



So it was decided that they would head in after dark, apparently Kate's grandmother was an ace lock picker. "I was a forgetful girl. Always locking myself out of the house when I was young," she said when nobody believed it of her.

Kevin didn't know these people very well, but he was quickly learning that there was much more to them than just a sweet old couple.

When the time came, they piled into the stolen SUV and made their way to the capitol's underground receiving entrance where, true to her word, grandma picked the lock with a pocket knife and a bobby pin then used a similar method to disable the alarm that sounded on the door. Then she stood back and held the heavy door open for them, grinning with pride.

"Way to go, Grandma!" Kate said. The older woman met her granddaughter's high five with gusto.

"I haven't done something like this in decades!" she said in return, having too much fun considering they were currently committing a major crime.

Armed with only a flashlight, Kevin led his mother, who still seemed to be in a little bit of shock, into the capitol basement and toward the stairs.

Kate and her grandparents followed close behind. The place was deserted and dark. The air conditioning kicked on and covered the sound of the footsteps with white noise. Kevin was confident they were alone in the building.

"Where to first?" Kate's grandfather said.

"The John Brown painting," Kevin said. "It's our only lead. Anybody know where it is?"

"Second floor," came in a chorus from those behind him. Apparently, Kevin was the only one who didn't remember.

The stairway gave way to the large corridors of the second floor; lined with statues and larger than life murals that gave Kevin the creeps in the dark. The team walked the perimeter of the corridors until they happened upon the Tragic Prelude mural. Kevin stared up into the fanatical eyes of John Brown and saw there a man filled with fury and ready to kill. Kevin physically shivered with the impact of it.

The group stood in silence, all flashlights trained on John Brown's face as if waiting for something to happen. Anxiety pooled in Kevin's stomach. He was leading this expedition, and he had no idea where to go from here. He had hoped that somehow, he would see the painting and something his father had let slip would come back to him or that his mother would remember something else important and they could finally put a stop to whatever was going on. Instead, he found himself staring into the painted eyes of a madman in the dark, just as clueless as he had been before.

Kevin blinked. He thought, for just a moment, that the mural had moved.

It happened again, and this time he heard his mother gasp.

A wispy, three-dimensional figure was forming on top of representation of John Brown's face. Kate grabbed his arm. He could feel her trembling.

It started with the head, and the other extremities, then slowly, softly glowing white cloud filled in the entire form of John Brown and a ghost-like figure stepped out of the painting, 15 feet tall, windblown beard, rifle, Bible and all.

Kevin could hear his own pulse, and forced himself to take deep breaths as the ghost of John Brown studied them all with eerie solemnity. He didn't know how to defend them all from a crazed, giant ghost, but he did know the first step was to not pass out while it made up its mind whether or not to kill them.

Eventually, the ghost lowered his arms, tucked the Bible into his belt and slung the rifle over his shoulder. He pointed one long, brown finger at Kate's grandmother, and motioned for her to follow him. The ghost stalked past them with a heavy, tromping, and very unghostly gait.

The group followed the ghost of John Brown up the stairs to third floor and to the doors of the Senate chamber, where he stopped and waited for them to catch up.

"I told you we should have been researching ghosts," Kate whispered in Kevin's ear.

"Are you *enjoying* this?" he said.

"I'm scared as hell, but isn't it exciting?"

Exciting wasn't necessarily the word Kevin would have used to describe the situation. "I always knew you were crazy."

Kate's grandfather cleared his throat and inclined his head toward the ghost of John Brown, who seemed to be waiting for them to finish their conversation before continuing on. He gave Kevin a particularly stern frown before turning around and disappearing through the wall into the Senate chambers. The doors opened behind him and the ghost's shimmering silhouette could be seen standing next to the Senate president's gargantuan, ornate desk. When the group had gathered around him once again, the ghost walked through the back panel underneath the clock.

There was a loud rumbling sound as the panel just below the clock right over their heads moved backwards and up into a low corridor. Kate's grandfather was the first to follow the ghost, followed by his wife, then Kevin's mother. Kate pulled Kevin by the hand as if she didn't think that he would follow the ghost and the rest of them on his own.

After about thirty feet the old-fashioned carpeting gave way to stone, and the corridor slanted down at a steep incline. The air turned cold and damp, and smelled of wet moss. The ceiling was low, and being the tallest of the group, Kevin had to stoop to avoid scraping his head on the rocky ceiling.

Ten uncomfortable minutes later, the corridor opened into a brightly lit, grand underground chamber, thirty feet high, the perimeter lined with polished copper columns and next to glazed brick walls. The

floor was no longer paved stone, but a yellow tile that almost seemed to glow from the chandelier light overhead. On the far side of the room were two ornately carved wooden doors that rose in height to the ceiling.

15 feet in front of the doors was a stone dais on which stood a pedestal that resembled a carved bird bath with twisted, driftwood like perch in the middle. Next to it stood the ghost of John Brown. In the light of the room his form was barely visible, a wisp of shimmer and stern eyes.

