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JEFF LINDSAY

The McFall Art Museum was closed for the night. Down in the main galleries the security lights were on, throwing bright, ugly puddles of light on the doors and hallways. It was very different from the careful track lighting of the day, lovingly trained on the paintings and sculptures that lined the rooms to show them at their best, without glare or shadow. The illumination from these nighttime lights was harsh, hard-edged. The garish pools of light they threw made the museum seem darker somehow, more strange and threatening than a building filled with great art should have been.

It was not a big museum, but it had made a name for itself in San Francisco, “the gem of the Bay Area,” people called it, “an undiscovered treasure trove of art from nearly every era.”

Near the marble staircase that led to the second floor, the sharply outlined shadow of a statue fell across the floor, the figure of a nude athlete holding half a javelin. The athlete had been dead for almost twenty-five

hundred years, and his javelin had been broken for seventeen hundred, but still he stood poised for his throw. With the glare of the security light on his marble skin, that throw seemed imminent, adding to the strange sense of foreboding.

From the far end of the back gallery an eerie sound fluttered across the spotless tile floors. It echoed off the hard surfaces of the floor and walls until it was almost impossible to recognize it for what it was—the sound of a cheap radio playing a ball game. Moments later, the sound was joined by the scuffle of the night guard's feet as he walked back to the security station at the front door, where he put the radio down beside a bank of video monitors. The guard settled into his chair, just in time for the louder gabble of a tire commercial.

The sound echoed up to the first landing of the marble staircase but somehow failed to turn the corner and make it to the second floor. At the top of the stairs greater darkness waited to join the sudden silence. The pools of shadow were swept aside by one security light halfway down a hallway lined with office doors. The entire length of the hallway stood prey to the shadows, half dim and half lit by the small and ugly light from that one bare lamp.

All the way down at the far end of the hall, one additional pool of light spilled out into the hallway from the half-open door of the corner office. It was a much warmer light, though not terribly bright. Then, quite suddenly, the light went out. For several moments nothing else happened: no sound, no sign of any living thing

moving anywhere near the corner office—but the careful observer might have noticed a strange, dark blue-purple glow coming from inside the room. Without really lighting anything properly, the glow somehow caused the lettering on the office door to jump out in almost three-dimensional clarity:

CHRISTOPHER THOMAS

Curator

From the doorway, there was almost nothing to see in the darkness of the curator's office. The walls reflected a faint texture that had to be books, hundreds of them, lining the room from the floor all the way up beyond the reach of a normal human being. They seemed to loom above the room, holding in and magnifying the tense emptiness that gripped this museum tonight. And faintly visible in the dim blue-purple glow was one end of a large leather couch.

At the other end of the room was a large draftsman's table with a lamp suspended above it on a gooseneck, and from this lamp came the glow. It shone down on a canvas stretched out on the table, and it reflected strangely off the thick, square glasses worn by the man who leaned over the canvas. When the young woman beside him opened her mouth to take a ragged breath, it lit up her teeth with a brilliant and otherworldly sheen.

"It's quite clear under the ultraviolet light," the man said. Something about the way he said his words made

them sound stilted, as if he were reading from a script, but the young woman didn't notice. She was staring at his hands as they hovered just above the canvas. Like the rest of the man, his hands were long and angular and strong. "Here," he said, "and again, here." He moved his hand in a choppy half circle over the lower corner of the canvas.

The young woman ran her tongue out and across her full lower lip. She looked closely at him, the light casting strange shadows into the angles of a face not classically handsome—the slightly hooked nose, the too thin lips—yet something about him was beautiful, beautiful and dangerous.

"Are you listening?" he barked at her, her normally copper-colored skin edging toward purple in the light.

"Yes, yes, of course."

"Look," he commanded. He made a patting motion over the canvas. "It's very good. The artist used old linen and real Prussian-blue pigment, very expensive, but fugitive, so it's turned to black, a nice touch." The hand turned over, and the young woman watched with fascination.

So expressive, she thought, staring at the fingertips as they fluttered.

"But," he said. Quite suddenly, one of the hands moved away and switched on the conventional light. "Your Soutine is a fake. You've spent a great deal of the museum's money on a *fake*."

As that statement hit home, she snapped her eyes away from those hands and onto the man's face. "Fake,"

she said, shaking her head dazedly. “But that’s—I have the provenance. And it was a good one, proving where the painting has been every moment since it left Sou-tine’s studio in France in 1939.”

The man straightened up—he was quite tall—and he inched closer to her. His movements, like his words, gave the impression of a bad actor, not quite sure how to act the part of human being. “I read your provenance,” he said. “It doesn’t add up.”

“But I talked to the family.”

“You talked to con men.”

“What?” she gasped.

“The whole provenance is fake. Like the painting.”

