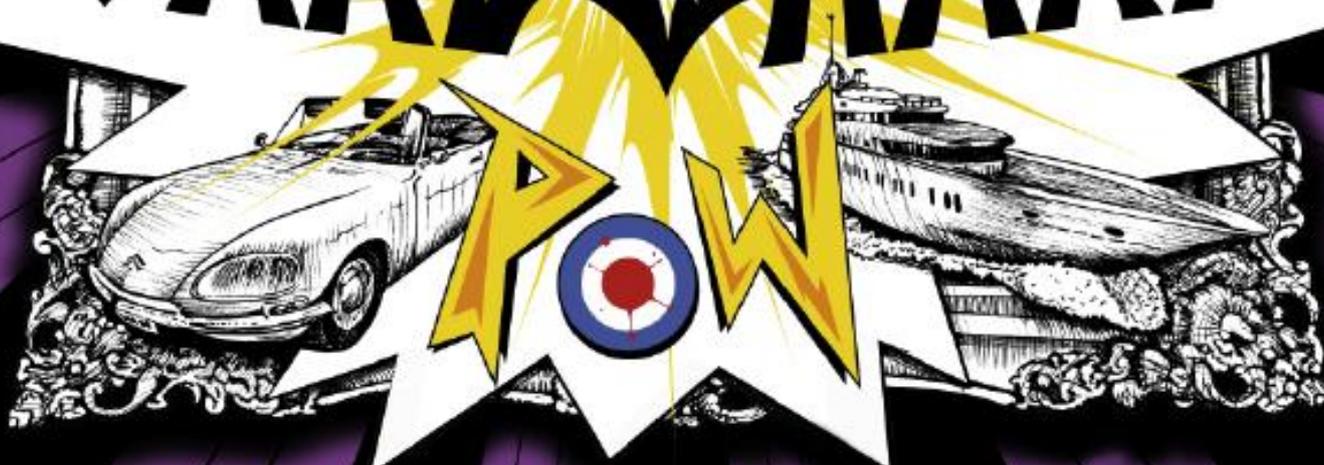


# CARD SHARP



A VINCENT WARD ADVENTURE

**CARDSHARP:**  
**A VINCENT WARD ADVENTURE**

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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, and tickled 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, making my *Magritte* poster of a man with a floating apple for a head turn brown. It caught light and flakes of burning paper fluttered down, igniting a dirty sock left on my floor. The smoke clouds swirled like the brushstrokes in a Van Gogh painting above my bed and 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. It reached 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 hanging above 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," he said and drew a deep breath that puffed his chest out. "This is our only chance to save what's left of the collection. Every second we stand back and do nothing, those thieves cost us another painting." He spat into the darkness. "Come on Vincent. We can stop this." Dad grabbed my hand and together we ran across the grass, back to the burning house.

Dad stopped at the edge of the gravel and began scanning the burning windows, tracing the path of the fire as a plan formed in his mind. I squeezed his hand, will him to go inside and start the rescue. Didn't he say that every moment we waste, we lose another painting? What was he waiting for?

"Stay here Vincent. Don't come any closer, Vincent. And don't come after me. Whatever happens, stay back and you'll be all right." Dad jabbed his finger as he spoke, firm and definite, and it made me nod and agree to do as he said. Dad turned with a flap of his dressing gown and ran back inside the house.

Rooted to the gravel, I stood and stared in through the darkened windows as the smoke and flames rose from the upstairs windows and billowed into the night sky, blotting out the stars.

Inside, the Whistler and the Stubbs were hanging in the back gallery, still safe on the walls with the other paintings. But where were Mum and Dad?

Precious seconds ticked away.

I held my breath, the way I hoped Mum and Dad were holding their as they fought their way through the smoke. Then the flames from the front of the house reached into the room with the rush of a fireball as Mum and Dad opened the hallway door. Flames reached into the gallery over their heads and clawed at the doorway, hungry for the flammable oil paints and their dry wooden frames. Dad batted them back with a slam of the door and began pulling the paintings from the walls. Mum raced across the room to unlock the French windows.

