

THOMAS SWAN

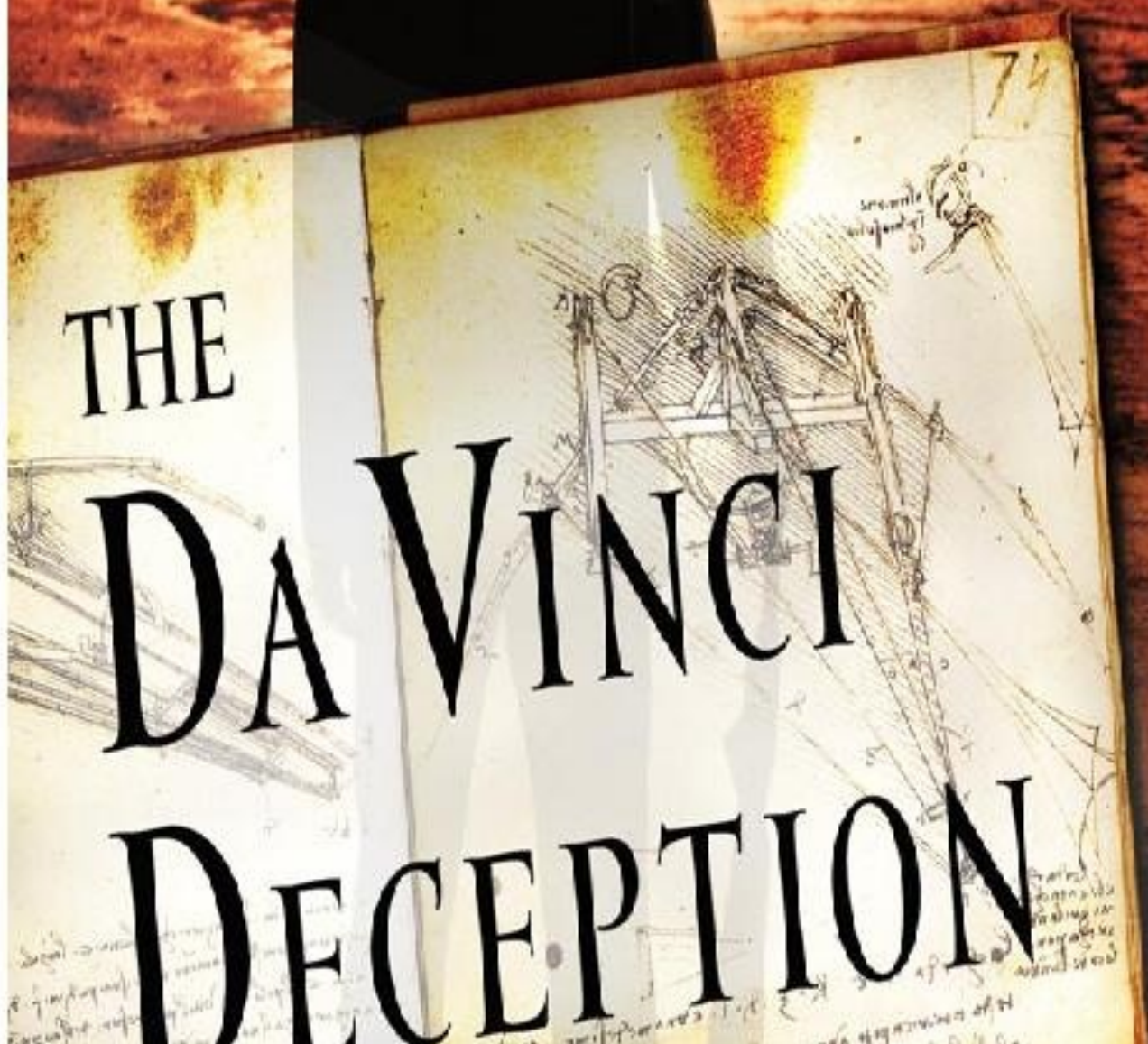
"Captivating." —*Booklist*



THE

DA VINCI

DECEPTION



The
Da Vinci
Deception

THOMAS SWAN



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Praise for the acclaimed art crime mysteries by Tom Swan featuring Inspector Jack Oxby

The Da Vinci Deception

“Fans of Iain Pears’s art mysteries will enjoy the lavish detail Swan provides on the minutiae of forgery. The captivating premise of *The Da Vinci Deception* will win over those who like the thrillers well decorated with objets d’art.”

—Booklist

“A grand old caper yarn of classic design, filled with tantalizing details of forging techniques and facts about da Vinci’s work....*The Da Vinci Deception* isn’t just good, it’s terrific.”

—Book-of-the-Month Club News

“A series of cat-and-mouse chases that range from New York to Lake Como...provides a rousing denouement.”

—Kirkus Review

“A full cast of sharply etched characters, both villains and good guys, trace a twisting adventure.”

—Publishers Weekly

The Cézanne Chase

“A surprisingly sexy and dirty world where nothing is sacred—least of all, art....The beauty of *The Cézanne Chase* is in the technical details about fine art—great tips on conserving it, packing and shipping it, buying and selling it, and destroying it forever.”

