paintings.”

He told Humph to contact Victor and tell him to release the painting to Borasco and accept any other freelance jobs from him.

Three weeks later, Rebecca reported having heard from Victor.

“He has accepted three more jobs from Borasco.”

Higgins doubled surveillance on Borasco.

At the same time, he continued his surveillance of auction houses. His boys soon discovered that the first painting was in a large auction warehouse on the Upper West Side awaiting auction day.

A day later, detectives discovered that the partial owner of the auction house and full owner of the auction warehouse was banker Norman Barrington.

Higgins had requested that New York Customs inspectors retain any packages addressed to Barrington. Inspection at New York’s ports of entry was vastly more exhaustive than it would be at an obscure, dusty Texas-Mexico crossing. The stolen painting had gotten into Borasco and Barrington’s hands with surprising quickness. Borasco would then create new provenance documents for the paintings, listing Barrington as the long-time owner. At that point, Borasco’s thugs would whisk the paintings to the auction warehouse. Once auction day arrived, Barrington would seat himself discretely near the back of the room, drawing next to no attention to himself. Since the paintings were clearly of great vintage and quality, it was only a matter of waiting until eager buyers bid many thousands of dollars. One day, two of Barrington’s paintings were sold. Check in hand, Barrington had his chauffeur drive him to his bank, where the money was deposited. From there, it was a short drive to his home. Being a fastidious businessman, he would record the transaction in code and, still in code, indicate how much he was about to pay the thieves, and their names. He kept

that notebook in his personal safe. Sometimes, the largest portion of the payment for a particular painting went to Borasco. Borasco would, in turn, as the case may be, pay the thief who robbed the gallery or home of the owner. He would also ensure that Borasco paid their new freelancer, Victor Garcia. As for the paintings recently stolen from the Havana gallery, he sent a big check to the gallery's director, who in turn would pay his thieves, a little gang who robbed other galleries and individual owners, or simply got handed the paintings by the national museum director with orders to get them safely out of the country and into the hands of forgers, like Belasco in New York.

While the case was progressing at a rapid clip, Humph still felt he'd failed on his Cuban trip. Sure, he had married the woman of his dreams, but professionally he had failed to nail Graham Jones. Higgins was also frustrated by that failure. Learning that there was no real extradition treaty between Cuba and the U.S. didn't help. Nor did the news that the lawsuits against Jones and Barrington had not progressed.

Higgins surprised the precinct by showing up at work on a Sunday, December 31, 1939.

On arriving, he had called Duffy at home.

"With respect, get your Irish ass to my office as soon as you can. I have a proposition to make."

Though his Bowery residence was not far from the precinct, it was two hours before he walked into Higgins's office.

Humph looked at his watch but said nothing. He pointed to a chair. Duffy stretched languorously before sitting.

"So sorry to have awakened you from your beauty sleep."

"Apology accepted," said Duffy.

Higgins raised his voice.

"I'm not in the mood for games this morning. I have a request. Shut up and listen."

The request was irresistible to Duffy.

“Go to Havana and use whatever means you need to wrap Graham Jones in a package with a neat bow and bring him back to me.”

Despite the fact that Humph and Rebecca went to Havana to get married, Duffy felt strangely jilted at not having been invited. Higgins’s offer erased all that.

The detective’s reasoning was that legal means to extradite Jones didn’t exist. Various protocols had been established between the two countries, but they mostly applied to American businesses operating in Cuba and importing and exporting. There were none for extraditing people, Cuban or American, to the U.S.

Was there anyone who could dance around such limitations in the law? No one but Duffy. As a New York cop, he did it for years yet never managed to have an arrest thrown out of court because of police malpractice. How he did it, Higgins didn’t have a clue. Now, desperate for Jones, he handed Duffy an open-ended ticket on the same vessel Humph and Rebecca took to Havana.

He stared at Duffy, or rather, he glared at Duffy.

“Can’t I fly?”

“Not possible. There are no planes from here to Cuba.”

A minute later, after perusing the ticket, Duffy sat up straight in his chair and said:

“Aye, aye, captain, sir.”

Tossing Higgins an inappropriately casual salute, Duffy departed.

The next morning, Higgins phoned Humph to inform him of his decision.

“What the hell were you thinking?!” Humph exclaimed.

“Hold on, hold on, Humph. Let me explain.”

“Christ,” said Humph. “It better be good.”

“Worry not. We’ve already begun extradition proceedings for Barrington. I anticipate that the Brits will be much more accommodating than the Cubans.”

Humph stopped him. “I never thought I’d hear you say that.”

“I never thought I’d say that,” Higgins answered. “But we’re between a rock and an Irishman, if I can coin a phrase.”

“Keep talking,” said Humph, trying to contain his outrage. He loved Duff and he had immense respect for his investigative skills. He had a way of thinking that couldn’t be mapped, couldn’t be predicted. But he got results, mysterious as they were. There was a lot more to him than whiskey. And Humph knew that, and Higgins knew that, too.

After Humph cooled down, Higgins said:

“Fact, Jones has no income in Cuba.

“Fact, he’s been there so long he must be nearly broke.

“Fact, he knows he can’t return to the States. He’s a wanted man for the lawsuits about his proxy scam.

“Fact, he has facilitated the export of stolen paintings of great value. Humph and Rebecca verified that.

“Fact, we—namely dear Duffy—can harass him to the point of insanity. He is bright. He comes from a privileged class. He is now a criminal. But he has no idea what it’s like to be the object of an international police investigation.”

“International? How so?” asked Humph.

“I have talked to our ambassador to Cuba, Humph. The last thing he wants is something to interfere with Cuba’s partnership with the U.S. He welcomes our investment, our industry. He grows rich, his country grows rich and he earns our protection as a democracy. Quote, unquote, Humph. We both know that’s a load of crap.”

Humph said he understood completely.

Higgins said that when you have a dishonest despot trying to claim freedom and democracy are his only aims, you know you have someone whose arm can be twisted.

“Humph, I’ve given Duffy carte blanche. I have State Department assurance that whatever he does will be

brushed under the rug, even if it means lying outright in the face of any Cuban protests. A big plus is that technically Duffy is not a member of the NYPD. He's no more than a private citizen. Whatever damage he might cause is clearly not the fault of the U.S."

Humph saw Duff off. But there was no one to wave to. Even though he was Irish, Duffy expended considerable energy on occasion to show he was not sentimental. Humph found that amusing since so many Irish songs were just that. Before Duffy boarded the Siboney, Humph said it might be a good idea upon arriving in Havana to find himself a pretty señorita to translate for him. Though Duffy was not a fan of water, which would soon surround him, he betrayed a glint in his eye at the notion.

"You're a wonderful travel guide, Humph."

When Humph went home that night, Rebecca met him at the door. Eve was beside her.

"Sad news, honey."

After only fifty-nine performances, and despite the biggest names on Broadway, Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein, being behind it, the show was soon going to fold. The reviews had been complimentary in parts but negative on the whole. The owners decided to cut their losses and back out. Eve was devastated.