Kevin stepped forward to examine the bird bath, ignoring the ghost as best he could. "Do you think this opens the doors somehow?" He said. The others were still taking in the grandeur of the antechamber. Kevin was certain now that whatever proof they needed must be on the other side of those doors.

Kate's grandfather came forward and examined the bird bath as well. "I think you're right, son. I'd say some sort of key fits into this protrusion here at the top." He turned to his wife. "What do you think, sweetheart. How about we give that old ring a try."

When Kate's grandmother stepped up to the dais and slipped her magnificent anniversary ring off her hand, Kevin's mother gasped and said, "He's been looking for that!"

"Too right we have," came a cold voice from behind them.

Kevin whipped around to find Bianca, two goons, and his father leaving the secret passage, all with guns trained on him.

"We thought dear little Kate had stolen it from us. We never suspected the sweet, innocent grandparents," Bianca taunted.

Kate's grandparents were grinning. "You probably should have," her grandfather said. "We're retired FBI. Came out this way when the little assignment I put my granddaughter on started to go awry."

"What assignment?" Kate asked, looking a little confused. Kevin suspected she never knew her grandparents were federal investigators.

"I'm sorry sweetheart," her grandmother said, "but your grandfather and I arranged this whole internship for you when we found out Bianca and her brood were involved with their embezzling scheme from the city. We wanted to keep a close eye on things. Finish our life's work."

Bianca was looking back and forth between Kate's grandparents as if trying to recall their faces.

"You won't recognize us," Kate's grandfather said. "We were before your time."

"But that doesn't make us any less of a threat to you," Kate's grandmother added.

Bianca said nothing, but aimed her gun at Kate's grandfather instead of Kevin.

"Give us the ring," Kevin's father said. He still trained his gun on his son, despite the ring still being in Kate's grandmother's possession.

“What’s behind the doors, Dad?”

“Nothing you need to worry yourself about, Kevin. I was trying to keep you out of this.”

“And now you’re going to kill me? And Mom?”

“Your mother betrayed me.” His father was wheezing.

“I didn’t want to be a part of this in the first place!” Kevin’s mother said. “I liked my life here! I liked this city. I wanted to see it improved!”

“What’s she talking about?” Kevin asked his father. He only shook his head and steadied his aim.

“Your father helped orchestrate one of the biggest embezzlement scams this country has ever seen,” Kate’s grandfather said. “We’ve been tracking the group Miss Bianca works with for years. They’ve done similar deals, but nothing to this degree.”

“But what are they doing? What does this have to do with the pictures?” Kate asked.

“It’s a tax scam,” Kevin’s mother said.

“With a little bit of money up front, Miss Bianca and your father contracted certain companies and city works to participate in construction projects that were supposed to help improve the city. At the same time they orchestrated a sales tax increase to help pay for all the new construction, only to have all that money flow back to them,” Kate’s grandfather said.

“That’s a pretty story, too bad you told it. Now you’ll have to die,” Bianca teased.

“You should have killed us already,” Kate’s grandmother snorted.

“Why, Dad?” was all Kevin could think to say. “Why?”

“He was coerced,” Kevin’s mother said. “His cough.”

“They made you sick?” Kevin said.

“Helping them is the only way to get the cure,” his father said, and was immediately consumed by a coughing fit.

“I am afraid you are still under arrest,” Kate’s grandfather said, and before anyone could stop him, he popped the ring into the perch and turned it so the light from the chandelier shone on the key hole for the door.

Desperate to understand, and keep anyone from being shot, Kevin dove for his dad, tackling him to the ground.

Just then, the lights went out and three loud shots echoed through the antechamber. Kevin crouched over his father, who was still coughing, waiting to feel the bite of a bullet, but nothing came.

“Is everyone all right?” He asked, fumbling for his flashlight.

“Kevin, where are you?” his mother said into the darkness.

“I’m with Dad. I’m fine.” His flashlight turned on and he shone it around the room.

Kate’s grandparents were picking themselves up off the ground. “Who shot?” her grandfather said.

“Who got hit?”

Kate still said nothing, but was staring into the space where the ghost of John Brown had been standing. It dawned on Kevin that that was why it was so dark. The ghost was no longer there to emit his ethereal glow.

“Kate, are you ok?” Kevin said.

“It was him,” she pointed to where the ghost had been, between the bird bath and the doors. “It was John Brown that shot them.”

Kevin shone his flash light on Bianca and her goons. All three were splayed on the shiny yellow floor in growing pools of blood.

Kevin stared in disbelief.

Kate’s grandfather gave a low whistle. “Well, would you look at that!”

The ring had only opened the doors a crack. Now Kate’s grandfather had pushed them open the rest of the way and was standing in a room out of a fairy tale, stacked floor to ceiling with gold.