—The New York Times Book Review

The Final Fabergé

“Swan continues his art-crime series featuring Scotland Yard’s Detective Inspector Jack Oxby... now hot on the trail of the last Fabergé egg created before the Russian Revolution...The pacing is quick and the action plentiful...Swan’s series strikes a comfortable balance between the more hard-boiled Lovejoy antique mysteries and Iain Pears’ more literary art-historical crime novels.”

BOOKS BY THOMAS SWAN

The Da Vinci Deception

The Cézanne Chase

The Final Fabergé

Dedication

*To my wife Barbara and to my children Sally and Greg. And to the cherished memory of my son Steve
who would approve and be proud.*

Part One

The bee may be likened to deceit, for it has honey in its mouth and poison behind.

—*Leonardo da Vinci*

Chapter 1

He pulled a thin blanket over his head to blot out the noises. He wanted to sleep. To get past the last of more than fourteen hundred nights in the state prison at Rahway. He tossed away the blanket and sat cross-legged on the narrow bed; hugging a pillow against his chest, he began rocking and humming. Then, abruptly, he rolled over onto his feet and switched on a fluorescent light that hovered over an artist's table. Taped to it was a letter he had read so many times he could recite it from memory. He stared at the words and they all rushed into his head at once:

Dear Curtis,

In ten days you will leave prison. I can only imagine your joyous anticipation. Though we have never met, I feel we have been friends for many years.

You possess an incredible talent, which you badly abused. You have paid a great price for that indiscretion, and have a clean slate on which to write new successes.

You have immense skill with the pen, a unique gift that if put to proper use shall bring rewards greater than any you have ever imagined.

I believe we are striving toward common objectives, and for that reason invite you to meet with me in order to discuss these matters of mutual interest.

Arrangements have been made at the Intercontinental Hotel in New York on the evening of your release. Upon arrival at the hotel you will receive another communication which will advise you of the meeting place and time.

Enclosed you will find five hundred dollars for expenses.

Stiehl's fingers explored the worn folds of the letter. He looked at his watch. It was 4:35. The incessant snoring of the other inmates had grown obscene. He fell back into bed and recalled his visit to the warden's office three days earlier.

Warden Connolly had pointed to a thin box wrapped in blue paper on his desk. "For you, Curtis. It was delivered this morning by messenger."

Stiehl picked up the box. "It hasn't been opened." He looked quizzically at the warden. "Isn't someone going to check it out first?"

"We'll do that together," he smiled. "I have a strong suspicion there aren't any hacksaw blades in that little box."

Stiehl noted the box carried a mid-Manhattan postmark and had been dated January 3, 1994. He opened it and found a letter and an envelope that was sealed with a daub of red wax. He began reading the letter aloud, then to himself. After reading it he folded the letter and slipped it into his shirt pocket.

Connolly had watched this closely. "Good news?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. Someone thinks we've got mutual interests to talk over."

Stiehl examined the envelope. The paper was heavy, expensive, and in the wax had been impressed the initials "JK" in intaglio. Each letter was voluptuously formed with serifs appended to serifs. He carefully separated the upper flap of the envelope. Inside were five one-hundred-dollar bills. He held them out and fanned the money as if he were holding a winning poker hand.

"You have something in your hand worth talking about."

Stiehl did not reply. He picked out two of the bills and rubbed a thumb and forefinger over each. Then he took hold of the corner of one and carefully tore it. In the light from the large windows behind him he could see the tiny fibers. A very slight smile crossed his lips. Then he replaced the money in the envelope.

“Maybe we will have a talk.” He closed the envelope. “Maybe we will.”

Connolly held out a hand. “We’ll keep the money until you leave. It will be safe.”

“I’m sure,” Stiehl answered, and turned to the door.

“Stay and we’ll have a chat, Curtis. You’ll be leaving in a few days and I make it a practice to talk with each man before he moves on. Though I usually end up having a monologue.”

In front of the windows two chairs faced a low table on which was a tray and a pot of coffee. “Let’s be comfortable.” The coffee was hot and Stiehl noted it actually smelled like coffee.

“It’s just a few more days. Got any plans?”

Stiehl held the cup with both hands and gently blew on the rising wisp of steam. His prison garb was faded nearly white by the strong detergent used in the prison laundry. Yet it fit him perfectly. His hair had grayed slightly, enough to contrast with skin tanned even now at winter’s end. He had a good face with a small cleft in his chin and blue eyes that had an inquiring brightness. He was nearly six feet tall but his hands belonged to an even larger man. His fingers were long and slender.

Stiehl searched for an answer that would not invite further questions. “No sir. I’ve some ideas but no plan.”

“When I talk to the men before they leave, each one wants to dump their anger, but they don’t know how. So I do the talking. Is that going to happen with you?”

Stiehl avoided eye contact, “I didn’t ask for a meeting, Warden. Sure I’m angry. Damned good and angry, but I’ll handle that.” He stood and walked to the window. “Four years in a place like this and you don’t know who to believe or who to trust.”

“You can trust me. They say you’re a hell of an artist. Is that so?”

