

PRAISE FOR CLAY G. SMALL AND
THE FORGER'S FORGERY

"*The Forger's Forgery* . . . was a great read, cleverly constructed, very entertaining, exciting, and humoristic."

—FRISO LAMMERTSE, Author of *Van Meegeren's Vermeers*

"With his first novel, *Heels over Head*, Clay Small made his debut as a gifted writer. In *The Forger's Forgery*, Small weaves a suspenseful thriller set between Dallas and the art world of Amsterdam, a city close to his heart. It's fast-paced and full of conflict, twists, and surprises. I found it impossible to put down."

—BRADFORD GARDNER, Managing Director,
Boston Financial Management

"Clay has a gift for engaging the reader, taking them to places they want to go, entertaining them, and using his legal knowledge to create multiple mysteries that the reader looks forward to solving."

—RAYMOND JACOBSON, McDermott, Will & Emery

"Perhaps one reason why *The Forger's Forgery* is a complex mystery—and yet realistic—is that it is based on a true story of master forger Han van Meegeren, who forged the works of Dutch masters in the 1930s and 1940s in a notorious crime that was clever, unprecedented, and difficult to solve. In *The Forger's Forgery*, author Clay G. Small is masterful at his depiction of Dutch culture and people, the art world, and the forgers who influence its development, making their illicit money on creations that are masterful in their own right. As the mystery evolves, the art worlds of both Amsterdam and Texas come to life, as environments are influenced by forgery events that connect disparate lives and people, changing and challenging the art world."

—D. DONOVAN, Senior Reviewer, Midwest Book Review

“*The Forger’s Forgery* taught this Amsterdam resident a thing or two about the city I live in. The intriguing history around Han van Meegeren is exciting. Clay Small combines cultural detail, rich geographic description, and countless plot twists to create an engaging and satisfying novel. Absolutely masterful!”

—KATE GORDON, Amsterdam

“Intricate plot, characters you’d like to get to know (well . . . not all of them), and just enough non-fiction to be both fun and educational. That’s Clay G. Small’s latest book in the Henry Lindon saga, *The Forger’s Forgery*. Clay’s depictions are so clear you can almost see the yellow-stained fingers holding a Gauloises cigarette. And when finished, you find yourself excited to see that Clay leaves a hint that the saga will continue.”

—CRAIG ENOCH, Justice, Texas Supreme Court (Ret.)

“What a ride! In *The Forger’s Forgery*, Clay Small skillfully weaves together fact and fiction while taking the reader on a journey into lesser-known aspects of the art world accompanied by the loveable, though fallible, Henry Lindon.”

—LEANNE OLIVER, General Counsel,
PepsiCo Foods North America

THE
FORGER'S
FORGERY

a novel

CLAY G. SMALL



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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First Edition

I'm big on keep'n in mind the difference between havin'
somethin' to do and havin' to do somethin'.

—Marvin Lindon

PART I

AMSTERDAM

1

The overnight flight across the Atlantic was turbulent and sleepless. As his taxi entered Amsterdam's center city, he was grateful for the serenity of a Sunday morning in January. At least for the moment, he was removed from his domestic turmoil simmering on the other side of the ocean.

Henry reread the letter from the University of Amsterdam about his stay as a visiting professor. His living accommodations were to be at apartment 2 at Roetersstraat 8-1, and his contact was Senior Professor Bernadette Gordon. He rechecked his information to make sure she lived in apartment 3. When the taxi pulled up in front of Roetersstraat 8-1, Henry was pleased to see that the dark brick, nineteenth-century building was directly across the street from the university's glass-and-steel urban campus.

With the driver's help, Henry wrestled his two oversized bags onto the sidewalk. Adjacent to Roetersstraat 8-1 he noticed multiple block-long bike racks supporting hundreds of student bicycles. He dragged his bags to the building's door and pushed the intercom button for Professor Gordon's apartment. A cheerful woman's voice answered, "*Goedemorgen.*"

"Hi, it's Henry Lindon, the visiting professor from Southerland University in Dallas."

"Oh, yes, we have been expecting you. I will buzz you in."

Henry wondered who the "we" were. With the door's buzz, Henry

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stepped into a tiny foyer, about a yard square, littered with flyers for various takeout and delivery restaurants. Getting his bags into the foyer was made even more difficult by the bicycle pump wedged into one corner. With trepidation, he looked up the nearly vertical, ladder-like staircase. The narrow steps could barely accommodate a half of one of his feet.

He began the Herculean task of hauling one of his huge bags up the tight staircase. Twenty steps later he reached the first landing, relieved to see the number 2 on the door. Breathing heavily, he heard the apartment door above him open and then a cheerful jangling noise.

As someone descended the curving stairs toward him, a voice called out in a Dutch accent, "Hello! Welcome to Amsterdam." Because of the turn in the stairs leading to the floor above him, Henry couldn't immediately see the entire person who was descending. First to appear were black running shoes and then slender legs in spandex, followed by a black sweater with rolled-up sleeves and dozens of silver bracelets bouncing on a woman's left arm. Finally, he came face-to-face with a striking, willowy woman with straight, jet-black hair cut in a sweeping hipster style, whose face-framing bangs rested on rectangular silver-framed glasses. She was blessed with the dewy, pale complexion and high cheek color of a Dutch girl raised on fresh country cheese.

Giving Henry a surprisingly firm handshake, she said, "I am Professor Bernadette Gordon. It is nice to meet you in person. You find me getting ready for my morning run."

"Pleased to meet you. That's some set of stairs."

"Oh, you will get used to it. They will keep you fit," Bernadette said pulling a red circle key ring out of her sweater pocket. "Let me show you your apartment." As she inserted the key into the door, she glanced down the stairs and said, "I see you have another bag. Did someone come with you?"

"No, I just wasn't sure what to pack. My wife, Marylou, will join me later. She's visiting our daughter and granddaughter in California before coming to Amsterdam." *Maybe she's coming, maybe not.*

“That is nice,” she said taking hold of Henry’s first bag. “I will wait in the apartment for you.”

Henry looked down the staircase; the trip down would be treacherous. “One slip and I’ll be an aching pile of bones at the bottom,” he said to himself.

Descending sideways while firmly gripping the banister, he eventually grabbed his second overstuffed bag and started manhandling it up stair by stair with his left hand, while pulling himself up the banister with his right. “With this bag banging on the stairs, I’ll wake the entire building,” he whispered.

