
Opening Extract from...

The Rembrandt Secret

Written by Alex Connor

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THE REMBRANDT SECRET

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Quercus

For my father

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A man who seeks revenge should first dig two graves.

Confucius

BOOK ONE

PROLOGUE

House of Corrections,
Gouda, 1651

This is the story of me.

I am writing it because one day someone will read it and know the truth. I write it believing that my history will get out of this place, because I never will. They have locked me in here, slammed the door on me. And when I panicked, water was thrown on me. It dried cold, the white cap which covered my hair stiff with starch, and spittle from one of the guards. After he had tried to feel under my skirt. After they searched me, looking in my mouth and ears, and in my private parts, forcing fingers into orifices, making an animal out of me.

They take your life away from you when they lock the door. When they say Geertje Dircx, housekeeper to Rembrandt van Rijn, has been committed to an asylum. She is a nuisance, she abused her employer verbally, accused him of breach of promise, sold the ring he gave her: the ring which once belonged to his late wife. She is immoral, she is ungrateful, she is mad with bitterness and

anger, telling lies, spreading gossip about how her master had promised he would marry her.

But she is silent now.

Only these pieces of paper hear my history . . . I lay with him when I had been at the house for some few weeks. He was grieving for his dead wife and I was eager to be promoted from kitchen to bed chamber, lying next to him and dreaming that the child I had been hired to take care of might – one day – become my stepson. Sssh . . . I hide these papers when I hear a noise. A footfall on the corridor outside means guards and people who peer in on me, watching me even when I relieve myself. Watching me, because I am labelled now. Locked up in the House of Corrections as a woman of licentious habits. A danger to myself, they said, when they took his part – which I should have known they would. Powerful and respected, how simple was it for him to have one mistress put aside for the newcomer. A girl younger than myself, with plump, country flesh that he will explore and probe. And then he will paint her. As he painted me.

She will look after him and his son, and sweep the floor, with its monochrome tiles, when the sunlight comes through the stained glass of the windows and makes fireflies on the panelling. She will smell the linseed oil and rabbit glue, and know the sound of the pestle grinding the colours with the oils and turpentine which burn the back of her throat. I know she will creep upstairs and watch his pupils work, and watch him too. She will rummage amongst the heaps of costumes and props he collects for his paintings and hang back in the shadows when patrons come to the studio. She will find herself glancing at her reflection in the mirror a little

longer than she used to, counting her attractions, because she wants the image to please him. She will do all this because I did. And I watched him watch me, and watched his expression turn from affection to love. I watched it – let no one say otherwise.

Sssh . . . I am pausing now, hiding the paper under the skirt of my dress as someone's eyes scrutinise me through the peevish little hatch in the door. I perform a crude gesture and the guard walks away, making a sucking sound with his lips. They think I'm promiscuous. I was once, with a few men, in the tavern where I worked, after I was widowed. I was, once. But they gave false evidence against me later. Not just my neighbours, but my own brother . . . What was he paid to lie? What amount was enough to have his sister committed? Does he lie awake in Amsterdam and look out of his free window at his free moon and wonder what sliver of captive sky his sister catches through the bars . . .?

I could have ruined van Rijn then, but I stayed silent. Could have exposed a secret which would have hobbled him and got all Holland grinding him under the heel of their righteous Dutch boot. But I stayed silent. Only asked for what he promised, what he later denied me . . . It's getting dark now, I can hardly see to write anymore. But tomorrow I'll continue. My history will be told and I will destroy you, van Rijn. From the asylum where you put me, out of your bed and your life, from here, on scraps of hidden paper, I will chart your ruin.

I shall write these letters to myself. I shall keep my sanity by this record. And one day, when they are read, the world will know you. They will know me, and you – and Rembrandt's monkey.