“I can’t claim to be an artist, Warden. That file on your lap probably says something about my ability to copy things.”

Connolly patted the file that Stiehl correctly guessed contained his dossier. “The file tells us many things, but not everything. You are an artist, and a good one. Why not admit to that?”

Stiehl shrugged. “All right, I’m an artist. A good one, some people say. But there are a ton of very good artists to compete against and I haven’t decided if that’s what I want to do.”

The warden leafed through the papers in Stiehl’s file. “I can’t find anything about the schools you attended. Do you mind sharing that information?”

Stiehl resisted the invitation to talk about himself.

“There wasn’t much. The usual schools.” He rummaged through his pockets for a pack of cigarettes. “Okay to smoke?”

Connolly nodded. “Did you study art or sketching?”

Stiehl lit a cigarette, then grabbed an ashtray from the warden’s desk. “I took some courses.”

“I understand your reluctance to talk about yourself”—he motioned toward the window—“but that’s a real world out there and people are going to ask questions that you’ll have to answer. And consider the handicap you’ll have. A prison record is not easily put aside no matter what special talents you can offer.”

Stiehl drew heavily on the cigarette then slowly exhaled the smoke. He looked out to the long stretch of wall and the exercise yard where he had spent so many boring hours. But all of prison life was boring. And all too often, very frightening. Just to be in the warden’s office was a reminder of that.

early days. He had been here once before. It was on his thirty-fourth day in prison. There had been a attempted break. A guard and an inmate were killed. He was questioned from one in the morning until after sunrise and was accused of being an organizer. He had known of the escape attempt but played no part in it. But it had gone on his record and destroyed any chance for early parole.

“When did you first show an interest in becoming an artist?”

Stiehl’s back was to the warden now. He stared down to a patch of ground where he and another inmate had raised a few anemic-looking flowers and tomatoes that would never ripen on the vine. In prison you trust no one, he thought. He wanted someone to believe in him. He turned and faced Warden Connolly.

“My dad died when I was nine and I was raised by my mother and her sister. My aunt was crippled with polio. She never married and never seemed to resent that she wasn’t. She would read all the time and read to me when I asked. My mother . . .” His voice trailed off to barely a whisper. “She was sick a lot, too. She was a teacher. She taught art at the high school, and turned the dining room into her studio. By a window she had a big easel and she would sit there for hours on the weekends trying to paint something she had seen or wanted to see. There was always paint and paper.

“She taught me how to make a brush from a handful of bristles. I began to paint, but all I was able to do was copy her paintings. I remember how she would encourage me, always saying I could be a great artist someday.”

Stiehl stopped. Dormant memories were stirring.

“Then what? School? Art lessons?” Connolly asked.

“Mother died from some damned thing. We never learned what it really was. She came home from school on a Wednesday and went to bed. On Friday they took her to the hospital and on Sunday”—his voice trailed off—“she died.”

“How old were you?”

“Thirteen. I remember wishing I was a Jew. I had Jewish friends who had bar mitzvahs and I wished I could, too. Then I’d have money for my aunt. Lutherans don’t have bar mitzvahs, so I got a job after school and on weekends. My aunt kept coming up with money from somewhere and with what I made we managed. She encouraged me to take lessons.”

“Did you?”

“I tried. In high school first. Then a year at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Then my aunt went into a nursing home and I was alone. I didn’t know what to do, so I enlisted in the army. I got into the Signal Corps, where I learned I could copy maps that looked better than the originals.” He said it as if he had wished he had gone on to another subject.

“From then on it was a course in sketching or learning about watercolor, then oils. I guess I taught myself, too. I liked going to the museums with a pad and pens. I’d go where the art students didn’t go. I liked the Dutch and the Italian painters, and I liked paintings with intricate detail. Strands of hair stitching in the clothes. It was a challenge and I copied them exactly.”

He turned and faced the warden. “The rest you must know about.”

“Pretty much,” Connolly acknowledged. “I’m aware that while you’ve been in prison you have worked very conscientiously on your painting skills.”

“It passes the time.”

“And when you are free to take up a new career, you’ll steer clear of municipal securities. The financial community doesn’t need any more of your near-perfect copies.”

“No more securities,” Stiehl echoed.

“Or hundred-dollar bills?”

“No comment.”

~~“Too many men go back out to the same thing that brought them here in the first place. I don’t suggest you try that.”~~ The warden joined Stiehl by the window. “The treasury boys have long memories.”

“I’ll be careful.”

Connolly extended his hand. “Good luck, Curtis. I don’t want to see you in this place ever again.” He smiled.

They shook hands and Stiehl returned to his cell.



“C’mon, move it! Get your ass in gear!”

Barking the command was Bull Harvey. None of the guards could win a popularity contest but Harvey, at least, possessed a semblance of humanity.

“Hold your water!” Stiehl yelled back. “I’m writing farewell notes to the cockroaches.”

Stiehl emerged from his cell holding a thick package of papers and sketches in one hand and a cardboard suitcase in the other. In it he had packed brushes, pens, and a few personal items.

Harvey led the way, muttering a stream of obscenities.

