

Lady With the Pink Parasol

The humid summer night clung to Sam's skin as she stepped from the town car to face the sparkling facade of Morgan's Gallery; city traffic ruffling the black gown she wore over a skin tight top and leggings. Gliding through the swinging doors her eyes glossed over the modern prints and expensive paintings lining the walls. Instead they lingered on security guards and cameras, mentally checking the exits and blind spots she had studied on the building blueprints earlier that evening.

With a polite smile the embossed invitation changed hands with the guard at the welcome desk and stepped through the single metal detector before slipping through the formally dressed crowd. In the nearest blind spot she pulled her Blackberry and Bluetooth headset from the bag settled over her right shoulder. She placed the headset in one ear and dialed the only number on the phone, her fingers beginning to tingle with anticipation, waiting for Max to pick up. After the third ring the faint sound of typing filtered through to her.

"I'm in. How 'bout you?"

"Of course. I'll have the cameras in another minute or so." Max's voice was distracted as the typing continued in the background. "Not bad for no prep time and a cheap laptop from Target."

"Do your victory lap when we're in the Caribbean. Or better yet, a non-extradition country."

“Fine. But this time I choose where we go. And why am I always the driver?” She could just picture the chauffeur’s hat her twin had worn sailing into the back seat of their car as he loosened the tie and collar of his white dress shirt.

“One word. Johannesburg.” Sam watched the crowd from her spot, reigning in her eagerness to begin working.

“That was an accident! How was I supposed to know about the raccoons?”

“They were ring-tailed cats and it’s our job to know about things like that. Especially pets with a taste for anything shiny. Besides you’re much better behind the keyboard than I am.” Laughter rippled through her body mixing with the anticipation to create a bubbly sensation better than the most expensive glass of champagne. Her brother’s voice continued in her ear, a chattering counterpoint to the constant typing in the background.

“What are you doing?” The question interrupted Max’s stream of babbling.

“Monitoring police bands, spoofing IP addresses; the usual. Oh, and checking on Mom and Dad.”

Curiosity warred with the impatience which was starting to gnaw at her stomach.

“Why? They’ve been on that job in Dubai for the past two weeks with Uncle Gerard.”

“Just worried.”

The silence seemed to drag on as Max’s typing picked up. Sam’s gaze continued to play over the glittering crowd as she waited impatiently.

“I’m looping the cameras now so you should have about two minutes before the system locks me out.” Sam felt her heart begin beating in time with his keystrokes, quick and light.

“Kepling is on the other side of the room, right next to your door.”

“I see him.” Her eyes rested on the portly man wearing a cheap tux and clip on tie, lips curving up at the pleasure of such an easy mark.

“He’s right-handed?” she asked, sidling into the crowd.

“Yep. Are you sure this is a good idea? Because I don’t like the timing, it’s too tight and the vault isn’t secure enough for this painting.”

Sliding through the crowd like oil, Sam’s hands brushed necklace clasps and dipped into pockets, expertly and quickly secreting her prizes in the purse still over her shoulder.

“That’s precisely why we’re doing this tonight. The second the Lost Monet goes on display it’ll be surrounded by more security than we could ever take on. Tonight’ll go just like Prague three years ago.”

“I got shot in Prague.” Panic crept into Max’s voice as his typing stuttered to a halt.

“Then duck lower this time. Now shut up for a minute I need to concentrate.” Sam snagged a glass of champagne from a passing tray as she spoke, gently loosening a few tendrils of hair from her simple bun. Sashaying towards the gallery director, Marcus Kepling, she made sure her hips swayed a little too much and her walk was a touch uneven. Reaching the small group gathered around him she gently collided with his shoulder, spilling the still full glass of champagne all over him.

“Oh! I’m so sorry! Are you alright?” She added a slight slur to her words, patting and wiping at the fabric with a cocktail napkin, her hand gently slipping into the left side of his coat and lifting out the keycard tucked into the inside pocket.

“Yes, I’m fine miss. Are you OK?” Kepling steadied her gently by the elbows, his eyes lingering on the contours of her body which was a breath away from his.

“I think I might have had a little too much to drink.” She gave a soft throaty laugh and peeled herself away from him, at the same time slipping his badge into her bag. “I should probably go clean myself off. Do you know if there’s somewhere I can freshen up?” Sam patted her hair, as if their run in had knocked her entire outfit out of sorts, making sure his attention was still squarely on her body and not her face.

