

# **The Lost Canvas**

**Sean Wyatt, prequel**

**by Ernest Dempsey, 1975–**

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*For my mom and dad.*

## **Wernigerode, Germany**

Adriana Villa sprinted down the sidewalk along the main street. It was dark and, what had been a vibrant city earlier, had all but turned in for the night.

Banners and draped flags hung loosely around the buildings and over the streets. A few random revelers strolled along, drunkenly, down a side street.

She'd noticed the man watching her as she'd exited the building several blocks back. He was medium height and build, fairly slender. His head sported a black fedora, a stark contrast to the gray leather jacket he wore. Adriana had been suspicious that she was being followed. It wasn't an uncommon occurrence for her particular line of work. She gave another quick glance back and saw that the man was no longer behind her. Villa didn't lessen her pace, though. She kept running until she saw another side street at the next intersection and veered onto it quickly.

The run had been a short one but it had been mostly uphill. The late October air in the foothills of central Germany was cold and burned as she inhaled. She pressed up against the wall at the corner and risked a peek around to see if the man was still following her. The street was empty save for a few cars that were parked along the sidewalks.

"What are you looking at?" The voice startled her and she nearly pulled one of her knives hidden within her black pea coat.

She turned and sighed at the sight of a friendly face. Martin Edert stood twenty feet away. His ruddy face had a curious smile on it. The receding hair on his head was gray with a few streaks of brown. He was short and slim except for his potbelly that came from years of drinking lots of beer and a steady diet of bratwurst.

"Someone was following me," she answered as she walked towards him.

"My dear, in those pants, I'd be tempted to follow you too." He pointed at her skin-tight jeans. Her brown hair dangled loosely around her ears.

"Don't go getting any ideas," she joked. Then she wrapped her arms around him in a big hug and gave him a kiss on the cheek. He accepted the Spanish gesture with a slight blush.

"I'm glad you're on time," she continued. "Let's go somewhere warmer where we can talk."

"My hotel is just up the street," he replied. "Come."

He motioned for her to follow him around the back corner of the side street that ended in an alley next to a large hillside. As they rounded the edge of the building, his car came into view. The silver Porsche Panamera revved to life as he turned on the engine with a remote start.

She raised her eyebrows. "Nice car. Turbo?"

"Turbo S," he replied with a corrective grin.

She nodded, approvingly, and opened the door. Inside, the supple, gray leather surrounded her, filling her nostrils with an intoxicating scent.

"I like this," she said.

"We Germans know a few things about making cars," he stated as he shut his door and pulled out onto the quiet street.

Suspicious that she was being followed, Adriana had previously gone into a local bookstore. It was one of the few retail places that stayed open until after eight in the evening. At the moment, there was no sign of her follower. She hoped her little ploy worked. She assumed that if someone were tailing her, they would go into the store and ask what she had been looking for or purchasing.

Martin weaved his way through the tiny streets of Wernigerode. It was a difficult thing to drive quickly through such a tightly packed area but her friend always managed to find a way to drive fast. A few minutes later, they arrived at a four-story building on the high end of the city, near the outskirts.

The building appeared to be nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, it looked like many other buildings and inns she had seen in that part of Germany. A metal sign hung from wrought iron over the entrance. The wording identified the place as The Struthassel Inn. Below the name was a shield with red and white checkers and a knight's helmet over top of it. Beneath the shield the year 1787 was inscribed.

Martin guided the Porsche around to the back of the inn, only shutting off the engine when he found a parking space away from the other cars. "Don't want some buffoon to scratch it," he explained.

"Of course not," she laughed slightly.

Upon entering the establishment, Adriana felt like she'd walked through a portal in time. Ornate, wooden beams and lattices were everywhere. The concierge desk was simple but made from hand carved oak. Off to the right, through some double doors, the inn's tavern was rife with the revelry of travelers and locals.

Wooden tables and chairs surrounded a bar, giving the feel of what a pub must have been like in the 18th century.

Martin led the way to the tavern and found a table in a corner near the back of the room. Before they sat down, a young blonde, blue-eyed waitress made her way over to take their order. Her traditional white dress and brown apron fit her body a little tighter than was probably worn during the 18th century.

"Zwei bieren, bitte," Martin said to the girl before she could ask.

She smiled and walked away towards the bar.

"So, what was it your friend wanted?" he asked as he got comfortable.

She looked confused. "My friend?"

He nodded with a clever smile. "Ja, your friend who was watching you back there. What did he want?"

Adriana glanced around the room, not fully trusting the tavern's crowd. "I'm assuming that he's tracking me until I find what I'm looking for."

"Ah," he replied and sat back in his chair.

The waitress returned with a few tall glasses of foamy, golden lager. "Danke," he said to her and took a large gulp of the beer. Adriana was less aggressive and took a few sips from hers.

"So, you need my help," he set his glass down as he spoke.

"Direct and to the point. That's one of the reasons I love you, my friend."

His pale face beamed. "I know," he said and held out his hands.

"And you are correct," she continued. "I do need your help. But not in getting away from that parasite. I am looking for something that I believe you can help me find."

"Und what would that be, mein frauline?"

"It's a painting."

"Ah, artwork this time. One of the things I like about being your friend is that I never know what you are going to be chasing down next. One week it's a painting

another week it's some kind of ancient artifact." He took another swig from his glass. "It keeps me on my toes trying to keep up with you."

"I do whatever interests me at that moment. Right now it's a painting." She smiled and raised an eyebrow then took two big gulps of beer, nearly finishing the glass.

He nodded. Martin understood her, which was rare for a man. Most men were captivated by her beauty but were threatened by her flightiness and seemingly random activities.

"And who is the architect of your latest fancy?" he asked as he leaned forward like a child sharing a secret.

"Vincent Van Gogh."

Her answer lingered in Martin's mind for several seconds.

A door opened at the entrance of the tavern. An elderly man in a dark green sweater walked in and found himself a seat at the bar. Martin brought his focus back to the conversation with renewed attention with a laugh. "I'm sorry. For a moment there I thought you said Van Gogh."

He returned to his beer and had another sip. Adriana stared at Martin, her expression unchanging. After a few seconds, he realized his companion was serious.

"Really? Well, my dear, you certainly have expensive and complicated tastes."

She pushed a frayed black and white picture over to the other side of the table. "During World War II, you are no doubt aware that the Nazis confiscated a large percentage of Europe's art."

"Of course. There are all kinds of stories about the looting that went on. Most of the things that were taken were never recovered." He looked at her with a skeptical eye then picked up the picture and peered at it intently. She could see his eyes grow slightly wider as he analyzed the image.

"There are lots of rumors about mountain caves in Deutschland where Hitler had many of the stolen treasures hidden for safe keeping. But they are just rumors, bedtime stories. No one ever finds anything."

"But you know the painting," she insisted.

Martin was silent for a moment as his mind raced.

"Ja. I have heard of this one. Until now, I thought it was just another fairy tale like all the others." He paused and held up the picture. "Where did you get this?"

She reached out and retrieved it from his hand. "A reliable source gave it to me," she said and placed the picture back in her jacket pocket.

He smiled and hoisted his glass. "I am your reliable source, my friend. Have you been seeing other people behind my back?" He let out a large laugh and tipped back the glass. The front door opened again. This time, a younger man entered the building and went to the concierge. Adriana recognized the face and moved carefully out of her seat.

