A COMPLIMENTARY READING SAMPLE

THE PERFECT MARK

DARREN BORSOS

PROLOGUE + FIRST CHAPTER

A NOTE FROM DARREN

Thank you for taking an interest in The Perfect Mark.

I wrote this novel because I wanted to see whether I could take an idea all the way through to a finished book. What began as a personal ambition became a story of art, deception and the danger of believing you can read everyone around you.

Here is the prologue and first chapter. I hope you enjoy meeting Adrian Vale.

Darren Borsos

PROLOGUE

THE FIRST TIME

He didn't mean to steal it.

That was the lie he would tell himself later in life, when lies became something he used more precisely. Cleaner. More functional.

But at twelve years old, standing in the noise and heat of a crowded Florence street market, there was no narrative yet. No identity. No system.

Just sensation.

His father was a few metres away, arguing softly in Italian over paint pigments he didn't really need but would insist were essential. The kind of argument that wasn't really about price, but about respect for craft.

Adrian had stopped listening halfway through.

Something else had taken his attention.

A man standing near the edge of the crowd. Tourist. Middle-aged. Distracted. One hand holding a camera, the other gesturing lazily as he laughed at something someone had said.

On his wrist: a watch.

Nothing remarkable.

Not to anyone else.

But Adrian noticed the details instantly.

The slight looseness of the strap. The way it shifted when the man moved his hand. The lack of awareness when he checked the time. The gap between attention and possession.

He didn't know the word for it yet.

Opportunity.

He just felt it.

Like pressure behind the eyes.

Like a door that wasn't fully closed.

His father's voice called from behind him.

"Don't wander."

Not angry. Just distracted.

Adrian didn't reply.

He was already closer than he should have been.

The market pressed around him—heat, voices, colour, movement—but everything narrowed into a small corridor of focus.

The man laughed again. Looked away. Shifted his weight.

The watch slipped slightly on his wrist.

Just enough.

Adrian stepped forward.

Not thinking.

Not planning.

Just aligning himself with the gap he had already seen.

His fingers moved quickly. Smaller than the man's attention span. Smaller than consequence.

A single motion.

Contact. Pressure. Lift.

The watch was in his hand before his mind registered that it had happened.

For half a second, nothing changed.

The world kept moving exactly as it had been.

Then his heart did something new.

It sped up.

Not fear.

Recognition.

He had taken something that belonged to someone else—and no one had stopped him.

The man kept talking. Kept laughing. Kept existing exactly as before.

Adrian stepped backwards automatically, slipping into the crowd's movement like he belonged there.

His hand closed around the watch inside his pocket.

Warm metal.

Real.

His father called again, further away now.

“Adrian!”

He turned too quickly. Almost too quickly.

His father was looking in his direction now, still unaware of what had happened, still caught between colours and negotiation.

For a moment, Adrian thought about going back.

The thought appeared briefly. Cleanly.

Then vanished.

Because something else had already replaced it.

A feeling he didn’t understand yet.

Not guilt. Not shame.

Power.

He stepped back into the crowd instead of forward.

And the world accepted it.

That was the moment he learned the first rule.

Not that you could steal.

But that you could do it and remain unseen.

Later that night, in a small rented apartment above the city, he sat on the edge of a bed and looked at the watch properly for the first time.

His father was asleep in the next room. Exhausted from walking all day. Unaware of anything beyond paint and money and tomorrow’s journey.

Adrian turned the watch over in his hands slowly.

It was heavier than expected.

Real weight always surprised him at first.

Like truth.

He studied the mechanism. The face. The second hand ticking forward without care for ownership.

Something inside him settled while he watched it move.

A quiet certainty forming in a place too young to understand its own architecture.

He didn't feel like a thief.

Not yet.

He felt like someone who had discovered a system no one had explained.

His father appeared in the doorway eventually.

Sleep-heavy. Gentle.

"What are you doing awake?"

Adrian closed his hand slightly around the watch without thinking.

"Couldn't sleep."

His father nodded, not fully awake.

"Come to bed then."

A pause.

Adrian looked down at the watch again.

Then back up.

“Do you ever think people notice everything?” he asked.

His father frowned slightly, confused.

“Some do,” he said. “Most don’t.”

That answer stayed longer than it should have.

His father looked at him for a moment longer, then smiled faintly.

“You think too much,” he said softly. “That’s good. Just don’t let it become all you do.”

Then he turned and went back to bed.

The door closed.

Silence returned.

Adrian looked down at the watch again.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

And for the first time, he understood something without having words for it.

The world did not notice him.

And that meant it could be moved.

Outside, Florence continued as it always had.

Unaware.

Unchanged.

But inside that room, a line had been crossed quietly enough that no one would ever be able to locate the exact moment it happened.