“The women’s restroom is just down that hallway, on the right.” His voice caught slightly as he gestured to a short corridor branching off from the main room, cheeks turning red as she gave him a saucy wink before turning to the passage he had pointed out.

Pushing open the heavy restroom door Sam checked each stall to be sure she was alone before unzipping her dress. As she shed the gown and heels the tingling in her fingers surged, spreading throughout her entire body and giving a feeling of excitement. Pulling a pair of comfortably worn converse sneakers from her purse she slipped into them before stuffing everything to the bottom of the trashcan.

“I’m heading into the ceiling now.” Tucking her Blackberry and the ID card into a secret pocket on the waistband of her leggings Sam pulled herself onto the top of one of the stall dividers. Reaching above her head she pushed against one of the ceiling tiles, popping it into the space above. “Keep an eye on Kepling for me.”

“Of course, ‘cause all I’m good for is keeping watch.”

Chuckling Sam carefully pulled her body up into the crawlspace, mindful not to put too much pressure on a single tile. The square of light filtering up around her body illuminated hanging wires and pipes. Wriggling away from the opening she slid the panel back into place, letting the ensuing darkness envelope her in a familiar and comforting cocoon. Crawling through

the warm air her muscles loosened as she pushed wires and cobwebs aside feeling adrenaline flood her system in anticipation as she squirmed closer to her goal. The internal clock in her mind ticked ever closer to zero, adding fuel to her movements and thrilling her senses.

“I’m almost there, is the coast clear?” Sam asked Max, brushing a spider off of her shoulder.

“Not quite. Kepling is headed to his office.”

“That’s fine.” Her breath huffed against a pipe. “Tell me when he leaves.”

Through the gloom a wall of dark metal suddenly rose up through the ceiling tiles to meet her. Resting her forehead against the cool surface she took a deep breath willing her pulse to race at a reasonable pace. She had done this a thousand times before but with the stakes higher than they had ever been she felt a slight trembling of nervousness creep in her limbs, for a moment eclipsing the excitement and adrenaline coursing through her system. A strange sensation which hadn’t plagued her since she was a teenager.

“OK Sam, you’re good to go.” Max’s voice jolted her out of her thoughts and back to the present. Easing a panel up she slid down headfirst, carefully catching the edge of the opening with the tips of her fingers and sliding through. Pulling her legs straight she hung for a moment before reaching up and sliding the tile back into place, lightly she dropped to her feet.

The entire wall in front of her was dominated by the intimidating face of a Greening 23LS vault. It was a thing of beauty, ebony steel accented with gold letters and designs. A traditional vault wheel gleamed silver against the darkness as a card-reader and pin-pad gave off a soft, eery green light.

Letting her eyes adjust to the murkiness of the office Sam reached beneath the hem of her shirt and uncurled a phone cord from around her waist. Stepping up to the vault door she plugged her phone in beneath the pad.

“OK, the phone’s connected. Work your magic.” The only response she received was an increase in the tempo of his typing. Seconds dragged, her pulse thundering in her ears like a stampede of elephants as computer code cycled over the screen.

“Nine digit password. Whoever designed this system is good, but not good enough.” Triumphantly Max hit one more key and a satisfying beep chimed from the door. Sam swiped the card she had taken from Kepling through the reader and heard the tell-tale grinding of bolts as they shifted out of place and the door slowly swung open.

The gleaming interior was dominated by a row of tables on either side of the doorway, paintings laid out on velvet cloth waiting to be hung above someone’s mantelpiece. In the very center stood a tripod covered with a sheet, drawing her attention like a magnet. Reaching out she gave a slight tug, watching as the fabric pooled on the floor. Sam’s breath caught in her throat as the rest of the world melted away.

“The Lost Monet.” she whispered to no one.

Inside an intricately carved frame was a small painting of a woman dressed in a flowing white dress, sitting in a rowboat on a small lake. Her face was hidden behind the fluttering edge of a soft pink parasol. Emerald, cream, and blue all the colors of the rainbow seemed to blend into the ever-so-slightly blurred lines of the image before her. Sam grinned suddenly, imagining the woman was hiding a coy smile of her own.

Removing a flat tipped lock pick from her bun, she was afraid her hands would begin shaking but they were steady as the screws fell away. Finally the edges of the canvas were exposed and she was able to peel it away from the frame backing.

“Max, we got it.” Her breath came in short bursts as she did her best not to dance and sing around the vault.