The old lady at the desk pointed a finger towards the tavern. He made his way into the pub and headed straight towards the corner where Martin was sitting. He swallowed the last of his beer only to find that Adriana had vanished. Confused for a moment, he looked around but saw no sign of her.

“Excuse me,” he said in a brutish German accent. “May I sit down?” The man was blonde with blue eyes. His physique was slender but athletic, something Martin determined from the tight gray sweater and jeans the man wore.

“Certainly,” he extended a hand. “Do I know you?”

The man sat down across from him, never changing his cold expression. “Where is the girl?” Martin figured his accent to be from the Bavarian region.

“What girl?” Martin asked.

“The one you were here with a few moments ago. The woman at the front desk said you came in here with a girl. Where is she?” The stranger’s eyes pierced Martin’s.

“Oh. She’s just a friend of mine,” Martin answered. “She already left.”

“Where did she go?”

“I’m sorry, do I know you?”

A roar of laughter erupted on the other side of the tavern. A large group of revelers were apparently having a great time. “We should step outside, Herr Edert,” the man said, purposefully. Under the table, he pulled back the hammer of a gun. “I’m afraid I must insist.”

Martin’s eyes narrowed. He said nothing as he stood simultaneously with the stranger. The man had draped a black jacket over the hand holding the weapon and motioned with his head to leave out the back door.

Martin obeyed and pushed opened the creaky exit. Once outside, the noise from the tavern became muted and was replaced by the sound of the small river that flowed nearby.

“Now what?” Martin asked, indignant.

“To the river.”

Again, Edert did as he was told and walked steadily over to the edge of the water.

“Tell me what you know about the lost canvas of Van Gogh,” the stranger demanded.

Martin turned around and faced him. “What are you talking about?”

The stranger lowered the sound suppressed weapon and aimed it at Martin’s knee. “I can torture you before I kill you or I can kill you quickly. Tell me what you know about the Van Gogh. Where is it? What did you tell the girl?”

Suddenly, a vinyl boot smashed into the stranger’s hand. The unexpected impact sent the weapon flying through the air into the dirt by the water. Adriana didn’t hesitate to attack again. She launched another flying kick at the blonde menace. The man turned just in time to see the bottom of her foot before it crashed into his nose.

He reeled backwards as blood flowed freely from the injury. He grabbed the nose with one hand and tried to recover. The shock passed after a few seconds and he lashed out with a flurry of punches. Adriana’s hands were just as fast as his, blocking and parrying all of his assaults.

He over extended on one punch and she grabbed the man’s wrist, pulling it over her shoulder, then jerked down hard. The arm broke easily at the elbow, extending the forearm backwards at a ninety-degree angle. The stranger screamed and dropped to one knee.

Villa whipped out a long knife from her jacket and kicked the man over onto his back. She jumped on top of him, straddling his chest, the blade pressed firmly to his neck.

“Who do you work for? Why are you following me?”

He said nothing, clenching his teeth in pain. She pressed the edge of the knife deeper causing a thin trickle of blood to start oozing from a fresh wound.

“I will kill you,” she said, coldly.

“I am after the same thing as you,” he spat. “They will never let you have it. You will die before that happens.” His eyes were filled with a crazed conviction.

“Who wants it?” she demanded again.

He laughed slightly through the pain, grinning sickly. Suddenly, the side of the man’s head exploded, splashing blood all over the ground. Some of it had splattered on Adriana’s face and hands. She looked down at the man’s face in shock. Lifeless eyes stared off into the night.

She turned quickly to see where the bullet had come from but in the dark. It was difficult to see but other than Martin, there was no one else around. Her friend simply looked on in complete surprise at what had just happened.

“We have to go,” she said plainly.

He nodded and the two of them sprinted back over to the parking lot and got in the car. She looked around again, seeing nothing but the darkness of the forest. Edert wheeled the car out of the parking lot, kicking up gravel as he fishtailed it onto the road.

“Who was that?” Adriana asked, out of breath. She turned her head around to see if anyone was following them.

“I have never seen that man before. But he was very interested in what you are looking for,” Martin stated as he caught his breath.

“Where are we going?” she asked. Her breathing had slowed. She kept an eye on the rear view mirror, just in case.

“I have a friend in a town about fifteen minutes from here. We will see if she will let us hide there for a little while.” He stepped on the gas and guided the car down the road, heading up small mountain.

“Can you trust her?” Adriana wondered.

He shrugged. “As much as I can trust anyone, I suppose.” Even though they’d almost been killed, Martin was handling the situation extremely well. As if reading her thoughts, he said, “You take things too seriously, my dear.”

Her eyes wandered out into the darkness of the passing woods. “Sorry, I just don’t see a lot of heads blown off in my line of work. Especially right in front of me.”

He understood. “That man was trying to kill you. And he would have killed both of us if he could have. If necessary, you would have killed him yourself. You have killed before.”

She shook her head and looked down at her bloody hands. The crimson liquid had already gotten sticky on her skin. “You never get used to it, Martin.”

The car crested the mountain, bringing into view a crescent moon high in the distance. It beamed down on a rolling meadow on both sides of the road.

“That is because you are human,” he stated sympathetically.

A few minutes passed silently before they were beyond the fields and into another forest. "I know someone I think you should talk to," he said after a few minutes of quiet thought.

"About what?" she asked.

"The lost canvas, my dear." He glanced over at her with a smile. "His name is Friedrich Mueller. He deals with many types of antiquities. In the morning, I can take you to his shop. It isn't far from here. I'll call him and let him know you are coming."

"You think this friend of yours will know something about the painting?"

Martin steered the car onto a small, town street. Nearby, old German homes dotted the hillsides. "My friend's house is at the top of that hill," he said as he pointed to a small chalet situated above most of the others in the tiny city. "And if Friedrich hasn't heard of your painting, then it probably doesn't exist."

The woman who opened the door was thin and rugged in appearance. If Adriana had to guess, she'd say that the lady was the same age as her Martin. She had short brown hair atop a narrow face with large ears and nose. The woman pulled a plaid robe tight against the cold evening air. Her feet were covered in slippers and her legs in some white pajama pants.

Her face lit up at the site of Adriana's companion. "Hallo, Martin! It is so good to see you." The woman's accent was mild, Northern German.

"Thank you for letting us come by on such short notice," Martin replied in a humble tone. "Greta, this is my friend Adriana Villa."

"Pleasure to meet you," she said as she opened the door wide and motioned for them to enter. "It's cold. Come. Come. I have a nice fire going. Would you like something to drink?" Adriana shook her head and smiled politely as she entered the house.

Martin, on the other hand, was not so polite "Bier bitte," he requested in German.

"I thought so, old friend." Greta said as she closed the door. She looked at the blood on Adriana's face and hands. "Looks like we need to get you cleaned up first." Greta cast Martin a worried glance.

"It's not what it looks like," he said, understanding her concern.

Their host showed them where they could hang their coats and led Adriana to a sink in the kitchen. "You may want to take a shower later but for now you can use the sink to get cleaned up." Greta retrieved a towel from under the sink and set it next to the basin. Then she disappeared down a set of stairs near the entrance.

The hot water soaked over Adriana's skin. She scrubbed the soap hard, trying to scour the sticky substance off of her hands. After a few minutes, she rinsed them off. There was no trace of the blood but she still felt like it was there.

