The Futile Grab by Danielle Gorman

A man in his mid-twenties was seen by many as he casually made his way up the steps to the National Gallery. His stride was long, confident, but in no hurry as it passed under the spectacular pillars that marked the Portico Entrance to the impressive building. People swarmed all over Trafalgar Square, and with the unveiling of a new collection of art the Gallery was no exception.

 But the young man had no interest in the new collection.

He was dressed in a long, dark coat, dark jeans, and wore a pair of sun-glasses perched on the end of his nose—to block the glare from the freshly fallen snow on the ground. Though snow was on the ground, it hadn’t actually snowed in days. *It’s beginning to stick*, the young man thought to himself as he dodged a particularly large pile of it on the ground in front of him. Autumn was passing, and winter was setting in. The attractive young man—for he was very attractive, his build athletic and slim, his hair a shimmering blonde that any woman would envy, and a smile that could charm even the most stoic of persons—the attractive young man turned the collar of his coat up around his ears, in an attempt to block out the harsh wind. However, the bad weather wasn’t enough to keep away the crowds of eager art enthusiasts, anxious Gallery shareholders, and curious passerby. They flooded the front doors; all excited to catch a glimpse of the new Cezanne, or was it a Rembrandt? The young man, for once, didn’t care. There was only one piece of art that he was interested in that day.

“*Are you in position, Evan?*”

The young man raised his arm to scratch his ear, subtly making sure that the minute, flesh colored plastic was still secure within the hollow space there.

“Yes, sir.” He responded, lowering his arm. He was smirking.

“*Don’t call me ‘sir’, Evan. You know it makes me uncomfortable*.” The strong, Irish voice snapped.

“And why is that, again?” was Evan’s cheeky response.

“*Our different stations in life*—“

“Irrelevant.”

“—*remind me daily that I should not be locked up in this room, but out there risking my neck, instead of yours*.”

“And why is that?” Evan’s tone was flippant.

“*You know why!*”

Evan paused halfway up the steps to the building and checked the time on his watch. They were missing their window of opportunity, but something needed to be said to assuage his mate. “Listen, Duncan. I’ve done this many times. More than you have. I know your concerns,” Evan absent-mindedly twirled the small crested gold ring on his pinky, “But I can handle this. It’s just a simple grab. You’ve done the security checks, I presume?”

“*Of course I did. I ran the scan a few minutes ago. All cameras are functioning but I hacked the one in the security room. You know, to keep an eye on our friends at Interpol*.”

“How can you tell that the guards are from Interpol?” Evan laughed, astonished at his friends powers of observation.

“*Let’s just say there are some familiar faces in uniform today. Agent Granger I can tell for sure, that puffed-up dandy, and maybe even Johnson. And you know you treated Johnson shoddily after you went out with her to get off of those theft charges back in ’08. ‘A woman scorned and all’, mate. Try to be inconspicuous, please*.”

“Not in my nature,” Evan replied, winking to some girls who passed by, giggling in response.

“*No flirting, Reynolds*.” Said a new voice; deeper, more serious.

Evan cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Of course, Brax.” He subconsciously straightened his posture, hearing the voice of his more experienced partner, Braxton Grey. “Are you here?”

“A man of your caliber would have been able to pick me out before I came over the comms unit.”

“A man of my caliber has an eye for art, not people.” Evan glanced behind him and saw a tourist, wearing a blatant union jack shirt and camouflage pants, taking his photograph. “Ah, I see.” He observed the garishly dressed man for a few more moments, then turned away. “You know you look positively ghastly. And we had discussed you arriving a bit earlier than this. When *did* you arrive?”

“*Doesn’t matter when I got here, Reynolds. Just keep doing your job, and hurry it up, I can see you dawdling out here*.”

“Set the cameras on me, have you?” Evan laughed.

Duncan was the one who responded and his tone was resentful. “*I did say that I hacked them, didn’t I?*”

“Yes sir, you did.” *I was making a joke*, Evan thought sardonically. He held the door open for a young family before entering the National Gallery himself. He was pleased to be out of Brax’s sight, if not his hearing. Sometimes Brax…rubbed him the wrong way; made him uneasy. The uneasy feeling vacated his body as soon as he stepped into the artistic environment, and yet he felt more afraid as he passed the many people going in the direction of the new art collection.