“Excuse me, what did you say?” he heard from above. Looking up, he saw a young girl about eleven standing on the landing in front of his apartment. *Mini-me*, Henry thought. She had the same jet-black hair and creamy complexion as her mother.

“Hello there, just talking to myself.” He was greeted by a smile, then silence, and a neutral hand wave.

As he finally approached the landing, he realized it was too narrow for his bag, the girl, and himself. His lower back was starting to cramp. Trying to catch his breath, he called out, “Professor Gordon, can I speak with you?”

Bernadette’s head appeared out of the open door. She looked at Henry, then at the girl. “Oh, where are my manners? Professor Lindon, I am pleased to introduce my daughter, Lola.”

Henry was looking for help, not an introduction. But, self-conscious about the size of his bag, he didn’t want to make matters worse by appearing impolite. As he reset his grip on the bag so he could extend his right hand to the girl, he lost his balance, tilted backward, and began to flail his arms. He made a stabbing grab for the rail and yanked himself forward into a face plant on the stairs. He saved himself from falling, but his bag hurtled down the stairs. It slid, tumbled, and then it bounced. Miraculously, halfway down the stairs, the racket stopped when it wedged itself under the bannister.

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No one moved. Wide-eyed, mother and daughter stared at Henry. Then, Lola put her hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle. Bernadette made a feeble attempt to shush Lola, but quickly joined her daughter in peals of laughter with hands on her knees.

Henry still lay flat on the stairs trying to collect his dignity. *So much for a good first impression!* Rising to his knees, he looked up at the laughing mother and daughter and said, "Nice to meet you, Lola," igniting further merriment.

"Well, Professor Lindon," said a smiling Bernadette, "I think that is what you Americans call a grand entrance! Let us try to move you and your bags safely inside."

After retrieving his bag, Henry entered the small apartment composed of two modestly decorated rooms. Bernadette pushed open the French doors separating the main room and the bedroom, revealing a room dominated by its ceiling. The thick and complex flourish of nineteenth-century decorative plaster gave the apartment an air of old-world charm. The room's bay window had a window seat—a perch from which to view the active street life below.

Bernadette asked, "Is this nice for you?"

"It's perfect," Henry answered, walking back into the main room. "I'm looking forward to getting to know the city."

"Professor Lindon, this neighborhood is called Plantage. It is more leafy and quiet than the rest of the city center. Down the street is the oldest zoo in Europe, and in the other direction is one of the last windmills in the city. I think you will find it very nice here."

"I'm sure I will, and please, call me Henry."

"Oh, very well, and you should call me Bernadette. Lola and I would be most happy if you would join us tonight for a simple dinner to welcome you to the university. We eat early, six o'clock."

"Yes," Henry responded a little too quickly. "That is very kind of you."

As mother and daughter walked back up the stairs to their own apartment, Bernadette called back. "Today will be an uncommonly warm day,

so enjoy your afternoon. All of Amsterdam will be outside enjoying the weather . . . and . . . be careful on the stairs.” A wave of her hand set her bracelets chiming.



After unpacking his bags, Henry put on his running clothes and went for a jog down Roetersstraat in an effort to energize himself. Turning left on Nieuwe Prinsengracht, he ran along the canal, past permanently moored houseboats in various stages of decay or renovation. On the stern of one boat, a skull-and-crossbones pirate flag and the Amsterdam city flag of three x’s on a background of red and black waved in the breeze. Beneath the flags, a man lay spread-eagle under a blanket. Henry hoped he was sleeping off Saturday night.

He took another left at the Amstel, where the houseboats on the river morphed into house barges. One well-preserved barge had been fitted with beautiful Frank Lloyd Wright–style stained-glass windows reflecting cheerfully in the afternoon sunshine. Across the street from the barges were rows of carefully preserved seventeenth-century townhouses. He continued up the river to the majestic Amstel Hotel, headquarters for Nazi military brass during the occupation.

The streets were alive with walkers, dogs, joggers, bicycles, baby carriages, and café sitters, all taking advantage of the sunny afternoon. The metal tables and chairs of the café had been rearranged so that all the patrons faced the sun. Plying the river were a dozen glass-top canal boats showing global tourists the wonders of Amsterdam.

As Henry jogged over a canal bridge, he heard opera. He stopped and down the canal spotted a gray boat that looked like a miniature destroyer—without its superstructure. The boat’s dozen passengers blended their voices melodically into what sounded like an Italian opera. As the boat glided under the bridge, Henry and the singers exchanged cheerful waves.

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Leaning over the bridge railing, Henry took a deep breath. Things were finally going his way. Amsterdam and Dallas could not be more different. He was in a place where his problems could fade away. *But would his issues boomerang back if Marylou decided to join him in Amsterdam?* He made a silent pledge to focus his thoughts on the moment.

Back at the street corner of his apartment, Henry stopped at the neighborhood wine store. The inventory twinkled in the afternoon light. He dithered back and forth between an overpriced Chassagne-Montrachet and a reasonably priced chardonnay.

As he walked back into the apartment building with his purchase in hand, Henry's thoughts were on dinner with the beautiful academic. He wondered if she invited all visiting professors to dinner. Or had she seen something special in him?

He showered and tried on three different shirts, choosing a black one with a slimming effect. Uncharacteristically, he spent five minutes ensuring his slightly unruly wavy hair was properly brushed. He thought about calling Marylou but decided to wait a day to let emotions settle. Finally, he made a cup of green tea, sat on the window seat, and watched the bustling flow of students across the street at the University of Amsterdam. He conjectured as to who might soon be in his class.

Below him, he saw the building's door open. Walking down the stairs with an empty canvas bag in one hand and a cell phone at her ear was Lola. He wondered where her mother was. "Is Lola out on a busy city street by herself?" he asked himself.

He watched her go down Roetersstraat, talking cheerfully on her phone and then turning left out of sight. His curiosity piqued, he stayed seated, watching for her return. Twenty minutes later, with the phone still glued to her ear, Lola reappeared with a long loaf of Italian bread protruding from her bag. She pulled a key ring out of her jeans pocket and went up the stairs.

