



CARD SHARP

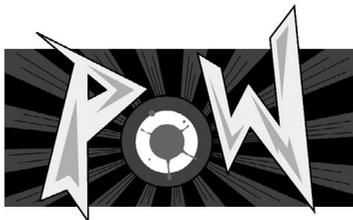


A VINCENT WARD ADVENTURE

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by



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Prologue

It was the eve of my sixth birthday and smoke was creeping into my bedroom while I slept. Grey plumes slipped under the door and wafted up around my hot-air-balloon lampshade and filled the ceiling with a noxious fog. Wisps reached down like fingers, tickling my nostrils. But I didn't wake up. The edge of the nylon carpet by the door began to smoulder, adding to the fumes. The clouds grew dense and moved in over my bedclothes like a warm, goose-feather eiderdown.

Out in the hallway, the fire was taking hold of the house. The stair carpet was crackling with flames. The oil paintings that lined the walls were blackened and blistering. The flames reached a pile of cards and presents, left wrapped by my door. Their sticky tape melted and the Happy Birthday paper ignited. In seconds they were stoking the flames into a yellow and white-hot blaze.

The heat radiated through my bedroom door and my *Magritte* poster of a man with a floating apple for a head turned brown. It caught light and flakes of burning paper fluttered down, igniting a dirty sock on my floor. The smoke clouds swelled into a smothering pillow over my head. I settled into my bed, feeling comforted and warm, and drew a deep sigh. The smoke moved in for the kill, reaching inside me and took a stranglehold on my lungs.

I lurched awake and sat bolt-upright, coughing and choking. The smoke stung my eyes as I waved my arms and fought for breath. I reached for the window by my bed and began wrestling with the sash. I could feel it rattling as tears streamed from my blinded eyes, but the lock wouldn't budge. Frustration took over and I began beating the glass. I wanted to scream and cry for help, but all I could do was choke.

Someone shouted outside and an engine roared on the gravel drive. I pounded the window to make them hear me. *Don't leave me behind!*

Footsteps thundered along the hallway. My bedroom door burst open and blinding, hot light reached in through the smoke. My dad rushed in. "It's all right Vincent, I've got you," he said, in a dry, rasping voice and scooped me up.

Out in the hallway, Mum was standing in the bathroom doorway, desperately pointing the showerhead at the burning paintings on the stairs. "Come on Cynthia," Dad shouted over the roaring fire, "we can take the backstairs."

Smoke swirled around us as Dad dragged Mum by the arm and carried me along the hall and down the backstairs. I could feel his lungs fighting for air, but he refused to give up. We burst outside into the cold night air. The gravel path crunched under Dad's feet as he took me around to the back of the house.

“David, look,” Mum cried, pointing through a broken window to the paintings in the drawing room. “They’ve left the Whistler and the Stubbs. We can save them!”

Dad didn’t reply. His feet ground the gravel as he turned and marched across the lawn. When we reached the oak trees at the bottom of the garden, Dad lay me on the grass. It was cold and the dew soaked into my pyjamas. My brain felt like it was swimming. Dad forced his lips into a smile. “It’s all right, Vincent. You’re safe now.”

Mum leaned over his shoulder. “David, the fire is in the front of the house. If we go now we can rescue the rest of the collection.”

Dad turned on Mum. “For heaven’s sake Cynthia, we’re safe – isn’t that the most important thing?”

“Yes of course it is. But we hid while those thieves broke in and cherry picked from our collection. We can’t let this fire take the rest.” She sighed. “Haven’t we lost enough tonight?”

