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Heist Society

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Heist SOCIETY

For my family

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ONE



No one knew for certain when the trouble started at the Colgan School. Some members of its alumni association blamed the decision to admit girls. Others cited newfangled liberal ideals and a general decline in the respect for elders worldwide. But whatever the theory, no one could deny that, recently, life at the Colgan School was different.

Oh, its grounds were still perfectly manicured. Three quarters of the senior class were already well on their way to being early-accepted into the Ivy League. Photos of presidents and senators and CEOs still lined the dark-panelled hallway outside the headmaster's office.

But in the old days, no one would ever have declined admission to Colgan on the day before classes started, forcing the administration to scramble to fill the slot. Historically, any vacancy would have been met with a waiting list a mile long, but this year, for some reason, there was only one applicant eager to enrol at that late date.

Most of all, there had been a time when honour meant something at the Colgan School, when school property was respected, when the faculty was revered – when the head-master's mint-condition 1958 Porsche Speedster would *never* have been placed on top of the fountain in the quad with water shooting out of its headlights on an unusually warm evening in November.

There had been a time when the girl responsible – the very one who had lucked into that last-minute vacancy only a few months before – would have had the decency to admit what she'd done and quietly taken her leave of the school. But unfortunately, that era, much like the headmaster's car, was finished.

Two days after Porsche-gate, as the students had taken to calling it, the girl in question had the nerve to sit in the hallway of the administration building beneath the black-and-white stare of three senators, two presidents, and a Supreme Court justice, with her head held high, as if she'd done nothing wrong.

More students than usual filed down the corridor that day, going out of their way to steal a glance and whisper behind cupped hands.

"That's her."

"She's the one I was telling you about."

"How do you think she did it?"

Any other student might have flinched in that bright spotlight, but from the moment Katarina Bishop set foot on the Colgan campus, she'd been something of an enigma. Some said she'd gained her last-minute slot because she was the daughter of an incredibly wealthy European businessman who had made a very generous donation. Some looked at her perfect posture and cool demeanour, rolled her first name across their tongues, and assumed that she was Russian royalty – one of the last of the Romanovs.

Some called her a hero; others called her a freak.

Everyone had heard a different story, but no one knew the truth – that Kat really had grown up all over Europe, but she wasn't an heiress. That she did, in fact, have a Fabergé egg, but she wasn't a Romanov. Kat herself could have added a thousand rumours to the mill, but she stayed quiet, knowing that the only thing no one would believe was the truth.

"Katarina?" the headmaster's secretary called. "The board will see you now."

Kat rose calmly, but as she stepped towards the open door twenty feet from the headmaster's office, she heard her shoes squeak; she felt her hands tingle. Every nerve in her body seemed to stand on end as she realized that somehow, in the last three months, she had become someone who wore squeaky shoes.

That, whether she liked it or not, they were going to hear her coming.

Kat was used to looking at a room and seeing all the angles, but she'd never seen a room quite like this before.

Though the hallway outside was long and straight, this room was round. Dark wood surrounded her; dim lights hung from a low ceiling. It felt to Kat almost like a cave, except for a tall, slim window where a narrow beam of sunlight came pouring in. Suddenly, Kat found herself reaching out, wanting to run her hands through the rays. But then someone cleared his throat, a pencil rolled across a desk, and Kat's shoes squeaked again, bringing her back to the moment.

"You may sit down."

The voice came from the back of the room, and at first Kat didn't know who'd spoken. Like the voice, the faces before her were unfamiliar: the twelve on her right were wrinkle-free and fresh – students just like her (or as much like her as a Colgan student could possibly be). The twelve people on her left had hair that was a little thinner, or makeup that was a little heavier. But regardless of age, all the members of the Colgan School Honour Board were wearing identical black robes and impassive expressions as they watched Kat walk to the centre of the circular room.

"Sit, Ms Bishop," Headmaster Franklin said from his place in the front row. He looked especially pale in his dark robe. His cheeks were too puffy, his hair too styled. He was the sort of man, Kat realized, who probably wished he were as fast and sporty as his car. And then, despite everything, Kat grinned a little, imagining the headmaster himself propped up in the middle of the quad, squirting water.

As Kat took her seat, the senior boy beside the headmaster rose and announced, "The Colgan School Honour Board shall come to order." His voice echoed around the room. "All who wish to speak shall be heard. All who wish to follow the light shall see. All who wish to seek justice shall find the truth. Honour for one," the boy finished, and before Kat could really process what she'd heard, twenty-four voices chorused, "Honour for all."

