

The Rembrandt Code

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Prologue

In 1976, Amsterdam was seized by shock following a bizarre incident on its canals. Several tourists perished under mysterious circumstances, with the sole survivor being an American marine biologist named Peter.

Thirty years later, his son, Jack, becomes entangled in a strikingly similar catastrophe in the very same city. Incredibly, he too emerges unscathed—once again, the only one to survive.

Peter resolves to return to Amsterdam to confront the ghosts of his past. As he delves into the mystery, he discovers the origins of these events trace back to the colonial history of the Dutch Golden Age.

Meanwhile, a clue seems to lie hidden within Rembrandt's masterpiece,

The Night Watch—a detail that could potentially expose that dark secret to the world.

Although this story is set against the backdrop of real historical events and existing locations, its plot is entirely a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or deceased, or to actual organizations, is purely coincidental.

Chapter 1: Canals of Crimson

June 14, 2006 – Amsterdam, Netherlands

Thousands of lights twinkled along the Prinsengracht, their reflections shimmering in the deep water. The canal exuded an air of ceaseless prosperity, an inheritance from centuries of merchant vessels. A faint, almost imperceptible scent of cannabis hung in the air, mingling with the sweet aroma of freshly baked stroopwafels from a nearby café and the briny tang of the North Sea wind. This unique fragrance had been the very breath of Amsterdam for ages, a city where the forbidden and the familiar had always blended with effortless grace since the Golden Age.

An elegantly appointed tour boat glided silently across the water's surface. On board, tourists from every corner of the globe leaned against the railing, captivated by the dreamlike tableau before them. The sounds of laughter and the clicking of camera shutters wove together, drifting through the air like a cheerful nocturnal symphony.

Jack—a tall, young American with a tousled mane of blond hair that billowed gently in the evening breeze—was on a graduation trip through Amsterdam with his closest university friends, their final adventure before stepping into the “real world”. He unconsciously toyed with an old coin in his pocket, one he had discovered as a child in his father Peter's study. Peter had told him it was a gift from an old historian friend from many years ago. Finding the coin special, Jack had asked his father for it. Peter had hesitated but eventually allowed him to keep it. The cool metal pressed against his fingertips; the obverse was etched with the figure of a man in a hat, while the reverse bore a series of indecipherable symbols that seemed to hail from a distant, ancient time. Sometimes, in his dreams, the coin seemed to shimmer in the moonlight, a silent token bearing an age-old secret.

His father had never elaborated on the story behind the coin, nor had he spoken much of that friend. Whenever Jack pressed for details, he would see a flicker of indescribable apprehension in Peter's eyes, a profound and inscrutable emotion he could never fully comprehend. Jack never understood its deep significance, yet he always felt the coin held a mystical allure, a connection to a time long past.

The tour boat slowly pulled away from the dock. The guide's jocular voice crackled over the speakers: "Your attention, please, ladies and gentlemen. Amsterdam's canals may be enchanting, but local folklore says they're also home to 'canal ghosts'—be careless for a moment, and they'll drag you under."

A wave of laughter erupted among the passengers. Some playfully shoved their companions from behind, eliciting shrieks and instantly enlivening the atmosphere.

Jack stared at the water's surface. The joke, however, felt like a tiny splinter that had lodged itself in a corner of his heart—a premonition of unease, as if something were watching them from the canal's depths.

"Jack, look over there! Those houses are gorgeous, like something out of a fairy tale!" Emily exclaimed, pointing at the ornate, historic buildings lining the canal. Her voice was bright and full of life.

Jack followed her gaze. The colorful old houses, illuminated by the streetlamps, seemed like jewels set into the velvet of the night. A strange sense of familiarity washed over him, as though he had seen this very scene in a dream.

"Amsterdam's architecture really is one of a kind," he replied with a smile, snapping a few photos. The water's surface was a mirror, perfectly reflecting the city's lights.

The boat drifted slowly into the Red Light District. Crimson lights flickered from the shore, where scantily clad women leaned in windows, casting alluring glances at passersby and drawing quiet snickers from the tourists. The air was thick with the scent of perfume, alcohol, and marijuana—the signature aroma of Amsterdam, the scent of freedom.

"This is Amsterdam. Anything's possible here," Mike said under his breath, his eyes gleaming with excitement. He was a classic American boy: full of desire, forever chasing novelty, and the Red Light District had ignited a curiosity in him like never before.

Jack chuckled but didn't reply. The garish lights and clamor held no interest for him; his gaze drifted back to the water. The waves were soundless, like a sheath of black velvet concealing some secret. He recalled the stories his father had told him as a child—legends of the “canal ghosts.” A shadow passed over his heart.

