

*Jake Daniels, a Baltimore art conservator, is drawn into a world of international art forgery and theft. The scope of crimes he uncovers endangers both his lover and himself as they follow a convoluted trail from Paris to Ghent, Belgium.*

## **Forged in Deceit**

By Steven Wills

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# Forged in Deceit

*"Deceiving others. That is what the world calls a romance."*

*— Oscar Wilde*



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And dedicated to Susan – my editor, my partner, my wife - without whose encouragement, both loving and forceful, I would still be somewhere in Chapter 3.



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# Chapter 1

Martik would never get used to the back-breaking ride down Thames Street in the Fells Point section of Baltimore. The combination of uneven paving stones and a police car with shitty struts rattled his frame. He scanned the sidewalks for the human leftovers of a typical Saturday night, but saw only joggers and dog-walkers in the dim 5:00 a.m. light.

Normal stuff.

But he didn't like what he saw ahead.

Curious onlookers had already formed at the Ann Street dock. Martik noted also that two policemen had set up yellow police tape and established a make-shift perimeter. He hit the siren for a microsecond, giving a shrill burp which parted the spectators like crickets, and he pulled to the curb. Tall and reedy, Martik stretched his back as he emerged from the sedan. He removed his jacket, set it neatly on the passenger seat, grabbed his phone and scene kit, and looked over the spectators – some jockeyed for a better look and some reflexively stepped back.

One of the policemen held up the yellow tape, and Martik ducked under. He pulled an ID wallet from his pocket and flipped it open as he walked to the other patrolman on the scene. "Detective Martik," he announced, looking at the body lying on the sidewalk, still dripping and in a pool of water. He squinted in the dim light at the man's name on his uniform. "Officer Harrison, what can you tell me?" Without waiting for a

reply, he pulled on his trouser legs and squatted over the body.

“Not too much, detective. The lady over there,” he said, gesturing to a young woman seated on a metal chair against the wall of a small café, light scarf to her mouth and a dog’s leash in her hand. The dog was curled up under the chair. “She called it in about 10 minutes ago. She yelled for help when she saw the body in the water and an older guy who was out crabbing ran over.” Martik glanced up and noticed an older man wearing a faded Orioles cap and a gray well-worn sweatshirt hanging over khaki waders.

“Was the body on the sidewalk when you got here or in the water?”

“In the water. The dispatcher told the woman not to touch anything, and neither of them did. We got here and fished the guy out.”

“Gloved?”

“Yes sir.”

Martik reached for a pair of gloves from his scene kit as he leaned over the body. “Well, I doubt he came from the Cat’s Tail Pub,” he said, nodding to one of the bars across the street. “Not dressed like this.” He pulled his phone from his pocket, clicked on the camera app, and tapped video. “Male, slender, six feet, maybe six two. Seems dressed well – gray slacks with matching jacket, dress shirt – pretty ragged.” He paused, clicked off the video, and stood to face the patrolman. “Harrison, tell me about the face.”

The patrolman glanced down at the body, grimaced and just as quickly looked back at Martik. “That’s how

we found him, detective. Crabs, maybe – or gulls. Gulls can do that.”

Martik exhaled and squatted once again, his phone recording. “Body generally intact, face and upper torso, where exposed from the ripped shirt, are decayed – or burned, or--” he glanced up at the patrolman, “perhaps predation.” He pulled at the jacket and ran his hand over the man’s pants. He poked gloved fingers into each pocket. “No wallet, no money, no ID,” he glanced at the wrists, “no rings or watch.” He squinted and looked more closely at what remained of the man’s face. Slowly blowing out air, he looked off to the left – then shook his head and returned his attention to the body. “Bullet entry in rear of the head, puffing of bone and tissue – probable contact shot. No exit wound. Likely small-caliber weapon. Only one shoe, black dress shoe. Gray socks and--” Martik quickly clicked off the video and reached for his scene kit, removing a small plastic bag and a pair of long tweezers. He again tapped the video record button. “Appears to be a paper tucked in the sock.” He carefully unfolded the paper, and took a picture of what was printed there. “Bagging paper, bag coded EB1.”

Martik stood and signaled the second patrolman to join them. “Okay, let’s start the canvas. Somebody heard something or saw something.”

The patrolman who had just joined them said, “I’ll start with the spectators – names and contact info. The Java Grill across the street is open – I’ll go there next.”

Martik nodded. "After that, go to the hotel on the other side of the dock. But before that, a coffee would be good."