A few moments later Greta reappeared with two large bottles of Hasseroder, the favorite local pilsner. She led the way into the main room where a fire crackled in the hearth. For a few minutes, she and Martin explained how they had become friends many years before at an antique auction. They had both been interested in the same piece and after an onslaught of bidding both of them lost the piece to another, more affluent bidder. After the auction, they bumped into each other and joked about the event. Within hours they had become fast friends.

Adriana wondered if there was some kind of a romance between the two but she thought it best not to bring it up. Apparently, Greta had never married. From what she knew, Martin had only taken the plunge once. His marriage had been a fruitless effort that lasted only a few years before ending abruptly in divorce.

After catching up on old times, the subject changed. "So, what kind of trouble are you in, Martin?" Greta asked, taking a sip of her beer.

"Someone tried to kill me tonight. Adriana saved me," he explained.

Greta looked over at the Spaniard. "Did you kill this person?" she asked, callously.

Adriana shook her head. "No. We don't know who did. Someone shot him before I could find out who he was or whom he was working for." She looked down at her hands again.

"I see," Greta responded. "Did you call the police?" she asked, looking from one to the other.

"No," Martin shook his head. "We just needed to get out fast. So we left and drove here."

Their host appeared a little concerned. "Did anyone see what happened? Were you followed?"

"No. No one else was there. And we weren't followed," Adriana answered. "I made sure."

Greta seemed uneasy but the answer Adriana had given made her feel a little better. The German woman took a few big gulps of her beer, copying Martin. Then she set her glass down on an end table and folded her hands.

"Would it be alright if we stay here for the night?" Martin asked after finishing his drink. "It is just for tonight."

"Certainly. You are always welcome here," she said, smiling. "But if the police show up, I will tell them you broke in." Her last remark was accented with a wink. "I will show you to your rooms," Greta said and stood, picking up the empty beer glasses. She took the vessels to the kitchen and then showed her guests to a few spare rooms in the upstairs portion of the house.

Adriana was surprised at how much space the chalet had. They walked by a study and a third bedroom on their way to the guest quarters. She hoped she would be able to sleep. Even though she was tired, everything that had happened was still rushing through her mind.

The following morning, Adriana woke to laughter downstairs and the smell of fresh coffee and bread.

She pulled on her clothes and made her way down to the kitchen where Martin and Greta were sitting at the table stuffing their faces with toast and eggs.

"Ah, there you are," he said with a smile. "We have breakfast for you and good coffee." Adriana accepted the offering with a polite smile and sat down to eat opposite the other two.

"I also called Friedrich for you. He will be expecting you this morning," Martin sounded proud of himself. It was almost as if he'd completely forgotten about the previous night's escapade.

"Thank you," she said. She took a knife and spread some butter on a piece of crusty bread.



Greta sensed her apprehension. "Do not worry. I have no desire to know why you want to speak with Friedrich. Though, if you are talking to him, you must be looking for something that is hard to find. He has a reputation for being able to get information about things that others cannot. I have no doubts that he will be able to help you."

Adriana crammed the toast into her mouth and chewed quickly. The sooner she could get to the shop the better. "That is good to know," she said when she was finished chewing. "Can he be trusted?"

Martin and Greta exchanged a quick glance. "We assume so," he answered. "No reason not to?"

Adriana frowned but accepted the answer. She never liked to assume anything. "Any word on the man who attacked us last night?" she asked after taking a long sip of the rich coffee.

"No," Martin replied uneasily. He cast Greta an awkward glance.

Greta spoke while stirring her coffee slowly. "I checked around a little bit this morning but there was no news of a murder and apparently no body was found. Whoever killed that man must not have wanted his identity to be known."

Adriana contemplated the situation while she stared out the window at the valley below. Off in the distance, the snow capped mountain known as "The Brocken" stood ominous and silent.

"I suppose I should be going," she said, suddenly. "Thank you very much for the food and for the bed. I really appreciate your hospitality."

"It is no problem at all, dear," Greta smiled and stood. "Are you sure you don't need anything else?"

Adriana shook her head and smiled as she said, "Thank you."

Martin stood as well. "I'll drop you off at Friedrich's. It's not far from your hotel so you should be able to walk back fairly easily from there. I have to be in Berlin for a meeting this afternoon so I won't be able to stay and introduce you."

"It's fine, Martin."

The two grabbed their coats and headed out the door. He turned and gave Greta a big hug before they hopped in the car and made their way back down into the valley town below.

The black sign that hung outside of Friedrich Mueller's shop was highlighted in gold lettering that read Mueller's Antiques. Adriana took a look around the city street, still worried someone might be watching. Cars sped by and pedestrians busily walked the sidewalks, all part of a normal morning in the city. She didn't, however, notice anything out of the ordinary.

She pulled open the door and entered the shop. The air inside was toasty warm compared to the chill out on the sidewalk. She loosened her jacket slightly as she walked through the foyer of the shop. The little store was filled with an odd and seemingly random collection of paintings, sculptures, memorabilia, and other knickknacks. On a wall to her left, prints of concert flyers hung over a shelf containing hundreds of vinyl records. As she made her way around, she saw shelves full of old books, even what she surmised were first editions. The room had a musty smell to it, which added to the historic feel of the shop.

"Can I help you?" a masculine voice startled her.

She turned to see an odd, little man with thinning, combed-over gray hair and wire-rimmed glasses. He wore a black vest and tie over a white, long-sleeved shirt. He appeared to be in his sixties but something told her that he was much older.

“Jallo,” she greeted him pleasantly. “I was told to see a man here by the name of Friedrich Mueller.”

He smiled. “I am Friedrich Mueller. You must be Martin’s friend, Adriana Villa.”

She nodded and extended a hand, which he shook vigorously

“I think it is time for me to take a break for a few minutes,” he said and made his way to the front of the store. He flipped a sign around that she assumed said he was out to lunch.

Friedrich motioned for her to follow and led the way to the back of his shop through a thick, steel door. The room they had entered housed a table and several shelves stacked with old guns, army helmets, and other random military items. A pair of old floor-lamps were the only illumination in the room, casting an eerie glow from one end to the other. The things that most caught her attention were the badges and small flags with the familiar swastika on them.

Located at the back wall, just beneath a small, barred window, sat a gray filing cabinet.

Friedrich motioned for her to sit down at the table in the middle of the room. After he took a seat opposite of her he spoke. “So, Martin tells me you are looking for some artwork you believe was stolen by the Nazis. Correct?”

She nodded. “Yes, Herr Mueller. I’m wondering if you can help me find it.”

“As I am sure you well know, there have been many treasure hunters who have searched for such things with little or no success.” He finished the statement by crossing his arms.

“I am. But this piece is different. I am looking for a specific painting that was stolen.”

She pulled the old photograph from her jacket pocket and slid it across the table. He raised an eyebrow and reached out to pick up the picture. Instantly, his eyes grew large. He stood up and walked over to a shelf and picked up a magnifying glass. For a few seconds, he inspected the photograph closely then returned the tool.

“So, he said as he stepped back over to the table. You are looking for the lost Van Gogh.” He chuckled and sat back down in his chair. “I have heard of this painting, though I have never had anyone ask me about it. Well, until yesterday.”