The boy sat and ruffled through the pages of an old leather-bound book until the headmaster prodded, "Jason…"

"Oh. Yeah." Jason picked up the heavy book. "The Colgan School Honour Board will hear the case of Katarina Bishop, sophomore. The committee will hear testimony that on the tenth of November, Ms Bishop did willfuly …um…*steal* personal property." Jason chose his words carefully, while a girl in the second row stifled a laugh.

"That by committing this act at two am, she was also in violation of the school curfew. And that Ms Bishop wilfully destroyed school artifacts." Jason lowered the book and paused – a little more dramatically than necessary, Kat thought – before he added, "According to the Colgan Code of Honour, these charges are punishable by expulsion. Do you understand the charges as they have been read to you?"

Kat took a moment to make sure the board really did want her to respond before she said, "I didn't do it."

"The charges." Headmaster Franklin leaned forward. "The question, Ms Bishop, was whether you *understood* the charges."

"I do." Kat felt her heartbeat change rhythm. "I just don't agree with them."

"I—" the headmaster started again, but a woman to his right touched his arm lightly.

She smiled at Kat as she said, "Headmaster, I seem to remember that in matters such as this, it's customary to take the student's full academic history into account. Perhaps we should begin with a review of Ms Bishop's record?"

"Oh." The headmaster seemed to deflate a bit. "Well, that's quite right, Ms Connors, but since Ms Bishop has only been with us a few months, she has no record to speak of."

"But surely this is not the first school the young woman has attended?" Ms Connors asked, and Kat bit back a nervous laugh.

"Well, yes," the headmaster admitted grudgingly. "Of course. And we tried to contact those schools, but there was a fire at Trinity that destroyed the entire admissions office and most of their records. And the Bern Institute experienced a terrible computer crash last summer, so we've had a very difficult time finding…things."

The headmaster looked at Kat as if disasters must follow wherever she went. Ms Connors, on the other hand, looked impressed. "Those are two of the finest schools in Europe."

"Yes, ma'am. My father, he…does a lot of work there."

"What *do* your parents do?"

As Kat searched the second row for the girl who'd posed the question, she started to ask exactly why her parents' occupations mattered. But then she remembered that Colgan was the kind of place where who your parents were and what they did always seemed to matter.

"My mother died when I was six."

A few people gave a slight sigh at this, but Headmaster Franklin pressed on. "And your father?" he asked, unwilling to let a conveniently deceased mother swing any sympathy votes Kat's way. "What does *he* do?"

"Art," Kat said simply, carefully. "He does a lot of things, but he specializes in art."

At this, the head of the fine arts department perked up. "Collecting?" the man asked.

Again Kat had to fight back a smile. "More like… *distribution*."

"Interesting though this may be," Headmaster Franklin interrupted, "it does not pertain to…the matter at hand." Kat could have sworn he'd stopped himself from saying *to my convertible*.

No one responded. The only motion in the room was the dust that still danced in the narrow beam of falling light. Finally, Headmaster Franklin leaned forwards and narrowed his eyes. Kat had seen lasers with less focus as the headmaster snapped: "Ms Bishop, where were you on the night of November tenth?"

"In my room. Studying."

"On a Friday night? You were studying?" The headmaster glanced at his colleagues as if that were the most outrageous lie any Colgan student had ever dared to utter.

"Well, Colgan *is* an exceptionally difficult institution. I have to study."

"And you didn't see anyone?" Jason asked.

"No, I—"

"Oh, but someone saw *you*, didn't they, Ms Bishop?" Headmaster Franklin's voice was cold and sharp. "We have cameras monitoring the grounds. Or didn't you know?" he asked with a chuckle.

But of course Kat knew about the cameras. She suspected she knew more about every aspect of Colgan security than the headmaster did, but she didn't think this was the appropriate time to say so. There were too many witnesses. Too much was at stake. And, besides, the headmaster was already smiling triumphantly and dimming the lights with a remote control. Kat had to twist in her chair to see a section of the round wall sliding aside, revealing a large TV.

"This young woman bears a striking resemblance to you, does she not, Ms Bishop?" As Kat watched the grainy black-and-white video, she recognized the quad, of course, but she had never seen the person who was running across it wearing a black hooded sweatshirt.

