

THE KEEPER

Chapter 1

I loved Michael because I had no other choice. He was all I'd ever known, and to stop loving him would've meant the end of me.

If anyone ever saw me they might have called me a spirit, or an angel, or a ghost. I wasn't sure if they'd be right or not. There wasn't a word to describe someone like me. All I knew was that I needed to keep Michael safe.

I chased him through the museum's darkened hallway, screaming for him to drop the knife. If I lost him there'd be nothing left—everything would go black. I ran as fast as I could.

We sprinted past a Picasso, a Kandinsky, a Matisse, a Brancusi. Michael ignored them all. Nothing could stop him tonight. Not until he did what he came here to do.

We stopped when he reached the next painting. It showed the image of a woman some considered strikingly beautiful. Others thought she was hideous. But everyone agreed the dark, crimson scars painted across her face meant she belonged in a museum. Nothing was extraordinary about the frame. Like Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, the image was smaller than most people imagined. But it never disappointed the thousands who viewed it each day.

Jolene was the reason most admirers packed into this hallway. And the reason the artist who created it had carried a knife into the Art Institute of Chicago.

Michael stared at his most famous work, face reddened, shoulders shaking, eyes focused on the scars that marked Jolene's face. He raised the knife and nodded, like he'd given himself permission.

No! I shouted. But Michael didn't hear me. He'd tuned me out again. I lunged to hold him back, pulled with all my strength. But I was no match for his rage.

The blade slashed through the canvas so deep it dug into the gallery wall. An alarm sounded. Michael raised the knife again. One slice wasn't enough—I knew this as soon as he thought it. Even a thousand cuts wouldn't be enough.

Drawing from the same energy that powered his famous brushstrokes, Michael murdered his painting.

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We spent the rest of the night in a Chicago jail. Typical Michael, he hadn't planned his escape from the Art Institute. It turned out he hadn't planned any of it. I'd left him alone too long and he went off again without thinking. His crime was as big a surprise to me as it seemed to be to the police. Getting arrested, handcuffed and fingerprinted, going to jail, seeing his mug shot splashed across every television in the country, setting off a firestorm in the art world—none of that mattered to Michael. The painting was gone now, along with his anger. Somehow that made it all worth it.

I sat on his bunk while he paced along the bars in a traffic cone orange jumpsuit, waiting his turn with the judge. Thoughts stormed through his mind. I couldn't avoid hearing them. All he worried about was how long it would take before he could return to his studio in San Francisco. Only when he placed his hands on his paint tubes, his marble palette, his saw, his brushes and his easel would he feel comfortable again. He hadn't slept all night, and it showed. His dark, curly hair stuck out at weird angles and bags had formed under his eyes, making him look much older than twenty-nine. He'd been running on adrenaline too long, and I knew he'd crash in front of the judge if he didn't get some rest soon.

I ran to his side and touched the back of his neck. A tingling sensation pulsed from my fingers and raced down his spine, letting him know I was there. He walked to the bed, lay where I'd been sitting and fought to quiet his mind. I knelt beside him and stroked his hair the same way I did when he was a young boy scared awake by a nightmare. "Thank you," he said, letting me comfort him, and soon he fell into a brief but much-needed sleep.

Michael was far from perfect but I loved him anyway. He saw the world with different eyes than anyone else. Colors were brighter and deeper, and people were darker and colder. Even though he couldn't see me, Michael was the only one who knew I was here. He was the only one who could hear my voice, the only one who'd ever said a word to me. I never had anything of my own—not even a name. Nobody ever told me who or what I was, but with Michael I found an identity and a purpose. He could be moody and antisocial. And sometimes he'd completely tune me out. But I could never abandon him. That was the last thing I'd ever do. Leaving Michael to fend for himself was more impossible than making myself visible to a Cook County judge.

The arraignment supplied no fireworks for the reporters who'd snuck into the courtroom, except for a brief debate over whether or not an artist could be charged for destroying his own painting. Michael couldn't avoid some kind of punishment, but by creating that grey area, his lawyers—hired overnight by Michael's richest collector—promised they could negotiate the charge down to a Class C misdemeanor. He'd pay a fine and maybe serve probation, but he wouldn't spend any time in prison. Definitely not a deal the district attorney would offer a typical vandal, but most vandals didn't attract a following like Michael Delacroix.