When he was away from the greater amount of people and making his way up another flight of stairs towards the other rooms in the Gallery, he began again, “Did anyone ever tell you, Duncan, that you are the best tech man we’ve ever had on a job? That even though you come from a farming family in the middle of Ireland, you were able to get a full-ride scholarship to Oxford, and graduate the first in your class there? That even though simple humor can be lost on you, your IQ is *so far* above my own, that—”

“*Alright, that’s enough Reynolds*.” Brax gruffly interrupted.

“*Thanks, mate*.” came the grateful reply of Duncan.

“You know as well as I that a bit of an ego-boost is necessary for the best of us, Braxton.”

“*Don’t call me that, Reynolds*.”

“Don’t call me Reynolds, Braxton.”

Duncan cut in quickly. “*Do I have to hear this argument again? Evan, just do your job, I’m getting antsy in here*.”

Evan chuckled. “Give me a minute to get to the right room.”

He passed a few stragglers, uninterested in the new collection just as he was. Uninterested is a strong word however, for Evan was never uninterested in any piece of art. On his lowest days, an original Renoir could work wonders on his gloom. He made his way up one staircase entering a room containing Van Gogh’s and Cezanne’s. He spent a few minutes admiring the art, trying not to catch the attention of a couple on the other side of the room; the less people who saw him, the better. Evan passed through the doorway to the next room, immediately recognizing artists from the Impressionist era. Seeing no one in this room, he passed the Pissarro’s and Seurat’s without another glance.

*“Tell me again, why we can’t just take it while the majority of security is focused on that new exhibit? Wouldn’t that be better than trying to take it tonight, when the total-lockdown descends tonight after closing?”*

“Duncan, mate,” Evan rubbed his eyes as he walked, “How many times must I tell you? A grab at night, with the highest security possible, is a better bet than less security in the daytime. If anyone saw my face and,” he shuddered, “recognized it, we would be in more trouble than if I got caught by the police.”

*“Oh, so you want to get caught by the police, now?”*

Evan ignored him, and kept walking.

His footsteps echoed in a rich, hollow sound, the slight heel on his expensive, Italian leather shoes making a *click, click* as he walked. He stepped across the threshold of the more well-known Impressionist painters and his breath caught in his throat, as it always did when he came close to the object he intended to steal. And there it was, blanketed in a soft light against a lilac wall.

*The Beach at Trouville* by Claude Monet. Nestled between *Snow Scene at Argenteuil* and *The Gare St-Lazare*, *The Beach* looked positively small. It seemed, at first glance, half-finished, the figures in the painting looking bland and missing details in their face and clothing. But to Evan, the simple painting took his breath away. He leaned close to it, smelled the muted scent of the paint and noticed the texture of the painting was a bit sandy. Evan knew that when Monet had done this piece, he had most likely been on the beach, with his wife most likely the inspiration for the woman on the left. Evan felt the steady beat of his heart speed up, and his mouth began to water, as if the tiny painting before him could fulfill his most insatiable hunger. He could have stood there for hours, admiring the detail of each brush stroke, but shook himself out of his admiring stupor. He had a job to do.

He turned his well trained eye on the other paintings in the room, quickly making a count of them. 25 total, including *The Beach*, and containing other Monet masterpieces like *Irises*, *Water* *Lilies*, and the *Japanese* *Bridge*. Looking at them all, Evan felt an intense desire in the pit of his stomach. Before every grab, Evan would have to deal with this—this—*addiction*. He didn’t want to take just *The* *Beach*, he wanted them *all*.