An impulse made me break my Dad's order and I shot across the gravel to help her. "Stay back, Vincent!" Mum shouted and threw open the French windows. A torrent of smoke raced from inside, stinging my eyes.

"Here Vincent, take this," she said and thrust a painting into my arms. I opened my burning eyes to see the Van Gogh that hung over my bed was on top. I couldn't believe it. Mum had gone all the way into the mouth of the fire and saved the picture I stared at every night until I fell asleep.

We couldn't save all the paintings in the house, but as Mum and Dad began pulling the remaining off the walls, a smile beamed from my face with the feeling that anything was possible.

# Chapter 1

The August sun was shining on Piccadilly Circus as I stepped out of the underground. I was early for work and savouring the last few weeks of my gap year as a research assistant at The National Gallery. My gap year had flown by, and opened my eyes to a lot of things I would never have learned at boarding school. But in just a few weeks, I'd be making my way back to St. Helen's, to start a four year art history degree.

As I turned the corner of Trafalgar Square, my phone buzzed with an all-staff email:

Subject: Help!!!

We have an important patrons' exhibition 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, The 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. Exhibitions like this are a gallery's lifeblood. They showcase special paintings you'd otherwise have to travel all over the world to see. The gallery then uses the money they make from tickets and souvenirs, to buy more paintings and preserve the pictures they show for free the rest of the year.

Feet rushed around me as I gazed at the Caravaggio. He's one of my favourite artists, and I've admired him and his paintings since my tutor, Professor Johnson, lent me biography two summers ago. He had superstar success, drank hard and fought harder, was impulsive and dangerous, and five hundred years ago, Caravaggio began a revolution in art that made him

the most infamous painter of his generation.

Countless old paintings like *The Cardsharps* have recorded history, changed the world and brought people closer to God. Not bad for a few paints and sheets of canvas that are now so old, they're too delicate to be touched.

It was hard to believe I was actually holding Caravaggio's *The Cardsharps*. 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 that breaks out when the young card player discovers he's been cheated. With a tilt, my reflection appeared in the painting's protective glass and my short brown hair and pale skin merged with the face of the young card player. He looked about eighteen, putting us in the same year at school.

The painting took me back to the St. Helen's common room when two bullies, Grady and Finch, conned dinner money out of us younger kids. Well they did until I set them up with a card trick from the school library – but that's another story.

An angry snap of fingers tore my eyes from the Caravaggio. I looked up to see the head curator, Mr Masters, glaring at me. He had more wrinkles than an oak tree and had run the gallery for longer than anyone could remember, but that didn't stop him getting stressed before an exhibition launch. His eyes burned and a vein on the side of his head pulsed with impatience. "Be careful with that, Mr..."

"Ward, sir. Vincent Ward," I replied, and a cloud of disappointment descended on me. I'd been arriving early every day for nearly a year, helping out wherever I could. The gallery felt like a second home to me, but Mr Masters didn't have a clue who I was.

"Now put that painting down before you drop it," he said, and pointed to an empty wall.

He needn't have worried – I'd rather die than let anything happen to a painting like this.

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, 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 knew most people at the gallery, but 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 – the thieves I knew of broke 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 on grass.

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 the steam in a pressure cooker.

Someone had to do something, but what?

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 emotions.

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. Flames were 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 we stand back and do nothing, those thieves cost us another

painting.” He coughed and spat into the darkness. “Come on Vincent. We can stop this.”

It had been years since I relived the night art thieves ransacked my parent’s collection and left the house to burn. At the time we felt like heroes, snatching the last canvasses as the flames took over the house, and that’s what the newspapers called us. But my parents couldn’t save everything, and just remembering the paintings they lost still makes them sad.

(I was six, and their first impulse had been to get me to safety. That decision alone cost them several irreplaceable paintings.)

Mr Masters made an angry grunt, as the shock of being robbed subsided and his anger took over. “You don’t you get it, do you?” he said to the guard. “Paintings are pieces of history. They’re pored over, made with love, given time – years! That’s what makes them precious.”