"That's not me."

"But the dormitory doors were only opened once that night – at 2:27 am – using a student identification card. *This* card." Kat's stomach flipped as the single-worst picture she had ever taken appeared on the screen. "This is your Colgan student ID, is it not, Ms Bishop?"

"Yes, but—"

"And this" – Headmaster Franklin reached beneath his seat – "was found during a search of your belongings." The personalized licence plate – COLGAN-1 – seemed to glow as he held it above his head.

It felt to Kat as though all the air had left the dim room as a strange feeling swept over her. After all, *accused* she could handle; *wrongly accused* was entirely new territory.

"Katarina?" Ms Connors asked, as if begging Kat to prove them wrong.

"I know that *seems* like a lot of very convincing evidence," Kat said, her mind working, gears spinning. "Maybe too much evidence? I mean, would I really use my own ID if I'd done it?"

"So since there is evidence that you *did* it, that should prove that you *didn't* do it?" Even Ms Connors sounded sceptical.

"Well," Kat said, "I'm not stupid."

The headmaster laughed. "Oh, well, how would *you* have done it?" He was mocking her – baiting her – yet Kat couldn't help but think about the answer:

There was a shortcut behind Warren Hall that was closer and darker and completely void of cameras…

The doors wouldn't need an ID. to open if you had enough Bubblicious to cover the sensor on your way out…

If you're going to pull a prank of that nature, you don't do

it the night before a morning when the maintenance staff will be awake long before the students…

Headmaster Franklin smiled smugly, relishing her silence, as if he were so smart.

But Kat had already learned that people at Colgan were frequently wrong – like when her Italian teacher had said that Kat's accent would always make her stand out on the streets of Rome (even though Kat had already passed for a Franciscan nun during a particularly difficult job in Vatican City). She thought about how silly her History of Art teacher had sounded when she'd waxed poetic about seeing the *Mona Lisa* (when Kat knew for a fact that the Louvre's original had been replaced with a fake in 1862).

Kat had learned quite a lot of things before enrolling at the Colgan School – but the thing that she knew best was that this was the kind of place where she could never share them.

"I don't know about Trinity or Bern or any of those *European* schools, young lady, but at the Colgan School we follow the rules." The headmaster's fist banged the table. "We respect the property of others. We adhere to the honour code of this institution and the laws of this country."

But Kat already knew about honour. She'd grown up

with her own set of rules. And the first rule of Katarina Bishop's family was simple: Don't get caught.

"Katarina," Ms Connors said, "do you have anything to add that might explain this?"

Kat could have said, *That's not me* or *There must be some kind of mistake*. The great irony was that if this had been an ordinary con, she could have lied her way through it without a second thought. But the truth? That, she wasn't so good at.

Her ID. badge had been duplicated. The licence plate had been planted in her room. Someone had dressed like her and made sure they were caught on camera.

She'd been framed. And Kat didn't dare say what she was thinking: that whoever had done it, they were very, very good.

Kat's bags were packed in twenty minutes. She might have lingered, saying her goodbyes, but there were no goodbyes to say. And so, after three months at Colgan, Kat couldn't help but wonder if the day she got expelled from boarding school might become the proudest moment of her family's long and colourful past. She imagined everyone sitting around Uncle Eddie's kitchen table years from now, telling about the time little Katarina stole a whole other life and then walked away without a trace.

Well, almost, Kat thought as she carried her bags past the once-perfect lawn. Ruts still tracked to and from the mangled fountain in the centre of the quad: a muddy reminder that would no doubt last until spring.

She heard laughter coming from behind her, and turned. A group of eighth grade boys was standing together, whispering, until one bravely broke away from the pack.

"Uh…" he started, then glanced back at his friends, summoning courage. "We were wondering…um. How'd you do it?"

A stretch limo pulled through the ornate gates and up to the kerb. The boot popped open. As the driver started for her bags, Kat looked at the boys and then back at Colgan one final time. "*That* is an excellent question."

The bells chimed. Students hurried between classes, across the quad. And as Kat crawled into the backseat of the limo, she couldn't help feeling slightly sad, or as sad as anyone could feel about losing something that wasn't rightfully theirs to begin with. She leaned back and sighed, "Well, I guess that's over."

And it would have been…if another voice hadn't said, "Actually, it's just beginning."