In the administration office Stiehl signed a half-dozen papers including a receipt for \$387.30. Among his personal belongings was the wallet his wife Jean had given him for his thirty-eighth birthday. In it he found an expired driver’s license, an out-of-date calendar, scraps of paper with long forgotten notes, and a photo of Jean and his daughter Stephanie, who was ten when he began passing counterfeit municipal securities. He might be with Jean and Stephanie now if the original certificate he’d copied hadn’t contained an error and been recalled. Unfortunately, he made precise duplicates—error and all. Jean divorced him two years after he was sentenced. She was now remarried, living somewhere near Princeton. At the right time he would locate Stephanie.

Also in his folder was the envelope with the wax seal. He withdrew the five hundred-dollar bills and carefully placed them in the wallet.

“Okay, Harvey. This is it!”

They were a seedy duo. Bull Harvey’s rumpled uniform was pulled tightly over his fat front and his short trousers revealed socks rolled down to the tops of scuffed, thick-soled shoes. Stiehl had been issued a striped, cotton shirt, chinos, and a well-worn raincoat.

They were waved through the east gate. Harvey extended a limp hand, his eyes unable to meet Stiehl’s. “No hard feelin’s for all the bullshit I threw at you. All the swearin’ and pushin’. It’s my job. I try to do it decentlike.”

“No hard feelings. Thanks for bringing me out.”

Harvey flashed a broad smile. “Look, Stiehl, the weirdos are behind you and all the nuts are right down that driveway. Walk to the end, turn left, and go about a mile to the first traffic light. That’s Route 1. Most of the buses are marked Port Authority.”

Stiehl picked up his miserable belongings and strode briskly away from the high walls surrounding the prison that had been his home and private hell for so long. He glanced back and saw the bright sun reflected off the golden dome atop the rotunda of the prison. A strange sight, he mused. A gold dome belonged over a merry-go-round in Atlantic City.

The sun had curved up to the highest point it would reach on a cloudless, cold March day. He stepped up his pace as he approached the noisy traffic on Route 1. Within minutes a New Jersey Transit bus pulled to the curb. He stepped aboard, took a seat, and rejoined the world.

On arrival at the Intercontinental Hotel he was handed the letter he had been told would be waiting for him. He did not read it until he was lying on the king-size bed in the pale-blue-and-rose-papered suite reserved in his name.

The letter was in an envelope with the same bold red wax with the initials "JK" in large, flowing script. He propped himself on the huge pillows and opened the envelope.

Dear Curtis,

This has been your first day of freedom in four years. An exciting time!

Tomorrow you shall begin a new life, with new challenges and opportunities and foreign lands to visit.

This evening you will be treated to fine food and wine in the dining room, where a special table is reserved in your name.

And then rest for our meeting in the morning.

Come to the address shown above. I shall look for you at nine.

I am most cordially
Jonas Kale

Chapter 2

The elevator doors opened like a theater curtain, slowly revealing Curtis Stiehl's eagerly anticipated new world. Directly ahead was a bronze plaque: JONAS R. KALEM & COMPANY, and beneath NEW YORK LONDON PARIS. He turned left off the elevator and walked into a paneled gallery displaying an exquisite collection of paintings. A voice emanating from concealed speakers welcomed him. Mr. Kalem, the voice said assuringly, would soon join him. He walked anxiously about the gallery, noting the paintings, in styles ranging from Romantic to Postmodern. He stopped, facing a wall on which were a small primitive portrait, a George Stubbs horse, a Manet, and a Childe Hassam. His attention was on the Manet when an opening suddenly appeared in the wall and a man of enormous proportions emerged from the dark void.

Jonas Kalem stood six feet four inches tall and weighed not an ounce under three hundred pounds. He wore a dark blue vested suit accented with a fine gray stripe and punctuated with a maroon tie. He was smiling, all but his eyes, which peered through thick, trifocal glasses. His hair was too black for his sixty years. His voice was deep and resonant.

"Welcome, Curtis. My congratulations upon your release from that great unpleasantness." He entered the gallery, his hand extended in greeting. "I am delighted you accepted my invitation to discuss our mutual interests."

Stiehl, still showing his surprise, shook hands gamely.

Jonas led the way through the opened panels to a conventional office with rows of desks and files, all surrounded by clicking printers and phones with their blinking lights and electronic chimes. Fax machines spewed out incoming messages and drawings from clients. They paused at a room jammed with video recorders, closed-circuit television screens, and elaborate audio transcribers and players. Five screens displayed each wall of the gallery and the elevator; several smaller screens showed workers in other departments, none apparently concerned that the cameras were trained on them.

"Our security and communications center," Jonas said. "Damned expensive but it's paying off. The insurance people like it and collectors don't mind loaning us their precious paintings."

They moved through a narrow corridor, the spirited music of Offenbach filling the air. They approached three massive double doors spaced thirty feet apart. Jonas opened the first set of doors and they entered a cavernous room. The room was forty feet wide and nearly seventy-five feet long. Leaded windows reached from the floor to a twenty-two-foot ceiling created by breaking through the floor directly above. The room was divided into three parts: the first, where they stood, was a library; the second was designed as a conference space and contained a variety of tables and chairs; and the third was an office setting with high-backed chairs and leather sofas surrounding a desk Stiehl estimated at eight feet in length.