“YES!! Now get the hell out of there, I want to be sipping Mai Tai’s on a beach somewhere in one hour.”

Taking one more moment to admire the masterpiece in her hands, Sam gently rolled the canvas into a tube and slid it into a plastic sleeve she had pulled from beneath the waistband of her leggings. She turned to exit the vault only to walk into two nine millimeter Glocks.

Brawny security guards flanked a third tall, handsome man dressed in a three piece suit designed to help him blend into almost any crowd. The grin on his lips accentuated a square jaw and made his dark eyes sparkle like it was Christmas and he had just opened the perfect present.

“You know I was wondering how long it would take for someone to make a run at this painting. We even started a pool so, thank you. You just won me two hundred bucks.” His rich voice rolled every syllable as strong hands reached for the painting still clutched in Sam’s grip. “One thing I’ve noticed about thieves is that they can develop a kind of tunnel vision as they get closer to their mark. Next time you might want to check for camera feeds inside the vault.”

“Spend a lot of time with criminals?” Sam found her curiosity peaked as he handed the painting to one of the guards, even as her mind raced with escape options.

“A fair amount.” Handcuffs gleamed in his fingers as he approached her again.

“Buy me dinner first Officer.”

“Agent. Special Agent Kevin Randall, FBI White Collar division.” he corrected. “Hands on your head please.”

“Ah, I should have known. You were the one who caught up with me in Chicago a few years ago, weren’t you?” She complied, raising her hands to lace behind her head.

“Chicago, are you kidding me? I don’t even know if the electrical system is tied to - you know what never mind. Just keep him talking for thirty more seconds.” Max’s typing reached a fever pitch, each keystroke seeming to reverberate in her chest.

“Out of professional curiosity how did you know I was here?” The snap of the handcuffs closing around one of her wrists was followed by the twin sensations of cold metal and warm skin as he gripped her arm and swung it down.

“Motion activated miniature camera placed in the tripod.” He brought her other hand down to rest next to the first. She could feel the warmth emanating from his body, sparking an answering heat in her core. “What was your way out once you had the painting? If you don’t mind my asking.” His voice held a forced levity, as well as genuine curiosity of his own.

“The front door. Of course that was just plan A, I had a few other exits planned in case something went wrong. Though I admit someone like you never factored into my backups.” She slowly walked between the two guards as they inched out of the vault.

“I must say I’m impressed. You’ll still get to leave that way but I’m afraid it won’t be with the painting.” He plucked the headset from her ear as he guided her to the desk chair. “I’d also like to extend the same invitation to whoever is on the other end of this line. You can have the cell next to your friend.”

Sitting in the swivel chair behind the mahogany desk Sam examined Agent Randall trying to figure out how she had missed him earlier. As she did so her fingers quickly went to work, twisting and probing the thin pick she had taken from her bun into the keyhole of the cuffs.

“So where’s your backup?” she asked, attempting to stall for a few more moments.

“On it’s way.” A satisfying click reached her ears as Sam settled back into the chair more comfortably.

“It’s really a shame I won’t get to meet them, but we should do this again sometime.” She felt herself grinning as confusion flitted across his face. “I think I’m going to look forward to you chasing me but some other time. And please don’t give me a lame nickname.”

“Any suggestions?” Suspicion edged his voice as Randall’s hand crept to the spot on his belt where his gun would normally be holstered.

“I’ve always liked the sound of the ‘Night Cat’ but some of my...associates think ‘The Shadow’ would be more fitting.”

Before he could respond all the lights flickered off, plunging the room into darkness. Faint screams could be heard coming from the gallery as Sam threw herself out of the chair and into the nearest guard before cartwheeling into the one still holding the rolled up painting, knocking him unconscious against the edge of a filing cabinet. Snatching the fragile tube from the floor she watched the other two shadows swing around in the dark.

The window was a pale gray square in the wall as she swept a heavy paper weight off the desk and lobbed it at the glass. The shattering caused Randall to swing around but Sam was already sailing through the opening, tucking her head and hands to keep them from being sliced. Rolling to her feet she dashed to the town car idling on the other side of the street as the sound of

a gunshot reverberated in the air. Yanking open the passenger door she chanced a glance over her shoulder to see Agent Randall raise his cell phone to one ear with one hand while the other trained a small revolver in her direction., trying to scramble through the window at the same time. Blowing him a kiss she climbed into the car. Max hit the accelerator, causing the tires to smoke and squeal as they peeled away from the gallery.