

The Assassin

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Lauren walked through the spacious room, turning on the lights one by one. Most of them were situated on the ceiling, directed tastefully toward various works of art.

The room was filled with works from the Middle East, Asia, and Eastern Europe. There were paintings of women working, children playing, men talking, animals, landscapes, and still lifes. Colorful and intricate jewelry and pottery sat on pedestals under glass. None of the lights were very bright, to keep the artifacts from fading as long as possible. Lauren could not imagine why anyone would want to come in here on an afternoon off, on a vacation, or for fun of any sort.

It was one of the most unfriendly places Lauren had ever set foot in, but she was somehow able to look past that. She was proud to be an intern with Harper Museums. Not many people knew about Harper Museums, but it got a decent amount of visitors, mostly lost tourists, elementary school classes, and snooty patrons. But Lauren was simply proud to be at a museum. She had always envisioned herself working at one. Museums were the perfect blend of intellect and art, and there was almost no human interaction involved. The few visitors who did come in were usually too afraid to carry on a conversation in the hushed environment of the Jane Harper Museum. They either looked around quickly before shuffling back out the door, or obediently listened to Lauren's tour, accepting what she said as incontestable.

After Lauren turned on the lights, she sat at the desk near the entrance to the museum. It was Monday and almost no one was interested in tourism at this time of the week; everyone was trying to catch up on what they'd neglected to do over the weekend. Lauren worked on a few research projects, every once in a while getting up to stretch her legs and admire some art. She had recently begun to notice a small set of ceramic dishes in the Eastern Europe exhibit. Each piece was so intricate and delicate but the colors were vibrant. Perhaps she would research those next.

Early in the afternoon, Lauren heard the bell at the door indicating she had guests. She adjusted her shirt, her name tag, and her hair, put a smile on her face, and looked up.

The tall form of her boss, Renea, filled the doorway. Renea was a large woman and today, like every day, wore a business suit with a skirt and

black high heels. Today the suit was also black. Her dark hair was in a large, tight bun at the back of her head. “Good morning, Lauren,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Hi Renea,” Lauren said brightly.

Renea’s big blue eyes caked in dark makeup crinkled in lieu of a smile as she turned to reveal a young blonde man behind her. “Lauren, I want to introduce you to our new intern,” she said.

Next to Renea, the intern looked positively scrawny and unprofessional, although he certainly tried to hide it. He had dirty blond hair saturated in gel, but it looked like he’d done that last night, then woken up this morning and left the mess on his head the way it had created itself. He wore a button-up lilac shirt under a pinstriped blazer, and jeans that looked like they were about to fall off his skinny frame. His fingernails were bitten so far down that there was almost nothing left on them, which probably made tying his thin shoelaces difficult. He tripped over the square toe of a once-shiny brown shoe as he walked into the museum, but recovered with a strut even stronger than before. He stopped right next to Lauren’s desk and leaned casually on it.

“Hey, I’m Brad.” He held out his hand to Lauren.

“This is Lauren, our other intern at the Jane Harper this term,” Renea said.

Lauren put on her forced smile, held out her hand, and said, “Nice to meet you.”

Brad grinned back at her cheekily.

“Do you go to the university, too?”

“Mm-hm,” Lauren said, glancing pointedly at Renea.

“Let me show you around, Brad,” Renea said, turning away from the desk toward the closest exhibit. “Have you ever been here?”

“Nope! Tell me everything!” Brad turned to follow Renea.

Lauren shook her head and blinked. She hoped she and Brad would work different shifts; she applied for this internship because it was low-stress.

All too soon Renea escorted Brad back to the desk where Lauren sat, saying she needed to go back to the main office. She wished them both luck.

“She’s kind of catty, isn’t she?” Brad said, grinning at Lauren again.

“Renea is very knowledgeable,” Lauren said without smiling. Brad snorted. “She’s wonderful to work with on collections and exhibits. What do you need to be shown still?”

Brad’s eyes had been wandering but he snapped his attention back to Lauren. “Renea said to have you show me your research projects,” he said,

“then I’m supposed to pick a project for myself.”