The library held more than five thousand volumes, many first editions. Aside from standard reference works and encyclopedias, the entire library was devoted to art and art history.

A balcony ran along the interior walls ten feet over the floor. More paintings filled spaces where there were no bookshelves or windows. Some belonged to Jonas, some were on loan, still others were the works of artists Jonas represented and for whom he secured commissions. Suspended from the ceiling over the conference area was a brass and porcelain chandelier with a spread of over twenty feet.

“I apologize for this ostentation, but I spend too much time here to feel confined. I’m a big person and need space.” Jonas guided his guest to a chair near his desk. He offered a box of Monte Cristo. Stiehl declined, his eyes continuing to inventory the grand room Jonas called his office.

“If I speak bluntly, forgive me,” Jonas said quietly. “I obviously know something about you, including, of course, the reason you spent nearly four years in prison. I feel badly we did not meet before you decided to compete with the American Bank Note Company.”

Stiehl shifted uneasily in his chair. He felt intimidated. “How would that have changed matters?”

“In many ways, I am sure. First you should know what we’re all about.” Jonas lit his cigar.

“We provide a complete range of art services to the communications industry, including through advertising agencies here in the east as well as throughout Europe. But I grew weary of the tasteless art directors that crowd those businesses and looked for new opportunities. Art has been my love since I was a child, and because I have an eye for fine art, I decided to put my knowledge to more profitable use. I added a number of promising artists to our staff and found them commissions for serious work. Their murals and paintings are displayed throughout this country and abroad. I’ll show you the scope of our work.”

Jonas touched the controls of an electronic switcher and a television screen rose from a nearby credenza. Images appeared and Jonas described the client, the assignment, the art, and the artist.

“Very impressive, every one,” Stiehl said. “I wish I had half the talent of any of your artists.”

“Your abilities surpass all that you have seen.”

“I’ve never painted an original painting that was worth a damn, or a dime.”

“What you can do so exquisitely is worth infinitely more. But you require direction.” He paused and twirled the cigar between two fingers then took several puffs and blew the smoke toward the ceiling. Then he added, “My direction.”

Jonas touched another button and on the screen appeared the photograph of a municipal bond certificate issued by the city of Paterson, New Jersey. “Recognize that, Curtis?”

“Of course, but what in hell does that have to do with your direction?” Stiehl’s irritation clearly showed.

“And what of these, Curtis?” In clear focus was a fifty-dollar bill. Then a hundred-dollar bill flashed onto the screen. Two of the hundred-dollar bills Stiehl had received in the envelope sealed with red wax were identical to the one on the screen.

“Very clever, Mr. Kalem. Where did you find those notes?”

“I can’t divulge all my secrets. Suffice to say I have gone to considerable lengths to learn all I can about you. And most especially about your true potential.”

Stiehl was confused. Jonas was slapping one cheek with an old indictment and caressing the other with his praise.

“There is more.” Now there was a photograph of a modest white frame house on the screen. “You will recognize your home. The one where you were living at the time of your arrest. I understand a small army of treasury agents tore up the house searching for a set of printing plates they suspected you made to counterfeit the fifty- and hundred-dollar notes we saw on the previous slides.”

“They found nothing.”

“Quite true. Your wife remarried and the property was finally sold a little more than a year ago. I bought it.”

“You bought my house? Why?”

“Let’s say it was speculation. The real-estate market had been quite bullish and I decided to remodel the home and put it back on the market. But I had another reason. I had a hunch I might find

something the agents had overlooked.”

Again the picture changed. On the screen was a photograph showing two sets of engraving plates. “Setting them beneath the metal insulation strip in the front door was brilliant. A metal detector would be confused by the strip and it was otherwise a much too obvious hiding place for those precious plates. The agents were anxious to search inside the house and, not finding them, literally tore the gardens and garage apart.”

With another touch of the controls the screen disappeared.

“My little show is over and you have learned what I know of you. I have come to know that your skill with the pen is at the genius level and so I want you to work under my direct supervision.

“Doing what? U.S. Savings Bonds?”

“No need for a sharp tongue. I have a very challenging assignment for you.” The huge body struggled free of the chair and walked toward a table directly under the wide-spreading chandelier. “Come with me, Curtis.”

From leather folders Jonas extracted a dozen sheets. Ceremoniously he placed each on the table.

“These lithographs are from the collection of Leonardo da Vinci’s anatomical drawings preserved in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle. There is great beauty here and I believe these drawings prove the Master’s incredible genius. Consider that he had little formal education, yet his curiosity was so intense that he would spend hours with a putrid corpse, dissecting it by the light of a lantern, to create these minutely detailed drawings.” Jonas peered intently through his thick glasses at Stiehl. “Leonardo knew that to paint the human form he had to know what lay beneath the skin. Study the drawings carefully, Curtis. Note his technique, his mastery of shading and shape.”

Stiehl picked up one then another of the drawings. He had a vague familiarity with Leonardo’s anatomical works but could not grasp the point Jonas was making. He was at an even greater loss to understand what bearing it had on him.

