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Saving Caravaggio

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Extract

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part one

calabria and 'ndrangheta

It is produced by way of proof. Rolled out from the old man's lap with a strong snap of the wrists, over his knees and across the ground to my feet. A wave of dust rises up as the last edge flaps flat. I don't move, react. I concentrate on hiding my shock, my disbelief. I look directly at the old man. The two young men to my right, one standing by the door of the small house, one leaning against the new BMW, shift in my peripheral vision. They are restive. It's hot. The sun is at its highest point in the sky. We are sitting in the shade of a tall, still cypress. We have drinks. Whisky. Johnnie Walker Blue Label. The old man is speaking. He's explaining to me that what I want might be like this. He waves an old brown hand over the painting. The image lies over his lap and legs like a vast heavy blanket, splaying out over the ground. The image is dark, cracked. There are webs of cracks and larger fissures. The edges are splitting, frayed and dirty. There is no sheen. Perhaps it has been produced by way of proof many times. But I don't think so – not this.

Every time the old man speaks I have to attune myself to the dialect, recognize the Italian hidden there; I understand about one-third of what is being said. It has been like this all over Calabria. Everything I say is understood. Even the old man has complemented me on my Italian.

'I am only interested in the Turner,' I say. 'The Turner painting.'

The old man doesn't respond. I see a subtle and swift roll of his eyes. My declaration was too bold; I have been unsettled by the example.

I scan the dark image. I know it very well. I have studied the few reproductions many times: the central light patches are forehead, shoulder, folds of fabric, a face; the darks are the saints; the white section falling over the side of the old man's chair is an angel. I know that the words trailing from the banner in the angel's hand

are *'GLORIA IN ECCELSIS DEO,'* although only restoration will make them legible again. I also know that if I return with this painting, this image will make the front page of every quality newspaper in the world. I will make the front page. There will be some national coverage if I bring back the Turner, but it will last a day. Speculation over the 'ransom' paid and to whom. There will be little about the painting. There will be nothing about my operation: two and a half months on mainland Europe: Vienna, Budapest, Naples. Now Calabria. Only one week and a single weekend at home.

I press my thumb and forefinger into the bridge of my nose. I am hot, tired. It has been a long morning. An interminable drive through the dry hills in the back seat of the BMW, air con off, windows down. For the last hour I was wearing a blindfold. I need to eat something. I feel my mind slowing down. The mental fatigue induced by heat and the proximity of violent men is particular. It is dangerous. I look across to the younger men. The one by the house smokes; the other is staring down into the shiny black surface of the car. He spots a blemish, rubs at it firmly with his sleeve.

I ask for something to eat. Smile. I explain I can't negotiate on an empty stomach. The old man nods and calls out. A woman appears from the small house. She is much younger than the old man, but could be the mother of the other two. She is dressed in black – black knee-length skirt, black bouse, black shoes. Her bare arms, legs, her face are a deep brown. Food is ordered. The old man then says something to the younger men and clicks his fingers. They move quickly but without haste. A table is found and placed in the shade of the tall, still cypress. Two more chairs are found.

The old man begins to roll up the Caravaggio. Rolling hands, twisting wrists, gently pressing – an automatic, absent movement. I watch as the faded image disappears, the dry paint ground against itself with the rolling movements of the old man's brown hands. When it's done, it is no more than a frayed old rug. He passes it into the arms of one of the younger men, who then takes it into the house. I can tell it has instantly disappeared from the mind of the old man. I help arrange our chairs around the table. The old man pours us all some Blue Label. Nothing is said. I don't sense any hostility from these men. We are like four strangers forced to

sit at a small square table in a small hill-village café, content not to talk. We are silent throughout our food. *Spaghetti e melanzane*, with a little chilli. When we are finished the old man calls for another bottle of whisky. It is Blue Label again. Over a hundred pounds a bottle in the UK.

Negotiations begin after *caffè*. The younger men are permitted to stay seated. They push their chairs back from the table, cross their legs and smoke. The old man says he doesn't have the painting but can get it. He'll need the money. I say I don't have the money but can get it. This irritates him. He shouts something I don't understand. The younger men don't react. I have been here before. I fix my eyes on the hazy outline of another small hill village across the valley; it appears identical to the one I've been brought to: twenty or so little white houses, a tiny church. I know that the old man wants the money first and then he will decide whether to hand over the painting. They all want this: to take the money and then to pretend the return of the painting is an act of largesse or a favour. If you're lucky. A million euros ransom is on offer for this painting. Why not just take it? Then sell the painting on. America. Japan.

The old man calms down. He didn't expect me to capitulate easily; he sensed the moment I climbed out of the car that I wasn't an amateur. He smiles.

'When will you have the money?'

'Within twenty-four hours of asking for it.'

He says he'd be happier with two million euros; it is worth ten.

I look across the valley. The hill is dry and rocky. The ground is dry and yellow. The tall cypresses are black and green. A window glints.

I explain that the institution to which the painting belongs will not raise their price. The old man rolls his eyes – the painting belongs to him. It is my turn to smile. Yes. Of course.

The old man, palms pressed on the table, pushes himself to his feet. He says something to one of the younger men, who wearily stands, sleepy from the spaghetti, whisky, heat. I do not understand what is being said; they have returned to deep Calabrian. When they are finished the old man turns and studies me one

last time – a final moment for his instinct to make a judgement: does he want to do business with me? I stand, allow myself to be scrutinized. I know I will not meet the old man again. From now on everything will be done by his soldiers – sanctioned by him, based on this last moment, what his instinct is telling him now. I know if I return here tomorrow, the old man will be gone. It has taken almost a month to arrange this meeting and it has lasted two hours.

The BMW is started, the engine revved, the wheels pointlessly spun. A cloud of dust covers the rear of the car. It is time to leave. There will be no handshake or kiss. On this recovery I have made it clear that I am working for the other side. Clear I'm a copper. The institution insisted that I must be seen to be legitimate throughout. No pretence of criminality. There is to be no negotiation. The money is a reward, not a ransom.

I step out from the shade of the tall, still cypress. The old man gives me one last look and then turns and goes into the small house. I climb into the back of the car. I am handed the blindfold. I stretch the elastic over my head, position the eyepatches.

The next couple of days are always the most dangerous. Negotiating the exchange. A location. The money. The handing over of the painting – in this instance a large oil, probably ripped out of its frame, rolled up, maybe even folded. But that's not what must concern me. I need a feel for the internal stability of the organization – is anyone looking to sabotage the deal? Does anyone gain if the deal goes wrong? Because that's when I'm vulnerable: when the emphasis shifts and it's no longer just business. But then, these days it's almost always just business. The wars have dried up. Yet the possibility remains. Especially when the *capo di tutti capi* is as old as this old man.

I don't sense instability. And this is a small deal. There is little to gain by sabotaging it. But the Caravaggio, that's different. The world's most famous stolen painting. Cut out of its frame from above an altar in a chapel in Palermo in 1969, and for the last thirty years moved around the families of organized crime as a multi-million-dollar marker, a guarantee for anything, from drugs deals to political assassination. Or so the myth goes. Like most police-

men in the art world, I was certain it had been destroyed. Like every Caravaggio lover, I hoped it had not.

The car is filled with hot summer air, baked dry, full of sharp fragrances, heavy on the skin. I know that when I get back to the hotel I must call it in. I must call in what is the biggest news in the art world for many years.