She had called Rebecca immediately after hearing the news.

"I thought the show was great," Eve said. "I never dreamed it would flop. Beautiful songs, beautiful dances."

"And, from what I read," said Rebecca, "a crappy story."

After a long silence, Eve said, "For some reason they rewrote a lot of it just before we opened. You might be right. To be honest, I never tuned in on the story. All I was really interested in were the dances we did and the music, which I loved. Fuck. New York is a bitch of an audience. They liked the show in Buffalo. Maybe I should move there."

Rebecca dropped to her knees and feigned horror at the notion.

“There’s nothing to do there except watch snow fall. Please don’t go. I once had my fortune read, and the only warning the cards issued was to avoid Buffalo at all costs. No reason given.”

Eve hauled Rebecca to her feet. “You’re a clown. I hadn’t realized.” She was smiling.



CHAPTER 30

AFTER the gangplank was removed, Humph hailed a cab down to Battery Park. He always loved looking at the harbor, and he wanted to watch Duffy's ship crossing it in pursuit of open water. The view relaxed him. That day he realized that despite the complexity of his current case, being married in itself lessened the pressure. A case, it seemed, was no longer his whole world.

After waving to the disappearing ship, Humph made his way across Lower Manhattan to the precinct. Before going home, he wanted to see if there were any updates about the surveillance of Barrington. He learned only that Victor Garcia had taken possession of the three additional paintings that Borasco wanted him to clean and varnish. Like the first one, the NYPD had sent a photographer to the Met to help them recognize them if they turned up at

auction or, if the NYPD got a warrant, to see if they had turned up at the auction warehouse pre-auction.

When he saw Higgins briefly, he asked if he had any more thoughts about what Duffy might do once in Havana.

"I prefer not to think about that, Humph."

"Home I go, detective."

Rebecca wasn't home. Humph poured a drink and sat down with a book of key phrases in Spanish. Rebecca had gone to the library with him and picked out that book because she said it would be useless to learn Spanish Spanish rather than Latin American usage.

She arrived just after seven.

She said she'd gone back to the Met to see Victor.

"His English is getting quite good. You might not need your book to speak to him if needs be."

Humph put down the book.

"Yes, 'if needs be'. That's the kind of expression you never know how to translate. You use it like you grew up speaking English."

"Humph, I was born in Puerto Rico, but I grew up here, for heaven's sake."

"How do I say, 'if needs be' in Spanish?"

"*Si es necesario*. That is one way of saying it."

Humph, still seated on the sofa, reached up and took her hands in his.

"Rebecca, let me be the first to tell you that you're better than a book."

"So glad to hear that, Humph. How much have you had to drink?"

Before he could pull her down to his lap and kiss her, she had scooted to the kitchen.

"We're having fish stew again, Puerto Rican version. If you don't want it you can make one of your favorite bachelor meals, you know, something like hotdogs. They've got to be the most tasteless food on earth."

“Rebecca, I’ll have you know that the history of the hotdog goes back almost five hundred years, to Germany and Austria, even before Columbus came to our shores. Fine German sausage, served with sauerkraut and a roll in our Bowery more than eighty years ago. Refined Europe loved them. Why can’t you?”

“Because those old European wieners bear no resemblance to the junk we produce here.”

“Point taken, my dear, but remember where I grew up, on the Lower East Side. Most people were German, and you could buy the real thing on any street. Coney Island was the death of real hotdogs.”

After a silence, Humph relinquished his stubbornness and announced he was dying for the fish stew. He had grown used to spices since meeting Rebecca.

They talked about Victor Garcia. Rebecca said Victor told her that the money he was paid for the first job was as much as he made in salary in a year. That alone was suspicious, Rebecca noted.

“God knows how much he’ll be paid for the next three paintings,” Rebecca said.

“Temptation, temptation, temptation,” said Humph. “Are we sure he won’t side with evil at some point?”

“Not in the slightest, Humph. I would love for you to talk to him, even briefly, just to get a feel for him. He comes across as a humble painter from a poor background, as someone just trying to swim in a new world, an American world. But after leaving him some days, I wonder whether he’s a whole lot brighter than he seems. I mean, he and I speak the same language. Sometimes his vocabulary is strikingly good, enough for him to express very accurate observations.”

“What do we know about his past in Venezuela?”

“Next to nothing,” said Rebecca.

“Is there any way of finding out? And please don’t suggest sending Duffy from Havana to Venezuela.”

Rebecca doubled over with laughter.

She said the answer was no but suggested that during their next meeting she could ask about his family.

"I could easily pretend to miss my homeland and family in Puerto Rico. We could bond a bit over nostalgia."

Humph prepared fresh drinks. He then nodded. Was he nodding his approval about the Scotch or Rebecca's idea?

After a minute or more of silence, Rebecca punched his muscled arm.

"Sorry, dear," Humph said, breaking free of his thoughts. "I think your idea is the best lead we have."

A few days later, Detective Higgins phoned to say the post office had unearthed another package. It wasn't addressed to Barrington personally but to his company, in care of someone else.

"Clever bastard," thought Humph. "Have you identified the recipient?"

"Yes, he's the VP for finance."

"Appropriate, no?"

"Absolutely."

Barrington obviously knew his mail was being tracked.

"Just as well," said Higgins. "If they feel the heat, they might make a desperate move to sell the paintings in order to pay off the people bringing suit for the Ponzi scheme."

Humph then told Higgins about Rebecca's observations of Victor Garcia.

"An astute lady, your Rebecca."

"That she is," answered Humph, proud of the judgment Higgins just passed on his wife.

"Let me know what the next interviews with him reveal. Maybe we should be watching him as well."

Rebecca met with Victor Garcia several days later. She reported to Humph that evening at home.

"He's a new man," Rebecca said. "No more paint-stained T-shirt. He now stands tall. There's purpose in his stride."

No more shuffling. No more apologizing before addressing anyone.”

Humph was all ears.

“He has moved to a new apartment, up in Washington Heights. He invited me to visit him there. I said, ‘OK, we’ll continue talking there. When?’”

Rebecca said it would be the coming Sunday.

“Would you like to join me?”

Humph thought about it but declined.

“He’s trusting you. Let’s not take a gamble that he would eventually trust me, even though he now speaks English.”

Rebecca agreed.

Humph then revealed a thought that he couldn’t fight off.

“Maybe, Rebecca, he has a crush on you. Maybe that’s why he is seeming to cooperate.”

Rebecca gave Humph a huge smile. Then she bent down and gave him a huge kiss.

“I like husbands who get jealous.”

They went to bed without supper.



CHAPTER 31

A week later, Duffy filed his first report from Havana. He sent it by express mail. He was aware his garrulousness was all but impossible to rein in. He decided to spare the NYPD the cost of a long-winded telegram.