A black, windowless van pulled up and two men exited, pushing a stretcher with a large sack folded on top. One had a camera over his shoulder. Martik nodded to the men, who went to work, taking photographs and recording information with the efficiency and speed gained from frequent practice. Within a few minutes, they had pulled the body onto the stretcher, zipped the bag from feet to head, and rolled it back to the van. Without a sound, the van moved from the curb onto the paving stones of Thames Street.

Martik pocketed his phone and pulled a small notebook from his back pocket, a small pencil tucked into the metal rings. He walked to the two silently waiting at the wall of the café. "Detective Martik. Ma'am. Sir. I need to speak with you both."

The older man in the baseball cap stood away from the wall. The woman with the scarf looked up from her chair, clutching her dog's leash.

From one of the rooms on the second floor of the luxury hotel across the water, the drapes were pulled back. The room was in darkness so no one could see the man watching the unfolding scene through binoculars. "Yes," he whispered. "Perfect." Closing the drapes, he turned to take a shower. He had an early plane to catch.

The red glow of the Dominos Sugar factory sign from across the harbor reflected off the still water.



## Chapter 2: Three days earlier

*“Non, rien de rien. Non, je ne regrette rien. Ni le bien, qu'on m'a fait, ni le mal, tout ce m'est bien egale.”* The plaintive sound of Edith Piaf’s voice from the boat ahead of him resonating in his native language, reminded Luc Benoit of the irony of the lyrics. Luc leaned against the “Private residence” sign at the end of the gravel road, taking one long look back to see if there was any sign of another vehicle on the cross street above. and relieved to note that, even on a Friday afternoon, there appeared to be no traffic on the narrow road. His crisp and creased silhouette was nearly obscured by the trunks of Cyprus trees and thick bushes. As he listened. Piaf was singing, *“No, absolutely nothing, I regret nothing. Not the good that has been given, Not the bad. It's all the same to me.”*

“Irony,” Luc said to himself, “I regret everything.”

He pushed aside the brush where he had parked, looking over at the dark blue pickup pulled under a Cyprus on the side and noting that there were spots of rust over the wheels. This had to be Jake’s second vehicle. Work truck, he thought, knowing that Jake would never tolerate rust on any car he drove to the art museum or university. Two steps through a patch of mud and he was on the wooden dock. When the second plank groaned and leaned, he grasped at the gray, hardboard rectangle that had been gripped tightly

under his arm and held it high over his head, skip-stepping to the next plank – which seemed to hold.

Checking the black nylon straps on the thin crate, he tucked it securely under his arm and walked gingerly down the dock onto the gangway, pulling a scrap of paper from the pocket of his navy-blue blazer and pushing curly, dark blonde hair from his forehead with his sleeve - wishing he had worn something more disposable. Staring at the address written there and at the damaged and aging houseboat ahead of him he shook his head. The lines of the boat were elegant and much of the fine old trim was still visible. But he could more readily see the past in this structure than he could the future. The low, flat deck was strong, but covered with equipment and the filth of reconstruction. The cabin curved at the bow, with a handsome filigree that was visible on one side even though it was missing from the other. Crusted metal was cleaned and polished in test patches, revealing a richly ornamented brass history that perhaps could impress again one day, especially if the dark woodwork could also be redeemed. Intriguing, he thought. To find this address, he had passed the most recognized (and most traveled) marinas along the Chesapeake Bay, and then to the lesser-known and seedier locations, and then finally to this. The cabin sported a large rectangular window in the front and three circular windows along the side. Two of these were missing glass and were covered with heavy plastic.

Unbuttoning his jacket for better maneuverability, Luc walked carefully toward the boat, carrying the

crate by its nylon handle and hoping the old boards would hold. Several of the wooden boards looked tenuous, and his long legs allowed him to easily step over them. He arrived to where a metal plank, at one time painted red but now mostly scuffed base metal, connected the dock to the boat deck. Black gripping strips had been recently glued to the metal.

“Jake?” he shouted. Hearing nothing, he stepped onto the deck, impressed that the boat didn’t shift on his arrival. He half expected his presence would tilt the thing, inviting the thick gray water of the bay onto the deck. “Jake!” he repeated. There was still no answer, but the music continued from somewhere inside and he stepped into the large cabin interior. The inside of the cabin, like the exterior, was a battle of old elegance and recent disrepair – excavated walls around brass fittings and oiled teakwood trim. The smell of solvent and wood oil rasped at his nostrils as he stepped forward. One wall had been refinished, varnished and polished, and on that wall hung a painting - small amber brush strokes catching the breeze of a mustard-yellow meadow wrapped in a square of blue and green poplars. He smiled, knowing that, despite all he was seeing, at least he was in the right place. “Lily,” he whispered. “Here you are.” The immediate effect was of warmth and the rich smell of light rain on an early-summer afternoon. It was also a bittersweet fragrance of another time – a better time.