Having been deemed a threat only to his own artwork, Michael made bail and walked free. He grabbed his things and headed to the nearest taxi stand. I was with him, of course. I went

nearly everywhere with him. The last, stubborn leaves of fall clung to their branches as brisk winds swept through the courtyard. All he wanted was to leave this place, to get as far away as possible from the memory of *Jolene*.

As he reached the street corner a blonde woman chased after him with a digital recorder. “Mr. Delacroix, just a few questions.”

The nearest taxi stand now seemed too close. He rushed down the sidewalk toward the next intersection without looking back.

“Why’d you ruin your best work?” The clipping of her heels on the concrete punctuated her urgency. “Why destroy something so amazing?”

He still had a buffer of fifteen feet, but she closed fast. He waved his arms at a taxi heading his way and grabbed the door handle before the car could stop. “O’Hare, and hurry.” He slammed the door behind him.

The opposite passenger door opened and a cold November gust blew into the cab. The woman with the recorder followed the wind inside and sat next to him. “I’ll pay the fare to wherever you want to go. And you don’t even have to answer my questions. Just let me ride with you.”

“Please get out,” Michael said.

“I’m not the only one looking for you.” She glanced toward the courthouse. “I know this is uncomfortable, but it’s about to get more crowded if we don’t get moving.”

A tall man in an Italian suit ran down the sidewalk toward them. He waved his microphone at another man carrying a television camera, motioning for him to hurry. Three other reporters trailed behind, adjusting their ties and coughing into their fists.

“Are we doing this or not?” she said.

The driver looked at Michael, drummed his fingers on the seat back.

I watched the battle in Michael's head. On one hand, he just wanted to get out of Chicago as quickly as possible. But he hated the idea of a half-hour cab ride with a pesky reporter who probably wouldn't shut up. He wondered if he could talk her out of this taxi and fight off the others at the same time. But then he caught a view of her midnight blue irises glinting in the light coming through the back window. They were the color of his favorite tube of oil paint, the same shade as the sky he saw the last time he was happy. And of all things, they were enough to win this fight.

The four of us sped past the crowd of reporters, then we rode in silence. This gutsy reporter had impressed us both, but I was the only one who wanted to hear her speak. As tense seconds stretched into uncomfortable minutes, she seemed to study Michael's body language instead of launching questions. Her mouth would open but then she'd stop herself, like she was rethinking her approach.

Michael refused to look at her. The Chicago sprawl outside his window kept his eyes occupied as he worried about what she might say.

When the taxi passed the first sign for the airport the reporter cleared her throat. "I'm Hannah Klein, *Sun-Times*." She flashed a smile, but Michael never saw it. "I'm not here to blame you or to make you look bad. It's just that so many people loved that painting, and they can't understand why you attacked it."

"I'm not a freeloader," Michael said. "I'll answer one question for the ride, but you need to decide which one."

The reporter grabbed a crystal charm hanging from her thin silver necklace and rolled it between her fingers. "Everyone wants to know why you did it."

“Is that your question?”

“Not exactly. Some think this was the move of a modern genius, more savvy than cutting off your own ear. People love their artists mad and self-tortured. They say you doubled the value of your work with the blade of that knife, but I don’t think that was your motivation. This comes from a deeper place.” She held out her recorder. “I want to know what made you hate that painting.”

Her question pulled Michael out of his staring match with the city. “I didn’t hate it when I painted it.”

“Not at first. But when you added those last, brilliant brushstrokes you certainly did.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I wouldn’t get very far in this job if I only looked at the surface.” She nodded, and her shoulder length hair bounced back into place. “That piece was such a contrast of itself—beautiful and horrific, peaceful on one level, violent on another. I bet you painted your masterpiece at two different stages of your career. Am I right?”

She was right, but there was no way she could have known for sure. This nosey, aggressive reporter had great instincts. It seemed like she was reading him while she talked, noting his reaction to each bullet point of the theory she was pushing. And Michael’s silence seemed to make her push harder.

