

The Honor Thief

Martha Reed

The tires screeched and I turned to see a pimped-out Crown Vic sweeping up to the curb. So it was happening. Two gorillas I had never seen before clambered out of the illegally tinted car. The bigger thug grabbed me around the waist. He tossed me into the back seat, pointed his stubby finger and said: “Sit.” Neither one of them said another word until we reached Manny’s park-like estate in Jamaica Plain.

Now I sat perched on a surprisingly uncomfortable mahogany Chippendale chair in Manny “Big Toad” Toducci’s private office. The room smelled like fine Cuban cigars and lemon oil polish, the scent of power. The antique chair’s central supporting rail kept cutting sharply into the back of my thighs. Ignoring the discomfort, I focused on re-buttoning my blouse.

“She’s clean,” Thing One said. He tossed me my bag.

Manny nodded curtly. The big goon crossed his arms and went to stand by the door. Manny sat back, drumming the tooled leather blotter with his fingers.

“We got a problem. Your brother Stefan died owing me big money.”

I settled the bag between my feet. That’s why Manny’s goons had snatched me off Boylston Street. Manny Toducci was Boston’s most ruthless and untouchable crime boss. He managed Combat Zone prostitution rings, ran numbers rackets and kept high-dollar book. He owned an empire of backroom pawnshops and usurious drive-through check cashing kiosks that took criminal advantage of desperately struggling people. I was a part-time art school student, and I knew Manny by reputation only. Maybe my brother Stefan was dead; but with Manny and money, next-of-kin meant next in line. I had to press my knees to keep them from knocking together. Taking a deep breath, I decided to try for bold.

“Guess that means you won’t get paid.”

“Ha!” Manny barked a laugh. “Figures. Smart-ass, just like your brother.” He wagged his hand. “I’ll get paid. Stefan had sticky fingers. Pretty good at working the five-finger

discount, but craps was not his game.” He moistened his lips. “Your brother died owing me ninety-seven thousand dollars, plus change. Congratulations, girlie. You just inherited his debt.”

Oh, Stefan. Black dots pulsed before my eyes when I heard the actual number. I laid both hands on Manny’s desk. “Listen. We’ll never be able to pay you back that kind of money. Never. I’m supporting my mother and my two sisters. We live in a crappy basement apartment near Fenway Park, ankle deep in backsplash half the time. I’m working three jobs now as it is.”

Manny stared unblinking as he toyed with a Napoleonic bronze eagle paperweight. “Not my problem.”

I considered bolting for the door. Thing One guessed my intent. Opening his jacket, he flashed his holstered 9mm Glock. Even if I sprinted past him, I’d never make it through Manny’s Black Ops home security system. He had his McMansion, his two-acre landscaped lawn and his gated driveway wired up like a maximum-security Federal prison, which in my humble opinion was exactly where the Big Toad really belonged.

Manny picked up a tablet, swiping his fingers over the screen. “Zita Zeechee? What the hell kinda name is that?”

And this was coming from a man named Toad.

“Central European, probably Czech.” I shrugged. “The borders got confused a couple of times between the wars.”

“Z-t-s-c-h-e-s-c-h-e?” He glanced up. “Is that really how you spell it? Fuck. Bet Immigration had some fun with that. Did they say *gesundheit*?”

“Funny guy.” I folded my hands in my lap. “We didn’t care how they spelled it as long as they let us in.”

“Funny girl.” He sat back. “You should try stand-up comedy. Earn me back my money that way.”

“Is that an option?”

“No.”

He kept scrolling through that damn tablet. I didn’t know what Manny was reading there, but Stefan had warned me that if I was ever in this situation to ignore him, that it was a bluff, that Manny did it on purpose to rattle people. I ran my eyes over his opulent

office instead.