“Jake, where the hell are you?”

There was a creaking below his feet, the music stopped, and a hatch cover rose -- visible around a

partial wall in the far corner of the cabin. An imposing figure, solidly-framed, emerged and unbent himself to stand erect, nearly disguised in oil and rusty grime. Once again, Luc wasn't sure he had the right place, although he did recognize the reddish-brown hair, curling with dirt and matted like some rainforest undergrowth. The man stopped and glared, hefting a large pipe wrench menacingly in his hand, biceps clearly flexed and pushing against the confines of a blackened tee-shirt. Rattling noises emerged from the open hatch, and without turning his stare, the man reached back with his foot and kicked the hatch cover closed with a metallic crash. Both men stood silently.

Luc waved at the expanse of the houseboat. "Nice place." He attempted a grin.

"How the hell did you find me?" Jake asked in a low growl nearly indistinguishable from the sound below of an engine clinging to life.

"Come on, yours was not a difficult trail." Luc waited for a response, but getting none, he raised one palm in surrender. "I knew you were back in Baltimore. Your father is still at the Walters gallery, and your mother is still teaching at MICA. He was out of the country, but your mother gave me your location and sent me here. You aren't really that hard to find." He took a tentative step forward. "At least your mother was happy to see me."

Jake stood silently, still unblinking through the filth. "There's a lot she doesn't know."

Luc paused, hearing the line as both a statement and a warning. "It's been a long time. Much to think

about.” He nodded in the direction of the painting. “I recognize the meadow at the canal in Troyes.”

“Why are you here?” Jake said. “What do you want? You look like a fucking businessman.”

“I want a few minutes of your time. To catch up, and to ask for one favor – perhaps for old times’ sake, and perhaps because I’m very close to being a dead businessman.”

Jake shook his head and exhaled, looking at the deck. “Of course you are,” he said. He set the wrench on the deck, pulled a plastic deck chair over and motioned Luc to sit. “I’m getting some coffee.” As he walked to the cabin door, a large dog emerged from the brush behind them as if had been part of the shadows. Its face signaled husky – or perhaps part akita. Its coat, a brindled brown with a white frame around fiercely attentive eyes, caught a flash of sun as it trotted along the dock and onto the boat, stopping suddenly to glare at the stranger – slight curl to the white fur over his mouth. Luc felt his pulse quicken. “Bromo, lie down,” Jake called from the cabin. “You are one hell of a watchdog. Anyway, don’t get Mr. future-dead-businessman’s suit dirty.”

“I appreciate the gesture,” Luc said as the dog flopped on the deck, licking some of the mud from its paws.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Jake replied, dipping a clean cloth into a basin and wiping away much of the filth from his hands and face. “I may still throw you into the bay myself.” Stepping into a half-renovated galley area, he noticed a drawer half open, revealing an

orange bottle of pills and quietly pushed the drawer closed.

As he waited, Luc looked again to the painting on the wall. He noticed it was carefully covered in glass, and sealed at the edges of the frame to protect it from weather. A few minutes later Jake emerged, two tall French press cylinders and two empty mugs in his hands. The smell of a strong French roast was suddenly everywhere. “Ahh,” Luc murmured. “Still have a taste for the finer things, I see.”

Jake slid into a second deck chair and slowly plunged the press, pouring himself a cup of the aromatic brew. Without looking up, he reprised his question. “So why are you here? What’s going on?”

“Five years, Jake. Five years can be a long time.” He sipped his coffee and spoke quietly, looking into the mug. “Things have changed. Things have happened.” Then he looked up and his face brightened for a moment. “And look at you,” he said, gesturing with an open palm. “Talk about change! You have turned things around. You have quite a reputation in--“

“What do you know about my reputation?” An accusation rather than a question. “I left Paris in a very bad place. I’ve worked hard to put a new life together. Is that about to be pulled apart? Again?”

“No, of course not. But I need to know if I can still trust you. I can’t apologize any more for your hand. I wish I could, but--”

Jake set his coffee mug on the deck. “It’s not about my hand – it never was. That’s history – and what I did in Paris I did of my own free will. It was my decision.

Every part of it.” He shifted in the chair, trying to quiet his rising anger.

