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NEW YORK CITY

A day in February, 1992. Catherine Denforth was shot in front of Sotheby's Auction House.

She and Jackson had stayed after the auctions to finish the paperwork on their sales and purchases. "Masterpieces in Islamic Art" was an important auction for the couple. For one of their customers, they sold three pieces well over the estimate and picked up a couple of bargains for a customer in L.A. They were happy. Business was good and, after months of tension between them, they were warming up to each other again.

Jackson stepped away to look around the corner for a cab. A *rat-tat-tat* cracked the air. When he turned, Catherine was in a heap. As he fell across her, he saw only the blankness in her eyes.



MIDEAST & EUROPE

March, 1992. Nellie was in Dubai when she heard of the shooting. She was trying to arrange a shipment to a Munich antiques dealer but got caught up in a hassle over the provenance of some of the pieces. An Iraqi expatriate and competitor with her Munich dealer had decided that some statuary had been stolen from the National Museum in Baghdad. What a mess. She was mired in paperwork and going crazy with a parade of pompous officials.

But that was her job—guaranteeing the unfettered passage of art and antiques from buyer to seller. And moving things through the Middle East was especially tricky these days.

"Did you hear about the murder in front of Sotheby's?" her

Munich dealer asked. “Taylor Jackson’s wife. Assault rifle. Middle of rush hour.”

“They aren’t actually married,” she mumbled stupidly.

“Police are saying it was random, but I don’t know. You hear things.”

“What things?”

“Lot of angry people in the world. Jackson—lot of business from the Mideast and Central Asia. Maybe crossed the wrong person.”

She was stunned. For days after the news, she found herself staring into space—staring into her past. She had been married to Jackson once upon a time—an impetuous disaster. He had deserved someone like Catherine—a Yankee aristocrat. And now she was gone. Jackson was alone.

There was no answer at Jackson’s apartment. She tried several times throughout the week. She scribbled a note and stuck it in the mail. As soon as this job was finished, she’d have money in her pocket and would go to Manhattan.

But the job got more complicated. Interpol stuck its nose in and she wound up shuttling negotiations between Damascus, Dubai, and Munich. Weeks turned into months. Still, she couldn’t reach Jackson.

“You hear these things,” her Munich dealer brought up again, months later. He was an Iranian expatriate himself, tapped into many networks. This time she had the presence of mind to ask questions.



NEW YORK CITY

September 1992. The first thing Jackson noticed was her legs. Restless legs, shifting from foot to foot as she huddled against the public phone. Black stockings and high heels showed all the

curves and muscles. Nice lines, he thought, and perfect ankles. The heart-shaped calves made him want to guess she was Asian, but the hair below her scarf was light brown and wavy.

“What’ll you have?”

The bartender startled him away from his scrutiny. “Oh. Coffee, I guess. Black.”

The day was unseasonably cold. The chill made his hands ache and he cupped them for a few seconds around the mug as he leaned a hip against the barstool. Next to the coffee lay his unopened mail—the dreaded VISA Gold bill and the dreaded weekly letter from his dad.

The VISA bill represented the enormous line of credit he’d used as working capital back when he was actually working. It had been maxed out by the end of their last trip to Asia, where he and Catherine had invested in a trove of Korean and Japanese paintings. Then, when Catherine was killed, her family, in a vindictive rage, laid claim to the paintings and any other assets they could lay their hands on.

Her murder had left Jackson living off a stack of hundred-dollar bills he’d accumulated in a safe deposit box for cash deals—good for another three or four months. That assumed paying the minimum to VISA. In his head one sleepless night, he had calculated that, if he sent in the minimum every month, he’d be eighty when the credit line was paid up. He was a whiz at that kind of math. His father had thought he’d be a hell of a tax lawyer, but he wound up being an overeducated art dealer instead. An art dealer who hadn’t closed a deal in seven months.

