



Illegal Possession

By Kay Hooper

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From *New York Times* bestselling author Kay Hooper comes a novel of suspense, mystery, and seduction that begins at the scene of a crime—and brings a man and woman together in a dangerous partnership that could cost them everything. ...

What she was doing was immoral, illegal, and could easily get her killed—but Troy Bennett wasn't apologizing to anyone. She'd been caught red-handed in the middle of a felony and she couldn't have picked a more dangerous man to be holding her fate in his hands. Not that straitlaced businessman Dallas Cameron intended to turn her over to the law. He had far more devious intentions for the sexy cat burglar. He planned to uncover the secrets of this complex and mysterious woman who broke into homes and yet had connections with Interpol, who rejected his interest but seduced him at every turn. Thief, security expert, art aficionado, Washington, D.C., hostess to the rich, famous, and immensely powerful—who was Troy Bennett? Would answering that question take Dallas over the line he always drew between good and evil and plunge both of them into the darker side of desire?

From the Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Kay Hooper, who has more than six million copies of her books in print worldwide, has won numerous awards and high praise for her novels. Kay lives in North Carolina, where she is currently working on her next novel.

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Chapter One

She checked the line for the third time and then swung out over the guttering, lowering herself cautiously until her feet were firmly placed on the lintel protruding slightly above the top window. She had no fear of being seen from within; this was the attic window, a round conceit fashioned in bogus stained glass and certainly opaque from paint if not from plain old dirt. Her soft kid boots gripped the stone securely, and she looked down over her shoulder to pinpoint her target one last time. Yes—there it was: a raised window sash on the second floor.

Her gaze continued downward until she noted the grass directly beneath her, noted indifferently and with but a glancing thought how that grass would welcome a body falling five stories into its grasp. It would have been easier, she thought, to climb up to the second floor rather than climb down to it, but inconveniently placed shrubbery lighting cast a distinctly unwelcome spotlight on the entire first floor. Only a suicidally bold thief would have taken the chance.

Troy was bold—but she was also shrewd and cautious. And luckily she could belay herself down faster and more quietly than nine out of ten men could have climbed up. Decision made.

Balancing easily on the narrow ledge, Troy reached up to roll down her ski mask to cover her face. That done, her gloved fingers moved automatically over her compact tool belt, ticking off each tool in its proper place. Then she gripped the line, expertly bent her knees, and pushed away from the building, swinging out and down with the speed and control of an experienced mountain climber. The first fall took her down to the third floor, her booted feet touching the brick wall with the lightness of a feather and the silence of a cat. Knees bent, she allowed her joints to absorb force and sound for a split second, and then pushed off again.

Her second jump took her exactly to target: the open window sash was at waist-level and to her right. Again, flexed knees took the force of her landing, absorbing sound. Troy paused for a moment, head turned and eyes fixed on the sentry who'd just rounded the corner of the building. She watched in silence, not a sound betraying her to the man or to the alert Doberman that was pacing on a short leash at his side. Both passed her position, some feet below her, and moved on, the man swearing quietly to his canine companion about the absurdity of patrolling on a night as cold as a witch's broomstick and as black as the Earl of Hell's waistcoat.

Troy turned her head to watch them move out of sight around the opposite corner of the building. She saw mist rise in front of her eyes and realized absently that she'd held her breath, but her lungs hadn't complained; Troy could hold her breath for a long time. She locked the line in position and used the niches in the bricks to pull herself sideways until she could peer between the crack in the drapes.

She had highly developed night vision so her eyes saw as much of the interior of the room as was possible through the narrow crack. A chair, a desk, what looked like a game table, and—ah! Books on shelves. The plans had been worth what she'd paid for them then; this was the library. The safe should be to the left of the desk and probably—unoriginally—behind a painting.

She braced her feet even more carefully and slid a hand inside the open window. Sensitive fingers gloved in form-fitting kid searched slowly and delicately for any indication of wire or trip device, and found none. Still cautious, Troy unhooked a small electronic device from her belt and pushed a button, her eyes fixed unwaveringly on a small green light as she moved the device all around the window frame.

A moment later Troy returned the device to her belt, her brows lifting silently and invisibly behind the ski mask. No alarm system. Then it was true that the man relied on his patrols and dogs for protection. Odd, she thought. But maybe not so odd. This man was somewhat new to the acquire-art-at-any-cost breed; his collection probably wasn't extensive enough yet to demand state-of-the-art protection. Or perhaps he just hadn't realized that he could be a target.

Behind the ski mask a smile appeared, and Troy let it have its way. By this time tomorrow night, she thought with real amusement, he might be calling me to rig up a security system for him. That thought almost brought a giggle, but hanging two floors up on a line suspended from the roof wasn't quite the place to indulge in humor. Troy swallowed the giggle and got on with the job at hand.