His letter said he solved the Spanish-language problem before even leaving the Havana airport. He ended up sitting at a lunch counter and bar next to a sultry young lady. She overheard him trying to order coffee and a ham sandwich. The waiter was puzzled. His counter companion stepped in and translated for him, then said in passable English that a *bocadillo* of ham and cheese had been ordered. Duffy was in love. Before the sandwich arrived, he told the young woman that he'd be in town for a few days and needed to find someone to translate for him. Before he had even finished the question, she said, "How much?"

“I did a quick calculation. I knew a Cuban peso was supposedly worth one dollar in Yankee money, but a Mexican businessman on my sea voyage said that, much like in Mexico, the average worker only got paid twenty to thirty pesos a month. Now, understanding that, I realized I wouldn’t have to spend an annoying amount of your money, Detective Higgins. I sealed the deal with the girl at twenty pesos for every day she offered me her language and transportation services. She said she had a brother who worked in construction. He had been laid off recently. She said he had some kind of beat-up gringo truck and would drive me in return for a full tank at the end of the day . . .

“I went to my hotel to check in, then the girl and her brother took me to the national art museum, the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes*. The nice thing about writing is that I don’t have to pronounce that.

“The next day, I contacted Mr. Jones at his home.

“I’d give my pension for that place. The walls are painted the same color as margaritas, for heaven’s sake.

“Jones was not at all happy to see me, but let’s say I ambushed him.”

“Despite his alarm, it’s funny how well-bred people are. He offered me coffee or tea and a comfortable chair.

“I said whiskey, Irish or Scotch, would do just fine.

“I dispensed with the niceties once I consumed his Scotch.

“I simply reminded him of his situation, namely, that he can’t return to the U.S. because of the warrants out on him for the Ponzi schemes. And the fact that, thanks to Humph, we knew that he was in receipt of stolen art of considerable value and that he facilitated its transport out of the country. And further, we knew more thefts of art had been committed at the same museum and that the paintings had been passed to the crooks and then to him.

“While he squirmed, I maintained an easy stare. I suspect it penetrated his eyeballs because he leapt to his

feet and turned his back on me under the guise of seeking a new *botella* of Scotch. When he returned, I let him refill my glass, then suggested that he would be wise to accompany me back to the States. He then lost his lifelong facade as one of the civilized people. ‘No fucking way.’

“I told him that American coppers were waiting outside. I said, ‘Think it over, laddie.’

“He seemed to have trouble understanding me. I told him to pour himself a healthy Scotch. I said it might be a long, long while before he had another.

“By then, I had run out of Scotch and patience. I walked over to him and bowled him over, dropping him to the floor. I cuffed him in a jiffy, hauled him back on his chair and explained life to him. I said we were now going to search his home. There was no ‘we’, but he didn’t know that. I was surprised he didn’t threaten to call his lawyer. Maybe, to save money, he never bothered to put one on retainer here. Anyway, only minutes later, taped to a cistern in his backyard, I found a bag with rolled-up paintings inside.

“I came back inside and said, ‘Look what my men found.’

“I swear you could see his heart sinking.

“I then went to the national art gallery with my seductive translator and showed them photos of the paintings that had made their way to New York. I intentionally didn’t ask to see the director. The assistants eagerly identified the paintings as theirs. Next, I went to police headquarters, accompanied this time by the director of the museum, and announced that Jones was an American citizen acting on behalf of an American corporation. One of the Cuban cops jumped in and said the arrest of Jones was imminent, and the paperwork for his deportation was in the process of being prepared as we spoke. Since Jones was in my possession, I knew they were telling me only what they guessed I wanted to hear. There was no way they had been in the process of returning Jones to American police.

"I explained that while the theft may have occurred on Cuban soil, by Cubans, the immediate transfer of the canvasses to an American was proof beyond doubt that this was an American-orchestrated criminal act that must be pursued in American courts.

"In conclusion, I said:

"Mr. Jones is here in your beautiful country on a tourist visa. He is not a resident. He is an American visitor, regardless of the crimes he may have committed in your country.

"I wish you luck in apprehending the Cuban art thieves who hoped to profit from this illegal conspiracy.

"I am pleased to say the case is solved. Good day, gentlemen."

"I suspect that my abruptness and uncharacteristic arrogance silenced them long enough for me to scoot out the door to rejoin a handcuffed Mr. Jones.

"But when my lady friend and her brother got us to the airport, I had a brainwave. If you're reading this, Humph, try hard to believe I am capable of brainwaves.

"I said to meself, 'What if I could lasso the lot of them?' I'm a small man, but thinking big never hurts.

"I remembered that when I first began tracking Jones's movements, including his visit to the museum and possible meetings with museum officials, I later saw Jones being stopped on the street shortly after leaving the museum. He was stopped by three Cuban males. Jones must have already known them because he was not alarmed by the men. They walked for a while, chatting. Jones, now suddenly carrying some kind of package, hailed a taxi.

"I flagged down one to follow the three guys who waylaid Jones. They went first to a flat in the Centro neighborhood. Once they were inside, I took a photo of the exterior of the apartment. After an hour, I left and resumed my surveillance of Jones. A day later, one of those three presumed crooks pays Jones a visit. As he leaves, I see him

happily shove a thick envelope in his back pocket. Payment for the paintings?

“The next day, I returned to the airport and ordered two ham and cheese sandwiches. They were excellent. I also ordered several drinks to nurse. Eventually, by sheer luck, as I returned from the washroom, I saw one of the trio of bad guys. He got in line to board a flight to Cancun. It seemed clear now that someone high up at the gallery was passing more valuable paintings to the crooks, maybe in the name of Jones.” Duffy couldn’t prove it, but the arrangement’s logic was hard to deny. The crooks made money for little effort, and the museum big shot pocketed an equal share. The arrangement with Jones was that he paid for the theft once he knew that the paintings had arrived in Barrington’s hands in New York. For the record, Duffy said that the crooked museum big shot’s name was Alonso Del Portillo.

In New York, when Higgins read Duffy’s letter, he was flabbergasted.

He called Humph and told him to come to the precinct immediately.

He let Humph read the report for himself.

Humph too was astonished, even incredulous.

Higgins said Duffy had avoided an international incident by mere blarney.

Humph almost roared:

“By God, yes!”

Humph and Higgins went down to the police bar next to the precinct. They ordered beer and exhaled.

“How,” Humph asked, “did Duffy get Jones to New York?”

“Ingenious. After Duffy reported this all to Havana police, they were sufficiently happy to be rid of the art thieves, whom they were about to arrest at the address he provided. As for the American in Duffy’s custody, he arranged for the police to issue papers to the beautiful translator and her brother allowing them to take the American criminal to

Cancun, Mexico, making the problem a Mexican burden. The pair flew with Jones to Cancun where the Mexicans, also eager to please the U.S., took him on a long drive to the Texas border where he was picked up by U.S. authorities.

“When Jones arrived in New York,” Higgins continued, “sleepless and covered with dust and apparently shell-shocked by his adventure, he apparently begged police to allow him to shower and compose himself and put on a fresh shirt before being interviewed. All requests were denied.”