He let his eyes rove the tiers of bottles behind the bar and wondered if he didn’t deserve a gin for his misery. No. When had cash flow ever driven him to drink? He looked at the unopened letter from his father. Now *that* might merit a shot. More nagging about his “getting back to normal” or an offer to “put a word in” about some hideous assistant professorship in art history, as if he were still in his twenties.

With a gulp of coffee he let his attention drift back to the pair

of legs. Much more fun to speculate about a stranger. Now he could hear the voice that went with them. A musical voice with a foreign flavor he couldn't place—Russian? Turkish? A voice that brimmed with nervous excitement.

“Yes...yes, I went yesterday...yes, it's Ruth...” She paused, then laughed softly. “I know...I know.” Then her voice changed—a higher pitch, a weepy undertone. A foot came out of her shoe. She rubbed her toes along the back of her ankle, then massaged the arch along the top of the other shoe. An endearing gesture, Jackson thought. She was tired, he decided, and very far from home. In a little trouble...boss...maybe husband. “I know...yes, I know... She's on her way, with Asme. It's safer to go separately...No, he doesn't...He'd kill me...”

A cold knot tightened in Jackson's stomach. *He'd kill me...kill me...kill me.*

“Of course I'm not afraid...I will...okay...I—I love you too.”

The woman hung up, but stood motionless—one foot hugging the other, knees pressed together. Jackson locked into her image. *Be afraid*, he called out silently to her. Catherine hadn't been afraid and Catherine had been gunned down on a crowded street corner in Manhattan. A terrible random act, the police said. But it wasn't. Catherine hadn't been afraid. And they got her. *Be afraid, my dear.*

Jackson turned away from the young woman only to view the toll of tragedy on his own aging face in the mirror behind the bar. *Be afraid.* The stranger with the expressive feet walked past him, met his eyes in the mirror, hesitated, then walked back.

“Taylor Jackson?”

Jackson faced her. She smiled brightly, but her eyes were blood-shot and tired. They were as hard to place as her voice—Asian in shape, but dusky blue in color. She held out a hand.

“Anna Gailani. Thank you for coming. Shall we grab a bite?” She led the way to a table.

The soulful phone conversation about *killing* and *being afraid* didn't mesh with the businesslike note that had been delivered to him this morning by private messenger.

Dear Taylor Jackson, You have been recommended as someone who might assist me in the sale of important Chinese sculpture. Your credentials as a scholar and your experience in authentication and valuation are critical to me. I am willing to negotiate a generous percentage of the sale price for your assistance. Meet me at Dominick's on Mercer at noon today if you are interested. Please. Yours truly, Anna Gailani

But what the hell, Jackson thought as he glanced at the menu, everything was fear and death these days. It had become kind of a new hobby for him, hadn't it? The miracle was that he responded to the note at all.

As they went through the ritual of ordering lunch, Anna had a funny way of staring at him. Her eyes kept snagging his, as if they'd met before and shared common understandings. Jackson smiled inanely. In another life, he might have flirted, if only to satisfy his curiosity about her, but it seemed like such a tiresome habit now.

"So you're a dealer?" he asked.

"Private dealer, mostly out of Connecticut these days. Westport," she said. The lilt of her voice, the throaty way she had with the letter R, intrigued him. "I've had the good fortune of working with a fairly small circle of clients with very specific tastes and lots of money. But occasionally, other opportunities strike."

They made small talk about dealing while he wondered if her accent was Hungarian. Slavic and Gypsy blood, mixed. His logic loped along. Maybe she was a Hungarian art teacher who decided to join the free enterprise sweepstakes after the demise of the Eastern bloc.

"So who would want to kill an energetic young woman like yourself?" It was a half-wit question that rose from his ongoing fixation with death. He watched it drain the expression from her face.

"What?"

"I overheard a bit of your phone conversation. Sorry."

“That. Oh.” Red splotches appeared on her cheeks, as if someone had slapped her, and a hand fluttered in front of her. “My partner—I overdrew the business account—he’s going to kill me when he finds out.” Her eyes locked into his as if willing him to believe the lie that didn’t track at all with the conversation he overheard.