She became suddenly alert. “Someone asked about it yesterday? Who?”

He held out his hands. “I don’t know who he was. He came in late in the afternoon, asked me a few questions about the painting and then left.”

“What do you know about it?” Adriana pressed. Concern had washed over her face. If the man that had been watching her yesterday knew about the painting, it seemed she was going to have some competition. Even though he was dead, she knew others were probably lurking. Her mind drifted to the mystery shooter who’d killed her assailant.

Friedrich shrugged. “It was known as *The Tree*. Apparently, it was one of the last paintings Van Gogh created before he died.”

“Have you heard anything about where it might have been taken when it was stolen?”

He laughed again. “I have heard all of the same rumors that you have heard: booby trapped caves in the mountains, hidden vaults, all kinds of wild stories abound with legends of Nazi gold and stolen relics. I haven’t seen any of them turn out to be true yet. But this one is different.”

His thought lingered for a moment. “What do you mean, different?” she asked and leaned forward.

After a few more seconds, he spoke. His tone was just above a whisper. “Several years ago, I was asked to appraise some pieces for a local businessman by the name of Holger Foyt. Herr Foyt is extremely wealthy. He owns a mansion in the nearby mountain town of Schirke.

“While at the home, I was given a the privilege of seeing nearly the entire collection of art and old antiques that the Foyt family had collected through the centuries. While I was documenting my findings, I noticed one particular piece that had been carelessly stacked with a dozen or so others in a storage room.”

Friedrich tapped the photograph with his finger. “It was this painting.”

Her eyes widened. “You have seen this in person?”

He nodded. “When the man came by yesterday and asked me if I knew anything about the missing Van Gogh, I did not know which painting he was talking about. But now, having seen this photo and analyzed the signature on it, I am certain that is the painting you seek.”

“How did you not recognize the painting’s creator when you were there?” she seemed dubious.

Friedrich shrugged. “Herr Foyt did not ask me to appraise his paintings. In fact, he made it a point to let me know they were of little value to him. So, at the time, I thought nothing of it. But I have seen Van Gogh’s work before. And this is, most certainly, one of his.”

She started to stand up. “Where is this Foyt’s home?”

He held up a hand. “Miss Villa, you cannot just stroll up to Holger Foyt’s home and ask to see his collection of artwork. He is an extremely powerful man. To be honest, I felt very uncomfortable even doing the task he asked me to do.”

“Why is that?”

There was a pensive silence before Friedrich spoke.

“Because, Holger’s father was a Nazi General.”

Villa raised an eyebrow at the revelation.

He spoke up before she could ask. “I don’t know for sure if Holger holds the beliefs of his father. He has lived most of his life out of the public view so it is hard to say. But he did inherit a great deal of money when his father died. It was money the old man had made during the war. Since then, Holger has built a small empire with a few companies he established, all legitimate businesses.”

“How can I get into his home?” Adriana was direct with the question.

He laughed loudly. “You want to steal from Holger Foyt?” He wagged his finger over the table. “This is not a good idea. There is much security around the estate. And while he may or may not be a Nazi, people who try to steal from him are dealt with ruthlessly. That much he did inherit from his father.”

“I need that painting,” she said. Determination filled her eyes.

Friedrich's eyelids narrowed. "Why that one? Surely there are other pieces of artwork around the world that could be easily bought or more easily stolen than this one."

"I am no thief," she corrected. "Taking something that was stolen to begin with is not stealing."

"Interesting justification, Ms. Villa."

She didn't appreciate the condescending tone but she understood. "Can you get me into the mansion?"

He shook his head. "That is one thing that I am afraid I cannot do. I have only been there one time and that was years ago. I wouldn't even know how to tell you to sneak in even if that was a possibility."

Adriana sat quietly, considering what he'd said.

Friedrich raised a finger. "There is someone who may be able to help you, though. She was a friend of Holger for many years. Some believe they had some kind of a romantic relationship. Of course, rumors abound that way. Her name is Helen Obermeyer. I believe she still lives in the same house. Every now and then she comes into my shop to buy something. We do not talk much but if there is anyone that can get you into that fortress of a home, it would be her."

"Where can I find her?"

Friedrich gave her some quick directions and asked if she needed a pen and paper.

"No," she said, "I remember everything."

She stood up and reached into her jacket pocket then tossed a thick, white envelope onto the table in front of him.

"Gracias." She said and walked out of the room, headed for the front of the shop.

He gently picked up the envelope and peeked inside. Within it was a stack of Euros, each bill worth one hundred. "Bitte," he said the German word as he heard the door to the front open.

Adriana had followed Friedrich's instructions and had little trouble finding the place. Now she stood in front of a beige home with a white door. It appeared to be several hundred years old, though still well maintained. Of course, that was a common thing in Germany. Many homes were passed down through generations, each successive heir doing what they could to renovate and keep up the ancestral manor.

An elderly woman with short, white hair appeared in the doorway a few moments later. She was tall and slender. While the skin on her face was wrinkled and old, she still carried herself with a youthful pride. The woman said nothing at first, sizing up Adriana.

"Frau Obermeyer?" Villa asked after the woman had opened the door.

The lady raised an eyebrow. "Und who are you?" Her English was perfect despite the German accent.

"My name is Adriana Villa. I have a few questions I'd like to ask you if you have a moment."

The woman appeared irritated. "Questions. What kind of questions?"

"In regards to this," Adriana held out the photo of the painting.

The woman's cold demeanor changed to confusion. She looked up and down the street then motioned for Adriana to enter. She did as instructed and followed the woman into the home.

Inside, the appearance of the place was rustic. The old wooden floors made her feel like going back in history. The smell of the wood mixed with a scent similar to a library, again adding to the sense of long ago.

"Would you like some coffee?" the host asked politely, carrying the photograph into the kitchen.

"No, thank you." Adriana preferred to get back to the subject of her visit. "So you know this painting?"

The woman found her way to a small, black bistro table in a kitchen nook that looked out on a back yard. Helen sat down and motioned for Adriana to do the same. She held the photograph reverently. When she spoke, her voice was distant.

"I have not seen this painting in many years," she began.

"Could you tell me where have you seen it?" Adriana asked.

The woman laughed a little. "My dear, I am certain you arrived here after speaking with our friend at the antique shop. He no doubt told you where this painting is located. So why are you here to see me?"

Adriana thought for a moment. "Friedrich told me that you were friends with Holger Foyt, that you might be able to help me get into his home."

"To what ends? Are you a thief? If so, what kind of friend would I be to show get you access of that nature?"

"Frau," Adriana said respectfully, "this painting was stolen a long time ago by some very bad people."

"And you justify your own thievery this way?" Helen tossed the photograph back across the table. Her eyes drifted to the window and stared out into the forest.

"It was stolen from a family during the war. They are the rightful owners. I'm going to get it back with your without your help." Adriana's tone sincere and her determination impressed the older woman.

Helen smiled momentarily. "Our fathers were friends," she started. "Holger's was a general, as I'm sure our friend Friedrich informed you. Mine was an officer as well. Since our fathers were friends, it was natural that Holger and I became close.

"When I was younger, we spent most of our time together," she spoke of the period fondly. "We became closer when my father was killed by the allies near the end of the war."

Adriana's face expressed sympathy.