“I guess, art’s about how you look at it, mate,” said the guard. “I just see them as money.”

A glimpse of fire raging in my father’s eyes flashed before me. He was weighing up the risks of returning to the fire to save his collection. But every second he waited, he lost another painting. ‘Run Dad, run,’ I thought. ‘Don’t wait, *GO!*’

“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. And unless I took it, I would spend the rest of my life wishing I had and this would be the last anyone saw of Caravaggio’s *The Cardsharps*.

Contempt for the thieves rose inside me like one of Caravaggio’s impulses as he stepped up for a fight. 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.

## Chapter 2

The old service lift creaked and clanked inside its shaft as I started up the stairs. My mind raced ahead. The lift was big enough to take all sixty-three paintings, so the gang must have a truck to get them all away. The only place they could park a truck that big in was on the forecourt out front.

It was a bold plan, but a gang who were prepared to hold up The National Gallery in broad daylight were daring enough.

I leapt up the stairs, three at a time. It had taken the gang less than five minutes to load all sixty-three paintings into the service lift. At a guess, it would take around ten minutes to carry all the paintings to the forecourt and make their escape. That was enough time to catch them. But how could I stop them?

When the stairs brought me to the lobby, I found the gallery security guards bound with cable-ties and gagged. Two more members of the gang were keeping watch. The gallery's front doors were jammed open, and just outside was the waiting getaway truck.

The service lift arrived with a rumble and its doors opened. I ducked out of sight against the stairs' wooden banister. The gang rushed out and formed a human chain through the lobby, and began passing the paintings into the truck.

Paintings and precious seconds slipped away as I tried to think of a way to stop the gang. But they were armed and I didn't have full use of my hands. My frustration fumed as *The Cardsharps* was lifted into the truck and the gang leader stacked it with the rest.

The gang won't get far without their truck! All I had to do was get out there and stop it.

Upstairs was a restaurant that overlooked Trafalgar Square and the forecourt. Under the circumstances, it was ideal. I ran up and almost overbalanced with shock. Sitting at the tables

were some of the gallery's most prestigious patrons. They were the business associates and wealthy people who provided most of the money the gallery used to buy its paintings. The amount they'd paid for their suits and jewellery could buy another Caravaggio. Laughter echoed around the room with the clinking of crockery as everyone enjoyed a morning out of the office before the exhibition launch, blissfully unaware of the robbery beneath their feet.

I twisted my wrists against the cutting plastic cable-tie as my mind raced against the ticking seconds. The restaurant knives weren't sharp enough to cut the cable-tie. But the chairs were strong enough to support fat-businessmen. A vacant one sat at a table where two American businessmen were swapping stories over croissants and orange juice.

"Is this seat taken?" I asked as I ran through and grabbed the chair by its back.

The two men broke off their stories and stared in wide-eyed shock as I hurled the chair at the window. There was a swish of air and a clatter as the chair hit the glass. A diagonal crack streaked across the pane. I brought the chair back and took another swing. The chair bounced off again, but the crack grew by a couple of inches. Alarm bells rang throughout the building, alerting the gang to hurry up – I might as well have put out a message on the Tannoy.

Guns or no guns, the gang had no right to take the paintings! I swung the chair again, but it was held back by the firm hand of a businessman wearing a yellow and black-striped tie. He wasn't big or imposing, just strong. "You don't want to do that," he said in a stern, Dutch-drool.

"Yes I do!" I replied as my muscles tapped an adrenaline reserve and wrenched the chair from his grip. My face contorted with ugly determination and with one last burst I hurled the chair at the window.

The pane shattered. Razor-sharp shards of glass showered me and tinkled across the marble floor. The sounds of buses and traffic in Trafalgar Square flooded the restaurant. I

peered through the window frame, the jagged glass gaping like the jaws of an enormous shark.

Down on the forecourt, the gang's truck fired into life. They were about to get away!