Anna retreated into herself. When their lunches came, they ate in silence till Jackson kick-started the conversation again.

“Your note this morning piqued my curiosity, but you need to know I’ve been out of circulation pretty much all year and—”

“Yes, your father told me.”

“My dad? Bill Jackson?”

“Your father was my advisor at Yale. I got an MBA there about ten years ago.”

An MBA? Yale? Advised by hard-nosed, free-marketeer William H. Jackson?

“MBA?” he repeated stupidly. Jackson’s impression had been formed by the phone call he’d overheard, by her eloquent feet, by the swell of emotion in her subtly foreign voice. And then by the fragility scrawled in her weary eyes. And by his own quickness to assume she was an amateur, trying to turn a few family heirlooms into a career.

“I can discuss utility functions or explain price elasticity—”

“Please, no.” He laughed. “Sorry, you caught me off guard. In a million years I wouldn’t have guessed that it was Bill who sent you.”

But why not? His dad wrote every week with advice that Jackson ignored, so maybe he’d switched to sending emissaries.

She spilled a packet of sugar into her coffee. “He’s not exactly convinced private art dealing is a proper profession, but he thinks very highly of your intelligence and your skill.”

“Don’t lay it on too thick, Anna. My dad respects the fact that I’ve been able to make a living despite his dire predictions, but I’m not even doing that these days and he can’t leave me alone about it.”

Anna played with another sugar packet. “At least you have a family who cares.”

Guilt. Just what he needed more of. “This note you wrote me—is there really something you want my services for?”

“Most definitely.” Anna described a Chinese statue she was trying to sell—a burial figure of unusually fine quality, from the Tang dynasty. Her buyer, somewhat of an amateur, was getting cold feet and insisting on an evaluation from a known expert. She’d persuaded him that Taylor Jackson fit the bill.

“I’ll give you ten percent. That should be at least fifteen thousand. Plus expenses.”

Jackson thought of his line of credit and smiled. “Where do we meet him?”

“Wonderful! There’s a flight leaving for Hong Kong this evening.”

Jackson clutched. *Hong Kong?* He’d envisioned a taxi ride to the Upper East Side, not an international odyssey. He scolded himself for the hesitation. A hop to Hong Kong when you’re in the Asian art business is hardly an *odyssey*. He’d done it dozens of times. Still, it was always tiring. And he might run into old acquaintances, people he and Catherine had done business with. People who would ask about her. Or those who would turn their heads and pretend they didn’t see him so that they wouldn’t have to ask.

“Hong Kong? Tonight? I don’t know—my schedule, I’d have to rearrange a few things—can I get back to you?”

“No!” Her eyes danced with panic, but she recouped. “I mean, the deal is at a delicate negotiating point—that’s why I need help. It’s a major deal. Surely you’re not going to pass up a chance to earn fifteen thousand dollars.”

Fair point, but Jackson had cold feet. It wasn’t only a matter of getting back on the horse of international trade. Dealing ancient Chinese treasures in Hong Kong was tricky business. Chances were that the piece was either illegal—smuggled recently out of the People’s Republic—or an outright fake. You needed your dancing shoes for deals like that. He waffled. “Twenty-four hours. If I decide to do it and the statue is right, I’ll close the sale for you. Promise. But twenty-four hours—I gotta have it.”

Anna shook her head. “You’re making this very difficult for me. From what Bill said—from what your father said, I was sure I could count on you...”

She let the sentence dangle, but Jackson was not so easily blackmailed by Bill’s expectations.

“Have it your way, then.” She heaved a dramatic sigh as she pulled a business card from her wallet and wrote something on the back. “I’m staying here for the moment. Everything will depend on the airlines. If there are no seats on either of tomorrow’s flights I’ll be compelled to leave tonight without you. I have no choice. Is that clear?”

“Yes.” He stuck the card in the breast pocket of his suit jacket, already deciding that he’d rather stay home and get back into business on his own terms.