No wonder the Toad's security system was so impossibly tight. His rumored art collection was mythic, but members of the general public were never allowed in to see it. I was only in Manny's inner sanctum because of my brother's outstanding debt. Stefan had mentioned seeing some important looking paintings on the walls, but I hadn't believed him. Now I noted a Vermeer, one of only thirty-four Vermeers in existence, next to Rembrandt's only known seascape hanging in a gilded frame behind Manny's desk. Mellow afternoon sunlight filtered through a jeweled Louis Comfort Tiffany stained-glass panel featuring boughs of lavender wisteria draped over opalescent water lilies floating in an emerald pool. A golden imperial Faberge egg glittered on a marble pedestal under a single canister light. Botticelli's *David*, cast in solid sterling silver, shone from a scallop-shaped alcove.

"Did you kill my brother?" I asked. I already knew the answer was no, because I'd found Stefan's note. Stefan wrote that he owed Manny a lot of money, that he felt like a failure, that suicide was the only way out. I was still furious with Stefan for even thinking that way after all we'd been through. Stefan was wrong. Suicide is never an option. Case in point. It only makes things worse.

"Me?" Manny looked up. "Nah. Stefan wasn't no good to me dead. Your brother wasn't pushed; he jumped. Even the cops are saying it. He took the coward's way out." His chair cracked as he rested his weight on his elbows. "What we really need to discuss is how you're going to pay me back. Luckily, your family's good-looking enough to work the street." He pursed his lips. "That's a bonus I didn't expect."

"I'm not dancing in one of your clubs if that's what you're thinking." I choked on the words. "Shoot me now. I refuse. I won't do it."

He seemed to consider my suggestion.

"Wouldn't work. You're tall enough, but too flat-chested. We'd have to invest in a bigger cup size. Besides, I wasn't talking about you." Manny sat back. His shirt gaped open to reveal wiry hair growing in a straight line up his pale potbelly. "I was thinking more about your two sisters. We've never had twin strippers in the club before. That's something fresh, something different." Opening the humidor, he selected a cigar. "My clients will like it."

I slapped Manny's desk so hard it stung my hand. Thing One flinched.

"Stasia and Iris," I hissed, "are only fourteen years old."

"That's okay." Manny shrugged. "It's a private club." He snipped the end off the cigar. "The more I think about the idea the more I like it."

"You can't do that." I scrambled to find another option. "Give me time to come up with another way, with something else."

"Sure." He chuckled. "Like you've suddenly got a hundred grand you're sitting on, tucked away, hidden. Must be driving a lot of Uber in that piece of shit Hyundai you own."

Fingers of raw fear clutched my belly, like the sick feeling you get when you wake up in February with a cold nose and you know that the furnace has crapped out again and you'll need to find the money to make the repair. Now I really felt frightened, because Manny seemed to know way more about me than I'd figured.

"Stefan mentioned you were working on a degree." Flicking a gold lighter, Manny lit the cigar. "Art history, right?"

"That's right." I inhaled a slow deep breath as butterflies battered my stomach. Sometimes my darling brother talked too much.

"Why waste your time?" Manny stretched out his arms. "What'll it get you? Look at me. Got some of the best art in the world right here. Didn't need to study art to appreciate it or to own it, neither." He jabbed the cigar for emphasis. "Earn the money and buy the art you like. That's the smart way to go about it."

Leaning forward, I rested my elbows on my knees. "You're saying that you bought all of the artwork in here?"

"No, I'm saying that I own all of it." His cheeks hollowed as he puffed. "Not exactly the same thing, but close enough."

"Funny thing, because unless my art history prof is wrong, that Tiffany window was stolen from the Griffin family crypt in Cleveland's Lake View Cemetery in 1983." Turning sideways, I pointed. "*The Concert* by Vermeer and Rembrandt's *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* were snatched during the Isabella Gardner Museum heist in 1990. That Botticelli statue is Nazi loot stolen from the Basilica of San Frediano in Lucca, Italy, in 1944." Straightening to face him, I felt no need to mention the Cherub with Chariot

Faberge egg swiped from the George M. Hensley Museum during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. That egg alone was worth fifteen million dollars. “Not to be too critical, Big Toad, but I’d say that technically none of this artwork really belongs to you.”