Suddenly, the boat shuddered slightly, as if it had struck something. Jack gripped the railing, his brow furrowed. The vibration was faint but distinct. It didn't feel like hitting floating debris; it was more like something hard scraping against the hull, or a bubble abruptly bursting. Immediately after, a nauseatingly sweet and putrid odor assailed his nostrils—a scent unlike any he had ever encountered, like overripe fruit mixed with some unidentifiable decay.

The stench was so potent it was almost tangible, coiling up from the depths like silken threads to invade his nostrils, making his stomach churn and causing him to retch. He quickly pinched his nose, but the odor was inescapable, even leaving a strange, meaty sweetness on his tongue.

“Jack, are you okay?” Emily asked with concern, noticing his pale face.

“I'm fine...” He shook his head, forcing a calm expression so as not to worry his friends. Perhaps it was just some pollutant in the water, or maybe he was overthinking things.

The boat continued on, and everything seemed to return to normal. The tourists were still laughing and chatting as if nothing had happened. But Jack remained on edge, his eyes constantly scanning the water, his fingers gently rubbing the coin in his pocket.

Then, a scream pierced the night air. “Oh god! What's happening?!”

Everyone turned to the source of the cry. A man had collapsed to the deck, his face instantly turning ashen. His lips trembled as white foam began to spill from his mouth, a foam that quickly turned pink.

Panic spread like a contagion, a wave of despair washing over everyone. Screams tore through the air, mingling with horrified sobs and whispered prayers.

“He’s been poisoned!” a woman shrieked, her own face drained of color. “Quick! Call an ambulance!” another person yelled.

The crew immediately began to administer aid, but the man’s condition deteriorated rapidly. His breathing grew fainter, his life signs fading. “He’s gone... no breath...” a crew member said, his voice trembling, his face grim. Even with his experience, he had never seen such a terrifying sight.

“Is... is he dead?” a tourist stammered, backing away involuntarily.

The atmosphere on the boat froze. Panic spread like wildfire. Screams, cries, and cold prayers tangled together. In a matter of minutes, this vessel of joy had become an inferno of death and terror.

Jack was frozen in place, unable to process what was happening before him. He felt a wave of dizziness as the putrid stench, like a summoned specter, rose from the water, thicker and more cloying than before, almost suffocating him.

But the worst was yet to come.

Another scream rang out. One by one, other tourists began to collapse, all with the exact same symptoms: deathly pale faces, foaming at the mouth, violent convulsions... They were consumed by an unseen force, dying swiftly.

Jack watched in horror as Emily, Mike, David—all of his friends—fell one after another. He wanted to help, but found he couldn’t move. His body felt as heavy as lead, pinned to the spot by terror. He couldn’t move, couldn’t scream, could only watch as his friends died before his eyes. He struggled to breathe, his throat feeling as if it were being constricted, unable to make a sound.

His strength was draining away, the shadow of death closing in, and he was completely overwhelmed by despair and fear. Yet, strangely, while he felt dizzy and short of breath, he didn’t suffer the convulsions or foaming at the mouth like the others. It was as if the toxin was wandering aimlessly inside him, unable to find its target.

The tragedy continued. More tourists collapsed as if struck by some collective curse. Death came quickly, bizarrely, and with chilling effect.

In the end, Jack was the only person left standing on the boat. His face was ashen, his body trembling, his eyes filled with horror and dread. He couldn't comprehend what had just happened, much less why he alone had been spared. All he knew was that he had just lived through a nightmare he would never escape, one that instilled in him a profound terror of this city.

The Amsterdam night was torn apart by the approaching sirens of ambulances and police cars.

Police and paramedics arrived swiftly, cordoning off the area. They confirmed that aside from Jack, there were no survivors. The scene was ghastly: bodies lay strewn about, stained with blood, a horrific sight. No one had ever witnessed such a gruesome spectacle.

This mysterious mass death event shocked all of Amsterdam, and indeed the world. Rumors spread online as panic quickly went viral, infecting the entire city.

"It's the water ghosts... it must be the water ghosts..." a wrinkled old woman murmured, her eyes wide with a fear that seemed to recall childhood legends. "Nonsense! There are no such things!" a young man countered, but his trembling voice and shifting gaze betrayed his own anxiety. "It's true... when I was little, the old folks always said something lived in the canals..." the old woman insisted, her eyes vacant, as if lost in a legend that had robbed her of sleep as a child.

Rumors of the "water ghosts" spread like wildfire, adding another layer of fear to a city already steeped in grief. People began to fear the canals, the night, and the monsters that lurked beneath the surface, which could reappear at any moment to claim more lives.

Chapter 2: The Nightmare Returns

Miami, Florida, USA

In the dead of night, the piercing ring of an old-fashioned telephone shattered the silence.

Peter jolted awake, his heart hammering against his ribs like a war drum. The sudden shrill not only tore him from a deep sleep but also reawakened a fear he had buried long ago.