■ ■ ■

At six o'clock, Henry knocked on Bernadette's door; it opened with the tinkling sound of bracelets. She was wearing black jeans, bright white Converse sneakers, and a loosely fitted white blouse. Henry admired the self-confidence of a woman who didn't dress for her dinner guest.

Bernadette's apartment was about twice the size of Henry's from what he could tell. The walls were hung with scores of oil-paint-stained wooden palettes of various sizes, shapes, colors, and ages. The palettes announced the apartment as a place dedicated to art.

Two things caught Henry's eye: Lola in an apron stirring something on the stove, and, in a corner of the room, two six-foot-high neatly stacked columns of the same book. The apartment shone with Dutch domesticity—all precise and tidy.

Politely accepting the bottle of Chassagne-Montrachet, Bernadette said, "Please excuse our mess. I am preparing for a series of book events in the coming weeks." She walked over to the piles and pulled one of the books off the top. It was titled *Perfect Strangers*.

"This is for you, Henry. Please sit," she said, gesturing to one of two couches in the room. "I treat myself to a cold Jenever as an aperitif before dinner—would that be nice for you?"

"Absolutely," Henry responded. Turning to the kitchen, he called out, "Good evening, Lola. Are you tonight's chef?"

Still stirring slowly, she responded, "Good evening, Professor Lindon. We are pleased to have you join us. I hope you will find my cooking acceptable. It is only spaghetti."

Bernadette returned with two tulip glasses of Jenever frosted by the freezer. Handing a glass to Henry, she lifted hers and said, "Welcome to the University of Amsterdam. Here we say *proost*."

Henry raised his glass, saying, "Proost." He took an immediate liking to the frigid aniseed-flavored liquor.

"Please, tell me about your book," Henry said, turning over the book in his hands and examining Bernadette's flattering profile photo on the back cover. "Is *Perfect Strangers* your first book?"

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"No, but it is my first novel. My other books are about techniques of Dutch artists—boring academic books no one reads. This one is historical fiction based on the infamous Dutch forger named Han van Meegeren. Do you know about him and his forged Vermeers?"

"I certainly know Vermeer. His painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is a favorite of mine. But I'm not . . ."

Before Henry could finish, Lola interrupted with an athletic hurdle over the back of the sofa, plopping down next to her mother. With a wave of the pale blue SPA water bottle in her hand, she said, "Mother, please, no van Meegeren tonight. I am so tired of that evil little man. Please, since Professor Lindon is here, can we talk about the United States?" Turning to face Henry, she beamed an uninhibited, toothy smile. "If Mother's book sells well in the United States, we will visit there. I want to go to Las Vegas! I want to meet Jerry Springer. Do you know him?"

Embarrassed that anyone in Holland would have any idea about Jerry Springer, Henry answered, "No, I do not. Why are you interested in Jerry Springer?"

"His show is on every afternoon at four o'clock. My friend Emma told me that *The Jerry Springer Show* is about what really goes on in the United States."

Bernadette laughed at her inquisitive child. "We will see about that. I promise not to talk about 'that evil little man' anymore tonight, other than to say that Tuesday afternoon at three o'clock I will be lecturing at the university about van Meegeren. It will be part of my class on Dutch art history. Would you be interested in attending the lecture?"

"I'd be honored," Henry said with an appreciative nod.

Bernadette stood and, lightly touching Henry's shoulder on her way to the narrow dining room, said, "Wonderful, I think you will enjoy it."

Over a spaghetti dinner complemented by rocket salad and warm Italian bread spread with pungent garlic butter, the conversation focused on the coming weeks' activities at the University of Amsterdam and Lola's

school. After dinner, the trio retired back to the living room couches with cups of coffee.

“Lola, you are a wonderful cook. Where did you learn your way around a kitchen?”

“From my mother’s cookbooks. She prefers to stay out of both the kitchen and the grocery store,” Lola replied guilelessly.

Henry was curious to watch the mother’s reaction to her precocious daughter.

“That is certainly the truth!” Bernadette cheerfully responded. “In Holland when children begin what we call *middelbare school*, they are given a fair amount of freedom. They have their own phones, bigger bikes, manage their money, and are responsible for their schedules. We believe that with freedom comes responsibility. For Lola it is going out shopping and cooking. It works well for us.”

“That’s wonderful,” said Henry. “I wish it was the same in America. Today we have ‘helicopter parents’ constantly hovering over their children. If they could, they’d wrap their kids in a cocoon of bubble wrap. I’m not an expert, but I think helicoptering reflects an endemic sense of anxiety in America.”

“Oh, that is sad. We Dutch may be boring and steady but certainly not anxious. With the pace of change, perhaps we should be. But as you will find, all most of us want is *gezellig*.”

Henry found Bernadette’s back-of-the-throat pronunciation of the “gugh” charming. He asked, “What is *gezellig*?”

“That was nice pronunciation of a difficult Dutch word, Henry. The word does not translate well into English. It is best to think of it as a cozy time with friends, like tonight. After you have been here for a while, you will understand. One more thing before I forget. This building is obviously old, and unfortunately the heat goes out from time to time. Please knock on my door, no matter what the hour, if your heat fails.”

“I’ll do that,” Henry said as he got to his feet. “But now I need some sleep. If I don’t see you tomorrow, I’ll be at the lecture Tuesday afternoon. Good night and thank you both for a beautiful evening.”

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Less than an hour later, Henry was sound asleep with his copy of *Perfect Strangers* open across his chest. He dreamt he was skating down a frozen Amsterdam canal, stride for stride, with Jerry Springer.

2

Tuesday afternoon, Henry sat in the back of a cavernous lecture hall at the University of Amsterdam watching the students file in, open their backpacks, and turn on their computers. Cheerful conversations bounced around the room. Two minutes before class was scheduled to begin, Henry heard the jingle of bracelets announcing Bernadette's entry into the hall. She bustled down the aisle with a large brown leather saddlebag hanging at her hip from a long strap across her shoulder. She carried a metal coffee container and wore forest-green slacks with a matching vest and green Converse sneakers.

With practiced movements, she removed a power stick from her bag, plugged it into the lectern, and set down her lecture notes. She scanned the lecture hall and made eye contact with Henry, giving him a coquettish wave with the fingers wrapped around her coffee container.

"Damn, she's hot," Henry murmured.

"Excuse me?" said the young woman to his right.