The businessman's hand grabbed my shoulder but I shrugged it off, lifted my leg and leapt through the window – out into the morning air.

Down, down, down, I fell until – *BANG!* – I hit the truck's roof.

The metal buckled and I fell forward just as the rumbling truck's tyres screeched against the forecourt's bone-breaking, granite slabs. Instinct reached out with my hands to break my fall, but the cable-tie stopped me spreading my weight. I fell to one side and rolled off the roof. Pistol bullets pinged through the roof as the gang in the back hammered their fists and shouted to the driver in the cab:

*"Go-go-go!"*

*"Step on it!"*

The truck lurched into the traffic. I hooked my fingers into claws and clung to the edge of the roof; my body swinging against the paintwork, my legs flailing in the air.

The truck roared on, heading west from Trafalgar Square. My foot hit the side with a bang. A second later a bullet burst through the side, missing me by an inch.

The driver took a sharp turn, accelerating towards The Mall. The gang in the back hit the truck side with a volley of thuds. I began inching along the edge of the roof, one finger at a time, the racing, icy air numbing each digit to the bone. My progress was slow, but the driver wasn't using his mirrors and I thanked Westminster Council for mending all the potholes.

We swerved onto The Mall and sped towards Buckingham Palace. My foot found a hold in the cab door. Clinging on tight, I slid my foot up the door until it found the handle. The driver slowed for the roundabout. Momentum pulled me forward, and with a kick of the handle, the

door swung open. The truck squealed to a halt and the force catapulted me into the air.

SLAP! – My shoulder hit the road; the tarmac scraped through my shirt, grinding my skin like a cheese grater, and leaving me wincing in pain.

Inside the truck, the driver scrabbled to release his seatbelt. He reached out to shut the door, but I leapt up and grabbed it. The horn of a car behind blasted angrily. The truck driver stamped his accelerator and shot off, dragging me along. I clung to the door, my shoes scraping the tarmac.

As we circled the roundabout, I caught a glimpse of a palace guard staring in disbelief from under his Busby.

We raced on through the traffic. I pulled myself up the door. The driver swung into the outside lane and the door threw me back, hurling my legs in the air. Car horns blared as the driver cut across the lane. A black taxi screeched, narrowly avoiding the front of the truck. My feet ran a two-step across the bonnet as the angry cabby shouted from inside.

With another turn, the driver spurred on past Green Park, and gave me a look of vicious determination – I was in trouble. As we sped up, the door swung shut, slamming me in the frame and forcing the air from my lungs with a spluttering cough.

The driver didn't let up. He began zigzagging between cars and speeding along the road. The door swung in and out, jarring against its hinges and battering me against the frame while the grinding tarmac flashed beneath me. The truck careered over a crossing. The jolt threw me into the air. For a moment I lost grip and was flying. I came down and caught the door, looped my arms around the window – the strong plastic cable-tie stopping me from being thrown into the path of the oncoming traffic.

I clung on as the truck burned down Park Lane.

The driver steered and the door swung open. This time I twisted my hips and stuck out my foot. The driver saw my attempt to get a hold inside the cab and stamped on the accelerator. The truck jolted with the burst of speed and the door swung back, throwing me inside the cab.

The moment I felt the seat under me, the driver lashed out with his fist. But my foot had a longer reach. I shoved the hard sole of my shoe into his ribs. The blow shoved him into the far side of the cab. The steering wheel turned and the truck jolted as its wheel arches ground into the granite kerb.

The driver tried to steer back onto the road, but I saw my chance and took another shot. He shouted a violent threat, but I didn't care – he shouldn't be stealing paintings.

I kicked him again – square in the gut.

The driver swore as the truck shook with another jolt, then he reached across his lap and drew a pistol from the door pocket. Keeping one eye on the road and one hand on the steering wheel, he pointed the pistol at my head and shouted: "Don't do that again."

Icy shock doused my burning temper and I slid back into the passenger seat.

"I'm just a driver, but those guys in the back work for RedRoom."