With a trembling hand, he snatched the receiver. Before he could speak, his niece Sarah's panicked voice flooded the line. "Peter, something terrible has happened... It's Jack... Jack's in trouble in Amsterdam!"

The words struck Peter like a bolt of lightning. His body went rigid, his mind instantly consumed by the nightmare from thirty years ago. The suppressed terror, like a cold, clammy hand, reached out from the abyss of his memory and seized his throat.

Jack? His son... The one thing he could not bear was to lose someone he loved again.

"What about Jack? What happened?" Peter's voice was hoarse and shaky, each word fraught with dread. The hand gripping the phone trembled uncontrollably, his palm slick with cold sweat. In his mind, that long-buried night was replaying itself—the tourists vomiting by the canal, the terrified screams, the dark shadow vanishing in the water, and the lives that were forever lost. He had thought those memories were buried by time, but now they surged forth like a tidal wave, threatening to drown him. He fought to focus, but an invisible hand seemed to be squeezing his chest, making it nearly impossible to breathe. A familiar, ancient fear began to gnaw at his nerves: history... it was truly repeating itself.

And this time, the victim was the one person he could not afford to lose.

"Jack... he seems to be okay, but... everyone else is dead..." Sarah relayed what she had seen on the news, her voice faltering, trailing off

into a soft sob. “Amsterdam... the canal... a mass death... and Jack was the only one who survived...” The words pierced Peter’s heart like daggers, dragging him down into the depths of his memory.

A wave of dizziness washed over him. His body began to shake involuntarily as cold sweat beaded on his forehead. This was the nightmare from thirty years ago, the very night he had sworn never to set foot in that cursed city again.

“No... no, that’s impossible...” he muttered, clutching his head, his knuckles white from the strain. He forced himself to calm down.

“Sarah, are you sure Jack is all right? Where is he now?”

“I’m not sure... The news just said he was the sole survivor and that the police have taken him in for questioning...” Sarah’s sobs grew louder.

Peter hung up the phone and sank onto the edge of the bed, feeling utterly defeated. Jack was in trouble... in Amsterdam... just like he had been all those years ago. The repressed memories flooded back, the images he had fought so hard to forget now appearing before him with harrowing clarity.

In 1976, he was a young marine biologist, full of boundless curiosity for the unknown, and he had come to Amsterdam. To him, the city was not just a stop for research but a gateway to adventure. Until that catastrophic night—a mysterious mass poisoning that claimed countless lives, leaving him the sole survivor, though at the time he never understood why the toxin had spared him. The experience left him not only with questions but also with a lifelong, unshakable sense of guilt.

That viscous, deep-rooted guilt stemmed from his survival. The vibrant lives that had shared the boat with him, smiled at him—including a little girl with eyes as clear as water, clutching a teddy bear—had all died in agony before his helpless eyes. For thirty years, the girl’s terrified and bewildered gaze in her final moments had haunted his nightmares almost every night, a constant reminder of the survival he could not escape.

He closed his eyes, and the scenes, both hazy and vivid, returned. Memories, like decaying water weeds, tangled in his mind—the slick, green-glowing expanse of water, the cloyingly sweet and pungent stench, the heart-wrenching screams, and the inexorable grip of cold death. It all felt as if it had happened only yesterday. Peter shivered, his body instinctively curling into itself, cold sweat soaking his back.

He stumbled to the window and pulled back the curtains. Outside, Miami's vibrant nightlife pulsed on, neon lights flashing, traffic flowing, as boisterous as ever. But the city's splendor could not dispel the shadows in his heart; instead, it made him feel even more alone and afraid.

Amsterdam... the place he had vowed never to return to... was now his only hope, and his deepest fear. Thirty years ago, he had fled that city, but the shadow of that night had never truly lifted. He had thought time could heal all wounds, but some scars never truly fade. Some memories could drag him back into the abyss in an instant.

And now, history was repeating itself, and this time it was his son, Jack. The thought twisted in his heart like a knife.

Peter was consumed by guilt and fear. He realized that his cowardice thirty years ago—fleeing the city and the spirits of the dead—might be the root of today's tragedy. He felt guilty for the brutal deaths of those innocent victims, having never summoned the courage to seek the truth, allowing suspicion to shroud everything. And that deep-seated fear and avoidance had also cast a shadow over Jack's upbringing, perhaps even indirectly affecting his late wife, Martha, making her a silent partner to his nightmares and his silence before she passed.

He looked at the news alert on his phone. A blurry photo of a tour boat—the exact model he remembered from thirty years ago, even the color was identical. In that moment, he understood: this was no coincidence.

He could not run anymore. He had to go back to Amsterdam. He had to find Jack. He had to uncover the truth.

Peter's gaze hardened with resolve. He clenched his fists, his nails digging so deeply into his palms that the pain brought a sliver of