The woman shook her head. "Do not take pity on me. My father was a Nazi and a thief. I do not condone what he, nor any of the others did. I loved him because he was my father but I am not proud of his legacy."

Adriana understood. Helen went on, "I remember seeing that painting with all the others in Holger's sitting room. His father used to sit and stare at it while sipping on brandy. After the war, he was one of the few high-ranking officers the allies did not go after for war crimes. Then, things began to change."

Helen took a sip of her coffee from a small, porcelain cup before continuing. "What had once been a simple admiration became an obsession. Whenever I saw the General in his study, he was looking through maps, old books, and taking fierce notes. All of it had to do with the painting."

Adriana looked curious. "What was he doing?"

"When the war ended, many German soldiers went back to their lives and started trying to move on. A few, though, were so dedicated to the Reich that they began looking for ways to resurrect it," she paused for a moment, lost in thought. "Such folly."

"You said resurrect it. What do you mean by that?"

Helen laughed and looked down into her mug. "You haven't heard about Nazi's search for immortality?"

Adriana shook her head.

"I suppose that is understandable," Helen shrugged. "Most people only know the surface of what the Nazi's were into. They see the history that was written by the victors: holocaust, madmen, cruelty. Only a rare few look beyond what is in the books and see what else the Reich was doing. Some have come across their research in genetics and the experimentation that was done on humans and animals. Others have looked into the testing that was done with quantum mechanics. There is even some evidence that suggests the Nazis were trying to find extraterrestrials. But one part of their research was of particular interest to Holger's father."

She paused for a moment, seeming to consider something. Adriana leaned forward, anxious to hear the secret.

"One of the greatest searches the Nazis performed was for something that could provide them with a source of power greater than anything known to man. Immortality." The older woman eased back in her chair and took deep breath.

"Immortality?" Adriana seemed slightly confused. "What could they possibly have been looking for that would provide immortality?"

Helen smiled and pointed at the old photograph still lying on the table.

"The painting?"

The older woman let out a flurry of laughter. "No, no, my dear. Not the painting. The tree in the painting."

"I don't understand. What is so special about this tree?" Adriana held up the picture and looked at it closely.

"Adolf Hitler was a very religious man," Helen said. "Though most people don't know it. For all of the detestable things that he did, deep down he believed that God was on his side."

Adriana was incredulous. "I find it hard to believe that he was a religious man."

Helen shrugged. "Most people find it hard to believe. But Hitler was deeply convinced that Germany was blessed by God, that it was a new nation of His chosen people."

"That's the first time I've ever heard that," Villa appeared deep in thought. "It sounds like a stretch."

"I understand your skepticism, my dear. But remember, my father was a Nazi officer, yours was not. Hitler believed the Jews stood in the way of the country's potential greatness. In his mind, they had to be eliminated."

Adriana clearly seemed uncomfortable. “How does any of this related to the painting of the tree?”

The woman’s tone became even more serious. “That tree is the source of eternal life. If humans were to eat of its fruit, they could live forever. It was an external sustenance that could stave off death forever.”

“It sounds like a fairy tale,” Adriana said. “There is no such thing.”

Helen shrugged again. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. What I know is that Adolf Hitler spent tens of millions in his search for it. He scoured the earth for clues, anything that could lead to the tree’s location. He was obsessed by it. The search for the tree occupied his mind at all times.

“In the end he died like everyone else,” Adriana added.

“Yes,” the older woman stood while she spoke. “He most certainly did. Although, he did not want to die. For someone who so easily sent men into battle to face death constantly, he was terrified of facing it himself. That fear further served to fuel his search for the tree. Men like my father as well as Holger’s were sent all over Europe and northern Africa in search of anything that could help pinpoint the location of the ancient source of eternal life.”

Adriana’s eyes grew wide with the realization. Even with the far-fetched story about a tree that granted immortality, things were starting to make sense but she still wasn’t quite convinced.

“The art, all of the ancient relics, the historical artifacts that were stolen during the war, those things were taken because Hitler was looking for some mythical tree?”

“No, my dear. The other things that were taken were because of greed. Only the Van Gogh holds the first clue.” Helen stood next to the sink, her coffee mug in her left hand. “There have been many throughout history who have searched for a source of immortality. Ponce de Leon looked for a fountain of youth in the Americas. The Egyptians tried to preserve humans after they died even though the body had already given up. Fear was only a portion of why Hitler searched so diligently. He wanted to live forever because of one simple thing. Power.”

“Power?” Adriana asked

“Yes. Imagine if he had been immortal. He would still be here, creating chaos and commanding atrocities without consequence. His dream of living forever was only the device to what he really wanted. World domination, run by a super race of people.”

Adriana looked down at the photograph. She stared at it; trying to process the information that Helen Obermeyer had just given her. “What is Holger Foyt doing with the painting?” she asked after a moment.

Helen leaned back against the sink. “Holger thinks the stories of the tree are just that, stories. He believed that our fathers and their precious leader were out of their minds. For him, the painting is just a piece of art that served to further their insanity.”

“What do you believe?” Adriana asked, genuinely.

“I have lived long enough to see many things. But I have never seen anything that would make me believe there is a plant that can overcome the power of death. We humans are frail creatures, easily destroyed by microscopic things or

by random accidents. I believe their search was futile and I am disgusted by the means they carried out their mission.”

Adriana looked down at the painting again. “Can you help me find the Van Gogh?”

There was a sudden click from the window at the rear of the kitchen. Adriana looked over and noticed the glass had cracked from a hole in the center. The next noise was the sound of a porcelain coffee mug shattering on the floor. She glanced back at her host just before the woman collapsed. Helen’s eyes were wide, staring ahead. Blood oozed from a hole just above her ear. Adriana instinctively jumped back from the view of the window and took cover behind the corner of the kitchen entryway.

She noticed a new, terrifying smell. Smoke. Panic crept into the back of Adriana’s mind.

She looked over towards the hall and saw the smoke entering through room, creeping along the ceiling. She crawled back to the front of the house, trying to stay as low as possible. Through a hallway that stretched to the back of the house, she could see the source of the smoke. The entire back wall of the house was engulfed in a raging flame.

Adriana gave one last glance back into the kitchen at the body on the floor. Helen Obermeyer was dead. She felt responsible but there was nothing she could do. She had to get out. Resigned, she reached over and grabbed the handle to the front door. She twisted it and pulled but nothing happened. Again, she jerked hard on the door but it didn’t budge. Fear flooded her mind. Someone had locked the front door from the outside.

A quick look back down the corridor revealed the flames were moving quickly along the ceiling and upper walls. Up the stairs to her left was still clear fire but smoke was quickly flooding the second floor.

There was a window at the end of the fiery hallway but even if she got through it into the back yard she would be a sitting duck for the gunman who’d killed her host. Smoke began inching lower and lower towards the floor. She could feel the stinging heat from the flames on her skin as the fire rushed towards the front of the house. She looked up at the small, narrow window next to the door but there was no way she could fit through it.

Across from where she was crouched, she noticed a decorative table with a flower pot on it next to the stairs. The object gave her an idea. There was only one way Adriana was going to be able to get out of the building and that was out the back. She’d just have to take her chances with the shooter.