“Right,” Lauren said, glad to have something else to talk about. She picked up a folder from the pile she had just stacked up neatly. “Well, right now I’m working on this silk tapestry from—” Brad shoved the pile further onto the desk and sat on the corner.

“Feel free to pull up a chair,” Lauren said coldly, indicating a folding chair leaning against the filing cabinet behind her.

“Oh.” Brad got up, picked up the chair, and unfolded it beside Lauren. She moved her own chair away from him a few inches.

“Basically, when you research an object you find out everything you can about it. Who, where, when, what they used to make it, how it got here, what it was used for, what it means..”

“Why?” Brad asked.

Lauren furrowed her brow. “Well, so we know as much as we can, and we can appreciate it and tell people about it.”

“How do you know if you’re right?” he asked.

“Well, you don’t always know, sometimes you just have to make good guesses.”

“What did you say you’re researching?”

Lauren sighed and pointed to the back wall in the East Asia exhibit.

“That tapestry over there,” she said.

“Why did you pick that?”

“It looked interesting to me, and Renea said I’d be able to find lots of information on it.”

“Is there anything in here there isn’t a lot of information on?”

“Oh, yes.” Lauren leaned over the desk and pointed around one of the walls to The Emperor, a large portrait in the Middle East exhibit of a dark-haired, noble-looking man. “That one in particular has very little information. I’m hoping to research him next.”

“Why aren’t you now?”

Lauren was losing patience. “Well, Renea said I should start with something a little easier. My first project was just taking pictures for our records. That’s how I really got to know our collection. Of course, we’ve gotten a few new items since then, but I’ve watched them come in.”

“So I could take pictures of this stuff?” He gestured at the museum in general.

“If you want, yes. That might actually help you get started. Here, you take the computer. I’ll show you how to go through the database to find out what objects still need to be photographed..”

After giving him a project, Lauren made it through the rest of the day avoiding Brad by giving tours, studying her tapestry, studying *The Emperor*, and burying herself in the filing cabinets behind the desk. She was glad he'd be taking pictures the next day so she could have her computer back.

When Lauren arrived at the museum the next morning, she was twenty minutes early, as usual. She smoked in front of the bank, her last chance before her lunch break, adding her share to the muggy city air. As she stood enjoying the sunlight and the smoke, her cell phone rang. She didn't recognize the number, but the area code was from her hometown. Her heart plummeted. "Hello?"

"Hi, is this Lauren?"

"How did you find my number?"

"Your school allows us access to your information. Lauren--"

"What, did you give them more money?"

"We just want to know what you're up to--"

"Mom, I told you not to contact me. What I'm up to is none of your business. You had your chance to know about my life, and you lost it."

"Lauren, we want to tell you--"

"No, Mom. I'm not part of your life anymore." Lauren closed her phone. Her hands were shaking. The last time she had seen her parents was when she'd been home for her first winter break of college, when she threw away or packed up the last of her belongings at their house. She'd last talked to them the following March before she got a new phone. She couldn't stand their lifestyle anymore. They'd inherited money from her father's parents and hadn't had financial worries since Lauren was a baby. They'd spent much of that money on art, but while Lauren spent hours staring at the art, wondering about its mysteries, they had bragged about their collection, exchanged parts of it when they'd gotten bored with it, and hosted parties themed around it.

She glanced at her watch. The museum was supposed to open in ten minutes, and Brad hadn't arrived yet. Perhaps he wouldn't show up. At this point she almost wanted him to come to take her mind off her parents. She ducked inside, walked through the bank's lobby, and took the elevator upstairs. Half an hour after she had opened the museum, Brad still wasn't there. She didn't miss him and his attitude, but all faces in the paintings were beginning to feel like her parents' staring out at her. Lauren considered calling Renea to see if Brad had quit after his first day, but just as she reached for the phone, the elevator bell rang and Brad came out, dashing her hopes.

"Hey!" He walked through the door grinning.

Lauren had quickly returned to typing and didn't look up. "You're late," she said.

"Yeah, I had to stop and get gas." Brad walked around behind the desk and began shoving things around in a drawer.

"What do you need?" Lauren asked.