“No, no, that isn’t what I meant. I mean that you’ve had to re-build your life. It’s a good thing – a great thing, really. I searched for you online and you do have a highly-regarded reputation you know. I learned that you were able to paint again. In fact, you have become very good again – perhaps better than ever. I am sorry that you can’t show or sell your work. Truly sorry.” Luc paused deliberately and sipped. “The coffee – thank you for this.” He shifted in the chair, making sure the crate was resting securely by his leg. “I stayed in one place, it seems. I still work in galleries - although I’ve moved around a bit and up that ladder. But you! You were able to begin again - to reinvent yourself! Lecturing around the world and organizing art conservation labs. Google knows you quite well! I saw you listed in Berlin, Moscow, Budapest. So many cities and so many museums. But never the Louvre, never the d’Orsay, never the Centre Pompidou. Never Paris.” He let the statement hang with the unspoken question.

Jake stared into a space beyond his old friend.

Luc looked again at the painting. “She would have taken you back, you know. In a heartbeat.”

Jake’s eyes suddenly snapped forward. “Enough. What’s this all about? Start talking.”

“I need you to hold something for me for just a few days. I have to speak with someone and then I’ll come back and tell you everything. It will all be over then. So will you do this for me?”

Jake looked at the boarded crate leaning against Luc's leg, recognizing it as transport for a canvas. "Why not just rent a storage locker someplace?"

"Because I'm being pretty closely watched." The statement hung in silence. "Will you do this for me?"

"No, I won't."

"Look Jake, as a friend," the word was a question. "I'm asking you because I need someone I can really trust – or at least used to trust. Only for a few days and then I can tell you everything. But I can't right now."

"Are you in trouble?"

"Yes, but I won't be when I see you again."

"Is this illegal?"

"Yes, but not for very long."

Jake looked at Luc and at the crate. He looked away and then back again. "Can I look inside?"

"I would really rather you didn't. I need you to keep this in hiding." Luc waited a beat and added, "Only for a few days. Then it will all be clear. I promise you."

Jake stood and reached out his hand. Luc handed him the nylon handle of the crate.

"Thank you. You won't regret it." Luc reached to shake Jake's hand, but when it wasn't offered, he turned to leave.

Jake turned to the cabin and held up the small crate. "I already regret it," he said.





## Chapter 4

Jake was sitting on the deck of his houseboat, reading the Sunday Sun with a cup of coffee and the company of Bromo, and deciding which of the many projects he would begin in his never-ending restoration. It had been almost two years since he had seen the derelict boat advertised and realized immediately how grand it had once been. Although the restoration only marginally involved skills he had learned as an art conservationist, he was drawn to the idea of seeing again what this craft had once been. The work continued to be difficult, and stretched his understanding of everything from woodworking to engine repair, but he found a kind of quiet in it. There was a sort of Zen moment – like a runner’s high – from the physical routine and slow progress. The vessel had been broken in so many ways, it would have been easy just to pass by and give it up as lost. He remembered, however, how broken he had once been, and his own slow journey from scrap. “I’ll bring you back,” he once said to the boat – and it seemed the filthier and more calloused his hands became, the more he meant it. The solitude of Sunday mornings was especially treasured, and he occasionally even spent Saturday night on the boat, rather than returning to his condo in Fell’s Point.

He had even pushed aside the turmoil of his encounter with Luc, until he saw the black sedan pull up to the dock. It was unmarked, but he could make out the municipal license plate from his deck chair. He

folded the paper and set it aside, taking one final sip of his coffee. "Shit," he mumbled to Bromo, "I knew it was going to be something." He stood to wipe his jeans, and realizing they were already stained, painted, and greased beyond any attempt at cleanliness, he set his coffee mug on a nearby packing crate and grabbed a rag from the deck.

After a long minute, a man opened the door and unfolded himself from the driver's seat. Stretching to his full height after some time confined in the car, he receded to a slight stoop - more from weariness than poor posture. From the deck, Jake noted that the man looked somehow used up, moving as if at the end of a long and exhausting shift. He pulled a gray nylon jacket from the car, and after removing a black breast wallet from the pocket, placed it carefully back in the car. He walked down the dock to the gangplank, ignoring the aging wood planks, and held up the wallet, displaying a shield and photo ID. "Detective Martik. Can I come aboard?"

"Sure." Jake said. He motioned Bromo into the boat's cabin. "What can I do for you?"

"Can I get your name?"

Jake tilted his head, pausing as he looked at the detective and pushing the thick reddish-brown curly hair to the side of his forehead. "Jake Daniels. My turn now - what's going on?"