"Sorry . . . it's . . . just so hot in here, don't you think?" said a flustered Henry. He was relieved that Bernadette had started her slide presentation.

On the screen flashed a photograph of her book cover:

Perfect Strangers

Bernadette Gordon

“Today we examine a subject close to my heart—Han van Meegeren. On the screen is the cover of my novel, *Perfect Strangers*, based on the life of van Meegeren. More on that book later.

“Art forgery has been with us for hundreds of years. As you can imagine, the unmasking of a forgery in a museum collection is a museum director’s darkest nightmare. There is no question that the world’s art collections are replete with forgeries yet to be exposed. As the price of fine art has skyrocketed, forgery has flourished.

“In Han van Meegeren, Holland produced the most colorful forger of all time. His forgeries were proudly displayed in the world’s greatest museums and private collections. But he cannot be considered the greatest art forger of all time. The greatest are those whose names we do not know—they have not been caught!”

Stepping out from behind the lectern, Bernadette straightened her shoulders and stretched her neck. Smiling broadly, she continued, “But before we can talk about the forger van Meegeren, we must at least mention the genius who led to van Meegeren’s infamous forgeries—the transcendent Vermeer.” The screen filled with the image of Vermeer’s famous *The Art of Painting*. Henry sat up straighter. He felt emboldened by the fact he knew the painting was generally considered a self-portrait of the artist at work in his studio. He wondered if his undergraduate days as an art history major might finally pay off.

Taking a moment for her students to appreciate the masterpiece, Bernadette continued, “We all know about the great ‘Sphinx of Delft,’ an artist whose world-famous paintings capture timeless calm and restraint. He inspires a cult-like following from both art aficionados and the man on the street.”

Bernadette clicked slowly and silently through some of Vermeer's most renowned paintings, including *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, *View of Delft*, *The Milkmaid*, *A Girl Asleep*, and *Little Street*. Students in the lecture hall pointed out their personal favorites to their friends.

"Is our fascination with Vermeer because we know so little about him? We know he lived in mid-seventeenth-century Delft, left only thirty-five accredited paintings, fathered fifteen children, and, in a staunchly Calvinist country, converted to Catholicism. He used unique yellows and ultramarine blue in his paintings. In that era, ultramarine was made from the lapis lazuli stone, which was more expensive than gold. He painted domestic scenes of women that remain vibrant centuries later. The great artist died young, penniless, and virtually unknown.

"But here are a few things about Vermeer that are often overlooked." Visibly warming to her subject matter, Bernadette slowly pressed her arms in and out as if playing an accordion. "Early in his career, he painted religious canvases that have little in common with the domestic scenes we cherish today."

On the screen flashed Vermeer's *Saint Praxedis* followed by *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*.

"These canvases and their religious themes are markedly different from Vermeer's domestic scenes renowned worldwide. There is no known transition from his early works to his beloved later genre. It is not uncommon for artists to have multiple creative periods and styles. Picasso, van Gogh, and Monet are just three examples.

"However, it was the stark differences between Vermeer's early paintings and his later masterpieces that van Meegeren ingeniously grasped to fuel his great fraud centuries later. Before we move on to van Meegeren, are there any questions about Vermeer?"

A sprinkling of hands went up, and Bernadette pointed to a student with a blond corona of hair, sitting in the middle of the hall. "Professor, those last two paintings you showed, the religious ones. Do you like them?"

"What art I do or do not favor is not relevant," responded Bernadette

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with a shrug of both shoulders and a mischievous smile. "But, as long as you asked . . . NO!

"One more question, and then we will take a quick break," Bernadette said, pointing to a tall, slouching student in the sixth row.

"Are art historians sure those two paintings—the ones you don't like—are Vermeers?" the young man asked. "They don't look anything like, you know, *The Milkmaid* or the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, or any of the others."

"Thanks for that," replied Bernadette. "You provided the perfect segue into the story of the criminal, and unlikely Dutch hero, Han van Meegeren. As we will see, he took full advantage of the discrepancies between Vermeer's early efforts and later styles. But now it is time for a coffee."

3

Henry trailed the students out of the lecture hall to the coffee kiosk line. The students in front of him ordered coffee and a stroopwafel. Henry copied the order and returned to the lecture hall. He was enjoying the stroopwafel's sweet, cinnamon syrup sandwiched between cracker-thin waffles, when he heard Bernadette admonish a student in the front row, "Please, enjoy a coffee but no eating in the lecture hall. It is not polite."

Henry discreetly slid his stroopwafel into his coat pocket and checked around him to see if anyone witnessed his *faux pas*. The student immediately to his left gave him a wink and said, "You are not the first."

Henry nodded, mouthing, "Thanks."

He looked up at the screen that held a photograph of a white-haired, dapper man sitting in a courtroom. It was the same photo of van Meegeren as on the front cover of *Perfect Strangers*.

Pointing at the image with her laser pointer, Bernadette began, "Here is where van Meegeren ended his career—in the dock, accused of trafficking in Dutch art treasures with the Nazi occupiers. More specifically, selling a Vermeer to the malevolent psychopath Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring. Göring was the Nazi who directed the Luftwaffe's destruction of Rotterdam on May 14, 1940. At the time of this photograph, van Meegeren was a self-acknowledged philanderer, drug addict,

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syphilitic, alcoholic, and, of course, a forger. But, first some background on his path to the courthouse.

“Van Meegeren was a *bon vivant* with the look of a leprechaun,” she said with a toss of her wrist that jangled her bracelets. “He began his career in The Hague specializing in society portraits and making a living sufficient to fuel his increasingly rampant alcoholism and infidelity. Copies of one of his works, a pencil drawing of Princess Juliana’s pet deer, became the most widely owned piece of art in the Netherlands.”

An image of the delicate drawing of the princess’s fawn lit up on the screen. “In the late 1920s, one in five households in the Netherlands owned a copy of this drawing.

“Van Meegeren was indisputably an accomplished artist. His turn to the dark side appears to have been sparked by his 1920 solo show at the Blessing Gallery. The art world had embraced modernism, and van Meegeren’s religious-themed canvases were viewed as out of step with the times. Critics dismissed them as being technically excellent but lacking any kind of inner creative life.

“By all accounts, van Meegeren was devastated by the critics’ rejection. He had great expectations for his role in society as a renowned artist. Predictably, failed expectation became the mother of resentment.”