Higgins added that Jones, now facing a charge of conspiring to murder his wife, realized he’d gone from a boy born with a silver spoon in his mouth to a man with nothing but a grimy prison cell in his future. With the art theft scheme, he’d been expecting to live a life of luxury in Havana.



CHAPTER 32

HUMPH met Duffy at the dock. Duffy looked depressed but tanned at least.

“What the hell is wrong, my friend?”

Duffy stared at him for an interminable amount of time.

“I used all the tricks in the book to lure my translator lady to the world’s greatest city. She finally said in English, ‘No thank you. America is not Cuba.’”

“You’re a madman, Duffy!” Humph exclaimed, shaking his friend by the shoulders. “You’ve just pulled off a police coup for the ages. Everyone at the precinct is talking about it. Detective Duffy, you were masterful.”

Duffy suddenly smiled.

“What is it you Englishmen say in the face of such praise? Oh yes, pshaw.”

“That term has never crossed my lips. Come on. People want to see you.”

He picked up Duffy’s bag with one hand and all but dragged him to a waiting taxi.

On the way to Humph’s place, he told Duffy that the administrator of the Cuban national art gallery had already been charged with conspiracy to steal from a national institution. “That’s a special charge they have down there. Its consequences are a lot more serious than stealing from a mere citizen of Cuba. As for the thieves, their trial is a ways off, but their holding cells would turn your stomach.”

“And Jones?” asked Duffy.

“Let’s just say you gave our friend Higgins the Christmas gift of a lifetime. As a Scot, he has no great love for pretentious Anglos. Yeah, he’s as objective as humanly possible in every case, but you can’t blame a man for his private feelings. He told me recently that he was going to pray for Jones’s late wife. What she must have suffered from this man was unconscionable.”

As the evening wore on, more cops appeared at the door with outstretched hands. All of them had been on the force at the same time as Duffy. The man was a legend, and to a man, they wished he was still among them. One of the cops even called out:

“Make him chief of detectives.” It took only a few seconds for him to realize that the chief of detectives was there, standing a foot or two away from Duffy.

“Sorry, sir.” He shrank back in among his companions.

Duffy raised a glass to them.

“You guys are the backbone of New York, the greatest city in the world. Never forget that. Be fearless, be proud.” Duffy sounded like he was standing on some kind of election podium, not in a small living room in a Lower East Side apartment.

“Where is Duffy’s mind right now?” said Humph in a whisper.

Rebecca said, "Irish heaven."

Humph laughed. "I suspect you're right."

"Let's let him enjoy the moment," Rebecca answered.

The next day, Duffy, Humph and Rebecca eased themselves and their hangovers into Higgins's office.

"I thought it might be helpful for us to sum up where we are in this case. The other gentlemen you see behind me are experienced detectives from various precincts who might be useful in the resolution of this case. Two of them know a lot about art."

"Then they're one up on me," mumbled Duffy. Humph squeezed his knee until he flinched. "Shut up," Humph hissed in a whisper.

Higgins continued.

"The head of this racket is Norman Barrington, a big-shot broker on Wall Street—connections all over the place. However, we now have enough evidence to, at a minimum, nail him for operating Ponzi schemes for the past several years and ignoring the subpoenas related to civil lawsuits filed by victims of the scheme. Those Ponzi schemes, we think, allowed him to set up a very effective art fraud scheme in Manhattan. Of late, we've verified that his operation has international tentacles, Europe, Cuba and God knows where else."

Higgins paused to consult his notes. Since Duffy's return from Cuba, those notes had become more voluminous with confirmed links to the national art gallery in Havana and several Cuban art thieves. Most significantly, he explained, the dossier contained pages of evidence and confessions from one of the principals, a Mr. Graham Jones, an architect and art aficionado and, to put it mildly, a schemer from New York, who worked in tandem with Mr. Barrington. Jones was also a suspect in the murder of his ex-wife, who possessed a small fortune in artworks. "As I mentioned, he is now in custody here in New York."

"Among other things, our job now is to put the cuffs on Barrington over the Ponzi civil suits and eventually to

file criminal charges tying him to thefts and forgeries of artwork originals and creating Ponzi schemes. We know he hired a British forgery expert named Borasco who, at Barrington's request, is living here. We are certain of our suspicions about Borasco, but as yet we have no hard evidence against him."

The following day, a precinct on the Upper West Side contacted Higgins to say they had verified that a new batch of paintings had been deposited at the auction warehouse. The package bore a red-lettered instruction that the package was to be picked up by a Mr. Benjamin Borasco.

"We haven't had the chance to investigate further. We thought that you'd be in a better position to determine if the paintings have anything to do with your case."

Duffy, who just happened to be in Higgins's office, watched as the detective dispatched two other detectives to the auction warehouse with instructions to, "as they say in the art world, verify the provenance of the newly arrived paintings."

"Ho-ho," said Duffy. "What do the French call that, a *bonne mott*? Whatever. Bravo, sir."

"Bo mo," corrected Higgins, betraying satisfaction at his choice of words.

Just before Higgins called it quits for the day, the two detectives reported in.

"As best we can tell," said one of them, "the paintings were shipped from Spain, from the Museo del Prado in Madrid. A note attached said, in Spanish . . . I had a patrolman translate for me: 'As requested by the sender, Mr. Barrington, here is one Goya, one Velázquez and an El Greco. It goes without saying, sir, these are irreplaceable and invaluable. We are putting them in your hands based on your reasonable fees for their restoration and your conservator's fine reputation.' The sender's cover letter, from the Prado, cited as an example of the conservator's work, 'a painting restored by what we believe to be your

man at the Met, a Señor Garcia.”

“My God,” said Higgins aloud, though the room was empty. How wide was this art theft network? How in heaven’s name was their humble Venezuelan painter involved at this level?



CHAPTER 33

HUMPH now regretted not having taken Rebecca's invitation to join her at Victor's new apartment. He hadn't wanted to interfere with their burgeoning friendship, based, it seemed, on a shared Hispanic heritage. It disturbed Humph to no end that Victor's name kept popping up, in police interviews, in international mail from Spain and Cuba, and Rebecca herself. She clearly thought the young painter was blossoming into the creative person he really was now that he had money and big chunks of the English language at his disposal. From time to time, he wondered whether it was a flaw for a cop, or a part-time one like Rebecca, to be basically a nice, trusting person. On the other side of the coin, did Rebecca find him cynical, untrusting? If she did, he feared their relationship would drive off a cliff in the near future. She was too full of life,

too much like Eve, to allow herself to be shut down by attitudes like his.

That night, over supper, he confessed to being at a dead end in his investigation. He admitted that he couldn't help thinking that Victor Garcia was not all that he seemed to be. He also admitted he wished he had joined her at Victor's house the previous month. "I know," he said, trying to soften his approach, "that Victor seems straight up. He seems to be honest. After all, he was the first one to link art theft and Borasco."