Slender, startlingly powerful hands slid beneath the sash, gripped, raised. With a silence born of long practice she lifted one leg over the sill until she was sitting astride it. She unhooked herself from the line, making sure that it was within easy reach outside the window, then swung the other leg over and straightened up inside the room.

She stood for a moment, allowing her eyes to adjust to the very slight difference in the texture of the darkness, then moved swiftly. Avoiding furnishings as though it were her own living room, she crossed to the door and stood for a moment with her ear against it. Silence. Turning away, she produced a pencil flashlight and pointed it toward the floor, going back to lower the window to its former position and completely close the drapes: Troy took no chances with a sentry's wandering gaze. Only her rope remained outside, and it blended in perfectly with the wall.

In seconds she was standing before the painting she'd expected to find. One sweep of the light showed her that it was a rather commonplace print, and she grinned again behind the mask. What thief would bother with this painting? Only one who suspected something behind it! A brief inspection told her that the man didn't stint on inside protection: the framed print was wired. After a moment's thought she rolled her mask back up and placed the narrow flashlight between her teeth, reaching for tools and getting to work.

In a space of time that would have embarrassed a certain security company, Troy had the alarm disconnected and the hinged frame swung open to disclose the safe behind it. And with a speed that would have won the admiration of half the safecrackers in the world, she opened the safe. Still holding the flashlight in her teeth, she reached in and swiftly found what she was looking for. The painting was rolled up in a cardboard tube. She grimaced. Granted, that cardboard tube made things easy for her, but to treat an Old Master this way . . .

And then the lamp in the corner spilled golden light over the room.

Troy had only a few seconds in which to think and plan, but it was enough: she was nothing if not quick on her feet. Holding the painting again rolled up and ready to slide into its tube, she turned her head toward the

door and studied the intruder with an insolence not a whit marred by the flashlight still gripped between her teeth.

He was dressed in pajama bottoms and a robe, and seemed disgustingly wide-awake and aware for two a.m. Well over six feet tall, he had thick black hair brushing his collar in back, shoulders that a football player would have envied, and a face that half the women Troy knew would have murdered spouses to have lying on the pillow next to theirs. It was a lean, intelligent face with keen eyes that were presently staring at her with a sort of fascinated wonder, high cheekbones and firm jaw, and a mouth that was curved with innate humor and more than a spark of sensuality.

Troy had never seen him before, and was reasonably sure that he wasn't a resident. In her five days of studying the layout of the house and the comings and goings of its occupants, he hadn't crossed the threshold. Just her luck, she grouched silently, that he'd turn up for the night and then go looking for something to read!

Making the best of things, Troy grabbed the ball and ran with it. Taking the flashlight from her mouth, she hissed, "Shut the door."

Automatically he did so, then seemed to collect himself. "What the hell—" he began.

"Shhhh!" she hissed again. "You want to wake up the whole house?"

Unconsciously whispering, he said, "I think I'd better."

"Don't be ridiculous." Troy calmly closed the safe and hid it behind the print, still holding the painting and cardboard tube in one hand.

"Now, look—" he began in a fierce whisper, but she cut him off again.

"You're not a friend of the owner of this house, are you?"

Advancing a little farther into the room and placing himself absently or by design (Troy thought the latter) between her and the window, he glared at her and answered, still in a whisper. "No. He wants me to join him in a business venture, but—" This time he broke off himself, looking somewhat bewildered. "Why the hell am I talking to you instead of calling the police?" he demanded in a wrathful mutter.

Troy ignored that. "I wouldn't take him on as a business partner if I were you," she advised, her voice not a whisper but still soft enough to be mistaken for one.

The stranger stepped closer, looking her up and down with an expression that covered a wide range of emotions—surprise, bemusement, appreciation, anger. Clearly he was seeing the definitely feminine attributes advertised by her form-fitting black sweater and pants, and the delicate features that would have dazzled a movie mogul, and was wondering what a girl like her was doing robbing a safe in the dead of night.

Before he could give voice to his emotions, Troy unrolled the painting and displayed it in front of her. "He wouldn't be very trustworthy, you know," she told the stranger conversationally. "The master of the house, I mean."

Shifting his eyes from her face, the stranger sent a cursory glance down at the painting. Then his gaze grew

intent. He stepped closer. "Isn't that—"

"Yes, it is. Stolen from a private collector in Paris two weeks ago."

The stranger stared at her as she began rolling the painting back up. Then he seemed to feel that some defense of his host was called for. "John couldn't have known it was stolen when he bought it," he said a little uncertainly.