“I want to know who this woman is. And what made you hate her.”

“I *never* hated her!”

The cab swerved as everyone inside reacted to Michael’s words. Hannah grabbed her crystal again and held it like a cigarette. “Okay, you didn’t hate her. Then you must have loved her.”

“Terminal One,” he said to the driver.

Michael neared eruption now, I could tell. He gripped the door handle and leaned his head against the glass as we approached the terminal. The reporter only had a few seconds left with us, but I feared she might glimpse a side of Michael few had ever seen—one she definitely wouldn’t like.

The reporter must have sensed it, too. She leaned back against her seat and softened her tone: “You may not believe me, but I hope you find peace one day. Maybe your next painting will provide some healing.”

“I may never paint again.”

“What—why?”

Michael threw open his door as the taxi stopped in front of the terminal. He tossed a twenty into the front seat. “Or maybe I’ll destroy a few more. Thanks for the ride.”

Chapter 2

The next morning I rode with Michael in his silver Hyundai down Sea Cliff Avenue in northern San Francisco. Every house on this street reflected a different architectural style, and each one seemed to battle for its own space on the skinny lots that backed up to the Pacific Ocean. But to Michael they blended in with each other, creating a never-ending string of excess he had no interest in studying. He slowed as he approached a powder blue fire hydrant, the only landmark on the street he'd cared to memorize, and parked along the curb in front of Grant Thatcher's house.

A woman in a yellow bikini answered the door. She squealed and threw her arms around his waist. "Graaant, he's here," she said.

Thatcher bounded into the foyer dressed only in a heavy cotton bathrobe. The thick, curly hairs on his chest were wet, but his smile was as dry as ever. "Ah, my shining star finally returns." He draped a hulking arm around Michael's neck and pulled him away from the woman. "Keep the hot tub warm, Tiff. It's time for our planning session." Together we walked down a long hallway toward his office.

The inside of his home looked like an art gallery, with Michael's paintings featured as the main attractions. To our left hung an image Michael created while studying at the San Francisco Art Institute, one of over a dozen that decorated this long wall. Most came from Michael's studio, but Thatcher also had hung a few painted by younger emerging artists, though he rarely mentioned their names in front of Michael.

“This old gem.” Thatcher pointed to an abstract with ribbons of gold leaf running through it. “Remember that one? Your stunt in Chicago just tripled its value—assuming you don’t have a knife in your pocket.” He slapped Michael’s back and laughed.

The art world considered Thatcher one of the most successful dealers of the post-internet age because he knew how to handle people, both the artists he recruited and the super-rich collectors he kept happy. He’d mastered the ability to make people feel like they were the center of the universe, but Michael never believed much of what the man said. And neither did I.

“You don’t have a knife in your pocket, do you?”

“Not today,” Michael said.

“Good to know. Come, let’s talk.” Thatcher ushered Michael into his office. Everything in the room that wasn’t a piece of art was white—the computer, the desk, the curtains, the filing cabinets, the walls, even the leather beanbag chairs thrown into the corner. The idea was to wash out the details of everything else to highlight the colorful artwork, and the effect was stunning. No one could walk into the room and not notice the paintings—all of them Michael’s, of course—and that’s why Thatcher used this room to close his biggest deals.

“Pull up a seat.” He motioned toward one of the beanbag chairs before sinking into his own white leather recliner. “We need to talk about Chicago and what we can do to capitalize on the fallout, but first I need to know something. Sorry for having to ask, but what the hell were you thinking?”

I could easily figure out what Michael was thinking at any moment. We stayed so connected all I needed to do was listen when I was near him. With anyone else, I needed to be inside their head, which took a lot more effort. It was one of the few abilities I’d discovered about myself while trying to protect Michael, but I rarely used it with others.

If Thatcher hoped to get a straight answer today he needed to share my ability, because Michael wasn't about to tell him the truth. "Just one of those things, I guess."

"One of which things?" Thatcher said. "I've never felt anything that would make me stick a knife through my favorite painting."