1

Amsterdam

His body was bent over, his head submerged in the confines of the basin, his knees buckled, trousers pulled down. Blood seeped from between his buttocks, intensive bruising around the top of his fleshy thighs. On the floor beside his puffy right knee lay the toilet brush, its handle bloodied. A series of small nicks covered his lower back and the skin of his scrotum was mottled with burn marks. Although his head was submerged, the back of his neck showed the imprint of fingers; his wrists bound together with the same gilt wire often used to hang paintings.

It had taken him a long time to die. As he fought, he had struggled, his wrists jerking against the wire as it cut deep into his flesh, down to the wrist bone in places. Repeatedly his head had been dipped into the filled basin, then pulled out, then submerged again. When the water finally began to enter his lungs, his body had reacted, foam spittle gathering at the corners of his mouth. Much later it would rise from the corpse to make a white death

froth. Against the push of water, his eyes had widened, the pupils turning from clear orbs to opal discs as he stared blindly at the bottom of the basin.

The killer had made sure that the death of Stefan van der Helde would horrify not only the people who found him, but also his business associates and his cohorts. In sodomising him they had exposed Van der Helde's hidden homosexuality, humiliating him and bringing down one of the top players in the art world. But there was more to it than that: a reason why no one would ever forget the death of Stefan van der Helde. When his body underwent post-mortem examination the pathologist found stones in his stomach. Apparently, over a period of hours, he had been forced to swallow pebbles, one after the other, each one larger than the last, until they threatened to choke him. Even when his oesophagus reacted and went into spasm, he was forced to keep swallowing, his gullet bruised and torn in places by the stones.

They found twenty pebbles in Stefan van der Helde's stomach. They found the water that drowned him – and the twenty stones. The pathologist didn't know what it meant. Neither did the police. No one knew the meaning of the stones. By the time they did, the world would have plunged into recession; the auction houses losing fortunes on collapsing sales; and dealers forced into ruin as bad debts were called in and old favours demanded repayment. As the year ground into an unsteady and claustrophobic spring, the global art world was in a depression no one had foreseen or prepared for.

And from behind elegant façades and glossy reputations crept the venal underbelly of the art world. In a matter of months the financial collapse of the market was underscored by a moral malignancy that left no one unscathed. And four people dead.

It was, some said, a culling.

2

London.
The present day.

Tucked tight in the central kernel of the capital, in amongst the crochet of streets off the thoroughfare of Piccadilly, lies Albemarle Street. Every building is dissimilar. In shop fronts gilded with fashion logos, porters in funereal suits open doors for tourists and the wives of Russian oligarchs alike. Other shops have been there for over a hundred years; a dusty sprinkling of snobbery courts the passer-by with windows cradling bespoke shoes or hand-rolled cigars. And dotted among the By Royal Appointment signs and robin's-egg blue Tiffany boxes nestles the Zeigler Gallery.

It had first opened in 1845, but attracted no notice. After that, it had changed hands several times, closing during the Second World War. Left abandoned, its walls denuded of paintings, the building had sat out the fighting alone, the flat above remaining empty. The rates had been too high, the landlord too greedy. At the height

of the war there had been a suspicious fire in the gallery. Some said it had been caused by a tramp, sneaking in and falling asleep with a lighted cigarette in his hand. But neither the tramp nor his cigarette – not even a stub – had ever been found. Yet soon afterwards there *had* been a real fatality: a soldier killed whilst on leave, his body left in the back of the gallery, hidden among the empty packing crates. The soldier – who had worn no dog tag and carried no identification – had never been named and the murder was never solved. But the death of the unknown soldier had cast a pall over the building and the gallery had acquired a ghost. Or so rumour had gone.

Then, in 1947, the gallery had been reopened by a Polish man called Korsawaki. He had come from Warsaw – where he had had been forced to leave behind a fortune and a family – to try to make his name in London. In his home city he had been a dealer of some note, but in the austere years directly after the war he made little headway in London. Forced into selling cheap prints, he was soon grubbing around for any means to pay the rent and, by the time 1949 came around, Korsawaki had left. A couple of other dealers followed, with little success, and the gallery gained a reputation for being jinxed. Left deserted as its neighbours flourished, it had one brief spell in the sunshine as a café. But soon the clink of dishes and the pulse of conversation ended, and the doors were closed and bolted once again.