CHAPTER ONE

THE EDUCATION OF THE EYE

My father never taught me how to steal.

He taught me how to see.

The house we lived in didn't look like much from the outside. Narrow frontage. Faded brick. Windows that hadn't been replaced in years. The kind of place people walked past without remembering they had. Rainwater stained the guttering. The front gate dragged against the concrete whenever it opened. In winter, the cold pushed through the walls no matter how high the heating was turned.

Nothing about it suggested value.

That was intentional.

My father believed attention was dangerous. Real wealth—the kind worth having—never announced itself loudly. It concealed itself inside ordinary things and waited for the right eyes to recognise it.

Inside, the house became something else entirely.

There wasn't a single empty wall. Every surface held something. Canvas. Frame. Texture. History. The smell hit you first—oil paint, old wood, varnish, turpentine, dust trapped inside fabric older than the country we lived in. Even now, years later, I can still remember it perfectly.

A Rembrandt hung above the fireplace.

Or what most people would have sworn was a Rembrandt.

The light alone would have convinced them—the way it fell across the subject's face, pulling detail from shadow with a softness that felt almost impossible to replicate. Beside it, a Constable landscape stretched wider than it needed to, clouds layered with a depth that gave them weight. The greens were slightly muted, deliberately so, aged just enough to suggest time had settled into them naturally.

In the hallway—a Van Gogh.

Not the kind people expected. No sunflowers. No night sky. Something quieter. A field. Movement trapped inside the brushwork. Energy restrained just enough to feel controlled without losing its urgency.

I stood in front of that painting more than any other. Even before I understood why.

Further inside, in what my father called his "workspace," the styles changed completely. A Hockney leaned against the far wall. Bold lines. Flat colour. Clean composition that looked effortless until you realised how precise it had to be to feel that way.

A Basquiat sat half-finished on an easel, chaotic marks layered over one another in a way that felt accidental until you looked closer and realised every line carried intention behind it.

A Francis Bacon study lay draped beneath cloth, though I had already seen enough of it to understand what it was—figures distorted just enough to feel wrong without ever becoming unrecognisable.

I grew up surrounded by them.

Not as decoration.

As education.

My father rarely raised his voice. He didn't need to. He carried authority quietly, the kind built through absolute confidence rather than performance. Tall. Thin. Dark hair beginning to silver at the temples long before most men his age. His hands were always marked with traces of paint no matter how much he scrubbed them clean. There was usually a cigarette somewhere nearby, balanced on an ashtray overflowing with burnt filters while jazz played softly from an old radio in the corner of the room.

When he painted, everything about him changed.

He became calmer somehow. More precise. Every movement slowed until even reaching for a brush looked deliberate. He could stand in front of a canvas for twenty minutes without touching it, simply studying the surface as though waiting for it to tell him what came next.

"Look at the brushwork," he would say, standing behind me, his voice low and patient.

"Don't look at the whole. Break it apart."

I did.

I learned how paint sat on canvas. How it moved. How it stopped. How Rembrandt built light from darkness. How Constable layered atmosphere into something you could almost feel. How Van Gogh never really painted stillness, even when everything inside the image suggested it.

"Anyone can copy an image," my father told me once.

"Very few can copy intention."

That stayed with me.

We weren't rich. Not even close. Bills stacked on the kitchen counter. The boiler broke every winter. Some nights the electricity meter clicked toward empty while my father painted in silence like none of it mattered.

But if you walked into that house—you would have thought we were wealthy beyond measure.

That was the point.

My father wasn't a collector.

He was a forger.

And not just good. Exceptional.

The kind of man who didn't simply replicate a painting—he recreated the thinking behind it. The layering. The hesitation. The correction. He could paint doubt into a brushstroke. Confidence into a line. Age into a surface so convincingly that experts questioned themselves in front of it.

That was the part that fascinated me most.

Not the painting.

The belief.

"You're not selling the work," he said once, watching me study the Van Gogh.

"You're selling what people think it represents."

"And what does it represent?" I asked.

He smiled slightly.

“Whatever they need it to.”

That was the moment I understood something important.

Art wasn’t about beauty.

It was about perception.

And perception—could be controlled.

I spent hours in that house doing nothing but looking. Not casually. Not passively. Studying. The difference between a confident stroke and an uncertain one. The way colour shifted when layered correctly. The subtle imbalance that made something feel real rather than perfect.

Perfection, my father told me, was a mistake.

“Nothing real is perfect,” he said.

“If it is, people stop believing it.”

So he painted flaws. Tiny ones, invisible to most. Essential to all.

A hesitation hidden inside a line. A faint correction beneath dried paint. Cracking built slowly into varnish. Dust pressed carefully into corners where age would naturally gather.

He wasn’t creating paintings.

He was creating history.