Quickly, she stepped over to the table and swiped the flower vase to the floor. Then, she lifted the table. The wooden object was lighter than she had anticipated, which was a good thing and was just big enough to shield her from the flames. She peeked around the corner of the stairs at the fiery corridor. To her utter horrific dismay, the entire hall had caught fire faster than she’d assumed and was completely engulfed. Her only chance was to go upstairs and out another window. Without another thought, she flew up the stairs two at a time.

Most of the fire had not reached the upper part of the house but the smoke was thick and her lungs were beginning to burn. Adriana pulled her shirt up over her face to protect from inhaling too much of the deadly air. There were a few open



doors to other rooms but she was more interested in what was next to her. To her left, a window facing the street in front of the home gave her a little hope.

She rushed over to it quickly but found that it was not designed to open. A small decorative table sat nearby with an old picture frame on its top. She grabbed the table by the center stand and flung the object through the window. The glass and wooden frame shattered, sending smoke billowing out of the opening.

Careful not to cut herself on the jagged pieces of broken glass, Adriana knocked out the remaining parts of the window and climbed up onto the window. A moment later, she was on the outer ledge in the fresh air. She pulled her shirt back down, relieved to be able to breathe again.

She could hear sirens somewhere nearby. Emergency crews would be on the scene in a few minutes and she would prefer to not be there when they arrived. A small crowd had started to gather on the other side of the street after noticing the smoke roiling from the home. Behind her, through the window, something exploded and sent a burst of flame out of the opening next to her. No time to think. The roof was steeply sloped with reddish tiles. There was another ledge where the roof ended about six feet down. From there, she could make her way over to the next building.

Carefully, she lowered herself down from the window ledge and slid to the lower edge. Suddenly, another explosion rocked the house shook violently and her foot slipped just as she reached the narrow strip. For a second, she almost lost her balance, but she regained it, pressing her body against the roof.

She shuffled her feet quickly, careful to keep her body against the building. When she reached the end, she pushed away from the roof and stood cautiously. There was a small gap between where she was standing and the top of the next building. Fortunately, the distance was only a few feet but the drop down was closer to ten feet. Adriana didn't have a choice so she jumped. Another explosion shook the building as she leapt from the ledge. Her body flew through the air and landed safely on the other roof. She rolled a few feet and covered her face as smoke and debris shot out from the emblazoned building.

A few pieces of the wall and broken tile lay around her.

She made sure she hadn't hurt herself with the sudden landing then got up and looked at the burning home. Helen Obermeyer's house looked like it had been hit by a bomb. Huge pieces of it were missing in the roof and walls. The blaze continued to consume the building and several parts of the structure were beginning to collapse.

Across the street, the crowd of onlookers was growing and the sirens were only seconds away. Adriana ran across the roof, away from the scene, and jumped onto a side porch of an adjacent building. Then, she walked casually out onto the sidewalk as the fire trucks and police cars passed by, blocking her escape from the view of any witnesses.

A few minutes later, Adriana unlocked the door to her hotel room. She had made her way back amid the growing chaos around the inferno. Fortunately, she felt like no one had paid her any mind. She eased open the door to a room that had been completely torn apart. All of her clothes and personal belongings were

strewn over the floor and bed. The few documents she had brought on her trip were scatter about.

She pulled out her gun from within her jacket and stepped quietly towards the bathroom. Suddenly, she felt a sharp blow to the back of her neck and everything went black.

Adriana awoke to the splash of water on her face. Her wrists hurt and she realized they were tied behind her back: she'd been strapped to a wooden chair. A dim light hung in front of her and, as the haze began to subside from her vision, she realized where she was.

She didn't recognize the man holding the bottle. She peered through the haze but he squirted more of the icy water on her face then drizzled it on her hair as an additional insult to injury. She struggled against the ropes and rocked the chair back and forth but to no avail.

Another figure entered the room, his face hidden slightly by the shadow in the doorway. "You ask too many questions, my dear."

"Friedrich," she said the name through clenched teeth. Water spat out of her mouth as she spoke.

"And you are also too trusting, just like your friend, Martin," he added.

She squirmed again. "What have you done with him?"

"With Martin?" He walked slowly over to the table near where she was bound and sat down next to her. "I have not done a thing with him. Not yet anyway. We have to deal with you first. We will get to him soon enough."

Adriana stared hard at the man. Her head throbbed from the base of her skull; her eyes strained against the light.

Friedrich grabbed her chin in one hand while the younger man watched. "Now, my dear. Who is it you are working for?"

She tried to shake her head free of his grip but he held firm. "I work for myself," she spat.

Friedrich shook his head at the answer. The other man picked up a knife from the table. Again, she struggled as he took the blade and began cutting the upper fabric of her black tank top.

He had reached near the center of her breasts when Friedrich stopped him. "You see, my dear, the more you lie to me, the more fun I'm going to let our friend here have with you. And the more fun he has, the more painful it is for you. I promise you that."

She shook the chair violently, struggling against the ropes. Veins popped up on her bare arms and neck as she thrashed about.

Friedrich gripped her tight, restricting her movement. "Now, I'll ask you again. Who do you work for? Who is looking for this painting?"

She shook her head. "I already told you, dumbkopf. I work alone."

He raised an eyebrow and spoke in a cynical tone. "Oh. Well, that is good. That means no one will come looking for you when he is finished. Not that there will be much left to find." Friedrich nodded to the other man again who immediately continued cutting the tank top.

Her chest heaved as the fabric exposed more and more skin. The man with the knife was sweating a little, perhaps becoming more excited as he exposed more of her skin.

A loud click came from the direction of the doorway. The man with the knife appeared stunned for a moment, his face grimaced in pain. As the body collapsed to the floor, Mueller turned towards the door but his movement was too late. Another click sent a bullet through his right eye and out the back of his head. There was a few seconds pause before his body fell over backwards.

Adriana looked at the bloody mess around her. The wall and concrete floor were splattered in crimson. She tried hard to see into the doorway and catch a glimpse of who had killed her captors, but the only thing she could make out was the silhouette of someone in a black turtleneck and pants. The face was in shadow.

“Adriana Villa?” A voice in a local accent.

“Yes? Who are you?”

Two figures entered the room, completely covered in black and wearing ski masks. They both carried black handguns with sound suppressors attached to the barrels.

“What do you want?” she asked as the men untied her wrists. One of them held her jacket in one hand.

“Put on your coat,” the voice said from the doorway.

“What are you going to do with me? Why did you help me?” She was confused. The man had saved her but she wondered to what end.

The silhouette said nothing. After she put on her jacket, one of the men started to put a pillowcase over her head. “That won’t be necessary,” the figure in the door stopped him. Satisfied with the order, the two other men exited back through the doorway.

“Come with me,” the man said flatly.

She looked back at the two bodies for a moment. Blood had begun to pool on the floor. The man in the doorway had already turned and started for the front of the shop. Uncertain what was going on, she followed quickly behind. Outside the shop, the man hopped into the front of a silver Mercedes sedan. One of the other men opened the rear door for her and she slid into the black leather seats. As soon as the door was closed, the driver took off and wheeled the elegant car onto the street headed for the outskirts of town.

She looked back and saw the two men in ski masks re-enter the shop. “What are they doing?” she asked as she peered through the sloped back window.

“The same thing those dead men did to Helen’s house,” he replied. “Burning it down.”

“Who are you?” Adriana asked. “Holger Foyt?”