Jackson walked down Mercer toward the Soho loft that held all the memories of his decade with Catherine, as well as the sculpture collection he’d need to sell soon if he didn’t start taking opportunities like the one Anna offered. His father’s words scolded: *Get back to normal, son.*

Exasperated that Bill had that kind of nagging power over him, he stopped at a crowded corner and tore open the letter. This week Bill provided the name of a Manhattan psychiatrist someone had recommended, along with the usual observation that Jackson’s refusal to plug in his phone was abnormal. He didn’t mention Anna Gailani.

Jackson crumpled the letter and started to toss it into the trash can, but refolded it instead and tucked it back in his pocket.

What Bill didn’t realize was how far Jackson had actually come in the seven months since Catherine’s murder, considering that her death had been only the final crash landing of a downward spiral. But damn if he didn’t have a long way to go when he asked for twenty-four hours to make a decision about dealing ancient

sculpture.

In his youth it had been a game: how many minutes between the end of a phone call till he was out the door, spirit leaping with excitement, heading for the train or the airport, to the side of someone as excited as he about the warmth of a Colima figure or the cleverness of a Japanese netsuke. By mid-career it was reflex: *Yes, I can...I'm ready, leaving now...* Today he was sober, slimmed down and learning to play a decent game of racquetball, but all those old passions were blunted. Pity.

Waiting for the light, looking down the block to his building, Jackson spied a tall dark-haired woman standing near his door, two suitcases at her feet. She was looking in the opposite direction. Though she wore a loose jersey that fluttered in the breeze, her stance was athletic—shoulders back, arms poised for action, as if she were ready to start a marathon. Jackson used to know a woman who looked like that. Married her, in fact. He was beginning to wonder if he'd ever see Nellie again when the woman turned toward him. Their eyes met.



When their eyes met, Nellie's first impulse was to dash through traffic into his arms, but she checked herself, made herself stand absolutely still and let him come to her. It had to be his choice.

He didn't run. He didn't even pick up his pace. He didn't smile.

They were practically nose to nose before he spoke. "It's you."

She was jumping out of her skin. "It's me."

"I thought it looked like you."

"And so it is."

He looked down the street, squinting, appearing to be at a loss about what to do next. The afternoon shadows were just right to pick up the pounding pulse in his neck.

"I was passing through," she said. "No one ever answers your

phone—thought I’d—”

A panhandler shoved between them. “Spare some change, lady?”

Jackson lunged and suddenly the man was down on his butt. Nellie barely saw how Jackson put him there, the reaction was so fast. Jackson himself seemed startled.

“Sorry,” he mumbled and handed the guy a couple bucks. He turned to Nellie. “You better come inside.”

They started the ride in the lumbering elevator like strangers, staring forward. After a few moments Jackson said, “I thought he was going to hurt you. Streets around here aren’t safe anymore.”

“I know,” she said. They were both thinking of Cathy.

The awkwardness between Jackson and Nellie continued as they entered his loft on the top floor. The space he’d shared with Cathy Denforth was not huge—not by Denforth family standards—but it poked high enough above the neighboring buildings to capture magnificent light through its tall windows, perfect light for art dealers, perfect light for a sculpture collection. Nellie had visited four or five times over the years and immediately saw the radical change. Cathy was gone. Her silky Persian carpets and her delicate seventeenth-century furniture were gone, as were the miles of shears and damask draperies.

The great room furniture had been replaced by Jackson’s old oak Stickley, retrieved from his back-room study, and the carpets by smaller tribal pieces. The windows were bare. Where once his magnificent sculpture collection had been lost among the fussy gold and florals, now it was dominant.

“The place is transformed.” Nellie paraded through, stepping out of her shoes, dropping her purse along the way, soaking it all in. “I always liked your Mission furniture best. Bet you picked up a fortune on that Louis the Whatsis stuff. And the carpets—”

“They wanted it all, her family did, so I shipped it up to Boston.” His face grew even more pained. “The drapes I ripped down myself, ripped them down one night when everything...when everything just became too much...”

