

Art Thefts in PARIS

Stuart Gustafson

America's International Travel Expert[®]

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This book is primarily a work of fiction. Although some of the places in the story are real, their usage and characterization are fictionalized for use in the story. The story line, the people, and the events are primarily products of the author's imagination. Any references and/or resemblances to actual people, places, and events are purely coincidental or are being used in a fictional setting.



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Fiction:

Missing in MEXICO

Mathematics Professor Alfred Dunningham,
PhD series

The Math Professor, a short story introducing
Mathematics Professor Alfred Dunningham,
PhD

Murders in SYDNEY (previously published as
Sydney Murders-SOLVED!)

Disappearances in the MEDITERRANEAN

Art Thefts in PARIS

Non-Fiction:

Parables for Life in the 21st Century

Questions to Bring You Closer to Dad

Questions to Bring You Closer to Mon

*Questions to Bring You Closer to Grandma &
Grandpa*

*Remembering Our Parents ... Stories and Sayings
from Mom & Dad*

PREFACE:

This book is a fictional mystery story. Some of the locations, museums, galleries, and other places are real; others are made up for the purpose of this novel. The vast majority of the events are fictional, having been developed in the mind of the author to be used in the story. The characters in the story are fictional, and I've tried to use names that might be typical for the story's intended purpose.

Paris, France, is one of my [many] favorite places to visit. As *America's International Travel Expert*[®], I am frequently asked to name my favorite place in the world. I'm never able to answer that question with a single location – I like so many of the places I've been. Admittedly, there are a few I've been to and don't have a desire to return, but those are in the small minority. Paris is always in my list of top places; there is so much to do there, to see there, and to enjoy there.

My wife and I were able to enjoy a wonderful two-month stay in the City of Light where I developed the basis for this story. By living as locals as much as we could, we saw Paris in the way that most Parisians do – a large city where one lives, works, eats, and enjoys life. We made friends with some of the locals, and we took part in some of the local activities; we weren't going to allow our limited French-speaking ability to hold us back. Our early summer stay meant that the number of tourists was at its peak for the year, but it also meant that we were able to see people outside when the weather was beautiful and there were many community events taking place. I then took another three-week journey on my own to fully immerse as a local Parisian.

If you've never been to Paris – what are you waiting for? If you've been there, but didn't feel that special charm – go back without expectations and let the city envelop you.

The dialog and descriptions in this book are primarily written in English even though the conversations among the Parisian characters would naturally be in French. This convention was chosen to make it easier to read without having to suffer translation interruptions as well as dealing with conversions from meters to feet, Euros to Dollars, etc. Some of the more common French words and phrases are occasionally used in French (and are shown in *italics*) to add to the authenticity of the action and the flow of the dialog.

Maybe we can meet up in Paris someday, whether it's on a cruise, a land tour, a leisurely stroll down any one of the fantastic rues, avenues, or boulevards, or just sitting at a sidewalk café. Until then . . . Au Revoir!

Stuart Gustafson

Boise, Idaho



Main Characters



Claudette Bouchet. Art Director. Single, age 37; born in Paris, France. Studied art in New York City, in Florence, and in Paris. Lives in the Montmartre section of Paris just below Basilica Sacré-Cœur.