Warming to her topic, Bernadette restarted her accordion arm gesture. Henry found the flow of her arms infatuating. She was totally unaffected and unguarded. He realized that spontaneity was a large part of her appeal.

“Van Meegeren left Holland for France, where forgery became his full-time job. Was it for the money or as a means of revenge against his critics? Forgery gave him the vehicle to both demonstrate his artistic prowess and make fools of the art critics who mistakenly certified his paintings as those of great masters. Whatever the true motivation, forgery proved incredibly lucrative, making van Meegeren the wealthiest artist of his time.

“He eventually made an ingenious breakthrough that paved the way for

his most successful forgeries—Bakelite.” Bernadette flashed up a photo of colorful pool balls made of the early plastic.

“In the mid-nineteenth century, art restorers discovered that alcohol dissolved new oil paint but had no effect on paint that had hardened over decades if not centuries. The alcohol test was key in testing a painting’s authenticity. When van Meegeren mixed Bakelite into his oil paints and then slowly baked the canvas in an oven, the age of the paint became unsusceptible to any age-testing with alcohol. Van Meegeren’s artistic talent, combined with this technical breakthrough, set the stage for his spectacular success as a forger.

“His first big splash as a Vermeer forger came with *Lady and Gentleman at the Spinet*.” Bernadette played forward a PowerPoint slide of the painting. Highlighting the painting’s elements with her pointer, she said, “Here we see so many facets familiar in Vermeer’s work. The checkered floor, the mysterious letter dangling from the woman’s hand, the ancient oil painting on the back wall, the use of the golden yellow on the woman’s dress—all signal Vermeer.

“Van Meegeren then had a crowning bit of luck. One of the foremost Dutch art critics of the time was Abraham Bredius. A pompous, difficult man of wealth, he devoted his life to Dutch art. Bredius publicly authenticated van Meegeren’s *Lady and Gentleman at the Spinet* as a Vermeer. With that accreditation, van Meegeren’s career as a Vermeer forger was launched.”

An unrelenting hand shot up on the left side of the lecture hall. Henry smiled knowingly. As a professor, he was familiar with this particular student species. Perhaps ignored as children, but more likely coddled, calling attention to themselves was their universe. This species, intent on asking their question, was oblivious to a professor’s nonverbal signals to hold the question for later. From the tone of Bernadette’s voice acknowledging the student, Henry concluded it was not the first time this student had interrupted one of her lectures.

“Professor, is it not ridiculous that centuries after his death, people

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would believe that paintings by such a famous artist would just magically appear out of thin air? Should we all start searching grandmother's attic?"

"Good question, Ms. van de Paverd," Bernadette said while stepping out from behind the podium. "A couple of factors helped make it all believable. First, for centuries, Vermeer was all but forgotten. His popularity did not really ignite until the 1920s, and then especially in the United States. So, no one was searching for his paintings. Second, three authentic Vermeers had been discovered in the twentieth century. The unearthing of another Vermeer was plausible."

The vibration on Henry's phone announced a text. As discreetly as possible, he checked to see who was texting. It was his wife, Marylou—"Please call now." He looked up to see an enthusiastic Bernadette lithely move to the other side of the podium to emphasize a point. He was pulled in two different directions. He knew he should call Marylou but was reluctant to miss any part of Bernadette's lecture. He wondered whether it was really the lecture he'd miss or simply the opportunity to watch Bernadette.

Saying "pardon me" to each of the students between him and the aisle, Henry squeezed out of the row and up the aisle to the exit. Once he found a private area in the hall, he called Marylou.

"Hello, Henry, I hope I'm not disturbing anything important."

"No, not really. Just attending a lecture."

"What's it on?"

"A forger named Han van Meegeren; he famously forged Vermeers. It's fascinating stuff. What's up?"

"I'm back in Dallas after a terrific trip to San Francisco. Our granddaughter is precious and their new townhouse is tiny but very cute. I'm heading your way in five days and wanted to check on the weather and what type of clothes I should pack."

A sting of irritation hit Henry. Had he been pulled out of Bernadette's lecture to talk about the weather? He closed his eyes and his hand went to his cowlick.

“It’s great news that you’re coming. Well, it’s winter here on the North Atlantic, so it’s damp and cold. Obviously, you’ll need a coat and some sweaters.”

“That’s what I thought. I can tell by your tone that you’re anxious to get back to the lecture.”

“Sorry, is there anything else?”

“In fact there is. I’m bringing a big surprise with me to Amsterdam. Bye, Henry.”

Before he could ask about the surprise, Marylou terminated the call. Aware he had mishandled the situation, he contemplated calling back. It was the right thing to do. But conscious that he would miss much of Bernadette’s lecture, he decided the call could wait. Besides, a call back might lead to a conversation he wanted to avoid.



Taking the first seat on the aisle, Henry listened to Bernadette respond to a student’s question. From what he could decipher, the question had been about brush technique. Bernadette glanced at the slender silver watch intertwined with her arm full of silver bracelets. “In the interest of time, we need to move on to how van Meegeren, a self-acknowledged forger accused of treason, was resurrected to hero status in post-war Holland.”

Bernadette clicked to *The Supper at Emmaus*—a placid, flat, washed-out painting of Christ and three disciples at supper. “Take a moment to look at this painting. It has no relationship to the Vermeer paintings we all know. Not only does it lack any artistic relationship to Vermeer’s paintings, but look at its imperfections. For instance, look at the disciple on the right. His shirtsleeve, rather than connecting to his shoulder, goes to nowhere. There is nothing appealing about this painting. Yet, with the help of yet another authentication by the art connoisseur Bredius, van Meegeren was able to pass off this unappealing painting as a Vermeer.”

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Bernadette paused to emphasize her next point. “The key to van Meegeren’s deception was the fantasy he manufactured—that new examples of Vermeer’s early religious paintings had been discovered. The logic was simple: they did not look like his later works of domestic tranquility because they were a missing part of Vermeer’s early religious oeuvre. In 1936, this banal *The Supper at Emmaus* became the toast of the art world. The Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam heroically paid a fortune for the painting to keep a Vermeer safe from foreign ownership. It became the pride of its collection.