A slight laugh came from the man in the front seat. He did not, however, turn around, still keeping his face a mystery to her. The car zipped up a small, winding mountain road. A black forest blurred by outside. The homes of the city had been left behind and now she assumed they were on a private driveway of some sort.

A few minutes passed before the car arrived at a huge gate. Two men wearing gray coats and black caps were standing next to a guard shack as the metal barricade swung open slowly.

“Tight security,” she mentioned as they passed through the gate.

“One can never be too careful, Ms. Villa.”

“How do you know my name?” she asked.

“I know many things about you, Adriana. I know where you went to university. I know who your father is. And most importantly, I know what it is you are looking for.”

The statement worried her. *They knew who her father was?* The car veered around a sharp curve. An enormous mansion appeared in front of the vehicle. A solid wall surrounded all sides with a single tower off to the left. The home was made of a mixture of old stone and brick. She wondered how old it was but kept her thoughts to herself as she observed the beautiful structure. The driver pulled the car around a gravel circle and stopped in front of a large wooden door. The entrance was underneath a stone balcony that jutted out from the second floor.

Many of the windows were dark, save for a few on the right.

The driver got out of the car and ran around to open the door for her. The man in the front seat exited and walked directly to the door. Another man who had been waiting on the steps quickly opened it for him. Adriana hurried to follow the mysterious man into the mansion. She wondered if he ever waited on anyone.

The man led the way into a large foyer and then headed to the right past a giant set of stairs that wrapped upwards to the second floor. The hallway they entered must have been twelve feet high. The décor, however, was simple. Brushed bronze wall sconces dotted the beige walls. Under foot, the stone floor was made from what appeared to be pure sandstone, something she was fairly sure didn't come from that region.

She wanted to ask the man so many questions but he never turned around as he strode quickly down the corridor. When they reached the end, the hall turned sharply to the right and opened into a large study just beyond dark double-doors.

“Herr Foyt will see you now,” the man directed her in with one hand. His sharp, distinct features never wavered.

“So you are not Herr Foyt?” she seemed a little confused.

The man cracked his lips into a thin smile. “Nein,” he said as he shook his head.

Adriana nodded slightly and stepped through the open doorway into the study. Twenty-foot-high bookshelves wrapped around the octagonal shaped room. Two rolling ladders on opposite sides stood on bronze wheels. A large, red oak desk sat off to the right in front of a set of shelves containing a random assortment of pictures and objects. Behind the desk, a thin, gray haired man in a dark sweater sat writing on a piece of paper. His wire-framed glasses rested on the tip of his splotchy nose.

She stopped about halfway across the floor and stared him. For the first few moments, he didn't acknowledge she was there. Apparently, the documents he was signing were extremely important. After a few awkward moments of silence, he spoke but still kept writing.

“You may sit down if you like.” His accent was ruffled with the scratchiness of age.

“I'd prefer to stand, if that is alright,” she responded.

“Suit yourself,” he answered as he punctuated his last signature with a flamboyant line. Foyt laid down the silver pen and looked up. His old, blue eyes were still as piercing as they must have been fifty years before.

“So, you are Adriana Villa and you seek the lost Van Gogh. Given the chance, would you have stolen it from me?”

“I do not consider it a crime to take something that was stolen.” She stood firm, uncertain what was going to happen. On the outside, she had nerves of solid rock. Inside, though, her stomach was in knots. She wasn’t sure where the conversation was going.

The old man laughed; his voice echoed through the tall chamber. “Of course. I imagine most thieves have some sort of justifications for their actions.”

“Did you bring me here to kill me? You could have just done it at the shop.”

“Kill you?” he waved a dismissive hand. “I did not bring you here to execute you, my dear. If I wanted you dead I would have let Friedrich finish what he started. I brought you here because you wanted the painting. You do still want the painting, yes?”

She nodded but was still confused.

“That is why I have brought you here. It has been in my possession long enough.”

Adriana was stunned. Had she just heard correctly? This old man was about to give her what was most certainly a priceless piece of lost art? “I’m sorry. You’re just going to let me have the painting?”

He nodded. Before she could ask her next question, he answered it for her. “There is one catch, though.”

She didn’t like the sound of that.

“What do you know about the painting?” Foyt asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know much. Although, it would seem the people who know the most are dead now.”

He stood from his brown leather chair and walked over to one of the bookshelves. His fingers ran along a row about shoulder high and stopped on a particularly ordinary looking book. The white lettering on the olive green cover had faded through the years. He pulled back on the book and suddenly she heard a click. The bookcase next to him swung open slowly, revealing a secret passageway.

“Cliché, I know,” he said, smiling. “But a necessary precaution given the collection I inherited from my father.” He stepped into the hidden stairwell as light bulbs flickered on, illuminating the stone wall.

Adriana hesitantly followed the old man into the passage. The stairs continued down further and further, deep into the belly of the mansion’s foundation.

“My father purchased this home during the war,” he said. “It was a very lucrative time for our family. Unfortunately, most of our gains were ill gotten.” The last sentence was filled with regret. “Originally, it was built three hundred years ago, a fairly young home in German years. The family that lived here was of noble descent and had been close to kings and kaisers for centuries. They had fallen on hard times after the first Great War and the offer my father made to them was more than enough to help them recover.

“That was one of the few decent things my father did,” Foyt said with disdain.

They came to the bottom of the stairs in front of an old, steel door. An electronic keypad next to it seemed out of place in the ancient structure.

“So you don’t believe in what your father was doing?” she asked innocently.

He turned and gave her a quizzical look then entered a few digits on the keypad. “No,” he shook his head. “What they were doing was pure evil; all of it. I’m ashamed that my family had anything to do with the Nazis.”

The sound of a bolt moving inside the door interrupted their conversation for a moment. Then it slowly began to swing open. Fluorescent lights blinked to life inside the vault-like room beyond the threshold. Adriana peered into the space for a moment then followed her host inside. Once inside, she realized the enormity of what she was seeing.

The room, carved out of the mountain rock, was at least forty feet long and probably that wide. Each wall was decorated with various pieces of artwork. She didn’t recognize any of them but assumed they were part of the cache that had been amassed during the war. On the floor, various sculptures and busts lined the walls making the chamber feel like it was the exhibition room of an art museum. As she looked closer, her eyes grew wide upon seeing the signatures on some of the paintings.

She stopped and stared at a particular piece. “Yes,” he said, interrupting her thoughts. “That is a Monet. We have three of his paintings. There are several renowned artists represented here. Each one of the works in this room is absolutely priceless.”

“Were all of these taken by the Nazis?” she asked.

He nodded, solemnly. “Yes. They were.” He stood still for a moment and looked thoughtful. “My father wanted to sell off all of these works to fund the rise of a new Reich. He believed that the Fuhrer would have wanted that. When he died, I swore to protect these works of art and never let any of them be sold to fund the Nazi’s evil.”

Adriana shook her head. “Why not return them to the families they were taken from?”

He laughed. “What should I have done, my dear? Make an announcement that I have found a lost Monet and whoever the rightful owner is should come forward? I would have ten thousand people showing up on my door. My father and his men kept an inventory of everything but not where they were taken from. Except one.”

“The Van Gogh?” she asked.

The old man nodded.