“Smart girl.” Manny tipped the silken gray ash off his cigar. “You’ve been paying attention in class. You get a gold star. I may need to find another use for you.”

There was a sudden hubbub from the hallway and a drumming on the door. Thing One reached for his Glock.

“Don’t be stupid.” Lowering the cigar, Manny swiveled his chair to face the door before carefully placing both hands in plain sight. “Until we see who it is.”

The heavy oak door swung open, followed rapidly by Thing Two, who was tripping over his heels as he backed into the room.

“Couldn’t stop ’em, boss. They got a warrant.”

FBI Special Agent Cesar Mayas and three beefy associates I didn’t know filled the doorway. I felt the tension ease from between my shoulder blades and it surprised me, because I’d never been happy to see that solid hunk of G-man before. Cesar’s brown eyes glittered with triumph and righteous amusement. He extended the folded bench warrant in his outstretched left hand.

“Manny Toducci, wish I could say it’s good to see you again. Brought you a little something extra this time. Been a long time coming.”

Snatching my bag, I scrambled behind the carved marble pedestal, moving out of the direct line of fire because I didn’t know exactly how stupid Manny really was. The two men kept their eyes locked on each other as Cesar cocked his thumb at the paintings lining the walls.

“Emmanuel Lorenzo Toducci, you’re under arrest. I’m charging you with receiving stolen property under federal statute 18 USCA, Section 662.”

I jumped as Manny pointed at me.

“You little snitch!” He spat. “I’ll make sure they skin you alive before you die!”

Cesar calmly snicked his tongue against his teeth. “And thank you for that. USCA Section 1512, witness intimidation. Keep it coming, Manny. I’d love to add more to this list.” He slid the warrant across Manny’s blotter with his fingertips. “And just so you know, anything happens to this woman or her family, whether you’re involved in it or

not, we'll be coming for you. And that means you'll get life without parole. You're already looking at five-to-ten in the Sumterville pen. Hope you like Florida weather. It can get humid."

Taking one hesitant step toward the door, I swung my bag to my shoulder, my mouth suddenly bone dry. "I loved my brother." My voice quavered and cracked. "You pushed him to suicide." I clenched both fists. "You threatened my family. You needed to be stopped."

"Easy, Zita," Cesar said. "Take a breath." Draping his heavy arm across my shoulders, he guided me outside as his fibbie associates cuffed the three goons. "Let's get some air."

I had forgotten that it was a normal spring day, well, as normal as a day can be with four black Suburbans and three Boston blue squad cars parked at the front door.

"You did good with this one, kid," Cesar said. "The Bureau appreciates your assistance, and your expertise. Like we told you, we knew they'd come for you eventually, and they did. And that in there took real guts." His brown eyes warmed. "I knew you could do it. We've been trying to get inside Big Toad's office to ID his artwork for years."

Slipping my fingers into the frayed lining of my bag, I placed the bug in the center of my palm. "That big goon didn't look hard enough. Got distracted studying my bra. Did you want this back?"

"I do, actually. Inventory will ask for it. Thanks." Wrapping the wire in his royal blue silk pocket square, he tucked it away. "Manny's going down hard for this one, Zita. We had to be careful, walk the line on probable cause. Couldn't give him any chance to wiggle out of it in court. He hires top-notch lawyers." Cesar looked up, and his face split into a wide smile. "Never thought we'd crack it. And there's a silver lining. You're going to be rich. The Gardner Museum is still offering a reward for the return of those paintings."

Hope flared in my heart like the sound of a distant and welcome train whistle. "Don't tease, Agent Mayas. It hurts too much. I heard the museum cancelled that reward."

"You heard wrong." He tugged his ear. "They extended it. And they raised it to ten million dollars, if the paintings are returned in good condition. I'm no expert, but they looked to be in pretty good condition to me."