Michael stared at the beanbag chairs in the corner. He wondered what kind of person would agree to sit in one of those. "Look, I can't explain why, but it had to be done. If you're worried about the money—for the lawyers and the painting—I'll pay you back. Just know it was something I needed to do."

Thatcher locked his fingers together behind his neck and leaned back in his chair. "Jesus, if you didn't want it to hang there, I could've had it moved. I know at least three other museum curators who would have killed to add it to their collection. *Jolene* drew larger crowds than *La Grande Jatte*. Do you have any idea how huge that is?"

It surprised me how little Grant Thatcher knew about his most famous client. He had no idea how much guilt Michael felt each time he thought about *Jolene's* image. If he'd been paying attention during their seven-year business relationship he would have known Michael stayed purposefully blind to the popularity of his work. He never painted because people might find it pretty and want to pay Thatcher more than an average mortgage balance to own it. He painted because it was the only way he could make any sense of the world he saw.

"Forget about it." Thatcher swatted at the air between them. "Today's a new day, right?" He grabbed a sheet of paper from his desk and held it out to Michael. He'd printed out a spreadsheet filled with names, phone numbers and email addresses. "I have five A-list celebrities and two financial execs all begging me to pre-sell your next painting. We're talking seven-

figures each. And they don't even care what it looks like. You could take a shit on the canvas—it doesn't matter, as long as you sign it. What do you think?"

"If you're asking me to paint, I do that already."

Thatcher laughed again. "No, I need you to paint your ass off. I'm talking six or seven a week. We need to make the most of this before people forget." He climbed out of his chair and leaned across his desk. As he did, his robe fell open and exposed more of himself than either of us wanted to see. "Listen, I'm not mad at you, but you owe me for *Jolene*. Crank out a few dozen masterpieces and all is forgiven. We'll each make a few million, then you can get back to your normal schedule. Deal?"

"I'll see what I can do," Michael said.

"I need a stronger commitment than that." He held up the sheet of paper again. "These people aren't used to waiting."

And Michael wasn't used to being pressured. On any other day he might have told Thatcher off for pushing so hard, but he did feel bad for destroying a painting this man had paid a ton of money for. And then there were the lawyers who'd appeared just when he needed them. "Give me a few days and I'll have something."

"That sounds like my golden boy talking." Thatcher retied his robe and grabbed a cigar from a drawer in his desk. "Hey, you want to jump in the hot tub with me and Tiff to celebrate?"

"No thanks."

As we walked together down the long driveway toward the street, Michael spoke to me. "Did you hear what Thatcher said? 'Crank out a few dozen masterpieces and all is forgiven?' Who does he think he is?"

I answered him the only way I knew, using another ability I'd discovered by accident a long time ago. The words started in my mind as my own voice and entered like a whisper in his:

He's a businessman, not an artist. What did you expect him to say?

"He never even looks at them. It's only the signature he cares about."

Remember what he did for you in Chicago. At least he was there when you needed him.

Michael smiled. "I thought that was your job."

I was there, too. But you wouldn't listen.

"Anyway, that's all over now. Time to get to work." He turned away from the house and saw something that caused him to break into a run. "Hey, get away from my car!"

On the street a tow truck had hoisted the back end of Michael's Hyundai into the air. The driver stood at the lift controls. Tall and thick-bearded, wearing a denim ball cap and matching coveralls, the man didn't react when Michael sprinted toward him.

"What are you doing? This is my car!"

"My job," the man said.

"Are you a car thief?"

"Repo man, actually." The driver pulled a handkerchief from the front pocket of his coveralls and turned away from us.

Michael checked the towing mechanism under his bumper. He knew at first glance he could never unhook it by himself. "This is a mistake. You've got the wrong vehicle."

The driver was still turned away, working his hands, fidgeting with something we couldn't see. "I hear that every day. But this is what happens when you don't make your payments."

"I paid cash for this car. Like I said, you've got the wrong—"

The driver spun around and covered Michael's nose and mouth with the handkerchief. He pressed it hard over his face, forced him backward, drove him to the ground. Michael gasped, and in the next moment everything went black.

That's how I lost him. It happened right in front of me, faster than a blink. And all I did was watch.