“Now to Hermann Göring.” Bernadette clicked on a photograph of the corpulent, self-assured Göring in full white military uniform with gold trim and a spray of medals. He proudly held the diamond-studded, ivory-and-gold military baton awarded to him by Adolf Hitler.

“Göring was a man of enormous appetites and an even larger ego. He, along with Hitler, was obsessed with collecting—in reality *stealing*—the world’s art treasures. But Göring pined for what Hitler already had: a Vermeer. Hitler confiscated *The Astronomer* from Edouard de Rothschild’s enormous Paris art collection, and Göring yearned for his own work by the great master.”

On the lecture screen appeared another drab, uninteresting painting, *Christ with the Woman Taken in Adultery*.

“Göring’s opportunity came in 1943 when he heard from a Nazi banker in Amsterdam that this remarkably unappealing painting, supposedly by Vermeer, had become available.” Bernadette stopped speaking, turned to look at the painting on the screen, and shot her arms into the air in a gesture of disbelief.

“Van Meegeren,” she continued, “told an intermediary that the painting came from the collection of an elderly widow in dire need of money to immigrate to America. Off the painting went to Berlin for Göring’s viewing, and by all accounts, it was love at first sight. After considerable negotiation with intermediaries, Göring traded 137 paintings from his collection for the single Vermeer. It was his pride and joy.”

Inserting a bit of levity into her lecture, Bernadette flashed on the screen a photo of two bottles—Pride furniture polish and Joy detergent. Noticing a sidelong glance from a student, Henry realized he was laughing too enthusiastically.

“Now flash-forward to Holland in 1945,” Bernadette said, her voice edged with sadness. “The Nazis pillaged Holland of food supplies and fuel. Citizens stripped the cities and countryside of any wood to burn for heat and even began eating tulip bulbs.

“But not van Meegeren. His enormous forgery profits bought him this beautiful townhouse at Keizersgracht 321.” A photo of the four-story orange-brick townhouse flashed on the screen. “He also purchased fifty-seven other properties in and around Amsterdam. Included in these properties was a studio where he held notorious gin- and cocaine-fueled orgies. While the rest of Amsterdam suffered unspeakable indignities, van Meegeren partied on.

“His party ended on May 8, 1945—V-E Day.” A black-and-white photo showed a packed street with joyful people waving Dutch and American flags. “There were exuberant celebrations across Holland. Predictably, there was also a thirst for revenge against those who had collaborated with the Nazis. Public beatings and humiliations in the streets were commonplace. Those who profited from the occupation were favorite targets. On May 29, 1945, van Meegeren was arrested and charged with selling a Dutch national treasure, a Vermeer, to the Nazi Göring. The alleged treasure was the forged Vermeer *Christ with the Woman Taken in Adultery*.

“After two weeks of endless interrogation, van Meegeren stunned his captors by saying, ‘I did it, I painted it.’ He was ultimately forced to acknowledge that many of the paintings in prestigious collections across the globe were his forgeries, including the pride of Rotterdam’s Boijmans Museum, *The Supper at Emmaus*.”

Bernadette moved from behind the podium and stood close to the students in the front row. The entire lecture hall went silent. The screen lit

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up with a photo of van Meegeren standing in front of a large canvas with a paintbrush in one hand and his palette under his other arm.

“To prove he had in fact painted Göring’s ‘Vermeer,’ and therefore had not committed treason by selling a national treasure, van Meegeren offered to paint another Vermeer. The court provided van Meegeren with the necessary tools to do so. The process became a media circus.

“With the court-supervised completion of *Jesus Teaching in the Temple*, the public’s opinion of van Meegeren reversed. Overnight, the despised Nazi collaborator morphed into the lovable court jester who had defrauded the loathed Göring. He was the little Dutchman who had outwitted the monster who had flattened Rotterdam. Myths built up around van Meegeren. *The Saturday Evening Post* ran an article entitled ‘The Man Who Swindled Goering,’ and a comic book for Dutch school students appeared titled *The van Meegeren Matter*. Remarkably, a poll in *The Netherlands* newspaper listed him as the second most popular man in the country.

“In retrospect, the outpouring of public adoration came from two polar-opposite directions—what the Americans call a ‘perfect storm.’” Bernadette glanced at Henry and gave him a subtle smile.

“On one hand, van Meegeren filled the nation’s need for a comic catharsis to shake off the horrors of the war years. In the world of public opinion, he was a lovable rogue akin to the congenial uncle who tells clever stories but drinks too much.

“From a very different direction came the unsubtle culture wars. The van Meegeren forgeries opened a vein of class resentment for all to see. With overwrought language and uncompromising certainty, the experts with their semi-mystical powers had blessed the forgeries’ authenticity. For the masses, it was delicious to see the pompous, self-important art connoisseurs exposed as frauds. Their humiliation calls to mind the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale where the child calls out that the emperor has no clothes.

“The trial was, of course, a public spectacle.” Bernadette turned to point her clicker at the computer on the podium. The new slide was of a packed courtroom with some of van Meegeren’s Vermeer forgeries hung on the walls. The ornate courtroom could have been mistaken for an art gallery.

“The forger’s wit during the proceeding enhanced his legend. For instance, when asked by the judge to admit he sold his forgeries for high prices, van Meegeren responded, ‘I could hardly have done otherwise. Had I sold them for low prices, it would have been obvious they were fake!’

“In the end, van Meegeren was convicted on the charge of forgery and sentenced to a year in prison. Fueling his growing legend, he died of a heart attack before serving a day of his sentence.”

Bernadette clasped her hands together and fell silent. Apparently interpreting the silence as an invitation for questions, hands shot up all over the lecture hall. Bernadette smiled broadly and again clicked the screen to reveal the cover of her book, *Perfect Strangers*.

“I am afraid we are out of time,” she said. “But if you want to hear more about van Meegeren, please come to my book event for *Perfect Strangers* this Friday at six o’clock at the American Book Center on Spui 12.” She turned to the podium and began packing her leather bag.

Henry waited for the students to leave for their next classes and walked down the lecture hall stairs.

“Bernadette, that was a terrific lecture,” he said. “What a story, what a life!”

“Thank you, Henry. The ‘evil little man,’ as Lola calls him, was terribly clever and energetic,” she said while packing her bag. “To me it is a wonder he could balance his addictions, work, and wealth. There is so much more to the story.”