Cesar grabbed my arm to steady me as I missed a step. Swinging my bag over my oth-

er shoulder for balance, I clutched the iron railing with both hands. “Ten million dollars? And the money is mine?”

“It’s all yours.” He laughed easily. “See? Crime does pay.” He studied me carefully for a moment. “I didn’t want to mention it before in case you got flustered. Someone from the Bureau will be in touch to make sure you get it. I’m sure you’ll be hearing from the tax guy, too.” He glanced reflexively up and down the shaded street. “Need a lift back to town?”

“No, I’m good.” I tapped my iPhone. “I’ve Uber’d a ride. Two-minute warning. He’s on his way.”

“Alright then.” Cesar’s forehead puckered. “You be careful out there, Zita. And don’t worry about what Manny threatened. He’s blowing smoke. They’ll close his book and leave your family alone. They’ve got bigger fish to fry.” He scratched his chin. “You’ve got my number, though, right? Promise you’ll call me if you need to, okay?”

“I will.” I felt genuine and humble gratitude welling up from my soul. “Thank you, Agent Mayas, for all that you’ve done for me, and my family. This means a lot to us, to get this cleared up. To clear my brother’s name. To clear his memory.”

“It wasn’t for revenge though, right? It’s done. We don’t want to make any more trouble.”

“No.” I gave it some thought. “It’s done. It was more like...justice.”

“Good. I can live with justice. Here comes your ride.”

A dinged-up, rusted-out beater Sonata pattered through the security gate, rolling up the driveway and navigating around the obstacle parked cars. Just like any gentleman would, Cesar opened the rear door and I slid in. He shut the door firmly and I waved the nice FBI special agent goodbye. “221 Buswell Street, Kenmore Square.”

“Like I don’t know that.” A pair of hazel eyes studied me in the rearview mirror, identical to mine. His new spiky blonde haircut still shocked me. “So, Double Z? How’d it go?”

“You’re a free man, Stefan. They bought it. They all think you’re dead.”

Spinning the steering wheel with the heel of his right hand, we returned to the street. “You’re the best, Zee. Truly. I owe you big.”

“True. But you were right.” I dug through my bag to check on things. “Manny had that

house wired tight. Infrared cameras, heat-sensors, pressure pads under the oriental rugs, invisible key laser ports. It was a good plan, using your debt to get me in there. I never would've made it into his office, otherwise."

"But *you* contacted the FBI and suggested they use you to take Manny out." Stefan happily tapped the wheel with his fingertips. "Brilliant! And the reward money from the museum we talked about? What's up with that?"

"It's still ten million dollars. I pretended I didn't know about it." Tipping my head back against the seat, I closed my eyes for a beat. My blood sugar level was somewhere down below my knees. "Agent Mayas said the fibbies will help me claim it."

"Excellent." Stefan paused. "And you'll take care of Mom and the twins, right? When I'm...gone?"

"Of course, I will. I always do." Making my final decision, I reached back into my bag, feeling very sorry for my poor, desperate, and terminally unlucky brother. Stefan was so bright, so engaging, but he was always chasing after the easy money the wrong way and placing his trust in the wrong people. "I have something else. A surprise for you."

"Really, Zee?" He smiled his goofy crooked smile, the smile I remembered from our childhood, that dumb innocent smile etched forever in my heart "What is it?"

We cleared the overhanging canopy of leafed-out maples. Sunlight streamed into the car, fracturing against the slim lines of the colorless D class baguette diamonds set into the peerless layers of guilloche enamel I held in my hands. Hundreds of miniature rainbows danced across the Sonata's ceiling like the reflections from a spinning mirrored disco ball. Peter Karl Faberge had truly been an artist of staggering and monumental genius.

"What is it, you ask?" Reaching over the front seat, I dropped the imperial Easter egg into Stefan's lap. "It's your second chance."