And so they stayed, until one bitingly cold morning in 1963 when a young man had paused on Albemarle Street

and seen the FOR SALE sign in the window. Curious, Owen Zeigler had leaned forward, peering in, but all he had been able to make out was a deserted interior with a staircase on one side and a skylight at the end of the room. He tried the door handle, but it was locked. Then he had stepped back – almost into the path of an oncoming car – to stare upwards at the flat above. The windows had given nothing away, but Owen had felt drawn to the place for some reason that escaped him. Intrigued, he tried the door again without success, and then noted the name and address of the estate agent.

That afternoon he had visited Messrs Lyton and Goldthorne, asking for details on the gallery. They – spotting a potential customer for a property which had proved virtually impossible to shift – encouraged his interest. In fact, Mr Lyton had taken Owen to the gallery within the hour, pushing open the door and waving his prospective customer in. A little probing told Mr Lyton that Owen had family backing and that his father was a dealer in the East End.

What Owen *didn't* tell the agent was that Neville Zeigler dealt not in fine art, but in a variety of 'collectables'; a Jew who had come to London before the war; a Jew who had learnt the business the hard way; a Jew clever enough to develop an eye for the marketable and, later, the valuable. And over the years Neville had instilled in his only child a terrifying ambition. He would take Owen to Bond Street and Cork Street and show him the galleries and

tell his son – no, *insist* – that one day there would be a Zeigler Gallery within this cluster of culture and money. With a ferocity which might have daunted a lesser child, Owen learned to develop his natural appreciation into a skill. Neville's long hours of labour in the East End afforded Owen a university place – and the son repaid the father well.

When Owen Zeigler finally entered the bull ring of the art world, he was clever, adept and confident. He could pass as an upper class scholar, a natural inheritor of a cultural career. With his innate ability and his further education, his progress was seamless. But what people didn't know was the other side to Owen Zeigler, the side inherited from his Jewish father, along with Neville's shrewd, invaluable business acumen.

Encouraged by the widowed Neville, who knew the fortunes to be made in the art world, Owen was told to keep quiet about his background and 'get climbing'.

'You've a foot in both camps,' Neville told him. 'You know about culture, and you're street-savvy too. Use it. And remember – there's plenty of room at the top.'

Of course Mr Lyton didn't know any of this, but was impressed when Owen returned a day later having uncovered the gallery's erratic history – which he used as a bargaining tool. In short, by the time two weeks were up, Owen Zeigler had become the new gallery owner. And by the time three weeks were up, the interior had been painted, the flat above was furnished, and there was a

new sign outside: after an uncomplicated delivery, the Zeigler Gallery had been born.

In that same bitter winter, Owen held an opening to which his neighbours came to gawp and to criticise, a few to predict disaster. But the dealers from Dover Street and Bond Street realised within minutes of walking through the door that they had a serious new rival. The market at that time was swamped with French art, and the Impressionists, the gauzy country scenes, were becoming commonplace – almost boring – by their very repetition. So Owen had chosen another speciality – Dutch art. Not the thundering names of Rembrandt or Vermeer, in which he could not afford to trade, but the smaller followers, and the still-life painters.

There had been only twenty paintings exhibited on that cold winter day in 1963, but by the end of the month eighteen had been sold. Owen Zeigler's career had been launched. Not perhaps as a grand, ocean-gobbling liner, but as a swift, clever little lighter that could ride the waves of the art market and survive . . .

And all this, Owen Zeigler's son, Marshall, remembered, looking at his father in disbelief.

