

Pt. 2 of Chapter 5

“I refuse to agree to a deal we can’t recover from,” I exclaimed in a slight panic.

“You don’t think that I have thought this through enough to have figured out how to deal with any repercussions?”

“C’mon you know me better than that,” she responds.

All I can think is, she’s right. Even though I would never say that to her face. She has a way of crafting these elaborately daring deals that somehow work. Within a group, by herself, or even while dragging someone into her mess, she remains stealthy, prideful of the fact that she works hard to never get caught. However, I still complain and push back even though we are both aware of my desperation.

“And you know me, I need details,” I snap back in the coldest tone I could muster. But, unshakable Stella doesn’t miss a beat or at least she doesn’t show it.

“There is an opportunity-”

She loves to be non-specific and I love to roll my eyes at her attempts to hide the catch.

“You complain that I don’t give you details but when I try to, you roll your eyes and give me an attitude. You see why this is not working, right?”

“Ok, ok, an opportunity, that leads to what.....”

“Don’t worry about that right now-”

I interrupt again, “Ok, that means I will worry about it later. Continue.”

“Anyway……. If you would let me finish, I need to run some money through your store. You sell the painting to me and I’ll give you more than what you ask but in cash. You take the extra money that I bring back to you after doing my deed and you split it between the two of us. Seriously, I have made this so much easier for you, you barely have to do anything. Just do what I ask, and keep your story straight.”

“I got that the first time. I need details, Stella!! What is the deed, how did you get the cash, how are WE going to end up with so much cash.”

I rip out of my seat and my voice rises with me. She knows that I will refuse to agree to anything again if she does not give me very morsel of detail about it. As long as I am working with her, there will always be a catch. No matter how hard she tries but fails, to conceal it.

Stella is now glaring at me from across the table. She leans in on her hands onto the table which is littered with papers, our belongings, and half-finished drinks. Her eyes are piercing as she hisses at me in complete frustration. You can feel her emotions piercing like an arrow with each word and as the conversation progresses. “I got my money as I always have. Is it a yes or a no?”

I can’t agree while waiting in the dark. Her vagueness can cost me my career. We haven’t fully dived into the details of her complicated past, but I know enough to know better than to let her lead me blindly. I trust her to have everything figured out but I can’t trust her enough to be assured that if something goes wrong she won’t leave me to take the fall and suffer the damages alone.

“So you want me to sell you a piece of artwork and accept money that you got by stealing artwork?” I am aware that I am being difficult but I refuse to let her think that she has won me over so quickly. I know she has her own secrets and motives that she will make sure are seen to fulfillment so I need to do the same for myself. I am too invested for this not to work, so if I have to fake it ‘till I make it, then so be it! I need her to believe that she is going to have to do more convincing.

“Sioban,” she sighs, “What happened to want to save the younger artist? Being Robin Hood? Now you want to eat reasonably. When those politicians turned their noses up at you, you clearly stated that you were down for whatever. Now you want to back out and judge me for my past?”

“I am not backing out, I am just trying to make it make sense, Stella,” I fire back.

“It already makes sense Cy!” As she raised her voice, I instantly became uneasy. I wish I could say that I am not judging her, but I honestly am. I cannot let it be known that I and she are working together or that we are planning this big scheme. As much as I care about the artists, I still need to worry about myself as well. If word gets out it can tank my already struggling career.

It is as though I am being forced to choose to either sit and watch someone commit a crime against the people I care about, or take matters into my own hands and commit the crime myself but I choose the target. The government has failed us for years and has proven itself to be unreliable. They steal from the poor and give to the rich. People who have had to rely on the systems that run this crazy country the most are thrown out like trash. Forced to fend for ourselves, I feel like many Americans are starting to become hyper-aware of the realities of trying to make it here. We are either trash, target practice, or jokes to the rich. Standing by is no longer an option for me but my desperation and determination do not take away my conviction and nerves. But, I continue to fake a sense of power and cross my arms over my chest to stop my hands from shaking.

Stella is still wearing her face of intimidation as she awaits for me to agree to this plan of hers. Her argument is compelling but my hesitations are still pulling me back to comfortability. Even though there is nothing even remotely comfortable about having to fight for support and needs, it's comfortable to not be breaking the law. Another major concern, I don't want our attempt to play Robin Hood to lead to more work than I agreed to. After all, is said and done, we will need to frame all that work on someone else - and Stella has yet to detail how we are exactly supposed to do that and to whom. We would have to commit another crime just to cover her crime, my crime, and my finesse. No matter how she spins it I still feel as though I am the one with more to lose if we get caught.