I shrugged. They were all thieves, whatever they called themselves.

"They'll kill you if they get the chance," he said and jabbed his gun at me. "Now let me do my job and you won't get hurt."

"All right," I said, although I knew he didn't mean it.

A breath of calm entered the cab as the driver pressed on through the morning traffic. There were plenty of cars on the road ahead, but they were moving at a good speed. As the driver wove between them I lifted my hands and reached over my shoulder for the seatbelt, then brought it down to strap myself in.

Before the buckle met the socket, a police siren screamed behind us. The driver swore again and turned on me. He saw my hands on the seatbelt and lashed out with his pistol. I ducked and the pistol's steel butt hammered into the metal rear wall of the cab. The driver swung it again, hitting me hard in the back. It was agony, but the blow clicked the seatbelt buckle into its socket.

The truck bounced over a central bollard in the road. The driver wrenched the wheel as oncoming cars screeched and skidded around us. I clenched my hands into a ball as though I was praying, and watched the driver's feet.

Car horns blared in alarm as the police sirens caught up and wailed on the road behind us.

Gunshots blasted through the mayhem of car horns and sirens as the gang in the back began firing blindly at the police – I prayed they weren't shooting the paintings.

The driver spun the steering wheel and the truck bucked as it mounted the pavement and roared into Hyde Park. The engine revved as the tyres began churning across the rain-soaked grass.

The sirens faded as we left the police cars and the road behind. Cheers rose from the gang in the back – they were getting away. But the driver was going too fast, and one large bump could buckle the truck's axle. The moment the driver's foot eased on the brake, I thumped his knee.

The driver's foot stomped on the brake and the truck lurched to a halt. The momentum hurled us forward. The seatbelt throttled my chest, while the driver cracked his head on the steering wheel. His pistol twirled round his trigger finger and spun out of the window.

The gang in the back knew something was wrong and began opening the rear doors. My heart sank – I was in the middle of the park with no way out. Before I could worry about what

the gang might do with me, several angry shouts came from the back, then a volley of gunshots. They were trapped and trying to shoot their way out!

There was no time to sit and wait for the gang to escape. I unclipped my seatbelt and hauled the unconscious driver on to the floor. Then slid into his seat and turned the ignition key.

As the engine started the gang stopped shooting.

There was no sign of the police, but the wing mirror showed me a small restaurant on the edge of the park. An idea struck me like lightning. I yanked the gears into reverse and hit the accelerator. The truck fired back across the grass towards the restaurant.

The place wasn't open, but as the truck charged closer, I saw a cleaner inside wiping down the bar. I was going too fast to stop. I punched the horn to warn him, but the cleaner only stared in disbelief as the truck sped towards the restaurant's glass front.

"Here goes another window," I said as the truck rammed into the plate glass.

Shattering glass filled the air with an ear-wrenching crash as the back of the truck careered through the restaurant.

The impact shook my seat like a bucking bronco, but I kept my foot hard on the accelerator, ploughing the truck back through the restaurant. Tables and chairs were swept aside by the truck's bumper while the wheels spun and burned up clouds of rubber. Eventually the metal rear doors clattered against the brickwork and the gang's escape was blocked.

The engine rattled to a stop.

Before I could sigh with relief, a bullet shot through the back of the cab and shattered the windscreen. I gasped as more shots blasted out. I scrambled over the steering wheel and the glass-strewn bonnet and tumbled on to the floor. Glass splinters cut my shirt, embedding in my

hands.

As I staggered through the open window and dusted myself off, six police cars screamed in from nowhere and skidded to surround the café. Armed officers in helmets and flak jackets sprang from the cars and a commanding voice shouted: "Put your hands in the air."

Slowly I lifted my bound wrist above my head, while the weary cleaner waved his white cloth from behind the bar. The gang, however, were not ready to give up, and began firing every bullet they had in every direction

As soon as the cleaner and I were safely outside, two officers wearing thick masks stepped in with enormous guns. *Phutt! Phutt!* Two canisters fizzed through the air and rattled across the glass-strewn floor. In seconds the restaurant filled with tear gas. The gas seeped into the back of the truck through the bullet holes. A few minutes later the driver was in handcuffs, the truck was towed out and the crying gang were arrested.