“Oh, Jacks!” She threw her arms around his waist. “I’m so sorry, so sorry about what you’ve been through.” She was going to die on the spot if he didn’t respond. His hesitation was hell, but then he pulled her shoulders against him, warm hands against her back, and nuzzled his cheek to her hair. *Don’t ever let me go*, she begged silently.

Still holding her, he asked, “Why did you come?”

“Do I need an excuse? I’ve been worried about you. Everyone is worried.”

“No one is worried. I’ve set a world’s record for disappearing friends. No one is worried, except my parents, who don’t want a basket case of a son to burden their old age.” She felt the tension curl his fingers against her back. “Anyway, Nellie, it’s been seven months. Why bother with the sympathy call now?”

“Jackson!” She pushed herself out of his embrace. “What are you talking about? *You’re* the one who won’t answer the phone. And I wrote you—”

“A line on a postcard.”

“Two postcards.”

“And you haven’t passed through the city once in seven months? That’s a little hard to—”

“Stop it! What the hell are you talking about? *You’re* the one who went into exile, so why are you mad at *me*?”



Jackson glared at her. “Because in twenty goddamn years you’ve never given me a straight answer off the bat.” Her eyes were smudged with exhaustion, her face streaked with some anxiety that made holding her shoulders feel like grabbing onto a high-tension wire, but damn if she’d come right out with it. God, it felt like old times. It gave him a sudden rush of affection for Nellie, who he knew so well, who knew him so well. He took a deep breath,

worked on maintaining his frown, and nodded toward the chair. “Go sit down. I’ll get you something to drink.”

As he pulled ice and 7-Up from the refrigerator, she asked, matter-of-factly, “Did I ever tell you how much I hate you, Taylor Jackson?”

He turned to her. She was settling into the armchair, composing herself, smoothing her ruffled hair, crossing her legs, picking a shred of lint from her dress—a high-fashion sack that, like a magic trick, misdirected the eye, drew it from the squared-off shoulders down a straight line of buttons to a hint of leg in dark stockings—stylish angles that disguised her full breasts, round hips, long muscular legs.

“Yeah, once or twice.”

A stinging sensation made him look at his hand. The screw-top on the pop bottle had snagged his index finger. He grabbed a paper towel to stanch the flow of blood and steadied himself for a moment against the counter, as the rushing sound in his ears subsided. He fumbled in a drawer for Band-Aids, spilled the metal box onto the floor and wound up pressing his head against the cool surface of the refrigerator. There was a blank moment, then Nellie had hold of his hand.

“It’s not so bad,” she was saying. “I thought you cut your finger off, your face went so ashen.”

“Nasty little neurosis I picked up since...blood...meat...pretty neurotic, but I can’t shake it.”

“No one could blame you,” she said as she led him to the sink and dressed his tiny wound, while he looked the other way.

When she finished, he finally handed her a glass of soda. “So let’s start all over, Nellie. What brings you my doorstep?”

Her eyes wandered over the kitchen cabinets. “This could use a splash of something.”

“Only alcohol here is in the wine closet.” He’d nearly forgotten about it. It had been Catherine’s pleasure to keep the closet stocked with world-class vintages. The wine didn’t pose the temptation that gin had.

“Nevermind.” She marched back to her chair, Jackson following.

“You going to talk to me or what?”

He sat on the couch across from her, elbows on his knees. She toyed with the buttons on her dress. “I happened to be in New York this week and had some time on my hands—”

“Without a hotel room?”

“What?”

He nodded toward her suitcases. “Bet you a sawbuck you came straight from the airport.”

She made an impatient gesture with her head. “Look, I’m not going to beat around the bush, Jacks. It’s time to put our heads together, talk it through and figure out what really happened to Cathy.”

He glared at the frayed edge of the small Turkmen carpet under his feet. “I’m through talking. I told the story a thousand times: once to my father and again in French to my mother, ten times to Violet Denforth, a hundred times to her team of lawyers, and eight hundred and however-many-is-left to the police. The police didn’t want to believe it was a planned hit and the Denforths did, only they wanted to put yours truly in the middle of the conspiracy. Stalemate. End of story.”