But, if we don't try we would all lose. We just have to be smart about every aspect of the plan. There can be no room for mistakes. I know the wrong thing is the right thing despite my natural urge to stray from the potential of danger and severe repercussions. But as I look at Stella, I see through her tough girl persona slightly and can catch a glimpse of anticipation. She needs this as much as I do. Eventually, I give in, "How much are we talking about?" I signed. Now, I am pacing behind my chair. Stella sits up straight. She knows that she has me now. If you can get someone to bargain they are basically on board. Bargaining is just a stone's throw away from signing your name on the dotted line.

"I want to sell that big painting that was on the back wall for \$150k".

"What?! Not." I stop mid-pace. "First, I worked so hard on that painting so if I sell it I would either want it to be a legitimate sale for a sale of more than 150!"

Now Stella is moving, but instead of nerves and uneasiness, disbelief and confusion prompt her to move in a pace-like manner. "You want more than 150 for a painting that you haven't even tried to sell?! Be serious."

"Yes, 200 minimum if you seriously want this deal," I say with my hands on my hips. Now we are square facing one another. Stella stopped pacing. I am standing in the same position. She does that intimidating glare thing while I'm focusing on putting on the strongest face I can. Stella knows what she is doing. This plan of hers is going to be just as stressful and unhinged as the last crime she committed. But she needs me on board. With my business as the cover but yet the main pawn in this game of chess, we could get away with it all. And Stella has the remarkable ability to get innocent people involved in her fanatical schemes.

Even though I will deny it if you ask, I am stubborn and am giving her a hard time through this whole negotiation but there is a slight part of me that wants to see how this one will play out. She won the last round. Now, I am fascinated with seeing if she can remain undefeated against the law.

“You’re crazy. If I go too high I can't resell it. No one would go for more than 280 for that painting. The most are 200, maybe 250.” Standing she leans back onto the table. Her hair gracefully falls to shape her face but she remains strong in her glare.

I hold my head up high, and look her straight in the eye. I will not budge on this one. My last attempt at trying to get any kind of led me to get talked down to and looked over. When I was first beginning to reach out for funding I was merely being led. I took no lead and did not stand my ground. This time will be different. One, I am working with a seasoned criminal so hopefully she can lead us to actual pay, and two, this time I am more tired than I have ever been. Tired of the system, and the government, and waiting idly by. Never piss a woman off so that she gets tired of your existence. That never ends well. “No, I want 200, and another meeting discussing the coverup plan because there is no way we are going down now.”

She straightens up again. The tension in the room is so thick that neither one of us can stay still. Anxiety and adrenaline are rushing through both of us. We both know that we are on the brink of an escapade, we just need the perfect play. “We are not going down. 155.”

“190,” I snapped back.

“You're going to make it so we end up stuck with no one to sell that painting to! You have to go lower. 160. And that is the highest I will go.” Stella sits down finally and so do I. Again, I hate to admit it but she is right. We have to play the game so that another museum can buy the painting and we get the cash cleaned. Finesse requires you to always be one step ahead of the victim. Plus courteous, if you want to get somewhere.

“170, and that is the lowest I will go.” I sit back in my chair and cross my arms again over my chest. Now it is my turn to glare at her across the table of drinks, paper, and belongings. Her backpack rests in the chair next to her and my mind can't help but wonder what might be concealed in it. I doubt that she dislikes me enough to feel the need to bring a weapon but I wouldn't put anything past her. My bag is laying on the table next to Stella's nearly finished

glass of white wine. I've glanced at the papers sprawled out on the table at least 100 times and with each second passing, the tension and suspense build. The room holds its breath with me as we await Stella's final decision.

"Fine," Stella responds. Just like that, short and sweet.

The room and I let out a relieving breath. I tried my hardest to be as confident as possible but I doubt it was that convincing. Everything that I have is riding on this deal and the lives of 26 artists are dependent on my future as well. Stella's wisdom on how to get away with the crime is what will help us through this process but how much can I trust her? How much does she trust me?

"Good," I reply just as shortly. "I know a gallery that has been begging for that piece for a while. I'm sure they'll be glad to take it off your hands."

"Ok, but you need to get the word out that the piece is sold. Create demand for the painting."

"Great, so we have a plan and a deal." Stella and I both rise as the room expands with the release of tension.

There is still a spirit of uneasiness among both of us but you can sense that there is a feeling of rest shared in the room. We have the hard part figured out - getting along. The next step is putting our plan in motion. We both pack our things and begin to head toward the door. She shares a few parting words and what could be considered a threat if I mess up my end of the plan. I respond with a brief nod and a few parting words myself.

We then leave heading in opposite directions but we both are now more connected than we ever thought we could be.