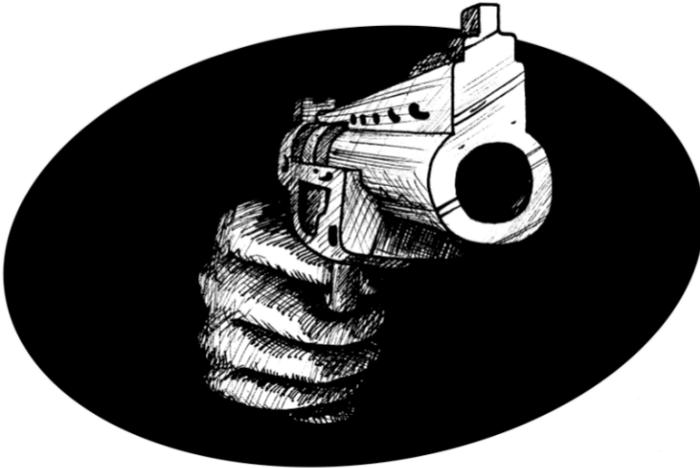
Dad’s hands tightened into fists. “The fire brigade are on their way, Cynthia.”

“Yes David, but they won’t save the pictures. We can if we go now.”

Dad sighed and wiped his brow. “All right. Go!”

Mum turned with a snort of frustration, and ran back across the grass.

Dad turned to me. The flames from the house were reflecting in his eyes. “Your mother’s right. This is our only opportunity to save the collection. Every second costs us another piece.” He spat into the darkness. “Whatever happens, Vincent, you’ll be all right.” He turned and ran after Mum, back to the burning house.



Chapter 1

The sun was shining on Piccadilly Circus as I left the underground and strolled to Trafalgar Square. I was early for work and looking forward to another day in the research department, tracking down paintings for the National Gallery to purchase. Then my mobile buzzed with an all-staff email from Alice, our head curator's PA:

Subject: Help!!!

We have an important patrons' preview this morning and the decorators have overrun. Can everyone with a free pair of hands come to the basement exhibition hall and help with the final preparations.

Thanks, Alice

(Sent on behalf of Mr Masters, Head Curator, National Gallery.)

Five minutes later I was standing in the basement exhibition hall holding a priceless Caravaggio, while Alice rallied everyone into

hanging sixty-three post-renaissance paintings before the patrons arrived in an hour.

With feet rushing around me, I gaze at the Caravaggio. It's a painting called *The Cardsharps*, which I studied at university but never imagined holding. It shows a young man playing cards with two dangerous conmen – or *cardsharps*. Even close-up the details are as lifelike as a photograph, and it's easy to imagine the argument after the young card player discovers he's been cheated. Five hundred years ago this painting began a revolution in art that made Caravaggio the most famous painter of his generation. And gave him a lifestyle he revelled in until his spectacular fall from grace.

With a tilt, my reflection appears in the painting's protective glass. The young card player and I have pale skin and short brown hair, and my black jumper mirrors his velvet jacket. Old paintings like this are too delicate to be touched, but that hasn't stopped them recording history, changing the world, and bringing people closer to God. Not bad for a sheet of canvas and a few paints.

An angry snap of fingers tears my eyes from the Caravaggio. I look up to see our head curator, Mr Masters. He's ruled the gallery for longer than anyone can remember, and has more wrinkles than an oak tree. His eyes burn, while a vein on the side of his head pulses with impatience. "Be careful with that, Mr..."

"Ward, sir. Vincent Ward," I reply. He needn't worry – I'd rather die than let anything happen to a painting like this.

"Put it there," he said, pointing to an empty wall. As I set it down, Mr Masters gathered everyone together. "When we first discussed the pictures we'd like to include in this exhibition, I doubted so many galleries would loan us their biggest attractions. Now, I don't know how we persuaded them, but here we are surrounded by more great works of art than I have ever seen together." His smile beamed. "This

will be a spectacular exhibition.” Mr Masters opened his hands. “But we’ve so much to do, I don’t know where to start.”

“I do,” said a deep voice behind him.

Stunned that anyone would dare interrupt him, Mr Masters turned to see a man in dark glasses and a long, coffee-coloured overcoat. I’ve worked at the gallery for over a year and didn’t recognise him. And from the look of Mr Masters, neither did he. In a flash, the man’s overcoat unfurled like a ship’s sail in the wind and he drew a pistol with a long, steel silencer screwed hard into its barrel. He pointed it at Mr Masters and said: “You can *start* by putting your hands behind your back and dropping to your knees.”