After a moment of silence, Rebecca answered that it was certainly theoretically possible for nice guys to be involved in crime.

Humph reached across the table and squeezed her hand. He was beaming.

"I'm so relieved you're capable of cynicism."

Rebecca returned a blank look.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You've just shown me that you're able and willing to suspect even the most unlikely people of a crime. You gotta leave your heart at home when you're carrying out an investigation."

"If you say so, Humph," Rebecca said. But the look on her face read more like, "Is he kinda crazy?"

The conversation ended there. They moved on to less challenging subjects, like the variety of sauces that can result from minor recipe changes. But later that evening, she found a possible answer to Humph's bizarre need for her to be cynical and clear-headed when investigating:

"It was a man thing," she told herself. "Men can't imagine that a woman could separate herself from her feelings long enough to make a cold, fact-based assessment." As annoying as the truth was, she forgave him.

In the morning, she left early to get back to her Broadway job. It was winter and a host of new shows were trying to enter the fray. Some, from new-money men, were trying

to pry open the lid on valid contenders for acceptance by theaters on Broadway. The theaters were looking for shows that offered the possibility of long, profitable runs. Newcomers, be they owners or producers, faced an uphill battle.

Rebecca knew the process. However, only one new show interested her: *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Eve had a minor speaking part in the show. It was to open next year. A review of the original play described it as “a farcical black comedy revolving around the Brewster family, descended from Mayflower settlers but now composed of maniacs, most of them homicidal.” Irresistible. And wonderful for Eve. The show had big backers. They weren’t going to call it quits at this point.

Rebecca and Eve had tea at 5:30, half an hour after rehearsals stopped.

That evening at home, Rebecca said simply, “She’s radiant.”

She was met with a dumb, blank look.

“Eve. She’s got a part in what should be a blockbuster show. I saw her today.”

“Why didn’t she tell me?” asked Humph.

Rebecca explained that nothing is certain until it’s certain in her world. “She wouldn’t want to jump the gun.”

Humph, a man who didn’t gamble, realized he could not live in Eve’s world. He was in awe of how she stayed sane with all that fragile uncertainty.

Rebecca brought him a drink. It was wine. Along with a casual caress here and there, it would relax him. Unlike the effects of whiskey, it would not rouse him to exaggeration.

She won the night.

A few days later, Higgins called. He wanted Humph, and Rebecca if he so wanted, to head to the Bronx. Barrington was going to make a speech or some kind of presentation at the borough’s most prestigious hotel, the Concourse Plaza Hotel.

“Where the hell is that?” asked Humph.

“You don’t get around much, do you, Humph? The world doesn’t begin and end with the Lower East Side. You’ll find it at Grand Concourse and East 161.”

Rebecca couldn’t get away from work, so Humph went by himself.

On his way, he realized that the hotel, a luxury one according to Higgins, would be walking distance from Yankee Stadium. When he arrived, he mentioned the fact to Higgins, who was not a baseball fan. However, Humph was surprised when Higgins said he would probably be interested in the fact that Babe Ruth used to live there.

Barrington was speaking in one of the hotel’s two smaller ballrooms. When they entered, the place was packed. “What on earth for?” whispered Humph, his right hand sweeping over the sea of faces.

“I suspect,” said Higgins, “that far more people than we expect have swallowed the malarky that Barrington-Jones investment funds all but guarantee extraordinary profits year after year.”

The introduction of Barrington made mention of the supposed fact that the funds were growing even faster than today’s speaker had anticipated just a few short years ago when he had founded them. “It is with pleasure that we present for your edification none other than Mr. Norman Barrington himself, a constantly rising star on Wall Street.”

Humph leaned close to Higgins and asked if the detective was hoping Barrington would betray himself or Graham Jones. Sudden applause at something Barrington said drowned out Higgins’s response. Since they were seated in the last row, Humph wasn’t worried about disturbing anyone. He asked his question again, a little louder this time.

Higgins said he doubted it but added that he hoped to hear someone stand up and accuse Barrington of something.

“Such as?” asked Humph.

“Refusing to return an investment when asked, or not having paid interest in months and months. Signs of discontent,” Higgins said, louder than he meant to.

As the audience broke into laughter at something the dapper Barrington said, Higgins explained, “I’m looking for disenchanted investors who can give us facts, figures and insight into the way the funds are managed.”

Half an hour later, Barrington finished what had essentially been a pep talk.

“Perhaps there are among you those who have not already invested, who have not already made the wisest decision of their lives. Seated in the front row, on your left, are some of my associates who can answer any questions and provide the paperwork that will set up your investment in us.”

As he left the stage, some people stood to give him a standing ovation. Higgins closely watched those who did not. He spotted three men who didn’t even applaud. He pointed out one of them to Humph. He then stood and headed for a second one. On the way, he signaled a nearby plain-clothes to detain another gentleman about ten rows ahead. The cops couldn’t officially detain any of them, but Higgins figured that if they had a bone to pick for Mr. Wall Street, they’d be happy to talk to them.

“Say you’re a cop, and just say we’re investigating Barrington’s affairs. That should be enough to get us started. In fact, once you’ve got your man, suggest we meet in the lobby for a chat.”

Humph nodded. The detective had really thought this out.

After the round-up, Humph asked the angry investors and his men, Humph included, whether they would enjoy a calming drink in the hotel’s elegant lobby. To relax everybody, Higgins asked if they knew this hotel had become a regular election stop for presidential candidates.

Eventually, the three men began explaining their anger with Barrington. Two of them said they’d become

suspicious about investment income reports issued by Barrington that showed almost identical amounts two years in a row. There's no way, one of them said, that such a thing could occur. The third man said he needed to restructure his investments after his wife and adult son, a partner in his business, had died in a car accident. He told Barrington he had to cash in his investment.

In all three cases, responses from Barrington and Jones were months in coming, and when they did arrive, they got legal gobbledygook that essentially meant, "No."

Humph couldn't resist breaking the subsequent silence with a mention that the Bronx County Courthouse was just down the street, on the opposite side. "You can't miss it," Humph added. "An eleven-story art deco building. Maybe someday we'll have Mr. Wall Street on the stand there."

"I hope it happens," said one of the investors. He raised his glass to toast Humph's idea. The others laughed, returning the toast.

Finally, the three agreed to file charges.

Higgins had a police car waiting for him. Humph rode back downtown with him. Higgins was upbeat. His instinct had proven accurate. Three more nails in the coffin.

Once home, Humph told Rebecca about his Bronx afternoon.

"I'm really sorry I couldn't join you. This case is getting more exciting by the minute."

Humph loved her enthusiasm.

"If I were rich, would you quit your job on Broadway and join my one-man agency as a full-time detective?"

Rebecca planted a kiss on his left cheek, sat back and said, "No."

Humph was crestfallen.

"Because I love Broadway even more than being a detective. Can't help it. I must be made that way."

Humph nodded. His daughter Eve was made that way, too.

Rebecca slid next to him on the sofa.