At the end of the room a little frame hung in the corner. It was much smaller than the rest of the artwork in the room and could have easily gone unnoticed. Even before Adriana got close to it she could tell what it was. Her breath quickened and her heart raced. She could barely believe she’d found the lost Van Gogh. The painting was more legend than anything else. Most people believed if it did exist, it had been destroyed decades before. But there she was, standing in front of it.

She admired the artistry of the brush strokes and noted the oddness of the subject in the painting. The tree’s two trunks and odd-looking fruit were certainly different than anything she’d ever seen. A small river flowed under two trunks that joined in the center. Flowers, bushes, and other trees blurred the background behind the majestic figure.

“During the early stages of the war, it was taken from a Jewish synagogue in Poland. After my father interrogated the Rabbis, he had them all executed.”

The last sentence sent chills down her spine.

“Beyond that, he was given one mission. He was to do whatever it took to find every bit of information he could about the tree.”

“Hitler wanted to live forever,” her voice trailed off.

Foyt nodded. “Yes. I see Helen must have informed you on the Fuhrer’s true aspirations.” His voice stopped, cracking a little at the end.

She turned around, sensing his pain. “I’m sorry. It is my fault she’s dead. None of this would have happened—”

He raised his hand and stopped her in midsentence. “I appreciate your empathy. It was only a matter of time until something like this happened anyway. The men that killed Helen and captured you have been after this painting for a long time. They work for a group that has been trying to find clues as to the whereabouts of the real tree.”

He looked around at his collection then back to her. “They are an evil organization, Ms. Villa, much like the one my father worked for. They do their work with a religious zeal.

“They were called The Rosicrucian Order in the old days, hundreds of years ago. Now they go by a new name, one that they believe fits their motives. The Order of the Golden Dawn.”

He sat down on an upholstered chair nearby and began to talk again. “Mueller had been recruited by The Order a long time ago. They have people everywhere. I have spies of my own throughout the country so I keep well informed.”

Adriana’s eyebrows came together trying to understand the information. “So, you knew Mueller wanted the painting but you invited him to come to your home and see it? Why?”

He shrugged and smiled. “I’m an old man. Got to have some fun while I still can.” His eyes beamed from behind the glasses.

“You were taunting them?” she asked.

He raised his eyebrows and cocked his head to the side. “It was funny to me.”

Adriana smiled at the thought.

“But now,” he continued, “I need you to take the painting.”

“Take it?”

He nodded. “I won’t be able to keep it safe much longer. They were content to wait it out and let me die, hoping to purchase the painting at auction. Now that Mueller has been murdered, I suspect the ones pulling the strings will try to take it by force. It is only a matter of time.”

“But it’s secure here. Does anyone else know the code to this room?” she wondered.

Foyt waved his hand. “Locks can be broken. While I trust most of the people who work for me, nearly everyone has a price, Ms. Villa.”

“I have protected the painting and its secret for long enough. It is time for someone else to do it.”

She shook her head. “Why me?”

He laughed. "You are a horrible thief, Ms. Villa. You came here for the painting. Now I try to give it to you and you will not take it." His face was sincere. "I know you are not a typical thief," he said before she could protest.

The old man stood up again and walked over to the frame. Gently, he lifted it off a hook and handed it to her. "You must take it," he said. "And you must protect it. The secret it hides is more powerful than anything the world has ever known. If it falls into the wrong hands it could change the course of human events."

Her eyes were puzzled. "It's just a painting," she said, confused.

He shook his head. "No, my dear, it isn't. When you figure it out, then you will understand."

She held the object carefully, eyeing the colors and images.

"You must go now," he said, already heading back towards the door. "The Order will no doubt be coming for retribution."

"You are a powerful man. What could they do to you?"

He smiled again at the sentiment. "I appreciate your respect but there is only so much I can do against a foe such as The Order." Foyt hesitated a moment before speaking again. "Do you know how Vincent Van Gogh died?"

"She shrugged her shoulders. He shot himself when he was 37," she answered.

The old man nodded. "That's what the history books say. But if he shot himself, why did the authorities never find the gun?"

Adriana looked down at the painting again.

"The Order murdered him. They killed him because they knew he'd stumbled upon a secret, a secret they had been searching hundreds of years to uncover. My resources can only protect the painting so long, Ms. Villa. But you can hide it. They don't know you."

She understood. The old man felt like he was at the end of his run. With the wolves howling at the gates, he needed someone else to take his torch and run. She followed him out of the room and the heavy door closed behind them.

She started to head back up the stairs but he grabbed her and shook his head. "You should probably go out another way." He held out his hand pointing towards another corridor that led away from the safe room.

Adriana obeyed and headed down the hallway to an open door. Through it, she saw two, black Range Rovers.

When she looked back at him, he was holding out an electronic key. "Don't try to tell me you cannot take one of my cars. I can only drive one at a time anyway." He smiled kindly at her.

"Thank you for trusting me with this," she said, grappling with the gravity of the situation.

"You are a good person, Ms. Villa. I am certain you will do what is right. Now go." He turned and started walking back down the hallway.

She looked over at the nearest SUV and hesitated for a moment. Then she pressed the remote ignition button.

Adriana sat on the edge of a bed in a hotel room. She'd left the mountain complex and driven down a hidden dirt road and found her way back into town. There was no way she was going back to her room in Wernigerode so she'd left her



things and driven the two hours straight to Frankfurt. There weren't any flights available until the next morning so she decided to hole up for the night.

She held the painting reverently and looked over it, trying to see what was so special about it. He'd said it was one of many clues. *Clues to what*, she wondered?

The television interrupted her thoughts with an image of a fire. She recognized the mansion instantly. The news reporter was speaking so quickly that it was hard for her to understand all of the German. She did, however, pick up a few words that gave her goose bumps.

The fire at Holger Foyt's mansion had destroyed all but the stone and brick on the outside. Several bodies had been found inside the building but none had been identified yet. The scene seemed chaotic with police and firefighters rushing around everywhere. It was believed that there were no survivors and the cause of the blaze had yet to be determined.

A small twinge of emotion panged in her chest. Foyt had been a nice man and he'd trusted her with something big, perhaps something he didn't fully comprehend. She certainly didn't understand it.

She flipped over the painting and looked at the back. On the backing paper of the frame, she noticed the bottom right corner had been peeled away a little. She lifted the edge and pulled it back. Five numbers were written on the back of the canvas accompanied by a strange set of backwards letters.

Adriana stared at the numbers, wondering what they meant.

36115

Curious, she grabbed a pen and paper and started writing down the numbers and letters. For several minutes, she tried to make different words of out the letters but kept coming up with nothing. She looked up from the paper and saw herself in the mirror. Then it hit her. She took the painting over to the mirror and held up the back of it to the reflection.

The letters spelled out the word, *Coronado*.

But what did it mean and what about the numbers? Fatigue was setting in. Her eyes were getting heavy. The long drive hadn't been easy after the day she'd had.

There would be time to figure out the mysterious meaning of the word and numbers tomorrow. For now, she needed sleep.

As she laid her head on the pillow, the news had changed to a story about an American agency that had discovered some ancient relics just outside of Istanbul. Two men, probably in their mid-thirties, appeared on the screen holding up a few small, stone statues. They looked proud, smiling as they handed the objects over to a Turkish emissary.

The room was getting blurry as her weariness caught up to her. The last thing she heard as she drifted off was one name.

*Sean Wyatt.*