I watched him work late into the night, the room quiet except for the soft sound of brush against canvas. He never rushed. Never forced anything. If something wasn’t right, he stopped. Walked away. Came back when it made sense again.

That discipline stayed with me.

Not just in art. In everything.

Because what he was really teaching me—was control.

Control of movement. Control of timing. Control of perception.

And once you understood that—you understood people.

Because people didn't see what was there. They saw what they expected to see. And if you gave them that—carefully enough, confidently enough—you could place almost anything in front of them.

And they would believe it.

As I got older, my father stopped explaining things directly. Instead, he tested me. He would place two paintings side by side and ask me which one felt wrong. Sometimes the difference was almost invisible. A shadow too deliberate. A colour mixed too cleanly. A brushstroke that ended with certainty when the original artist had always carried doubt in the hand.

I became obsessed with it.

At school, teachers thought I lacked focus because I rarely listened. The truth was the opposite. I noticed everything. The expensive watches teachers tried to hide beneath sleeves. The fake handbags some students carried hoping nobody would question them. The tiny changes in behaviour that revealed insecurity, arrogance, attraction, fear.

My father taught me to observe long before I understood observation could become a weapon.

"You know what the rarest thing in the world is?" he asked me once.

I shook my head.

“Attention,” he said.

“Real attention. Most people never truly look at anything.”

He was right.

Years later, that understanding became more valuable than any painting hanging in that house.

Because eventually art led me somewhere else entirely.

Diamonds.

The transition happened naturally. Wealth always moved in the same circles. Paintings hung on walls beside private collections of jewellery worth more than the houses surrounding them. Men who bought art wanted watches. Women who collected diamonds wanted paintings. Auctions blended one world into another until eventually they became inseparable.

By the time I opened my gallery, I already understood how those people thought.

The gallery itself sat in Mayfair, hidden behind understated black frontage that revealed nothing of its value from the street. Inside—soft lighting. Open space. Quiet confidence. The kind of place where billionaires lowered their voices without realising they were doing it.

Actors came first. Then footballers. Hedge fund managers. Royal advisors. Old money families who treated masterpieces like currency.

They trusted me because I spoke their language.

Not verbally.

Psychologically.

I knew how to make them feel understood. I knew when to praise restraint instead of excess. When to remain silent and allow them to fill the silence themselves. When to suggest rarity without ever appearing desperate to sell it.

My father taught me that too.

The wealthy didn't buy objects.

They bought identity.

The gallery gave me access to homes most people would never even see from the street. Penthouse apartments overlooking London. Country estates hidden behind private gates. Vault rooms disguised as dressing areas. Insurance-grade safes concealed behind paintings worth millions.

And eventually, another pattern revealed itself.

Paintings weren't the most valuable things in those homes.

Diamonds were.

Unlike art, diamonds moved easily. Quietly. No customs paperwork announcing their existence. No catalogue photographs documenting ownership publicly. Wealth condensed into something small enough to fit inside the palm of a hand.

I became fascinated by them.

Not just their value.

Their psychology.

The obsession people had with possession. The way they locked them away but still needed visitors to know they existed. The way wives casually revealed collections during private dinners while pretending

they weren't showing off. The way men underestimated everyone around them once money insulated them from consequence.

Most importantly—I noticed how predictable security became when designed by people obsessed with status.

Motion sensors. Pressure floors. Timed locks. Reinforced glass. Thermal cameras. Biometric safes.

Complicated systems built by men who believed complexity alone created invulnerability.

It didn't.

Every system had weakness because every system was built by human beings. And human beings were governed by routine, ego, fatigue, distraction and fear.

The technology never interested me as much as the people using it.

Because eventually every lock depended on behaviour.

And behaviour could always be studied.

That became my real education.

Not theft itself.

Preparation.

Learning staff routines. Understanding alarm reset windows. Knowing which clients drank too much after auctions. Which husbands cheated. Which wives secretly hated each other. Which security consultants cut corners to preserve aesthetics over practicality.

I never forced anything.

That was the mistake amateurs made.

Force created unpredictability. Precision created control.

And I hated losing control.

Over time, the impossible became routine.

Private collections vanished without signs of entry. Safes opened without damage. Insurance investigators blamed internal staff because no evidence suggested anyone else had ever been there.

That was always the part I enjoyed most.

Not taking the diamonds.

Leaving behind certainty that made no sense.

Because the greatest illusion was never invisibility.

It was making people believe they had never seen you at all.

Years later, I realised something else about my father.

He wasn't simply teaching me how to see art.

He was teaching me how to see opportunity.

Where others saw value—I saw access.

Where others saw beauty—I saw belief.

And belief—was always the easiest thing to steal.

THE STORY CONTINUES...

What happens when a man who can read almost anyone meets someone he cannot predict?

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