“But tonight, don’t disturb me. I’m going to be dreaming of a three-man, or three-person, agency of you, me and Eve. We’d be the toast of New York.”

Not missing a beat, Rebecca responded:

“Well, now is not tonight. I’m going to bother you now.”



CHAPTER 34

AT Humph's request, Rebecca called Garcia to arrange a visit with her man, Humph. She arranged it for a day when she was fairly sure she could skip work.

Rebecca liked the idea of going to Washington Heights. There weren't many Puerto Ricans there, but she knew of a small neighborhood where the music dictated who lived there. It was like three square blocks of home.

Humph said he was willing to go there before Garcia's place. He knew it would energize Rebecca, and he had to admit he was becoming vulnerable to the rhythms himself.

Garcia's place wasn't far. On the way, Rebecca bought a Puerto Rican dessert called *trembleque*, a coconut pudding. When visiting, it was customary to bring a gift of some sort. Garcia wasn't Puerto Rican, but surely he would understand the gesture.

He lived in a four-story brownstone on the second floor.

They opened the main door, and just as they were about to go up the stairs, they heard a rumble. Heavy footsteps pounded down the stairs. A high-pitched tirade of English obscenities and light footsteps followed him, accompanied by flying shoes and an ash tray. The man barreled by Humph and Rebecca and disappeared out the door. Then silence, utter silence. It was as if they had briefly, accidentally, entered another universe that in the end side-stepped them.

On the second floor, Garcia welcomed them warmly. It was as if he hadn't heard any of the commotion, or was it so common there that he had learned to pay no attention?

He had already prepared coffee. The large pot sat on a table in the living room. He directed Humph and Rebecca to chairs.

The room's walls were covered with all sorts of art, classical, contemporary and satirical. The man was visual, no doubt, thought Humph.

As he made his observations, Rebecca had embraced Garcia, and the two exchanged rapid-fire Spanish greetings.

With everyone seated and coffee served, Victor looked at Rebecca and then Humph. His first words, said with undoubted sincerity, were:

"I love America!"

"So do I," said Rebecca with a joyous smile.

There was a silence afterward.

Finally, Rebecca asked, "What most makes you love America?"

"When I came here, I had nowhere to stay, no bed, no clean clothes, no job, no one who understood a word I'd say. And no money to get the hell out of here. Can you imagine that loneliness, that fear?"

Rebecca let his words sink in. Then she admitted that she'd had a soft landing in America. She had family and friends. And she'd already known English pretty well.

Victor nodded, understanding.

Then he announced:

“Well, that was then, and this is now!”

“Damn right,” said Rebecca.

“I have a job I love, at America’s biggest, greatest art museum. Every day, I see the greatest, most inspiring art in the world. Every day, I get to touch these works with my peasant, ignorant fingers. I get God’s blessing every day because I caress mankind’s most noble accomplishments. I go to mass every day.”

Humph was silent because he didn’t know what to think about this man’s supposed, self-proclaimed elevation to sainthood. He let Rebecca continue.

Always with a soft smile and sympathetic eyes, she allowed him to continue. Finally, she asked:

“Do you know a Mr. Barrington?”

She got a blank stare.

“How about a Mr. Borasco?”

Garcia blinked. His pupils dilated like a beachball being pumped full of air.

“No,” he answered.

Humph noted that he was clearly unnerved.

“Under what circumstances did you meet this Borasco guy?”

After several seconds of silence, Rebecca did something that on the surface made no sense. She moved close to Victor and took his hand in hers.

Humph was dumbfounded but maintained his stare at Garcia.

After taking Rebecca’s hand with both of his, he swallowed deeply and told Humph:

“He said he’d make me a rich man, a rich American.”

“Go on,” said Humph in a soft voice.

“He said I wouldn’t have to do anything illegal. He said all I’d have to do was a touch-up, a slight restoration of a couple of paintings handed to me by my superintendent

at the Met. He would present me the jobs as my next assignment. I didn't have to steal anything or forge anything. I'd do some restoration or preservation work and turn it in as a completed assignment."

It took a while for Humph to digest that process. After several minutes, he asked:

"Do you do freelance work?"

"Of course. Every conservator does."

"Does the Met insist on knowing what freelance jobs its conservators do?"

"Sort of, but you don't have to give many details."

"How much money did you get paid by Borasco for the freelance work you did for him?"

"You mean three paintings from the Cuban gallery? They didn't need much work. The only thing unusual that I had to do was distort the provenance pages. I was told they had been forged and new, valid ones had to be created."

Garcia paused.

"Being new to this end of the art world, I just said, 'Sure, I can do that.'"

On the way back downtown, Rebecca said her heart told her Victor was a decent guy, but if he was in business with Borasco, he was guilty of theft one way or the other.

Humph said he agreed, but there was no reason to arrest him now.

"He spoke of how he was about to be assigned to work on three invaluable paintings. Sure, any work he does on them might be illegal if we can prove he knew that someone was substituting other paintings for the masters' paintings. But he could be just an innocent conservator, doing what his supervisor told him to do."

Humph told Higgins later that day about the visit to the Venezuelan's apartment. Higgins was more than interested. "But," Humph said, "ignore him for now. He might be involved in crime, but I think he's just a pawn in

a Borasco-Barrington rip-off. I'd rather nail them than the Venezuelan."

Higgins said he'd rather nail the people he could and go on from there. "That way, we take down the lot of them as we go along."

Humph thought for a moment.

"Talk to you later, my friend," Humph said as he headed home. Once he got there, he felt frustration set in. It had been a productive day, yes, but the bottom line was that he had no real lead as to who the mastermind of these thefts and forgeries was. He had suspicions, but you can't bust anyone based on suspicions.

As January inched its way toward February, all was quiet on the artistic front—no thefts, no complaints of fraud, no more civil suits filed against the incarcerated Graham Jones or his boss, Barrington. For the muscle men working for the forger, Borasco, Duffy complained that his surveillance duty had become so boring he was seriously considering taking up drinking as a pastime.

Eve was now officially out of work, the curtain having come down on her show for the last time. The Broadway League, however, had announced that a record number of openings were expected by summer and fall. America was ready for happy thoughts and happy endings again. Broadway producers rubbed their hands. There would be new shows for everyone this year. Eve felt confident she could land a role in one of them. She had an agent now, not a well-known one, but one who kept his ear close to the ground for job possibilities for his clients. He was a long-time agent who gossips liked to say still wore the same rumpled suit and crumpled hat he was wearing during the Crash of 1929.

Humph spent much of his time reading. He visited the library every few days and devoured the papers as he always had. One paper that caught his eye was the newly founded *PM New York Daily*. It soon became a must-read for Rebecca. The paper's mission statement was "PM is

against people who push other people around.” It charged nothing to the public and featured stories on social issues, such housing, milk-price gouging, racism and especially America’s disinterest in World War II. The paper was recognizable for its often stunning and poignant photos of poverty and endless concrete. Its staff included two female photographers, the first ever hired by an American paper. Rebecca joked she might become the third female staffer with a camera.