“I’ve neglected my own class preparations because I couldn’t get my face out of your book. Congratulations. It’s a great read.”

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“Thank you so much; I am delighted you enjoyed it. Since you are interested in van Meegeren, I have an offer for you.” She paused to gauge Henry’s reaction. “I will travel by train in two days to Rotterdam to meet with the curator at the Boijmans Museum to examine their forgeries and files. Three of van Meegeren’s forgeries are kept in the basement. Would you care to join me?”

Henry fell into step with her as they left the lecture hall. “Absolutely, I’m free all day.”

“Very good,” she replied with a flick of her arm. “Please meet me in front of our building at eight o’clock. I will bring breakfast. Now we are friends, Henry, and should say goodbye in the Dutch fashion.”

Smiling into Henry’s eyes, she touched cheeks three times: right-left-right. Pulling back, she said, “Ciao for now.”

4

As their double-decker train pulled out of Amsterdam Central Station, Henry and Bernadette took seats across from each other on the train's upper level. She wore black peg-leg slacks with a matching jacket, a long white silk scarf, and metallic gold Converse sneakers. Henry felt fashion-challenged in his gray houndstooth Armani sports coat.

With the train picking up speed, Bernadette placed a thermos of coffee, bananas, and fresh croissants on the table between them. Pouring the coffee, she asked, "Do you take the train frequently in Texas?"

"Can't remember the last time."

"Such a pity, trains are wonderfully relaxing. Milk and sugar?"

Grateful for the strong Dutch coffee, Henry asked, "Did you drop Lola at school this morning?"

"No. Unless there is something special for me to do at school, Lola gets herself there. She is very fond of school."

"I hope I'm not prying," Henry said, looking at Bernadette over his mug, "but is your husband around?"

"There never was a husband," she replied nonchalantly while peeling her banana. "I was pregnant before I really knew Lola's father. I decided he would never transition from a sweet boy to a reliable man. I was young but not youthful . . . is that correct English?"

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"Absolutely," replied Henry. "Have you raised Lola by yourself?"

"Yes. It is best because I have changed in significant ways," Bernadette said as she brushed a finger across the top of her glasses and pulled aside her bangs.

Henry wondered what Bernadette meant by "changed in significant ways." Before he could ask, she said, "Look out your window. See the gardens with little sheds next to the tracks?"

He pressed closer to the train's window and saw row after row of gardens on squared-off plots of land fly past. Most incorporated red mini-structures resembling tool sheds.

"Who owns those plots?"

"They are owned by the municipalities and leased to people living in neighboring flats so they can enjoy a garden. We Dutch love our gardens. In the summer the flowers are fantastic. In Dutch the plots are called *volksuins*. I do not know how to translate that into English. But the reason I point them out is that when I met Lola's father, he lived in one of those shacks, and much of what he ate came from his vegetable garden. We had wonderful times there. Part of the problem is that Lola's father still lives there. Lola and I are fine in Amsterdam center."

Her emotionless logic—almost Spockian—impressed Henry. He could not help but contrast the appeal of her rational approach with Marylou's increasingly emotional state. The more time Henry spent with Bernadette, the more captivating he found her sheer "Dutchness."

"So, since you asked about Lola's father, is it polite to ask whether you have children?"

"Yes," Henry replied with a smile. "Marylou and I have a married daughter, Laney, living in California. As I think I mentioned to you, Marylou was visiting her and our granddaughter last week. She could not possibly make the trip to Holland without first seeing them."

"Do you regret not going with Marylou for the visit?"

Henry, reminded of the Dutch reputation for directness, took the question in stride. "I guess so, but I was pressed for time with my commitment

to the University of Amsterdam. Besides, alone time for mothers and daughters is a good thing.”

“That is wise of you. I look forward to meeting your wife. Does she have plans for her time in Amsterdam?”

“Excuse me,” Henry mumbled, pointing to his mouthful of croissant. He swallowed and continued. “She has enrolled in a painting class she hopes will be therapeutic. She has recently experienced some painful business problems.”

“I am sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks.” Henry was not in the mood to talk about Marylou’s issues. He was much more interested in getting to know his travel companion. “Will we go straight to the museum when we arrive in Rotterdam?”

“Yes, that would be best. I think you will find the Boijmans Museum very nice. It was one of the few buildings in Rotterdam the Luftwaffe missed.” She held up her thermos. “More coffee?”



Henry and Bernadette’s train pulled slowly into the silver-metallic, spaceship-shaped Rotterdam train station. After exiting on the station’s steep escalators, they walked briskly up the esplanade to the barracks-like brick Boijmans Museum. At the museum’s entry hall, Bernadette spoke in Dutch with the woman behind the information desk. Five minutes later, a bald, red-faced man with bright green-framed glasses presented himself.

In a vaguely British accent, the thirty-something Luuk van Wijngaarden explained that the curator, Mr. J. A. van Doorn, regrettably had been called away on an emergency, and he would step in as their guide. Bernadette, with a look of mild disappointment, shook his hand and said, “It is not a problem. Shall we go?”

Luuk led them down two sets of stairs to the museum’s basement. It was a cavernous space filled with wooden crates of all sizes for shipping and storing art works. The group stopped at a set of floor-to-ceiling

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steel doors and waited for a security guard to unlock the huge vault door. The door swung open to a musty-smelling room with a series of sliding shelves, twenty feet long and ten feet high, holding paintings. Luuk pulled open one of the shelves, carefully removed three paintings, and placed them on wooden supports preventing them from touching the floor. Luuk stepped to the back of the room and turned his attention to his cell phone.

"These are good examples of van Meegeren's forgeries," said Bernadette. "Look at this one. It was an attempt to forge a seventeenth-century domestic scene."

Henry looked at the painting of two couples playing a card game in the painting titled *Inn Scene*. It incorporated a number of Vermeer cues like the kitchen's open window, a tapestry on the wall, the white water pitcher, and the familiar checkered floor. Although well executed, there was something lacking in the painting's use of light.

"I like the painting," said Henry. "But it doesn't look much like a Vermeer."

"Oh, very good, professor," Bernadette said with wide eyes of approval. "It was sold to this museum as a Pieter de Hooch. I said we would see van Meegeren forgeries; I did not say they would all be Vermeer forgeries. You must have been an attentive student. I only can dream that my students will be so observant."