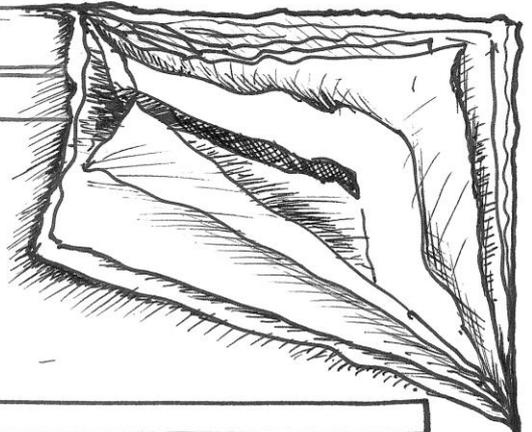
"You might be left with a few scars here," remarked a paramedic as she patched up my shoulder.

"Don't worry about me; I'm just glad the paintings are safe." I smiled.

The paramedic frowned as she wondered if the bumps to my head had knocked the sense out of me. But running into this gang had reminded me there was a darker world surrounding art: the world of criminals who only see the money in art, instead of its ideas or messages, its skill or beauty. Shadows of this world broke into my parents' house, took what they wanted and burned the place. At the time I was too young to stop them or help my parents save what was left, but from now on my eyes would be open and I'd be ready.

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# ART THIEVES NICKED!

## **Daring student researcher bags National Gallery robbers**

Art thieves from infamous underworld organisation, RedRoom launched a rush-hour raid on the National Gallery, swiping a collection valued in the hundreds of millions, straight off the gallery walls.

The robbery appeared to have been planned with RedRoom's trademark slick and bold perfection. They just didn't plan on a student researcher giving chase on the roof of their getaway van.

Armed police were quick to close in on the gang as emergency calls and eye witness reports sent the Met's switchboard into meltdown. Thanks to a quick response, the thieves only made it as far as Hyde Park before they were apprehended.

A police spokesperson said: 'Our policy is to advise civilians not to intervene in crimes, but we take our hats off to the brave young man and what he did today.'

'He saved the National Gallery, their insurers and the police a considerable amount of work. Not to mention, saving the paintings from the black market.'

RedRoom are a notorious organisation with well-documented links to high-level crime. It is not known why they stole the paintings or what they planned to do with them. Senior Met officers believe this is a major setback and have warned galleries around the world to be vigilant as RedRoom may target more institutions.

## Chapter 3

Two days later, the cuts in my shoulder were healing well and I was climbing the stairs to Mr Masters' office. The gallery was still reeling with shock and the air held the nervous fear there could be another robbery at any moment. To reassure everyone, Mr Masters had drafted in extra security, which made the place feel like an airport.

Before the robbery I was a lowly student researcher. Now I was 'that guy who saved the paintings'. People who used to pass me without a second glance, now recognised me from the cut over my eye or the CCTV pictures that made the newspapers. It gave me a buzz, but I just smiled and kept going to Mr Masters' office. Hero or not, it wasn't a good idea to keep the head curator waiting.

Alice Somers, his PA, smiled as I arrived.

"Hi, how are you?" I asked.

"Fine," she said. Her bright eyes had no trace that she'd recently been threatened by a gunman, and it was good to see she was over the ordeal.

"You can go straight in," she said, directing me towards Mr Masters' office.

The door closed behind me with a *sussh* of its fireproof seal. Inside, Mr Masters' office was as peaceful as a library. The floor was carpeted with a thick, sound-softening Persian rug, and the walls were lined with deep bookcases containing tomes of knowledge most people couldn't learn in a lifetime. There was even a sliding ladder that took you to the top rows. A brass plaque screwed to one of the shelves read: *Be ever engaged, so whenever the devil calls he may find you occupied*. It reminded me of the old line about idle hands...