*“Evan, you’ve got that look on your face. Snap out of it!”*

Evan turned towards the security camera located in the top left corner of the room. “Duncan,” he growled softly, a warning tone to his voice. He didn’t like it when his subordinate pointed out his biggest flaw. Duncan smartly stopped talking. It wasn’t the first time this had happened. Last year, at the Louvre—No, he wasn’t going to think about how close a call *that* had been. Evan was sorry to say that the second floor, west corridor loo would never be the same after they had, well, maybe blown it up a little. On accident. Evan blinked rapidly, shaking out his arms, bringing himself back to the present.

“Everything is great in here. I’ll be ready tonight, chaps.”

*“Good.”*

It was Brax who had responded, and something in his voice almost made Evan question him.

Almost.

Evening came. The Gallery would be closing in fifteen minutes. Evan began to cross Trafalgar Square. On his back was a black rucksack. As he pulled his coat tighter around his body, he felt the hard metal of the screwdriver in his inner coat pocket press against his ribcage. The flakes of snow that had been falling softly began to fall much harder, the breeze picking up and turning into a full force gale. It was as if London knew a crime was about to befall one of its most revered art galleries. When Evan quickened his steps, the people around him most likely assumed he was trying to escape the frigid, blustery weather for the nearest building, which happened to be the National Gallery. But Evan, who was on a tight schedule, knew better. He entered the building for the second time that day, and noticed that it was much emptier than it had been that morning. The horde of admirer’s who had come to see the new exhibit had seen it and gone. *No true appreciation for art*, Evan thought despairingly. *What is happening to the education of people today?* He made his way up the stairs to his right, passing the Van Gogh’s and Cezanne’s without a second glance, a true man on a mission. Before he reached the room containing *The Beach*—his prize of the night—he ducked into the loo.

*“Anyone in there, Evan?”*

Evan ducked to see under the stall door, and saw that the room was empty. “Just me.”

*“Here’s hoping that no one else shows up. But just in case—”*

“Yes, I know Duncan, I’ve done this hundreds of times.” Evan casually examined his profile in the mirror before speaking again. “Have you seen Brax, by the way? I haven’t heard from him since the Square this morning. It’s not like him to disappear on the day of a grab.”

*“He’s probably off looking in a mirror or something.”*

Evan snorted, but didn’t say anything about his recent glance in the looking-glass.

“All right, if you know what your doing—” Duncan’s tone was condescending, “—then I should probably warn you that a security guard is making his rounds of the lavatories and he’s heading your way.”

Evan was already pulling a screwdriver out of his pocket. He entered the nearest stall, stood on the seat, and wedged the screwdriver between the cracks of the ceiling plaster. The large rectangular piece of ceiling easily gave way. Evan pushed it out of the way and hoisted himself up into the small space amongst the tangled, intricate bits of piping.

*“Settle in, mate, you’re going to be there for a while.”*

“Will do, sir.” Evan placed the ceiling tile back in its place, leaving a sliver of a crack open so that he could see the door to the loo. He settled in.

Forty-seven minutes later, Evan removed the ceiling tile and dropped down, narrowly landing his right foot in the toilet. Relieved, he stood in the stall, gingerly stretching his arms and legs as he mentally prepared himself. Room 43, containing *The Beach* amongst the other Monet’s, was straight ahead as he left the lavatory.

“Ok, Duncan, I’m on the move.”

*“Alright, mate. Coast in clear in all directions. Make it quick though, I thought I saw someone lingering on the floor beneath you. He might’ve left, but I’m not sure.”*

“I’ll try not to worry about it.” Evan replied sarcastically. He moved as quickly and quietly as possible, his footsteps still echoing across the gleaming wooden floor. The spacious, lilac room was bathed in a soft glow coming from an emergency light in the center of the ceiling. The light didn’t reach very far into the room; However, Evan didn’t need the scarce light to know where *The Beach* was located. He made his way over to the gilded, gold frame containing the delicately painted women sitting gracefully by the sea.

“All right, lovely,” He murmured softly, arms outstretched, taking a step closer to *The Beach*, “I’m ready to—”

*“Evan, stop!”*

*Bugger!* After dozens of grabs, Evan knew when there was a problem. The problem was easily identifiable by the tone of voice he received through his ear-bud. And by Duncan’s tone, he could tell something horribly amiss had happened.