'Where did all the money *go*?' Marshall asked

Owen put his head in his hands. Now in his seventies, he looked no more than sixty-five. Years of careful grooming, and long walks in London parks, had kept him lean, and his hair, although grey, was thick and well cut. In front of him was the desk he had used since the first

day he had begun business at the gallery. A desk on which many a cheque had been written, and across which had passed many a handshake. Above it hung a Dutch painting by Jan Steen. Valuable, as were all the pictures in the gallery, the insurance rising regularly over the years to accommodate and protect Owen's success. The burglar alarms, red lights flickering outside like out-of-season Christmas bunting, all connected to nearby police stations.

Still staring at his father, Marshall thought back to his childhood. His first ten years had been spent in the flat above the gallery, but as his father had prospered the family had been moved out of London to a country house, Thurstons. During the week, Owen had lived in the flat, spending his weekends in the Georgian stereotype of upmarket success. But when Marshall's mother had died, Owen had returned frequently to Albemarle Street, leaving his son in the care of a nanny, and later the rigid arms of public school.

'Where did the money go?' Marshall repeated.

His father made a movement, almost a shrug, but the action dropped off, half-made. 'I have to do something . . . I have to.'

For the first time Marshall noticed that his father's hair was thinning slightly at the crown. Even his expert barber hadn't managed to disguise it, he thought, knowing that it would embarrass his father if he knew. Then he noticed the raised veins in his hands, the liver spots puddling the tanned skin. His father was getting old, Marshall realised,

unaccountably moved. All Owen's little vanities were becoming noticeable, obvious . . . Marshall glanced away, thinking of the telephone call which had brought him back to London, his father asking him to return from his work in Holland.

'I need to talk to you,' Owen had said, his voice shivering on the edge of panic. 'If you could just come home.'

He had done so at once, because his father had never been possessive or demanding. Marshall might have longed for more closeness as a child, might have grieved alone for the loss of his mother, but in his teens he realised that his father's affection had never been withheld. Just neutralised. Having lost his wife so unexpectedly in a plane crash, Owen had spent the next decade in waiting, almost as though some other plane – real or ephemeral – might bring her back. As though, if he refused to accept her passing, she would one day arrive at some spiritual terminal. Where he would be waiting by the gate to bring her home.

But she never did come back, and Marshall watched as his father finally faced the truth, ten years after her death. He watched the grief, sitting with his father in the country house, staring into country fires or country views. He listened to old memories that had never been his, memories from before his birth, and realised that inside some men there is one space for one woman. And if that woman is lost, the space is never filled again. With a father so bereft, Marshall absorbed his own grief alone, and by the time Owen invited him to talk about his mother's death,

she had been parted with. As beautiful, but out of time, as his grandfather's old French paintings.

His thoughts coming back to the present, Marshall prompted, 'You said the money had gone.'

'All gone,' Owen said, nodding.

'How?'

'Debts.'

'*Debts*?' Marshall was shaken. His father had never intimated that money was tight. 'You never said you were struggling. The last show was a success—'

Still seated, Owen turned his face upwards to his son, fixing his gaze. 'I've been cheated.'

I've been cheated . . . The words seemed to swell in the gallery, skim along the picture rails, slide across the red silk on the walls, and then slither up the staircase into the dark beyond. A creeping sense of unease swept over Marshall, the same feeling he had had as a boy sleeping in the flat above, remembering the old story of the building. And listening for the ghost of the unknown soldier. The young man who came out at night, who walked around the gallery below, then crept up the stairs in the darkness.

'Who cheated you?'

'I should never have believed him.'

'Who? Who are you talking about?'

'Manners.'

Manners. The name fell like a corn thresher, slicing the air between the two men. Tobar Manners, one of his

father's oldest friends and a fellow dealer. Tobar Manners, with his small pink hands and dandelion hair. Tobar Manners, quick, clever, mercurial, always so charming to his father, but another man to Marshall. Indeed, it was Manners who had told Marshall about the murdered soldier, taking delight in frightening a child with stories of a ghost and then laughing, insisting he was only teasing, but knowing that he had planted a poisonous thought. Many disturbed nights of his childhood Marshall put down to Tobar Manners. Many times, waking at a sudden noise, he blamed his unease on his father's changeling friend.