Troy laughed softly. "Bought it? Well, I suppose you could say that. He paid a man to steal it for him."

The stranger pounced. "How do you know?"

Coolly she answered, "Because the collector paid me to steal it back. And since he's a very well-known and trustworthy man, I'll take his word over your John's any day."

"He isn't my John," the stranger corrected irritably. He stared at her for a long moment. "Why don't we just call the police and turn the matter over to them?" he suggested mildly.

Troy strolled over to the desk and leaned a hip against one corner. Swinging her leg idly, she smiled at the suspicious stranger. "Why don't we? Go ahead—do it. I might have to spend the night in jail, but once this painting is identified and my employer contacted, John'll be the one explaining things to the police. If he sticks around, that is."

Her challenge met with a cautious response; the stranger didn't go near the phone. "I can't just let you leave the house with that painting," he said finally. "How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"You don't."

"Well, convince me, dammit!" he snapped softly.

Troy couldn't help but smile wider. She cocked her head to one side like an inquisitive bird. "You wouldn't have gone into business with him, would you? I don't think you trust him."

"That's beside the point," he said.

"Hardly."

He glared at her.

Troy returned his glare with a thoughtful look, then nodded slightly as she came to a silent decision. "Okay then; since you won't trust me, I'll trust you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he inquired warily.

She held out the cardboard tube. "You take it. Put it under your pillow or in your suitcase or something. If John calls the police in the morning, you'll know he's legit and that I lied. If that happens, wipe your fingerprints off this tube and drop it in the umbrella stand, where it'll be found quickly."

The stranger made no move to accept the painting. "And if he doesn't call the police—assuming, of course,

that he discovers the painting gone?"

"Oh, he'll discover it gone. I'll bet he drools over it every morning and again before he goes off to bed. He's probably built—or is building a secret room down in the wine cellar for this first acquisition and all those he hopes will follow."

"And so?"

"And so, when you find John at breakfast tomorrow morning gnashing his teeth and hear him giving his security people hell—and not bellowing about his loss over the phone to the police—you'll know he was responsible for having the painting stolen initially or that he was well aware of the fact he'd made an illicit purchase. Then, if you decide to trust me to return the painting to its rightful owner, we can meet somewhere."

The stranger appeared to be nearly as quick at making up his mind as Troy was; he reached out to accept the painting. "An honest man," he said ruefully, "wouldn't hesitate to call the police."

"Scruples are hell, aren't they?" she noted sympathetically.

"Do you have them?" he asked ironically.

Cheerfully Troy said, "I used to. But it occurred to me that I was missing a lot in life, so I threw 'em away."

Baffled fascination grew in his dark eyes. "Who are you?"

Troy made a slight gesture that a Shakespearean actor would have envied in its controlled insouciance. "Just a thief passing in the night."

"Quit it," he ordered irritably.

Amused, Troy realized that he was fast on his way not only to condoning, but even defending her chosen occupation. Swallowing a giggle, she fought hard to infuse her voice with an air of mystery. "Where shall we meet? In a dark, dingy bar with greasy cutthroats glaring in shifty-eyed malevolence?" She warmed to her theme while the stranger gazed at her in baffled silence. "There'll be a man with a face like a bulldog tending the bar, and the clientele will look as if they belong on the Ten Most Wanted list, and nobody will meet our eyes when we look at him. Mr. Big will be in the back room with his hit men, and he'll have one of them peer through a two-way mirror to make sure we're not wearing white hats. And then—"

"Enough already!" The stranger groaned softly.

Solemnly Troy said, "Not your type of habitat, I gather. Oh, well. Then we'll just pick up our lamps like what's his name and go in search of an honest man. What say we meet on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial?"

From [AudioFile](#)

Troy Bennett is an unlikely cat burglar. As the story opens, she's discovered in the middle of a burglary by houseguest Dallas Cameron. She leaves it to the straitlaced stranger whether to turn her in. As she shows him the "what" and "why" of her adventures, suspense and romance ensue. The interaction between Troy and Dallas is a delicate dance that Deanna Hurst seems to enjoy. She employs a hint of irony as the unflappable Troy slowly but surely draws Dallas into the intrigue she thrives on. As she deftly tosses off the repartee

between the duo, Hurst maintains a light tone and an appropriate air of suspense. J.E.M. © AudioFile 2008, Portland, Maine

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Sam Stenger:

Is it anyone who having spare time in that case spend it whole day by means of watching television programs or just resting on the bed? Do you need something totally new? This *Illegal Possession* can be the respond to, oh how comes? A book you know. You are and so out of date, spending your free time by reading in this brand-new era is common not a geek activity. So what these guides have than the others?

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