“Duncan, what is it? Do I need to get out of here?”

*“You—you’re not going to believe—Brax is her.”*

Evan sighed, relief filling his person like a river filling a canal. The step he had unconsciously taken away from the painting he refilled. Irritated with Duncan’s false alarm, he snapped, “Duncan, it’s just Brax. He must’ve finished whatever business he was taking care of earlier—”

Duncan scoffed, the sound oddly loud and scratchy in Evan’s ear; and when he spoke again, it was as if Duncan had matured several years before today*. “You don’t get it, Evan. I don’t think it was the sort of business you’re thinking about that kept him away. Anyway, he’s coming your way, and there’s a security guard hot on his tail.”*

“What?”

*“Bullocks, mate, don’t you get it? Brax is leading the security guards* right to you*!”*

Evan was speechless. He didn’t know what to think. He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know how to react, if this piece of news was true. Brax—leading the security guards to Room 43, in the midst of a grab he helped design and carry out? Not only did it not make sense, it was downright preposterous!

“I’m sorry, dear chap, but you must be mistaken.” Evan nonetheless took a cautious step towards the painting. Being closer to it, instead of farther away, made more sense to him, even with the security guards heading straight towards him. Evan felt safer when he could smell the paint and see the minute detail in the brush strokes. Say what you will, but Evan was nothing if not an art enthusiast.

*Or addict*, he thought darkly, remembering the many times he had made a grab—the sheer adrenaline rush, the way his hands would begin to sweat when he neared a priceless piece of art.

*“Evan—what—what do I do?”*

“First, you calm down.”

*“Calm down!”*

“Yes, or I’ll begin swearing at you for making me lose my cool.” Evan took a deep breath. “Here’s what I want you to do…”

Room 43 of the National Gallery contained many priceless paintings, from Monet to Monat. It also contained one Evan Reynolds. Evan was motionless. His father had always instilled in him the belief that emotions were for those who were weak, unless those emotions could make you some money. His mother, not the sanest of creatures, had advised him to, nonetheless, guard his reactions to undesirable situations. And so, he had trained himself a long time ago not to react rashly. A single drop of sweat slipped off of his left pinky, splashing silently to the floor as he stood still and silent in the center of room 43. That single sign of nerves was the only thing he allowed escape his physical body. Art, along with intense nerves undeniably dampened his hands. Waves of anger, disbelief, and fear washed over his body in mild convulsions. If what Duncan said was true, Brax would walk through that doorway any second with a security guard in tow. Why? Evan had absolutely no idea. If his action were traitorous, Evan was not the kind of man you wanted to double-cross—too many friends in high places. If his actions were in some way connected to the positive outcome of this night, Evan had no idea how that could be possible.

Moments later, footsteps were heard in the hall before him. After spending so much time with Brax, Evan could distinguish his confident step to the more timid one of the guard, which was an odd trait of one whose sole job was to responsibly keep priceless objects safe. They were soon in view, coming around the corner, immediately setting their eyes on Evan’s immobile person.

“Evan.”
 “Brax.”

They stood, twenty feet apart from each other, sizing the other up—wondering what the other would say, or do. Would Brax laugh, and say this was all a joke? Would Evan pull a miraculous stunt, and throw himself out the window before he was caught by the guard?

Would Evan get out alive? His immediate future—if he even had one—was uncertain.

Evan slowly began to move—to Brax, it must’ve looked like he was beginning to circle the other man, so Brax moved as well, the security guard scrambling to keep pace with his bewildering ally. However, Evan was moving to place himself closer to *The Beach*, closer to something that made him safe, and farther from something that scared him so bad it made sweat drip from his fingers. Evan was only feet in front of *The Beach*; he took a few hesitant steps backward until his feet hit the wall. Brax didn’t say a word about it. Evan reached behind him and felt the gilded edge of the painting against his smooth tips of his fingers, fingers which had stolen more paintings than Evan could claim to years of life. The cool frame put his erratic heart at peace, and Evan waited for the verdict of a trial that was sure to sentence him to death.