Their dinner-time conversation often started with a story in that day’s *PM*. But, with no detective work to keep Humph busy, the evenings rarely ended with a dance around the living room.

Finally, at the end of February, the gloom lifted. Victor phoned Rebecca, and she hurriedly translated for Humph. Three invaluable paintings from the Met’s collection had been brought to him by his supervisor for fairly minor repairs. Garcia dictated the names of the paintings for Rebecca to take to Higgins.

The significance of this was that those three paintings were the very ones Borasco had once mentioned.



CHAPTER 35

THE next morning, after coffee, Humph felt revived by the recent developments, but he couldn't visualize the process by which three paintings coveted by thieves would be picked out of the Met's enormous collections, which contained thousands of works of art, and sent to basement workshops for repair. He needed to talk to someone high up at the museum who was in a position to explain it all to him. He also wanted to talk to a guard. He was hoping to chat one up and ask him if he'd mind accompanying him for a coffee after his shift was done. It was going to be a long day, but that was a thousand times preferable to inactivity.

It was a brisk but sunny morning. To continue enjoying the sun, he was tempted to take the bus up Madison Avenue to get within a short walk of the Met on Fifth Avenue, at

83rd Street. He finally decided to take a numbered train, 4, 5 or 6, which would bring him even closer. Not that it made much difference to the service, some inner need for efficiency made him pleased that the city was now running all the lines previously offered by privately-owned, independent companies. BMT or IRT or IND, names like those didn't make any sense to him. He liked single letters or avenue numbers more. He opted for the Sixth Avenue line, which had opened only three months earlier, in December.

When he arrived at the Met, he all but sprinted up the countless stairs to the museum's imposing 82nd Street entrance. Before stepping inside, he got a hint that he was getting older. He needed to catch his breath, not for long, but long enough to take the observation seriously.

At the information desk, he explained that he was a PI acting on behalf of the NYPD in an investigation of an art-theft ring operating in the city and, apparently, abroad. Could he see the director?

"That would be impossible," the woman answered, "because he is in Madrid at the moment."

"Can you recommend someone, another executive or department head, or any of your experts in paintings and/or experts in security?"

With a wave of her hand, she signaled another woman to step behind the desk and handle the long line of museum visitors looking for information.

"Sorry, sir. We have temporarily run out of maps to the museum. They usually answer everyone's question. Replacements will be arriving shortly from the supply room. Now, sir, as to your query . . ."

She was undoubtedly efficient. He didn't detect much of an accent, but her manner of speaking made Humph wonder whether she was perhaps a well-educated British woman needing the daily comfort afforded working at a museum that displayed the best of civilization in this often

brusk metropolis.

She made a couple of phone calls. He couldn't hear what she said. Five minutes later, a man she introduced as head of security showed up. Another man appeared a moment later. She introduced him as the head of conservatorship for paintings.

Humph quickly explained what appeared to police to be an imminent threat. However, he twisted the truth a little to avoid implicating his inside source, Victor Garcia.

"Is it possible, gentleman, for an outsider, a non-employee, to inflict minor damage to a painting you are displaying, enough so that your conservators might, during their regular inspections, detect a need for restoration, all be it minor?"

The security boss admitted that such a thing was possible but went on for a good four or five minutes trying to impress Humph with the extreme importance the museum pays to protecting its art. "We have art-knowlegeable guards stationed throughout the museum, some of them not even in sight. They watch thousands of visitors every day and soon become experts at spotting unusual behavior."

The chief conservator spoke up, saying, "I second what my colleague has just described. We know the wealth we have on display in this museum. No royal house in Europe has ever housed treasure equaling the value of what we harbor here."

"I accept fully that your security is intense," said Humph. "What concerns me is a comment by an art forger in the city, a comment overheard by a detective very recently, that suggested that three masterworks would be discretely altered by a museum visitor, enough to require them to be sent to one of your restoration workshops. From there—and please let your imaginations run free—how would the thief get those paintings out of the building?"

The two men looked at each other. Not a word ensued.

"First of all," said the head conservator, "we thank you

profoundly for information about what seems a real threat, albeit a foolish one. Please let me get together with all my people to consider possibilities. Do you have a card?"

Humph handed it over.

"Call me, day or night, gentlemen."

Before returning home, Humph dropped in to the precinct, hoping Higgins was there.

He described his morning interviews at the Met and underlined the fact that he did not mention that their "tip" about the three paintings had come from Victor Garcia.

"I figured he was too valuable a contact for now."

"Agree completely," said Higgins.

He got up and poured two cups of black coffee. He gave Humph one.

"There have been possible developments since we last spoke."

Humph waited patiently.

"Barrington has fled the country. Why would he leave now? The Met scam had yet to be finalized. Did he find out about the new lawsuits coming his way for the Ponzi scheme?"

"Anyway, at the moment, we have no idea where he is. We've got a man at Idlewild right now checking departure sheets. Someone else is checking his bank accounts."

"What about our mayor's pride and joy, LaGuardia?" The airport was opened the previous year, the never-dull but frequently fractious mayor naming it after himself. He was the most popular mayor in New York history, and so far no one was calling him out on his egotism.

Higgins said he'd forgotten about that. "Anyway, what are your thoughts after today's interviews?"

Humph said he had trouble believing any of the museum's executives and department heads were involved. "They hold prestigious jobs in the art world, and from what I saw, their security is meticulous. The only time they take

the paintings off the walls is when they're being restored."

"And . . .?" asked Higgins.

"They've been assigned to Victor Garcia, someone they said they were very happy with, a talented artist himself and someone to be trusted."

With a shrug and no conviction, each of them tossed out a few possibilities. They weren't worth batting down.

Finally, Humph stood.

"I'm going home. Maybe Rebecca can turn my brain on again."

When he got home, he discovered that Rebecca was not there. There was no note on the coffee table explaining her absence. It was nine o'clock. She had left for work very early. Something was up, Humph thought, but he was too tired and puzzled by the case to obsess about her absence. He went to bed without even bothering to eat or have a nightcap. His final thought was that ignorance consumed more energy than knowledge.



CHAPTER 36

HUMPH slept like a dead man. He didn't hear Rebecca's return or even feel her presence in bed.

However, when his eyes opened in the morning, she stood by the bed, beaming, and holding a tray with coffee and toast.

"Drink, Humph. And eat. I don't want to talk to you until your faculties have returned to life."

Half an hour later, he'd pulled on his pants and made his way to the kitchen.

"More coffee, please." It was a mumble.

"Were you drinking yesterday?"

"Not a drop. I swear. Ask Higgins. I saw him last night."

"Well, I'm not convinced you're ready for this. Anyway, I spent the evening with our Met guy, Victor. He'd called

me just to chat. Said he was in need of a Spanish-language jabber. Nothing serious, he said, just a chat.