Jonas continued. “Leonardo was left-handed. His stroke was from right to left.”

“And he wrote in reverse,” Stiehl added. “I’ve seen examples.”

“It is most convenient that you are left-handed, Curtis.”

“You knew that?”

Jonas nodded. He then took one of the drawings and placed it in front of Stiehl. The sheet contained two human skulls, one drawn above the other. “Can you duplicate what you see on this page?”

“Why would I want to?”

“The question is not why. Can you? And exactly as you see them?” Stiehl studied the skulls. “Yes, I could do that. It would take time before I’d be sure of myself. It’s pen and ink, and all line. But the handwriting. That’s far more difficult.”

“I had no illusions it would be simple.” Squinting eyes stared out from behind thick glasses. “It is critically important that you tell me you can, after sufficient practice, create an exact duplicate of what you see on that sheet of paper.”

“That would be impossible. Only a camera could make an exact duplication.”

“But suppose Leonardo had never put these skulls on paper. Could you draw them so they would appear as if they had been drawn by Leonardo?”

“I can’t be sure that I could. Perhaps.”

“You are unsure. Yes or no,” Jonas shot back, his good humor fading.

“Damn it, I *can’t* be sure. Not until I try. Copying is one thing, creating is another. And it’s not my strong suit.”

“You underrate your own talents. You’ll have hundreds of his sketches and drawings to guide you

And there are a thousand more skulls in the medical books.”

“Suppose I could draw the skulls. The handwriting would be difficult. It requires an entirely different technique.”

“You will have expert assistance. There are countless studies and references dealing with handwriting. Just as you will have writing instruments and inks that are authentic to the period. The paper will be hundreds of years old, also dated to the time of Leonardo. You will not make a copy of this lithograph. You will have the genuine Leonardo drawing to guide you.”

“You have a card to the Royal Library?” Stiehl smiled.

“They’re not in the habit of lending their Leonardos,” Jonas replied. “But come, let me explain why I must know if you can produce a duplicate of the skull drawing.” He returned to his desk.

“The most valuable collection of Leonardo’s manuscripts is at Windsor. Nearly two-thirds of Leonardo’s surviving drawings are in the Royal Library. Note I said drawings. There are many volumes and notebooks in other libraries and museums; however, those contain Leonardo’s theories and observations on a wide variety of subjects. Scattered through those manuscripts are the remaining drawings.

“It is known that when he died, Leonardo left other notebooks and drawings. Perhaps a thousand pages have never been discovered. No one knows how many fine drawings are on those lost sheets. Some have probably been destroyed. But what of all the others? What drawings have been lost? And more importantly, if they were found, what would they be worth?”

“Can you guess how many drawings there might be?” Stiehl asked.

“Several hundred, perhaps more. Leonardo’s Leicester Codex was recently auctioned for nearly six million dollars. It consisted of thirtyeight pages and contained but a few unimportant sketches. One sheet holding an early study of the *Mona Lisa* could bring ten million alone. When a Van Gogh goes for more than eighty million a da Vinci will bring an untold amount.

“No one knows what the missing manuscripts contain, the experts can only speculate. Any that are found will be subjected to intense scrutiny and a battery of highly sophisticated tests. The first criterion is that they must be perceived as authentic.

“And that, my new friend, is where you enter the picture. I plan for you to create a generous supply of the missing Leonardo manuscripts.”

Stiehl’s reaction was immediate. “That’s insane! No one can do that. It’s craziness!”

“It is none of that,” Jonas shouted, and slammed his fist to the desk.

“You were serious about taking a Leonardo from Windsor,” Stiehl responded, his voice raised to match Jonas’s. “I thought that was a pretty bad joke. I was in prison for four years and I have no intention of going back.”

“And I won’t let that happen. You will have privacy and total security. You’ll have every protection.”

“Sort of the honor system,” Stiehl said with more than a little irony. “We protect each other.”

“You can become wealthy, Curtis. Beginning immediately you will have a substantial income and a studio with every amenity. Consider also that it is I who must present the manuscripts to the community of art historians. Should they discredit them, then I would merely say I had discovered worthless copies. There is no crime in being misinformed.”

“Why must I duplicate the skulls so precisely if you plan to create Leonardos that have never been seen before?”

“If you can duplicate a known Leonardo drawing with flawless accuracy, it is very likely that you can create a new work that will go unchallenged.”

“Who else is involved in your little game?”

“There will be three of you involved directly in the development of the Leonardo drawings. I will direct the project, and be aided by my assistant.”

“Who would I work with? When would I meet them?”

“You will proceed alone for at least six months, and then you will work in close association with a former professor of Renaissance studies at the University of Milan. Giorgio Burri is an acknowledged Leonardo scholar.”

“Six months is a long time.”

Jonas smiled indulgently. “Exercise the patience you so painfully learned, Curtis. It has taken more than three years to put this plan together. In the beginning you will receive written instructions from Giorgio and will communicate with him through me or my assistant. When the two of you meet, it will be as if you have known each other a long time. No one is more essential to our success than the one who puts pen to paper. Before you attempt to make a precise copy of the Windsor drawing, you will need all of six months to master Leonardo’s style and technique, and ultimately you must write as he did. No small accomplishment.”