'What did he do?'

Owen shook his head.

'Dad, what did he do?'

'I've been in debt for some time,' Owen said slowly, the words crisp, as though he could keep back his panic by the control of his delivery. 'Business has been bad. The collectors aren't investing, and the auctions have been hit too. A couple of galleries have even closed down.' He paused, grabbed at a breath. 'In the last few years, I overbought. I came across some good paintings and thought I'd have no problem selling them. But then there was the credit crunch. Not many people buy at these times . . .'

'But the big collectors?'

'Are holding back.'

'All of them?'

'No, but not enough are investing to stop me going under.'

‘Christ!’ Marshall sat down next to his father. ‘What about the house?’

‘Remortaged.’

‘The paintings,’ Marshall said, feeling some panic himself, ‘sell what you’ve got. You might make a loss, but you’d raise some money.’

‘Not enough,’ Owen replied quietly, his hands clenched together. ‘I didn’t want to tell you how bad it was. I thought I could get out of it, I thought if . . . I sold the Rembrandt . . .’

Slowly, Marshall lifted his head, staring at his father. The painting had been in the family since 1964, when Owen had bought it in Germany. At first he had believed it to be painted by Ferdinand Bol, a pupil of Rembrandt’s, but after numerous tests and some intensive research, it had proved to be genuine. It had been the first spectacular triumph of his father’s career. A seal on his talent as a dealer. Marshall could remember hearing the story repeated by his father, and by Owen’s mentor, Samuel Hemmings. *Watch your back now*, Samuel had warned him, *now you have enemies.*

‘Did you sell the Rembrandt?’

‘I took it to Tobar Manners . . .’

‘And?’

‘He said it wasn’t genuine. That it was by Ferdinand Bol, as we had originally thought—’

‘But it *was* genuine!’

‘It’s all in the attribution, Marshall,’ his father said shortly. ‘There’s no cut and dried proof—’

‘Samuel Hemmings backed your opinion,’ Marshall interrupted. ‘Surely his name carries enough weight?’

‘Samuel is a controversial historian, you know that. What he says is accepted by some people and vigorously denied by others.’

‘Usually when there’s money involved.’

At once, Owen flared up, his unruffled urbanity overshadowed by hostility.

‘I know what you think of the business, Marshall! There’s nothing you can say about it I haven’t heard before. You made your choice to have nothing to do with the gallery or the art world. Fine, that was your choice, but it’s my life, and despise it all you will, it’s my passion.’

The argument was worn thin between them. Owen might be committed to art dealing, but Marshall wasn’t blinded to the realities of the trade. And trade it was. A hard, tight little trade where a pocket of honest men traded with a legion of those without scruples. Dealers who had inherited galleries, working cheek by jowl with titans who had bought their way in. Deals brokered between old-school traders and the hustlers who drafted in dummy bidders to up the price on a gallery’s painting at auction. Not that all of the auction houses were blameless; the process of *burning* was well known. If a painting didn’t reach its reserve, it was supposedly sold, but instead it was *burned*, put away for years until the market had either forgotten about it, or presumed it had been put back on sale again by a private buyer. That way no famous name was seen

to lose its kudos and market value. Because market value was imperative. For every Cézanne that scorched through its reserve and set a new benchmark, a dozen other Cézannes in museums and private collections rose in value. Over the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties the art market had inflated the value of Van Gogh to such an extent that one purchaser had to put his painting in store for twelve years for insurance reasons. Art was being priced out of the galleries and off the walls into the steel tombs of bank vaults.

Sighing, Marshall realised that this was no time to resurrect the old argument and moderated his tone. 'So Manners said it wasn't a Rembrandt?'

Owen nodded. 'He said it was by one of Rembrandt's pupils. Besides, there was no signature on the painting—'

'There's no signature on many of Rembrandt's paintings!' Marshall snapped. 'That never stopped them being attributed to him. And God knows there are enough paintings *with* his signature that people doubt are genuine.'