“Oh, my God.” For a long moment she thought about a promising career, now smoldering in ruins. The years of graduate school, the overwhelming student loans she could barely pay, even with this prestigious job. And now—it was all over. She would be fired, disgraced, permanently unemployed. All she had worked for her entire adult life slipping away into shambles; the embarrassment she would share with her family, who had been so proud of her; the museum’s first African-American curator, a symbol of sorts to her community, something she’d never wanted but had become.

“I’m afraid there’s no doubt at all,” the man said, putting those long hands of his together in front of him.

“Oh, dear God.”

“A bit of a career-killer, isn’t it, *Justine*?” He used her name as if it were in quotation marks.

“I—there must be something. . . .”

He smiled. His teeth were large but white and strong looking. “Something . . . we can do?” he said mockingly. “To make it all go away like it never happened?”

The young woman just shook her head.

“Or did you mean something *I* can do—to save your career, hide your mistake, keep your life from sliding down the drain?”

“Is there?” she blurted out.

He stared at her for what seemed like a long time. Then he straightened and took another half step toward her. “There might be something. But . . .” He shook his head.

“But what?” Justine asked, barely breathing.

“It’s a huge risk for me. Personally and professionally. I would have to know that I can trust you completely.”

“You can trust me. You’re holding my career in your hands.”

“Of course, but that’s not enough.” He fluttered one of those big hands, as if to say, *What’s in it for me?* and she could not look away from it for several seconds. When she finally did and their eyes met, there was really only one thing to say.

“I’ll lock the door,” she said.

Later, after Justine was gone, Christopher Thomas sat up on the large leather couch and straightened his clothing. He felt rather pleased with himself, refreshed, and ready to get on with the night’s real work. He stood up and stretched, then moved over to his desk. Justine had

provided a pleasant interlude, but a great deal was still left to do tonight.

The desk telephone stood beside a five-by-seven picture frame that held a shot of his wife, Rosemary, and their two children. A pleasant-looking family group, and Thomas felt mild affection for the three of them: nothing that would prevent him from gratifying his frequent urges for other women, of course. He seldom seemed to have any time to spend on his little family, what with his work as curator and his other less public projects. Still, it was nice to have a family in the background. It made him feel so much more . . . authentic and irreproachable. Especially with Rosemary's pedigree—a child of wealth and privilege. Marrying her had been one of the smartest moves he had ever made. He gave the picture a brief, synthetic smile, pure reflex, and picked up the telephone, dialed a number from memory, and, after hearing a curt “Yes?” on the other end, spoke.

“I have three paintings you will be interested in.” Again the corners of Thomas's mouth twitched upward in a mechanical smile. “Including a rather rare Soutine.”

A moment of silence on the other end was followed by a harsh breath—an exhalation of cigarette smoke?—then the voice said, “Describe it to me.”

Thomas did: the wild, almost otherworldly exuberance of the brushwork, the sense of immediacy that jumped off the canvas and into the viewer's heart—assuming the viewer had a heart, which Thomas did not. But it didn't prevent him from gauging the effect this painting would have on others.

Another long pause on the other end of the line was punctuated by two harsh breaths. Finally, the man said, in a soft and raspy voice, “All right.”

Thomas smiled again. This time it looked a bit more like a real smile because he was about to get a great deal of money, and Christopher Thomas needed money. In spite of his rich wife and high-profile job, Christopher Thomas needed money badly, and quickly.

“I’m sending three canvases to your restoration company tomorrow afternoon at three thirty,” he said. “They will travel in a white panel truck with the museum’s name and logo on the side. All right?”

After one more long, harsh exhalation, the voice said softly, “Good,” then the line went dead.

Christopher Thomas hung up the phone, feeling pleased with himself. Tomorrow afternoon, the three paintings would disappear from the truck taking them to be cleaned. Naturally, the museum would be upset, but they would also get a large check from the insurance company. And a collector somewhere would get three nice works of art, and Thomas would get a hefty chunk of cash. As an added bonus, the young woman who had recently left his couch would certainly be grateful that he had allowed her to keep her job. A return bout on the reliable leather couch was clearly in his future.

So a self-satisfied Christopher Thomas locked his office and went down the hall to the marble staircase. Things were looking up, and just in time. He mentally counted the money he would get as he headed down the stairs. He hit the landing and circled around, continuing

down to the main floor of the museum. The sound of the guard's radio reached him, a roaring crowd that echoed into a confused blur and muffled the noise of his steps on the marble stairs. For just a moment he allowed himself to pretend that the crowd was cheering for him; he had done it. Payday. *Hooray for me*, he thought.

Thomas walked past the marble javelin thrower to the security station by the front door. "Good night, Artie," he said to the guard.

The man looked up, his face lit with an eerie glow from the half dozen video screens that surrounded him. "Hey, Mr. Thomas. You going to call it a night?"

"Yes. We all have to go home sometime." Thomas had arranged for Artie Ruby to get this job in security at the museum despite Artie's checkered past. The way Thomas saw it, didn't hurt having a crooked ex-cop working for you in security—it even came in handy sometimes.