“What if I fail?”

“You won’t. I have complete confidence that you’ll carry it off.”

“Who is the third member of the team? What part does he play?”

“She is a highly qualified chemist with advanced degrees from the University of Chicago and MIT. Her name is Eleanor Shepard; when I met her, she was most unhappy in her assignment with the FBI in Washington. I persuaded her to undertake a special research project in Italy.”

“What kind of research?”

“First she will locate the paper, then find or make the inks and pens you will use. Secondly, she will develop techniques for aging documents. And finally, Eleanor will study the modern methods for detecting the age and authenticity of art and manuscripts. All the more reason we must have the genuine Leonardo from the Windsor Library.”

“Then she knows what you are up to?”

“Not at all.” Jonas blew a thick cloud of smoke. “I have commissioned Eleanor to gather the information and the samples, then prepare a complete documentation of her findings, which I have told her will then be published.

“Will I meet her?”

“You would like that, she is a very attractive woman. But she must never know how the Leonardo manuscripts come into being.”

“At some point the whole world will know you discovered them.”

“And she, too, must believe that I have rescued them from some obscure hiding place. She must not suspect you and Giorgio have created them.”

Stiehl now realized how brilliantly Jonas had put his plan together. One of his conspirators would supply the raw materials for the missing Leonardo manuscripts, and then be the same person to test their genuineness.

“Where is she doing all this research?”

“In Florence. She must be where Leonardo lived most of his years. And where she will find paper of the kind available five hundred years ago.”

“I can’t believe paper that old can be found. And if any is located, could it be handled and worked on?”

Jonas swiveled around to the credenza and took from it a leatherbound book. “This is a rare Elzevir

manuscript, printed in 1611. The end leaves have never been touched; the paper has merely yellowed a bit. The paper was made in Holland, possibly Belgium. Feel how supple it is after nearly four hundred years.”

Stiehl was no stranger to paper. He rubbed the sheet between his thumb and forefinger. “You expect the Shepard woman will find five-hundred-year-old paper?”

“She will. You can depend on it.”

“You have an assistant. Another woman?”

Jonas smiled broadly. “My assistant’s name is Anthony Waters, or Tony as we prefer to call him. Tony fills a special niche and will have a variety of assignments. The first, which will occupy him between now and September, is to borrow Leonardo’s drawing of the skulls from the Royal Library.”

“You said it isn’t a lending library.”

“Tony is particularly adept at what I like to call ‘role-playing.’” Jonas added confidently, “Come September we will have folio number 19057 in hand.”

Jonas unwrapped a package of cashews and poured the contents into a bowl. “Any more questions, Curtis?”

“Not a question, just a statement. I haven’t said that I’m coming in with you.”

Jonas calmly popped a few of the nuts into his mouth. “You have an abundance of talent, Curtis, but a very undisciplined memory. Perhaps we should review those photographs.”

“Goddamn it! I’m the one that’s just out of jail and I’m not talking about Monopoly, where all you do is wait for the next roll of the dice. Forty-seven months . . . thirty days shy of four years shot to hell. If this scheme blows, I’m back for five, maybe ten years. You haven’t been there, and be damned, I’m well assured I’m not going back.”

“You won’t, Curtis. You have my word.”

“Your word? I never laid eyes on you until an hour ago. What goddamn good is your word when the jury says guilty? It seems I’m pretty important to your plans and that convinces me that I hold some high cards.”

“Not high enough. I would desperately hate to lose you, but having brought you into my confidence, I can ill afford to take any risks. The statutes haven’t expired on your counterfeiting escapade and a conviction would return you to that repugnant hell.”

Jonas leaned forward and continued in a low, husky voice. “It would seem that your choice is very simple: risk a return to prison or join us in creating Leonardo manuscripts that will bring make you financially independent.”

“You were talking about honor, about trust. And now you talk about blackmail.”

Jonas’s voice became little more than a whisper.

“I detest the word ‘blackmail.’ But I like the thought of a very painful and fatal accident even less.”

Chapter 3

“Here’s to Ellie Shepard. May she enjoy fame, fortune, and happiness.” Steve Goldensen downed the champagne in a single swallow. He refilled the tall tulip-shaped glass and raised it as if to make another toast.

“No . . . right words . . . wrong order. Here’s to fortune, happiness, and fame. Or should happiness come first? And health, Steve. Shouldn’t health be in there someplace?” Ellie asked, a cigarette in one hand, the other holding her champagne.

She giggled as she sipped. Her laughing stopped and she set the glass on the table and stared at Eleanor. Even with a frown spreading over her face, Eleanor Shepard was a stunningly beautiful woman. Long auburn hair contrasted with her pale, clear skin and her hazel eyes were flecked with strong green accents. Her lips were full and sensuous. “Oh God, Steve, that sounds horribly selfish. Why can’t I say the right words? I came to Washington with such dreams. I’m the gal who was going to be the first female director of the FDA and after three years I’ve managed to become an expert on analgesics and skin ointments.”