'Tobar was sure mine wasn't genuine. When I asked him to buy it, he was told that it was by Ferdinand Bol. He had it looked at twice, thoroughly investigated.'

'By whom?'

'By specialists!' Owen barked, hurrying on. 'Tobar was so sorry. He said that he would give me as much as he could, but nothing like I would have got for a genuine Rembrandt . . . Jesus, I *trusted him*. I've known Tobar for years, I had no reason *not* to trust him.'

Unbidden, images curled in front of Marshall. Images

of Christmases, of private views, of visits to the gallery – and in every image was Tobar Manners. Always there. Sometimes alone, sometimes in a group. Manners and Samuel Hemmings, and other friends of his father's, talking, laughing, swapping stories about dealers or customers. Gossip flirting from one glass to another; snippets of information traded over caviar and canapés; cankers of venom floating into greedy ears.

'What did he do?' Marshall asked finally.

'He bought the painting off me.'

'And?'

'I just heard,' Owen said blindly, 'I just heard about it. The sale in New York. Someone showed me the catalogue, and there is – was – my painting. The same one Tobar had bought from me as a Ferdinand Bol. Only it wasn't. It was in the catalogue as a Rembrandt. *It had been sold as a Rembrandt.*' His words were staccato, gunning his story out. 'Tobar Manners gave me a fraction of its value! He cheated me!'

Shaken, Marshall stared at his father. 'Have you talked to him? Confronted him—'

'He said it wasn't his fault!' Owen replied, his voice raised, anger making bright spots of colour on his cheeks. 'He said he had sold it on to someone as a Ferdinand Bol, and they had cheated *him*!'

'You don't believe him, do you?'

'Of *course* I don't believe him!' Owen hurled back, getting to his feet and walking over to the window.

To his amazement, Marshall could see that his father

was shaking, his elegant body trembling, his hands clenching and unclenching obsessively.

'It made a fortune at the auction,' Owen went on. 'Broke all records for an early Rembrandt. *My painting made a fortune.* A fortune I could have saved the business with. A fortune that was *mine*! Jesus Christ,' he said desperately, 'I'm finished.'

Sensing his father's despair, Marshall tried to calm him. 'Look, you can sell your stock – everything you've got. There are thousands of pounds hanging on these walls, you can raise money that way.'

'Not enough.'

'It must be!' his son replied, feeling a sinking dread. 'Call your collectors, auction what you've got. Ring your contacts. There must be some way to get money—'

'It won't be *enough*!' Owen snapped, control gone. 'I have debts you don't know about. Debts to many people, some of whom are pressuring me now. I can't afford the upkeep on this gallery. I kept thinking that things would improve, and then times got tough for everyone. People still bought, but much less over these last months. I can't shift the stock, Marshall, I can't raise money. There was only the Rembrandt left. It was always in the background, like a safety net. I knew that would raise enough to pay off the debts and get me straight again. But Manners . . .'

He stopped talking, his anger drying up, and an eerie calm came over him before he spoke again. 'He won't admit it, but he *did* cheat me. He lied to me, knowing I was in trouble, he lied to me . . . How many times did that

man come to my home? How many times over the years did I help him out? Lend him money to tide him over when he was struggling?'

Owen was no longer talking to his son, just staring at the desk in front of him. 'I'd only been here for a few weeks when Tobar Manners introduced himself. Your mother never really took to him, but I always thought that that was because he could be spiteful about people, and she never liked gossips. And when your mother died, Tobar was very kind . . .'

He was a leech, Marshall wanted to say. My mother saw it, and so did I, even as a child. And he wasn't smart, nothing like as talented as you. So how did he manage to dupe you? You could run rings around him once. You laughed at him with Samuel Hemmings. Not unkindly, more indulgent. But you let him in, too often and too close. God, why were you so stupid with the most treacherous of men?

'I've got a bit of money put away. You can have that.'

'No, I can't take anything from you,' Owen replied, then smiled sweetly, as though the offer momentarily obliterated the seriousness of his situation.