Bernadette's approval charmed Henry. For the second time in a week, he thought his decision to major in art history might have been more than a sophomoric whim.

"This one," Bernadette said, pointing to a poorly preserved oil titled *The Blessing of Jacob*, "is simply horrible. It is one of those van Meegerens sold as a lost painting from Vermeer's early years."

Henry squatted to take a closer look at the painting. It was torn in at least five places and was peeling badly at the top. In the bottom forefront of the painting, a man leaned over in front of Christ.

"Henry, how do you feel about the man preparing to receive Christ's blessing?"

"I hope this doesn't sound sacrilegious," Henry said, rising stiffly

from his squat, “but with his awkward position bent over the table and his grim look, well, he looks like he’s preparing for the guillotine.”

“I agree. Look here,” she said, gently touching Henry’s arm. “It is the exact same water pitcher as in the painting of the card game. Oh, van Meegeren was such a lazybones! The light reflecting off the pitcher is in the exact same place as the card game painting!”

Henry bent over to look and confirmed she was correct.

“I have read,” she continued, “that when they arrested van Meegeren, they found this same water pitcher in his studio. Of course, Vermeer used a similar pitcher in a number of his paintings, so it was an easy prop for van Meegeren to incorporate.”

After a few more minutes moving back and forth among the paintings, Bernadette asked, “Would you like to see the famous *The Supper at Emmaus*?”

“Absolutely,” replied Henry. “I remember it from your lecture. Is it in here with the others?”

“No, it is prominently displayed upstairs. Most of van Meegeren’s forgeries are concealed in museum basements. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam has at least five hidden away. They refuse to let me see them. But here, the museum has kept *The Supper at Emmaus* continually on display. They simply changed the artist’s nameplate from Vermeer to van Meegeren. For all the wrong reasons, it is probably the museum’s most famous painting.”

Henry was enchanted when Bernadette took his arm as they walked up the stairs to the main gallery’s entrance. They stopped in front of the infamous *Supper at Emmaus*. The painting had undeniable appeal. The plate of bread in front of Christ incorporated a well-executed punctilio of seeds in the Vermeer style. It called to mind the bread on the table in Vermeer’s *The Milkmaid*. Something caught Henry’s eye. Keen for Bernadette’s approbation, he said, “Look, Bernadette, van Meegeren did it again! He used the same white water pitcher as in the other two paintings with light reflecting off the same exact spot.”

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"You have made an art discovery!" Bernadette said with a wave of her hand that sent her ever-present bracelets chiming. "I wonder if anyone else ever noticed. I certainly did not. Do you think this painting is nice?"

"I guess the painting is interesting, but it feels flat and lifeless. There's something dull about the three faces."

"Yes, they all have such heavy eyelids. I think they look stoned. After all, it was painted in Amsterdam." Bernadette enjoyed her own joke.

Luuk, who had been hanging back, stepped forward, saying, "Unfortunately, I have another appointment. If you want to see van Meegeren's sketches in the print room, we need to go there now."

"That is fine," replied Bernadette. To Henry, she said, "I think you will enjoy van Meegeren's sketches. They show he was an artist of rare talent."

In the print room behind the museum library, Luuk took off the shelf a large canvas portfolio and placed it on the viewing table. Slipping on white gloves, he opened the book to a pastel sketch titled *Fighting Peacocks*. The drawing's flying feathers were kinetic. One peacock, lethal claws outstretched, was about to pounce on his opponent's neck.

"You can see," Bernadette said, "in this drawing, van Meegeren froze an explosion of motion into a singular moment. Freezing a single moment is quite a trick. He was truly gifted."

They paged through more of the files, thanked the librarian, and walked to the museum's foyer. Henry sensed a shift in Bernadette's usual sunny outlook. "Everything okay?"

"Oh, yes. Would you mind if we walk through the museum gift shop? They sell two of my technical books, but I would like to see what they have done with *Perfect Strangers*."

As they entered the gift shop, Henry spotted on the shop's front table twenty-five copies of *Perfect Strangers*. Propped on a small easel behind the books was a poster of Bernadette and a quote from the *London Times*: "*Perfect Strangers* is a *tour de force* casting an uncompromising eye into a dark corner of the art world."

“Bernadette, you’re a star! Why didn’t you tell me about the *Times* review?”

“Oh, the excitement will pass quickly,” Bernadette said with a shrug. “I think the English word is ‘ephemeral.’ Besides, despite my publisher’s efforts, we cannot seem to generate any interest in the United States.”

“Maybe we can help,” offered Henry. “Marylou’s college roommate stayed in Philadelphia after college and has become a leading figure in literary promotion. Her name is Penelope Smith. Let’s talk about her when Marylou arrives.”

“That would be very nice,” said Bernadette as they exited the museum. She immediately picked up speed walking back to the train station. Fighting to keep pace, Henry asked, “Your book describes in detail van Meegeren’s painting of the illicit lovers in *Perfect Strangers*. I spent an hour on Google trying to find a photo of the painting but came up empty handed. Is there a photo somewhere?”

“Not that I have found,” replied Bernadette. “In 1950 there was an auction of van Meegeren’s possessions to pay back taxes. The auction included many of his paintings. We know *Perfect Strangers* was auctioned to H. A. J. Kok from Utrecht. The description of the painting in my book comes from the auction records. After Mr. Kok paid five thousand Guilders in cash, a very high price for that time, the painting and Mr. Kok disappeared.”

“So, no one knows where it is?”

“Correct.”

“Any guess?”

“Maybe somewhere in the United States. After van Meegeren’s rise to fame as the swindler of Göring, the prices of his own works skyrocketed, especially in the States. Van Meegeren was an exceptional portraitist, and I have every reason to believe his painting of secret lovers in *Perfect Strangers* was excellent. I hope someday it will surface. Shall we stop for a coffee before the train?”

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As their train raced back toward Amsterdam, Bernadette closed her eyes and quickly fell asleep. Henry alternately stared at the endlessly flat Dutch landscape and stole peeks at his beautiful companion. He rebuffed thoughts about whether he and Bernadette might someday have something in common with the clandestine lovers in the *Perfect Strangers* painting.

The vague outline of a dangerous plan began to form. The missing painting, *Perfect Strangers*, a painting out of sight since 1950, just might be the key to solving Marylou's issues. Henry's mind went into overdrive.