He took her hand to his lips. “Ellie, my sweet, you haven’t lost that impetuous drive. You came with a thousand stars in that pretty head and expected Washington bureaucracy to bend to your will. It didn’t and it won’t . . . not for you or anyone. It’s all part of the fabric around here.”

Steve was right. Steve was always right, Ellie thought. She looked at his dark, handsome face.

“But it has to change. This city will cave in from its own flab. If I don’t run into sheer incompetency, I crash into idiotic mediocrity and there’s mile after mile of both.”

“So you’re going to run away from it.”

“No, I’m not running. That’s not the way I do things. I was told that if I wanted to make a contribution, I should become involved. To get on the inside. Well, I’ve done that. But I’ve become part of what’s happening on the inside. I’ve become one of *them*, and I don’t like it. All I’ve learned is how a single piece of this government works—slowly, stupidly, expensively. The waste, Steve. The mountains of paper, the meetings, the endless hearings, the pompous asses.”

“Hey, hold on. If you got rid of all that, you’d put us lawyers out of business.”

“Then they would have to hustle to earn an honest living. Is that so bad?”

“Poor choice of words.”

“I’m sorry if I offended you. I didn’t mean you were being dishonest.”

“Of course you didn’t. But you’re getting all hung up on feeling you must make a contribution. The things have to change. Ellie, it’s a lousy system but it’s the best there is.”

Ellie snuffed out her cigarette. “Look at me. Three years with the Food and Drug Administration and I’m still smoking.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“I think we should. We’re not being very happy right now.”

“I have a happy subject. Let’s get married.” He raised his glass. “Now.”

“Steve, I hoped you wouldn’t bring that up tonight. I know you love me—”

“Very much.”

“Yes, you love me very much. And I . . . I love you, too. But it’s not the same kind of very much. No, so I can say yes.”

“How far from saying yes are you?”

“In centimeters? Or how my heart feels? Or the way I think I ought to tingle? You’re a fine person, Steve. You’re very good-looking, you’re bright, we’d make beautiful children, you have a future, but . . .”

“But what?”

“Please don’t be offended.” Ellie looked intently at him. “I don’t want to be a Jewish Princess and I believe you would want me to be one.”

He slumped back in his chair, his eyes closed. She reached for his hand. “Oh, Steve, you sweet thing. I did it again. Believe me, it isn’t a religious thing. I don’t care that you’re Jewish or Moslem or nothing at all. I know you too well. You’d give so much, I’d be stifled. At sixty I might like it, but not at thirty. Right now I need a lot of independence, the freedom to move and do as I please. Does that mean I’m selfish?”

Steve smiled weakly. “I’ll take you home. We still haven’t finished that toast.” They left the hotel and walked in the chilled February air to Steve’s car.

Ellie was subleasing a choice apartment in Georgetown, one owned by an undersecretary in the State Department and an old family friend. The Frederick Youngs were completing a year-long assignment in Vienna and delighted to have Ellie look after their apartment and the valuable paintings and antiques they had accumulated during thirty years of government service.

Ellie turned the keys in two locks on a thick door, then switched off an intricate alarm system. Steve knew the collection and took a fast inventory, including a Matisse that hung directly over a Queen Anne desk in a small study. “All safe and cozy, the Young Collection has survived another day.”

“It’s no joke, Steve. I feel a terrible responsibility and I just know I’m going to forget to do something and come home to find the place in shambles and the paintings gone.”

He caught her by the hand and engulfed her in his arms. He kissed her forehead and cheeks then pressed his lips to hers. His eyes were moist, his voice slightly choked. “I can’t help loving you like this. It’s not fair to lose someone because I want to give so much.”

Ellie returned a warm kiss. “There’s a split of Mumms in the refrigerator. Let’s have a damned good toast and get you and me straightened out.”

“Okay, you’re on. I’ll meet you in there.” He nodded toward the hall and beyond to Ellie’s bedroom.

She looked up and was silent. She ran a finger down his nose and over his lips and chin. “You need a shave,” she whispered. Then her fingers ran across each eyebrow. “I’ve never made a champagne toast in bed.” She kissed him sweetly, her tongue reached for his. Then she pulled away and started for the bedroom. “Glasses are in the cupboard over the cutting board.”

Steve found a large, white napkin, which he neatly folded over his arm, and set the still uncorked bottle and two glasses on a small, silver tray. He entered the bedroom to find Ellie sitting at the head of the bed, a sheet drawn around her shoulders. Her auburn hair fell against the white bedclothes, a single light on the vanity spread a warm light through the room. He placed the tray on the bed, then sat beside her. She unknotted his tie and slipped it away from his shirt. Then each fumbled to unbutton the shirt and giggled as four hands tried to loosen a single button. The sheet fell away from her shoulders and he tenderly rubbed her swelling nipples. He leaned forward and kissed her on the mouth and then across her neck. Then, slowly, his tongue caressed the tips of her breasts. He straightened and kissed her firmly on the lips.

“Shall we have that toast before the champagne is as warm as you?” Ellie said brightly.

“Not while I’m fully dressed. I’m still wearing my socks.”

She reached down and pulled off his socks, ran her hands up his legs, across the thighs, then with

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