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Excerpts from *Captcha Thief* by Rosie Claverton

Excerpt #1 – A mere impression

Between the little puddles of light around the artworks, the black was absolute, only made deeper by the brightness of the lights. Paul squinted into the black spaces, his head beating up into his throat as the seconds stretched into millennia in his panic. Who was lurking in the darkness and what did they want? His boss was never going to forgive him—neglecting his duties, mooning at paintings. If something was lost, could he forgive himself?

He heard a whisper of movement to his right. Despite the screaming of his nerves, Paul ran through the archway into the adjacent gallery, looking left and right for the intruder.

Then he saw her.

The cruel rend was jagged, uneven across the background—more like a lumberjack’s hack than a surgeon’s precision. The top of the canvas had flopped over like a dog-ear, obscuring face and gloves and bustle. All that remained visible were her perfect skirts, fold upon fold of cerulean, azure and sapphire, and that cheeky inch of scandalous toe protruding beneath them.

The bastard had cut The Blue Lady.

Paul could weep for her. His hand stuttered forward, to restore her beauty, but then he jerked back. He must not damage her. Talia and Soo-jin and Noah—they would know what to do for the best. They would save her.

He should call them right away, before the cops. They had to preserve her—the weight of the canvas threatened to tear her further, rip her open like one of Jack the Ripper’s whores. Split open for the vultures—

Thud! Paul’s head collided with the painting and he slid, stunned, to the ground. He tried to get up, face his attacker, but his arms were strangely heavy, his legs uncooperative. His body was a sack of stones, beyond his control, a ghost of something like pain spreading over the back of his head.

He gasped for air that would not come and, as he looked up at the encroaching darkness, his vision was filled with the most perfect blue.

And a splatter of red.

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Excerpt #2 – Assessing the evidence

Amy had always considered herself focussed and dedicated, when her depression was bearable. But her attention was waning, more intent on watching her assistant than keeping an eye on the evidence. Though he was an attractive man, it went deeper than that—she depended on him. He was vital to her.

“You all right?”

Jason’s voice brought her back and she realised she was holding the CD over the open drive, staring off into space.

“Tired.”

It was her default excuse. The one that would prevent further questions from him. Stop him guessing the real cause of her absent-mindedness.

Processing the discs took a few minutes, so she looked over the crime scene photos, forcing herself to look, really look. But nothing was going in and Jason leaning over her shoulder in his customary position wasn’t helping.

“It’s a funny choice of weapon,” he said.

“Maybe it’s all he had.”

“For a pro? Your backup plan for a job gone wrong isn’t a hammer to the head when a gun pressed against his back would do the job, or even something gun-shaped if you can’t get hold of the real deal. Why risk the time for GBH or murder when the threat works better anyway?”

At moments like these, Amy was abruptly reminded of Jason’s past. She didn’t ask exactly what he would choose, or whether his experience was practical. Some things were better left in the dark.