Mr Masters’ mouth fell open.

“Now!” barked the man.

Bewildered, Mr Masters did as he was told.

“Very good,” said the man as he stepped behind Mr Masters and slipped a plastic cable-tie around his wrists. With a swift yank the cable-tie came taut, and the man kicked Mr Masters on to his face. “Now, everyone else!”

I glanced round to see another six men in long, coffee-coloured overcoats and dark glasses standing among us. Each one was brandishing a pistol with a blunt silencer. It was a bold gang that slipped into a gallery on the morning of a preview – thieves usually snuck in at night!

“Do as he says,” Mr Masters shouted.

The men bound our wrists with more plastic cable-ties and made us lie face-down. Two men watched over us, circling like sharks, while the rest of the gang set to work stealing the paintings.

The chill of the marble floor soaked through my clothes like night time dew.

The gang were swift and made light work of gathering the paintings

and stacking them in the service lift. As each canvas slipped away, my blood rose a degree. When they took *The Cardsharps*, it threatened to explode like steam in a pressure cooker.

But what could I do?

As I lay there, wracking my brain, a memory flashed before my eyes. A woman was running across a darkened lawn towards a flickering light. She ran into the shadows and a scream echoed through the garden.

The memory vanished as someone behind me sniffed back tears. A guard's footsteps approached and stopped near my head. His leather boots creaked as he crouched down. "It's all right, love, we're not here to hurt anyone," he said, but the chink of his pistol on the marble floor said otherwise. "We're just here for the paintings."

"I know that much!" replied Alice, her voice choking on tears.

Another memory sprung to my mind. I was sitting in my father's study. Sweltering sunlight was turning the room into an oven. He opened the front of an old clock, which was ticking away the seconds, and took out a bunch of keys to unlock the window. "Thieves only see the money in art, never its true value," he said with marked disdain.

The guard's boots creaked like a dry log on a fire, triggering another memory. I was back in the darkened garden, looking up at my father. Light was flickering in his eyes. He was out of breath and his face was blackened with soot. "Your mother's right. This is our only chance to save the collection. Every second costs us another piece." He coughed and spat into the darkness. "Whatever happens Vince, you'll be all right." He turned and ran after Mum towards the flickering light.

That was the last time I saw my parents – the night thieves robbed and burned our house. I used to relive the night in my dreams and wake up anxious and desperate to chase after them. Growing up, I

learned to block out the memory and buried it deep inside. It's been years since I last thought about it, but now I can almost smell the smoke. Guilt and sorrow wash over me with the thought of losing my parents in the fire. If I'd been older, stronger, I could have helped them – saved them and the paintings.

Alice sniffed again. "You don't you get it, do you?" she said to the guard. "Paintings are pieces of history. They're pored over, made with love, given time – years even! That's what makes them precious."

"Art's about how you look at it, love," said the guard. "I just see them as money."

A glimpse of fire raging in my father's eyes flashed before me, and for the first time I understood what had been going through his mind on the night of the fire. He knew the risks, but he saw a chance to save his collection and he took it.

"Last two!" shouted the gang leader.

Our guards grabbed the remaining canvases and followed the rest of the gang into the service lift.

This was it. This was my chance. I was older now, and stronger. I could either take the chance, or spend the rest of my life trying to track down the paintings.

I swallowed hard and twisted the cable-tie. Its tough plastic held firm, cutting into my skin like cheese wire. The pain stoked my adrenaline.

As the lift doors closed, I rolled onto my back, drew my knees up tight to my chest and slipped my bound wrists over my feet. It was a squeeze, but in a second I was on my feet and running through the exhibition hall, my heart pumping like a steam-driven piston. A vision of my father sprinting across the grass towards the burning house, raced through my head, filling me with the desire to save the paintings.

Will the robbers escape?
Is there anything Vincent can do?

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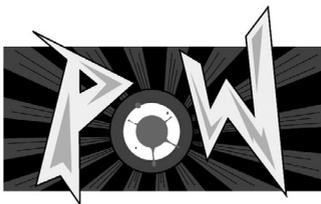
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