The books held more than the knowledge within their covers and pages. They also kept every word spoken in this office a secret. Even the most senior gallery staff didn't get to hear

half of what was said in here, and today it was my turn to listen.

An ornate mahogany desk dominated the centre of the room. The top was clear besides a lamp, a carriage clock and an A4 manila envelope lying in a dart of light. What secrets did that contain? Were they for the eyes of anyone besides Mr Masters?

To avoid looking like a snoop, I turned to an easel displaying Caravaggio's *The Cardsharps*. It was good to see the painting safe and sound after the robbery.

"It's good to see you're also in one piece," Mr Masters said as he looked up from reading a letter and stepped out of a shadowy corner. He nodded towards the painting I'd been admiring. "We tried to borrow the original from its home in Sicily, but they wouldn't let it out of their sight."

"Well it was only discovered a few years ago. They probably haven't got over the thrill of finding it," I said, letting him know that I was aware Caravaggio painted two versions of *The Cardsharps*. This was the second and more famous painting, because between the two versions Caravaggio's painting skill developed into a new, more realistic style that set him on the road to the fame he revelled in.

Mr Masters nodded – impressed – and his eyes returned to the letter in his hand. "An extensive knowledge of art history...speaks four languages...responsible and trustworthy." Mr Masters looked up to find me frowning with confusion. The old man smiled and held up the letter to reveal the crest of St. Helen's boarding school at the top. "Your tutor, Professor Johnson added this to your application letter. He seems to know you very well."

"Yes, I boarded at St. Helen's since I was eleven, and he's head of art history. He gave me the run of the library and extra books to read during the holidays."

"I see. And you've studied Caravaggio?" Mr Masters nodded to *The Cardsharps*.

“Yes, and all the Post Renaissance painters.”

“Good. Do you enjoy studying?” His eyes reached out through his wrinkled skin with the scrutinising stare of a headmaster.

Nervous fear took hold inside me. I swallowed in an attempt to suppress it, but that only made my blood race, urging me to answer. “Yes,” I said, because it felt like the right thing to say. Then a sudden impulse made me add: “But studying paintings in the school library isn’t as much fun as studying real ones. My parents’ house is full of paintings, so being here is like a second home.”

Mr Masters held up Professor Johnson’s letter. “Yes, I know who your parents are. Their collection is... outstanding.”

I smiled, but Mr Masters’ expression remained cold. “Err, I’d like to stay on and work in your research department, if I could?” I said.

To my surprise, Mr Masters’ expression melted into a warm smile. “It’s good to see a young man with a bit of purpose and ambition in him. Yes, studying is important, but you have to do something with it. That said, earning a post in our research department, particularly when you’re as young as you are, isn’t easy.”

My insides crumpled like a piece of paper headed for the bin.

Mr Masters smiled. “But that’s a conversation for another day. I invited you here because I need someone who knows about Caravaggio to do a little job for me.” Mr Master peered from under his eyebrows. “I don’t suppose you’d be interested, would you?”

I nodded: “Definitely!”

“You’d better sit down then.” Mr Masters offered me the leather chair opposite his desk and it creaked as I sat down. He placed Professor Johnson’s letter beside the manila envelope

and scanned the top of his desk, looking for somewhere to start. Intrigue seeped from between the books on the shelves and crept up on me, igniting my excitement.

“It’s all rather last minute, I’m afraid, but there isn’t time to release any of my researchers from their commitments, or for them to brush up.” Mr Masters placed a hand on the manila envelope. “I’ve had a letter from a contact of mine in Rome – chap named Carl Van Porter, who used to work in our acquisitions department. He’s found a journal at some flea-pit auction that, he thinks, might have belonged to our friend Caravaggio. More often, artist’s journals are hoaxes or little more than nice souvenirs, but he says there’s a buzz around this one. Carl believes it could be something special.” Mr Masters’ eyes narrowed and their pupils drilled into me. “So the question is: Do you think you can go and get it for me?”

