

What Remains Untouched

By Joseph Laguerre

Serina examines each piece slowly, as if care might change what they are.

The new oak table is immaculate, glassine sheets stacked square, bubble wrap rolled tight, artist tape aligned with the grain, scissors set parallel to the edge, everything in its place except the paintings.

She finishes inspecting the last one and lets out a quiet breath.

Richard drags a black leather chair beside her workstation, a glass of Moscato in hand. His cologne arrives before he does, sharp, expensive, unnecessary, and she coughs lightly as she gathers her hair into a ponytail.

Carefully, she lifts Rembrandt's *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee*.

"Isn't this part usually done before you call me?" Richard asks.

She doesn't look up. "Don't you know better than to play on a school night?" she says, smoothing the glassine beneath the frame. "And since when do you wear cologne on a job?"

"Since I knew I'd be seeing you."

She cuts the glassine clean along the edge, steady and exact. "Charles called you too early. Do you know how long it takes to validate fine art?"

"Nope. Just the transporter."

She folds the glassine over the painting. The long sides first, then the short sides, sealing each edge with deliberate strips of tape.

"So how much longer?"

Serina glances at him. “What are you, five?”

“I could be at Tony C’s right now. Celtics are on.”

“Well, why don’t you—”

“Now, now,” he says, easy, interrupting. “You know I’m not just here for the paintings.”

She says nothing. Instead, she wraps the Rembrandt in two tight layers of bubble wrap, pressing out the air before sealing it again, and when she’s done, she places it into a box with the care of someone returning something borrowed.

“I was supposed to be painting these,” she says, almost to herself. “My work was supposed to hang in places like this.”

Richard stands and drifts toward the window overlooking downtown Boston, where the city glows—alive in a way the room is not.

“Yeah,” he says.

That’s all.

She looks at him, waiting, but nothing follows. After a moment, he turns and gestures toward the box, and she hands it over.

“Thank you,” he says, then, lighter, “When this is done, The Envoy. Good view. Apple martinis.”

Serina hesitates just long enough to notice it. “Sure.”

Richard studies her for a beat longer than usual, as if something doesn’t quite settle, and then he leaves.

The door clicks shut behind him, and the room seems to expand in his absence, quieter now, less certain.

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Serina turns back to the table and lifts the next painting.

Vermeer.

The Concert.

Her breath catches, not sharp, but deep, like something remembered before it's fully understood.

The phone rings.

She lets it ring once, twice, before picking it up.

"Is the Vermeer ready?" Charles asks.

"Not yet," she says. "I just pulled it."

"I'm sending Richard back. Make sure it is. These Bulgarians don't like delays." A pause follows, just long enough to register. "They like disrespect even less."

The line goes dead.

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Serina sets the phone down slowly, her hand lingering on it a moment before she turns back.

She doesn't reach for the glassine this time. Instead, she rests her fingers along the frame, tracing the worn edge where time has softened it.

Inside the painting, three figures gather around music, suspended in a quiet that feels whole and unbroken.

For a moment, the room rearranges itself around it.

She is small again, museum light soft against polished floors, her mother's hand warm in hers, the hush of strangers keeping their distance as if silence were part of the exhibit.

*Look at how they listen,* her mother had said.

She hadn't understood then.

She does now.

Time presses in again, though nothing has moved.

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Serina crosses to her desk by the window and removes her wallet, unzipping the inner pocket with care. Inside is a photograph: her and her mother standing in front of The Concert, smiling into a moment that feels impossibly intact.

She flips it over.

*March 17, 1990. At the museum with Rina.*

Her thumb lingers on the ink before she exhales.

"I'm sorry, Mom."

Outside, the city hums, indifferent, continuous.

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She moves to the framed portrait of Einstein her mother gave her years ago and slides it aside, revealing the safe behind it. Her thumb presses the scanner; the lock clicks open.

Inside sits a black Adidas duffel bag—cash, passport, a future already reduced to contingencies.

She unzips it and runs her hand over the stacks of bills before pulling out a small flip phone.

She dials.

Voicemail.

"Hey, Richard. It's Rina."

Her eyes drift back to the painting as she speaks.

“Don’t come back for the Vermeer. This place is about to get loud.”

A breath.

“You were right. We all make choices. I can’t keep making this one.”

Her voice softens, almost surprised by itself.

“Maybe when things settle... We’ll get that drink. Or maybe we won’t.”

She ends the call, removes the SIM card, snaps the phone in half, and drops it into the trash.

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A siren cuts through the air below—faint at first, then rising, threading its way into the room.

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Serina stands still for a moment, listening as the sound grows closer, more certain.

Then she walks back to the table.

To the painting.

She lifts *The Concert* carefully, holding it not as cargo or currency, but as something that once belonged to her before she knew how to lose it.

For a second, she considers the bag, the door, the life waiting on the other side.

Then she sets the painting back down.

Untouched.

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The sirens grow louder.

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She turns off the lights, and the room falls into shadow, though the painting holds what little light remains—figures still gathered, still listening, untouched by what waits outside the frame.

Serina pauses at the door.

Then she leaves.

Closes it behind her.