He touched a finger to his lips and felt the Band-Aid. “So let’s not talk about Catherine—or her murder.” The muscles in his jaw tightened and the words felt stiff. “It’s ancient history.”

Ancient history. He closed his eyes. No sooner had the words been said, he saw Catherine—tossing her curly tangle of copper hair, batting her gas-flame eyes, crinkling her face in a smile—a face prematurely worn by a youth full of winter skiing and summer sailing, but a face that never failed to dazzle. He could still hear her laugh, a cascading laugh that easily pitched from delight to mockery—

Nellie cleared her throat.

“Ancient history,” he repeated and looked into Nellie’s chocolaty-warm eyes, so different from Catherine’s. He sat up straight and put some starch in his voice. “It was an evil, ugly time, Nellie.

And I went about grieving in my own evil, ugly way. But I'm okay now, getting back to normal, bucking up, exorcising the demons, *et cetera, et cetera*. In fact, just this afternoon I was negotiating going in with someone on a deal. Anna Gailani, know her?"

Nellie shook her head.

"Means I'll be popping over to Hong Kong tomorrow. Pity I didn't know you were in town." Aware again of the shadows around her eyes, Jackson realized what an ass he sounded like and softened his voice. "Stay here if you can, okay? It won't take more than a few days."

She looked away. "I came here to tell you something."

"Is it why you're so agitated and exhausted?"

"Exhausted? Jesus, Jackson, I just came from Hong Kong myself. I'm lagged out of my mind. Have you been stuck in this apartment so long you can't even remember what a toll—?"

"Enough, enough, enough." Jackson stood and headed for the kitchen. He yanked open the refrigerator door and grabbed a can of piss-awful alcohol-free beer. "If somebody made me write an essay about why our marriage failed in twenty-five words or less this is exactly what I'd tell them: *Can't give a straight answer if her life depended on it. Uses this trait to drive loved ones to violence.*"

He popped the can and spilled the foamy brew over his hand and onto the floor.

She'd followed him. "You know it only happens when—"

"When you're agitated and exhausted and worried and unsure."

She flashed a sour smile. "You always manage to bring out the best in me." Then she turned around to face out a window. "I won't bore you with the details, but I've been hanging out with a rough crowd lately and there's been a lot of talk about—"

"What *rough crowd*?"

"Okay, *rough* is an overstatement. They're just some guys who know all the angles, who know how to move—"

"Smugglers. You mean smugglers. I thought you were above that kind of shit, Nellie. I thought you did straight business."

"Sure I do, but, well, when business is slow, I've been doing

some work for Interpol. Giving them information, confidentially, you know, about who's stealing what and how. God knows, I always seem to attract that kind of creep, present company excepted."

Jackson laughed. How could he ever stay mad at Nellie for long? "It's perfect for you, kiddo. A snitch. Weaving whoppers with the pros. And you actually get paid for your information?"

She turned back to him. "Not exactly. I mean, not yet. But a couple guys there, they said once they knew they could trust me, they'd, you know, help me get gigs with insurance companies."

"So it's the charity work your pa always wanted you to do."

"Don't mock me. It's a lot more interesting than sucking up to museum curators seven days a week. But we're getting sidetracked. Listen to what I have to say. There's a loose-knit smuggling network working the route roughly from Hong Kong across Asia to London and New York and Cathy's death is on everybody's lips. Rumor has it—I heard it in London, I heard it in Beirut, I heard it in Hong Kong—rumor has it that she was assassinated for screwing up somebody's business—somebody's *dirty* business."

Jackson felt the blood drain from his face and his legs grow rubbery. "So tell me something I don't know."

"Well, if enough people are buzzing about it, someone must know something. It's ridiculous that the police haven't come up with anything. We have to see to it that the search goes international, that's all."

"We?"

"We—you and me. I've got contacts. I'm here to help you see that justice is done."

His Nellie was very much her father's daughter, but it was too dangerous and too late and too painful. "No," he whispered.