My eyes widened with shock. Was he really asking *me* to go to Rome and get Caravaggio’s journal? “Err, yeah, OK – if you think I could,” I said, the words stumbling over my tongue as they all tried to come out at once.

“It’s not about what I think, Vincent. You need to use your instincts as well as your knowledge of Caravaggio. Auction houses are viper nests. As head curator of the National Gallery, I can’t walk in there and start bidding or the auctioneer will know they have something special and most likely pull the sale. Then we’d never get it.” He cleared his throat. “No, I want you to get the journal and see what you can find. If it’s real, there could be a lead in there to something we don’t yet know about Caravaggio. Take a few days and see what you find – don’t go mad mind, I have the trustees to answer to. Play up being an art student if you need a cover story, or just be polite – no one will mind you asking questions.”

I nodded along, desperate to take in the enormous opportunity.

“Do you have a passport?” Mr Masters asked.

“Yeah, of course,” I said, jabbering with nerves.

“Good.” His brow furrowed, overshadowing his eyes. “Keep it on you, and keep your wits about you. As you know from the robbery, the art game is a dangerous one. Some people out there aren’t afraid to play hard.”

My head nodded, taking in the solemn warning. But how much harder could anyone play than mounting an armed robbery in broad daylight?

“I’m afraid there isn’t time for me to explain the details and answer all your questions. Everything you need is here.” He picked up the manila envelope and tossed it across the desk to me. “Now get yourself on the next flight to Rome.”

\* \* \*

“Vincent Ward?” asked the check-in assistant at Gatwick.

I nodded.

“Just hand luggage?”

“Yes,” I replied, and shook a small bag of things I grabbed from home before scribbling a note explaining everything to Mum while my taxi to the airport waited outside with its meter and engine running.

In the comfort of the plane, I opened the manila envelope Mr Masters gave me. Inside was a catalogue for the auction in Rome, the letter from Carl Van Porter and a gallery credit card clipped to a note from Mr Masters, which read: ‘This is for your expenses. Don’t go mad.’ I smiled and opened the auction catalogue at a page marked with a yellow sticky note. The page showed *Lot 32: A Seventeenth Century Journal*. On its cover was a hand-written title: *Nec Spe, Nec Metu*, which is Italian for: *No Hope, No Fear*. I was also the motto Caravaggio lived by.

My eyebrow rose with intrigue, and I opened Carl's letter.

*Dear Jerome,*

*Enclosed is a catalogue from the auction I mentioned on the phone. The journal may not look like much, and it can't have looked like anything to the auction house as they haven't flagged it, but I think it could be very special. The title – Nec Spe, Nec Metu – has got every art dealer in the city talking, and some think it could lead to Caravaggio's sword, which he used in the deadly dual with Tommasoni that made him flee Rome on the pain of death.*

*Personally I would be surprised if it uncovered something so obvious, since there's very little known about Caravaggio's four years on the run, other than his trail of paintings stretching from the Albany Hills and Naples, to Malta and Sicily. That said, this journal could be of huge interest and may contain clues to more paintings.*

*Contact me when you're sending someone and I'll meet them at the airport.*

*Yours,*

*Carl Van Porter*

I leant back in my seat, stunned. Caravaggio's dual with Tommasoni is well documented, as is his record of drunkenness and fighting. His arrest sheet has more entries than The Bible, and someone wrote at the time that: 'After a fortnight's work he will swagger about for a month or two with a sword at his side and a servant following him ... ever ready to engage in a fight.'

After the infamous dual, the Pope's police declared Caravaggio guilty of murder and passed a death sentence that could be carried out by any member of the Pope's police, the moment

they laid eyes on Caravaggio. Caravaggio immediately fled Rome and spent the rest of his life on the run and seeking a pardon from the Pope.

I stared at the photo of the journal. *No hope, no fear.* Could this journal reveal the deepest personal feelings of one of art's most notorious masters and the whereabouts of more paintings?

If you would like to read the full manuscript, please contact me at these addresses:

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