"Found it!" Brad pulled out a camera, sending rolls of tape, paper clips, and note cards flying out of the drawer. "Sorry." When Lauren didn't reply he said, "I'm going to take some pictures."

Lauren sighed, fighting the urge to smack him. "Okay."

Brad walked in the direction of the East Asia exhibit and before long, Lauren heard a quiet, "*Shit*." She shot out of her seat.

"What?"

"Oh, I must have gotten oil on my shoes at the gas station."

"What?" Lauren said again, gingerly approaching him.

"It's only a little." He was holding up his left foot, examining the bottom of his shoe. Lauren noticed a trail of dark stains from the doorway to behind the desk to the back of the museum, where he stood. "I'll go clean them off." Brad began to walk back to the lobby toward the bathrooms.

"No, stop," Lauren said, trying to stay calm. "Take them off first."

"Good idea!" Brad said brightly.

Lauren went back to the desk shaking her head as Brad removed his shoes and tiptoed across the room, carefully avoiding his own stains.

He returned a few minutes later, this time tracking bigger, darker spots on the carpet. Lauren raised her eyebrows at him. "It's just water this time." He grinned.

"I hope so," Lauren said. "Just make sure your hands are clean before you touch any objects."

After Brad had shot his pictures of some new pottery, he came back and asked to use the computer. As he was uploading his pictures, Lauren looked over his shoulder at all the close-up photos.

"Why did you take pictures of the Emperor?"

"Well, I saw we didn't have any close-ups, and I was in the area."

In spite of herself, Lauren said, "That's my favorite piece here."

"Oh," Brad said in a dull tone.

"Do you have one yet?"

"A favorite?" Brad said, not looking up. "Nothing really stands out."

"Nothing?" Lauren asked. "Not the ancient pottery or the remote landscapes only the artist has seen? Or the jewelry once worn by royalty?"

“Not really. I prefer modern stuff. And real people.”

“Why are you working here, then?” Lauren asked, indignant.

“Why is the Emperor your favorite piece?” Brad retorted.

Lauren was taken aback. “Well, because it’s the most mysterious. We know almost nothing about it, so we can only guess. Just look at his face! And all his fine things. I wonder if the artist knew him or just imagined him. Maybe they were lovers. Or maybe he just came to her in a dream.”

“Maybe.” Brad was looking at Lauren now, and raised his eyebrows. “Why are *you* working here?”

“Because I love art,” Lauren said immediately. “It’s the only honest thing people produce. Artists are geniuses.”

“Do you want to work in a museum for the rest of your life?”

“Yes,” Lauren said, somewhat defensively. The phone on the desk rang. “Have you answered the phone here before?” she asked.

“No.”

“Go ahead.”

Brad picked up the receiver, “Jane Harper Museum of Eastern Art, this is Brad.” He sounded like a telemarketer. Lauren recognized Renea’s voice on the other end but couldn’t tell what she was saying. When Brad hung up he said, “Renea wants me to come to the main office and show her what I’m working on. What a Nazi.” He got up. “I guess I’ll see you later, then.” He picked up his folder and walked toward the door but before he got there, he turned. “Let’s just tell Renea the tracks were a guest?”

“I’m not telling her that, but either way, you should tell her when you see her that the carpet here needs to be cleaned as soon as possible.”

Brad looked unimpressed. “Whatever you say.”

Lauren sighed as Brad walked out. She needed a smoke, but her lunch break wasn’t for another hour. She sat at the desk and picked up Renea’s Virgin Mary. It was so small and beautiful. Why did Renea have it blessed? It wouldn’t be any less beautiful. What did she learn in her Art 101 class so long ago? Art is for viewers. When an artist completes a work, he or she leaves it to the mercy of viewers’ interpretation. Lauren set Mary on the blue cow. She fit there perfectly. Lauren smiled at her interpretation, then shook her head. What was she thinking? She stood up to take a walk around the museum—maybe that would let off some of her steam. She pulled her lighter out of her pocket and flicked it on and off to keep her hands busy.