Martik paused and apparently made a decision. "Mr. Daniels. I need you to come to Central Station. Voluntarily, of course."

Jake paused. "Uh-huh, but that doesn't really answer my question." He waved a hand to his surroundings. "We're a long way from The Block here. Why Central Station?"

Martik looked down to the deck and nodded slightly. "Because Central is the location of my office, Mr. Daniels." He paused and added, "I'm hoping you can help identify a body."

Jake felt his pulse quicken, but fought down any visible reaction. "Detective, when you arrived, you didn't even know my name. You had to ask. So what makes you think I can be of any help?"

"We found a piece of paper on the person of a young man pulled from the harbor this morning. This address was on the paper. There were no other personal items, and we were hoping you could be of some help."

Jake looked to the overgrown brush that shielded his houseboat from all but the most determined passersby. He listened, but there were no sounds except the lapping of the water and a few morning insects. He heard a low magnolia branch scrape against the cabin behind him and remembered that he was going to trim that back today. After that, he was going to take a look at the bilge pump. It had every appearance of a terrific Sunday. "I'll meet you there as soon as I can. I would like to clean up and secure the dock. Then I'll get to the station. I'll be there in about an hour. Since this is voluntary, I assume that's okay?"

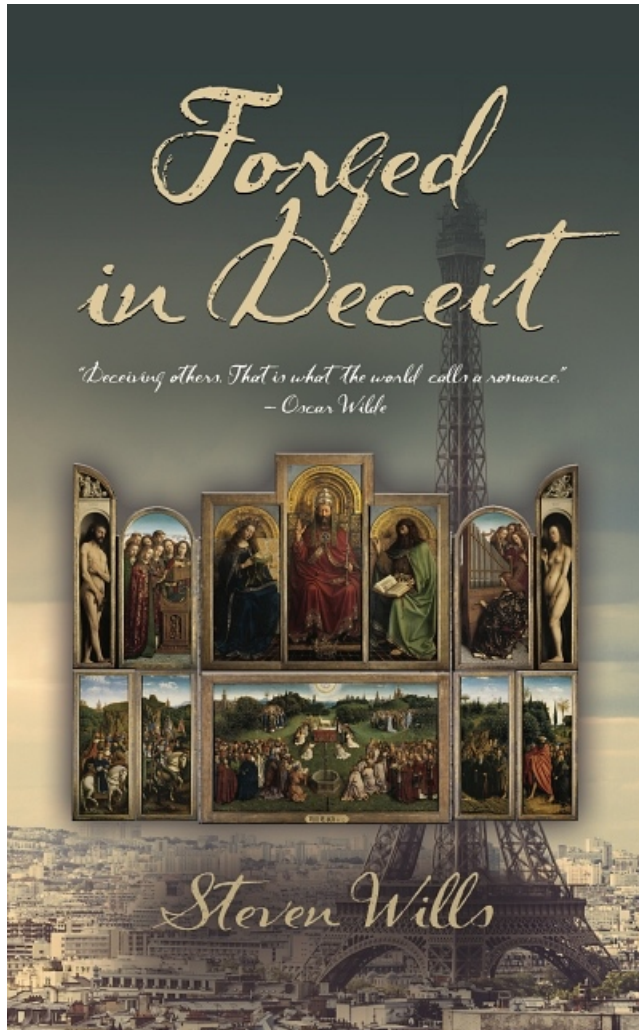
Martik pushed the wallet and shield he had been holding into his pants pocket and turned. "That would

be fine, Mr. Daniels. Thanks for your cooperation. The Central Station is on—"

"I know where it is. Let me get cleaned up and I'll get there as soon as I can. Probably an hour."

Martik turned to leave, speaking over his shoulder. "I'll alert the front desk, and have someone direct you to my office. An hour would be fine." With that, he walked to the dock, off to the gravel parking area and into his car.

Watching him pull away, Jake looked down at the deck and exhaled, as if he had just stopped holding his breath. He entered the cabin to see Bromo sprawled on the bed that they sometimes shared, his large gray head turned to the side and his four paws in the air. Bromo rolled, sat up and watched as Jake walked to the bed and, reaching behind the mattress, slipped a small section of paneling aside. The hardboard rectangle was still there behind the panel. He stared at it for a moment, then pushed the panel back into place. "Shit," he said, and then louder, "SHIT!" His right hand began to ache and he shook it to quiet the sensation. Grabbing a wallet, and a set of keys, he held the cabin door open. "Come on, Bromo. Time to do your business."



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