Artie smiled. "Ain't it the truth. All right, you have a good night, Mr. Thomas."

Thomas nodded and moved to the front door, waiting for just a second before the guard pushed the security buzzer, then he was out through the glass double doors and into the night.

Thomas walked through the bright orange glare of the security lights on the front of the building and circled around back to the staff parking area. The long walk was annoying, particularly at the end of a hard day, but the insurance company insisted that the back door remain locked. Not that it would do them any

good this time, he thought, wondering again just how much the Soutine might bring.

The parking lot was a great deal darker than the front of the building. It was normally lit by two large lights, one at each end, but Thomas saw that one of them, the one nearest his car, was out. He frowned and shook his head. Maintenance was supposed to check the lights regularly—again, as dictated by the insurance company—and someone had neglected the job. He made a mental note to scold the maintenance people in the morning. He certainly didn't need trouble with the insurance company, not right now when they were about to write the museum a hefty check.

Still shaking his head at this carelessness, he fished out the car keys from his pocket and stepped over to his car, a two-year-old BMW. As he unlocked the car and reached down to open the door, he felt more than saw a shape slip out of the shadows by the building's Dumpster and come up behind him. Before he could turn around or even straighten up, something cold and hard pressed into the back of his neck and a voice said, "Get in the car."

Thomas froze. For a moment he could not think, or even breathe,

The cold spot jabbed harder into his neck. "In the car. Now."

Thomas unfroze, jerked the door open, and got in behind the wheel. The shadow slipped behind him into the backseat and closed the door, quickly and soundlessly, then the cold spot was back on his neck again.

"How are you doing, Chris?" the voice said, the

words friendly, but the voice that spoke them was cold and empty.

“Who are you?”

“A friend of a friend. Somebody who asked me to stop by and say hello.”

“I don’t—what *friend*? What do you want from me?”

“Oh, I think we both know what I want,” the voice said with reptilian amusement. “You’ve been ignoring our mutual friend, and he hates to be ignored. Hates it like hell.” For emphasis, the man jabbed at Thomas’s neck with the gun barrel. It hurt. “Is that how you treat a good friend? Somebody who lends you that much money, from the goodness of his heart?”

Thomas now knew who had sent this man. He had known on some level since the man came at him out of the shadows, but now he was quite sure. He had half expected something like this ever since he had borrowed the money. It had been a truly stupid move, one of the few really dumb things he had ever done, but he had needed the money. And now he was paying for it.

“I can get the money,” Thomas said.

“That’s very good news, Chris. Why don’t you do that.”

“I just—I need time.”

“We *all* need time, Chris. But we don’t all get it.”

“No, listen,” Thomas said. “I really do—I have a very large piece of money coming to me, very soon.”

“I’m very happy for you. But I need something now.”

“I don’t have it now. But I will—I’ll have all of it, very soon.”

Nothing in the soft laughter that came from the man in the backseat was funny. “You know how often I hear that?”

“It’s true,” Thomas insisted. Reluctantly, he told the man about the canvases that would soon disappear, and the large bag of cash that would take their place.

Silence, a long and uncomfortable silence, came from the backseat. Then: “And this happens when?”

“Tomorrow. I should have the money within the week. All the money.”

Another long silence followed, and Thomas felt a slow drop of sweat crawl down his neck, in spite of the chill in the car.

Finally the man spoke. “I would hate to think you’re yanking my chain, Chris.”

“I swear to you.”

“Because you are really pissing off some very serious people.”

“I swear,” Thomas repeated.

“Give me your hand.”

Thomas blinked at the strange request. “Wh—what?”

“Your *hand*. Gimme it.”

Slowly, awkwardly, Thomas extended his hand into the backseat. The man took it and held it, and for a moment the small, hard circle of steel at Thomas’s neck disappeared.

“I am going to believe you just this once. And I hope this isn’t stupid of me.”

“No, I really—” Thomas said, but the man took hold of Thomas’s little finger and interrupted him.

“Don’t disappoint me.” The man pulled upward, hard, and the sound of the little finger’s snapping filled the car.

“Aaaggaaahhh,” Thomas cried out. The pain was intense, and he tried to pull away his injured hand, but the man held on.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?” the man said, wiggling the broken finger.

“I—I—aagahhh—yes, yes, I understand.”

“You *sure*?” the man said with an extravigorous tweak of the finger.

“Yes, ah, I’m—ow—positive.”

“One week.” The man dropped the finger, opened the back door of the car, and disappeared into the night.

Christopher Thomas watched him go, cradling his savaged finger. The whole hand throbbed, all the way to the wrist, and for quite a while he could do nothing except hold it to his chest and bite his lip. But the pain did not die down, and finally Thomas fumbled the keys into the ignition, started the car, and drove carefully away.