'What will you do?'

'Manage, somehow.' He was trying to fight panic, to press a lid on the scalding tide of his own despair. 'I'll talk to the accountant and the bank again.'

'Will they help?'

'I don't know. Maybe . . .' he replied, back in control again. The father, not the panicking man. 'Don't worry

about me. I was just so shocked by what's happened. I shouldn't really have troubled you, got you worried. I'll find a way round this.'

Unconvinced, Marshall looked around the gallery. 'You need a change. You should get out of here for a while, Dad. It'll help you think. I could come and stay with you at Thurstons for a bit. I don't need to get back to Amsterdam straight away.'

'It might . . .'

'It would do you good.' Marshall pressed him. 'We can talk if you want, or you can just relax.'

Owen nodded but averted his gaze. He was embarrassed to be seen as a failure by his son. Embarrassed and ashamed that he had panicked, crying like a child. After all, what could Marshall do? He hadn't the money to rescue him, and couldn't have guessed at the full plunging extent of the debts . . . He had never been a gambler, Owen thought, he should have known. Should never had fallen into the trap of over-buying, then relying on a friend to get him out of trouble – even a friend he had helped, a person who owed him a debt of honour. The shock of his imminent ruin fizzed inside Owen's head, along with the queasy realisation of his own stupidity. He knew that the painting was genuine. He had looked at it for years, treasured it, admired it, petted it like a favourite child. It had never been a follower's work. It had been painted by the Master's hand. And he had sold it short. Confused and panicked, he had listened to a cheat and been treated as a fool.

*

'You need to get away from here,' Marshall said, breaking into his father's reverie.

'It's jinxed.'

'What?'

'The gallery,' Owen said softly. 'When I bought it, I knew about the rumours. Nothing succeeded here for long. People came and went. Perhaps there *is* a ghost . . .'

'Bull shit.'

To Marshall's surprise, his father laughed. 'I wish I was like you, Marshall. I really do.'

'I always wished I was more like you,' his son said honestly, touching his father on the shoulder. 'We could go to Thurstons tonight—'

'I can't,' Owen cut in hurriedly. 'I can't just run away.'

'But if you got away you'd clear your head.'

Owen sighed. 'There are things to do. I have to see to a few things here before I can leave.'

'All right,' Marshall agreed finally. 'Then let me stay here and help.'

'No,' Owen replied, straining to smile. 'I should never have got you involved. It's not your worry, I just panicked that's all. You're right, Marshall, there *is* a lot of stock; perhaps I can raise enough to pay back some people.'

'What about asking the bank for a temporary loan? Just to tide you over?'

Mirthlessly, Owen laughed. 'They didn't seem to think I was a good bet.'

'Then let me go and talk to *my* bank.'

'No,' Owen said, almost harshly. 'Leave it be, Marshall.

Just talking to you has helped. I'll go through the stock tomorrow and draw up some figures. There are some people I can talk to . . .' He trailed off, looking around him. 'The Rembrandt would have sorted all this out, paid back all my debts. It sold for a *fortune*, did I tell you that?'

Surprised, Marshall nodded. 'Yes, Dad, you told me.'

'Manners cheated me.'

'So why don't we confront him together?'

His face set, Owen shrugged his shoulders. An odd gesture, resigned and feckless at the same time. 'What's done is done. I know this business, I made enough money out of it myself—'

'Not by cheating people.'

'No,' Owen agreed. 'And not by cheating friends.' He paused, then straightened up, smoothed his hair, his urbane charm restored. 'It might not be hopeless.'

'Are you sure that there's nothing I can do?'

'Nothing,' Owen said calmly. 'You go to Thurstons and I'll come at the weekend.'

Marshall nodded. 'I've some business to see to first, but I'll come back and we'll go together. OK?'

'OK, OK.'

Relieved, Marshall touched his father's arm. 'When you get away from here you'll feel different, I promise. It will all be different by the weekend.'