She walked across the room to the Ming tapestry, carefully avoiding Brad’s oily footprints, grimacing in disgust. When she got to the wall where the piece of silk hung, she stood staring at it, half looking for aspects to

research, half just trying to get lost in the history, the art, the genius. She flicked her lighter some more, her eyes roaming the colorful design. In their roaming, they came across a bright spot Lauren didn't remember seeing before. It was like someone had planted a speck of gold in the tapestry. Then, with horror, Lauren realized the speck *hadn't* been there before. It had come from her lighter.

"Shit," she whispered. The speck was at the height of her hand, so she bent to blow it out. With all the breath she could muster, she let out a large gust straight at the speck. It just glowed brighter. Lauren blew a bigger gust. The spark split in half and part of it flew to the floor behind her. "You're kidding," Lauren mumbled. She turned to stamp it out and her jaw dropped. It had landed in one of Brad's footprints; that foot-sized section of carpet was completely in flames. As she watched, a few sparks flew to other footprints.

"Shit, shit, shit." She looked around frantically. The only water was in the bathroom across the lobby and there was nothing to carry it with. Her water bottle on the desk across the room had only a few drops left in it. The sparks on the tapestry were spreading now, too. There was no way she would be able to control it without hurting herself. She looked to the desk by the entrance, looking for anything that might help her. Her purse was there, stuffed to the brim with research documents.

The documents. Lauren's body tensed. If she didn't do something soon, not only would countless valuable artifacts be destroyed, but all the records of their history and their meaning would also be lost. Unless she could save them... She looked at the file cabinet. It was much too large to carry. Something in her stomach turned. How could she let this happen? Everyone praised her for how careful she was with the objects. Maybe this would grant her a small amount of grace.

She looked around for something small she could carry, anything small she could save. The Emperor was out of the question; his frame was almost as tall as Lauren and there were dark footprints between her and the wall where he hung. The cases in the East Asia exhibit were now blocked by a stretch of low flames. She caught a faint smell of smoke. The fire alarm would go off any second. Her chest felt like it was being torn in half. She wasn't sure if it was fear or sadness, but fear overcame. She ran to the desk, threw the documents out of her purse, picked it up, and ran out the door. She took the back stairs rather than the elevator, stumbling out into an alley where the museum and the bank shared a loading dock with a bakery next door. Lauren ran along the dock, jumped off, and dashed into the next street

over. She jogged a few blocks before stopping at a bus shelter. When she finally looked back, she could see smoke and a few flames rising from the building. She could hear sirens and shouting now. The street out front was probably filled with bankers. She doubted many of the apartment residents were even home. The advertised rent price in the elevator indicated they probably had fairly steady day jobs to be able to afford it.

Lauren's mind was racing as she realized what she had done, and she thought of what she'd face tomorrow. Little, if any, museum. If she didn't get fired, she'd have to help clean and fix up the museum. She might even get fined with arson and kicked out of school, not to mention be shunned in the art world for destroying so many irreplaceable works. No one would ever want her near any valuable artifacts. She could hear her parents' voices saying, "See, Lauren? You just don't care enough. You don't *really* appreciate art. You aren't responsible." Maybe they're right, she thought, and a wave of relief washed over her. *Relief?* No, she couldn't possibly be relieved. She had just burned down a museum. But all she could find in herself was relief. She was glad she wouldn't be going back to the Jane Harper Museum.

This thought washed over her and she felt as if this were the first time she were really seeing the buildings in this neighborhood. They were as beautiful as some of the works in the museum. The building next to the Jane Harper Museum was particularly lovely. It stretched high into the sky, graceful and majestic, reflecting the beautiful day for all to see. She had never noticed it before. The people passing the bus shelter suddenly looked interesting. There was a young couple looking into each others' eyes, stumbling because they weren't paying attention to where they were going. There was an old woman and with a young man helping her cross the street. She wanted to stop them all and ask them what *their* favorite kind of art was.

The bus that would take her back to her apartment was approaching, but she decided to walk instead. She hadn't gotten very far before her cell phone rang. It was the main office. Renea must be furious. Lauren opened her phone.

"Hi, Lauren, it's Renea. I heard about the Jane Harper. Are you okay?"

"Yep, I'm fine."

"Do you know what happened?"

Lauren paused, then said quietly, "Yeah. I do..."