“Well, one thing led to another, aided by a bit of tequila—my suggestion, not his. To be honest, Humph, I just happened to have the bottle with me, you know, as a potential investigative tool.”

“Pray continue, my dear.”

“Well, Humph, I don’t think our boy has much experience with tequila. An hour later, he was slurring and staggering, but he was happy as hell. Finally, he plunked himself down on the sofa next to me and said he had a secret to tell me.

“It took forever to play out, but before telling me his secret, he took my hand and asked whether I would run away with him, anywhere I wanted, Venezuela, Mexico, Spain, name it, he said. He had the money.

“I said, ‘Where in the hell did you get the money? When I met you, you had nothing but a dirty T-shirt to your name.’

“He got up and went to the bathroom. He took his time. In retrospect, I think he was waiting for his head to clear a bit.”

After a dramatic pause, during which Rebecca saw she had her man’s full attention, she said:

“He grabbed my hand again and, with his other hand, ran it through my hair. ‘My *bonita*,’ he said, ‘I have stolen three absolute masterpieces from the Met. Impossible, right? But I, Victor Garcia, an impoverished Venezuelan painter, have outsmarted international swindlers and crooks, like Barrington and Borasco, and the Met security system, and come home with paintings all of Europe would die to have in their galleries. And, of course, the Met. The museum gave me a chance in life, but life is bigger than any institution. We all must be free to live it, regardless of whom we hurt.’”

Rebecca said the more he talked, the more it all sounded like romantic bullshit.

“But I couldn’t escape his grip. I kept struggling until the two of us fell to the floor.

“I begged him to let me go. Instead he gave me a drunken smile of affection. ‘*Mi querida, ven conmigo.*’ Come with me, my dear.

“He was right out of it,” Rebecca said. “Finally, his grip relented, and I scrambled to my feet. I put one foot on his chest and ordered him to talk. Like a guilty child, he did.

“He said the plan with Barrington and his forger was that I make the changes the museum wanted, the touch-ups, to copies of the paintings Barrington provided. Those copies were the ones to be returned to the conservators and, with their approval, to the walls of the Met. The copies of the real paintings were to be smuggled out of the museum by a security guard who had been paid off. They’d told me that so I wouldn’t get in the way.”

Victor then said, despite the discomfort of Rebecca’s foot on his chest, that before starting work on the three fake paintings, the copies, he cut out the canvasses of the originals. In the next days, he manufactured a story that he had been hit by an automobile and needed crutches. He came to work using them until everyone, including guards, got used to seeing him on crutches. Many expressed their sympathy. Victor said he was quite touched.

“Now,” said Rebecca, “listen to what happened next.”

She explained that over three days he wrapped a canvas under his fake cast. When he had all three securely in place, and people were used to his hobbled walk, he sent the “repaired” fakes for pick-up, to be returned to the gallery collection by senior conservators. After Victor’s last shift, he simply hobbled out of the museum and returned home.

He made no attempt to reach Borasco or Barrington. They had been awaiting word that he had doctored the fakes so they could be returned to the gallery walls as originals and that, subsequently, he could somehow get them out of the museum. Because of the risks inherent in

their scheme, no precise arrangements had ever been made to receive the originals from Victor. They had no idea how he was planning to pull off the heist. Because they had paid him exceedingly well in the past, they never suspected that he'd betray them.

Humph found the story so extraordinary that he asked Rebecca to halt for a moment.

"Your tale is more fantastic than the stories my mother used to tell me as a child. They'd fuel dreams for days."

They kissed, detective to detective.

Finally, Humph suggested they go together to Higgins and retell the story.

Suddenly, he stopped and asked where Victor was.

"I bound him, hand and foot, and I put a scarf over his mouth. He's probably rather thirsty by now." Rebecca said it with a twinkling eye.

Humph called Higgins. He said he was about to turn his day upside down.

"Send me a car. I need one for an errand. See you soon."

The patrol car arrived within fifteen minutes. They sped to Washington Heights. Humph and Rebecca entered Victor's flat. He was just where she had left him. He was sound asleep in a posture he would regret.

Humph lifted him to his feet. He then started waking up. He was clearly hungover. Seeing Rebecca, he leaned all his weight toward her. Humph yanked him upright.

The trip from Washington Heights to the precinct took a while. Victor kept lapsing into sleep. At one point, clearly dreaming, he said, "Rebecca."

"You do have that effect on men, my dear," said Humph.

At the station, Victor was booked immediately under suspicion of grand theft. However, the charge changed an hour later when the patrol car that had followed Humph returned with three canvases. There was no more mere suspicion.

However, what Higgins wanted to know was how Barrington and Borasco were involved.

It turned out that Victor had no idea. He said they'd never given him any details about anything. They'd only say that they had a job for him and to call them when he was done.

The charge for grand theft sobered Garcia a little. After the paperwork was done, he asked to speak for a moment with Rebecca before he was led to a holding cell. The cops agreed.

"I just wanted to tell you, Rebecca," Garcia began, "that there was one of those paintings I wasn't going to give back to Borasco and the big boss. I hadn't worked out a believable excuse yet, but my plan was to use the payment for the other two paintings to take off somewhere, out of the city, and quietly resume my own painting. I want that one masterpiece with me always, as an inspiration, a reminder about how fine art can be if you have the vision and are willing to work hard. My plan was to put it on an easel just beside the one that held my own painting."

Rebecca was somewhat touched by his sincerity and love of art. Though he had committed crimes, and despite the sight of handcuffs on his wrists, part of her didn't believe he had a criminal bone in his body. He was just a naïve, lonely man who liked to paint. Rebecca leaned forward and touched his hand before signaling to the guard to let her out.

Two weeks later, police raided Borasco's house on a warrant based on Victor Garcia's revelations. They turned up several works in progress, though none related to the Met scam. They also found a telegram from London. It read: "Thanks for the use of your old abode." It was signed, "Barrington."

"Bingo," said Higgins when informed. "We've got the Venezuelan painter. We've got Graham Jones, one half of the Ponzi fraud, we've got civil cases against both Jones and his partner, Barrington. And the Met has its masterpieces."

“Too bad we don’t have them all,” said Humph.

“Worry not. We’ve already begun extradition proceedings for Barrington. I anticipate that the Brits will be much more accommodating than the Cubans.”

Once outside, Rebecca told Humph she wanted to go to East Harlem, El Barrio. “We’ll find salsa bars there.”

“Fine, but why right now?”

“I was thinking,” Rebecca said, “that now that you can dance and now that you can speak some Spanish, you might get in the mood to suggest we take another vacation by sea, maybe to Cuba? What do you call it? Yeah, a second honeymoon, this one with no crooks to chase.”

Rebecca read doubt on Humph’s face. After an annoyingly long moment, he faced her and, still stone-faced, said: “Why don’t we honeymoon in Puerto Rico?”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wayne Clark is a Montreal writer and author of five other New York-based novels, including the international award-winning literary fiction novel *he & She*. In addition to writing fiction he has worked as a journalist, copywriter and translator.



