

BLACKWELL & BERRY, PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

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Excerpt:

The Crescent Moon displayed, sold and auctioned paintings to the world's upper crust. In keeping, the gallery looked a little overfed, but otherwise healthy. I'm not an art aficionado, but even I recognized enough names to know that the gallery had its finger on the pulse of popular, if overly pricey, artistic taste.

I introduced myself as Jason Brandt and told her I worked for a wealthy collector who wished to remain anonymous. It wasn't very original, but money talks just as loud in the art world as it does anyplace else - and when money talks everyone shuts up and listens.

"So who is he?"

"Who's who?"

"Are you always this coy, Mr. Brandt? What if I guessed his name?"

"Let's not confuse the issue by bringing too many people into it."

She made a face and turned her back to me. "You're not funny," she declared. "If he wants his privacy all you had to do is say so."

"I did say so. What he really wants is a Delgado, Ritchie, or Frascetti."

"We had a Delgado, but it was stolen. You must have read about it."

"No. You can't get any more?"

She stared at me with small fires burning in the depths of her eyes. "You're very insolent."

Yeah, but I could tell that she liked it.

"And what are you, Ms. Knight?"

"What do you mean?"

"I place you at 24 years old, single. You live in a one-bedroom apartment in the West End, and drive a sporty little car you really can't afford. You like cats, but your landlord won't let you keep one. After work you like to hit a coffee bar before going out to the theatre - usually with a girlfriend, sometimes alone. If you don't go out, you curl up at home with a good book. You wouldn't mind if some handsome man invited you to go sailing sometime, but it just never seems to happen...except in your

dreams. It's a nice life, but somehow it's not quite nice enough. How am I doing? You can stop me any time."

She pursed her lips.

"I'm 25. You've been spying on me."

"If I had I wouldn't have missed on your age."

"So I'm a stereotype. That's what you're saying, isn't it? A typical, deluded, West End, white, yuppie girl with artistic pretensions. Well...that's nice to know."

Her tone dripped sarcasm on the expensively carpeted floor. I'm not sure what you get that out with, but I was sure I didn't have any of it with me.

"You know, you can be different if you want to be."

"I thought you came here to look at paintings."

It was at times like these that I wished I'd listened to my guidance counsellor's admonitions to think ahead and plan things out. And keep my mouth shut in class.

"So who's standing in your way? Show me around."

She did. Going into rapturous detail about the artist's "school," his early influences, and the subtle themes and variations that sat poised in between other subtle themes and variations, if we only we had the perspicacity to see them.

I didn't.

In between her speeches I kept complimenting her - on how her eyes matched a particularly attractive hue of Woodland Brown in an oil on canvas, or how her smile gave new life to a water colour on vellum. She must have thought I was a total flake, but apparently I was the best entertainment going because she didn't tell me to get lost.

Tara waved her hand at an acrylic on canvas that resembled a pigeon that had been crushed by a bus at a zebra crossing.

"I think Blake is giving us a glimpse into the world of a man who is torn between truth and love. What's your opinion, Mr. Brandt?"

"I think you have beautiful legs. They accentuate the black and white pattern employed by the artist. And at least they're parallel."

"Mr. Brandt, my legs are down there, and the painting is up here."

"I'm conceptualizing."

"Really? I do hope I'm not wasting my time with you."

"You won't be if you have dinner with me tonight."

"Does that mean you won't be buying anything? For your employer, I mean."

"I'm afraid he has his heart set on a Delgado."

"Well...we have a new artist coming in in the next few days whose work very much reminds me of Delgado's Mediterranean period. Interested? In art, Mr. Brandt. In art."

"We'll discuss it over a meal. I'll pick you up at eight," I replied.

She turned her back to me. Women have a habit of doing that.

"I really had planned to go to a coffee bar...but I think I can give it up for one night." I couldn't see her smile, but I could sense it.