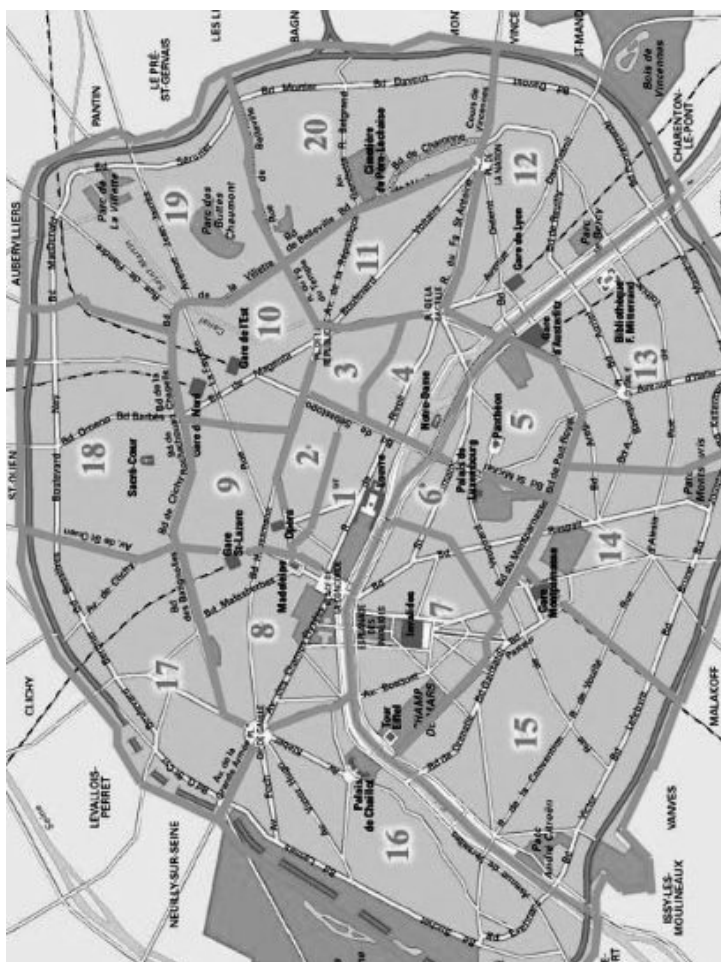
Alfred Dunningham, PhD. Mathematics Professor. Married, age 65; from Napa, California. Grows shiraz grapes; loves red wine and art. Conducts seminars on “Making Detective Work Easier Through Mathematics,” and he helps police departments around the world.

Robert Gilot. Writer and painter (at least that’s what he calls himself). Single, age 42; born in San Francisco, California. Took on French name to fit in; hasn’t sold any stories or major art projects. Supports himself through internet activities, most of them legal.

Marie Laurent. Police Detective. Single, age 29; born in Paris, France. Claims to be a distant rela-

tive of a famous French actor. Recently living beyond her apparent means; no steady boyfriend despite her natural beauty.

Henri LeBlanc. Chief Inspector for French National Police. Married, age 54; has lived in Paris for most of his life. Born in Lyon, France, where his family still has a home and he visits there occasionally. He considers art collectors “foolish boors.”







French Words and Phrases



The following is not meant as an exhaustive listing of common words and phrases used in common French communication. I've found that books that bounce between languages are difficult to read, and I feel that flow is more important than trying to be "too local." Here are some of the common words and phrases used in this book.

Bonjour - customary greeting meaning "Good morning" or "Good day"

Bonsoir - "Good evening," usually said later in the day as the sun is setting or has already gone down

Entrez - "Come," as in "Come in"

Je suis Charlie - "I am Charlie" referring to the people who were killed at the "Charlie Hebdo" magazine in January 2015

Madame - "Mrs. or Madam"

Merci - "Thank you"

Mon Dieu- “My God”

Monsieur - “Mister”

Non - “No”

Oui - “Yes”

Santé – “Cheers,” as in toasting with a glass of wine

S’il vous plaît - “Please”; it is sometimes abbreviated as SVP



1



“Okay, this is where you’ll need your Museum Pass,” the tour guide said as her small group approached the entrance to one of Paris’s small, yet extremely popular, museums – Musée de l’Orangerie. “Make sure your name is on it and that you’ve properly entered the date. Remember, we use the European form here, meaning we go day, month, year.” Elyse had been leading tours for years, both here in Paris where she did her graduate art studies, and in the Provence region in the southeastern portion of France. She wasn’t born in France, but she re-located from upstate New York when she wanted to advance her art studies. It came down to a choice between Italy and France, and when she compared all that France had to offer, it was an easy decision for her. She was now fluent in French, even down to the little gestures that made her seem home-grown.

Elyse showed her tour guide license and the guard waved her through. He then looked at each Museum Pass as it was held up for him, and he waved each member of the group to go inside. Closed on Tuesdays, the Orangerie was normally quite busy on Wednesdays, but she managed to get the group going early today so they could get there before the larger

crowds arrived. “Let’s meet over there by the counter after everyone’s been through the scanner. Small bags are fine, but the large backpacks will have to be checked.” She watched as each of her eight tourists went through the scanner and retrieved their metal items. She was leading a group two years earlier when one of the men forgot to retrieve his new Rolex watch, a recent present from his wife, and when they went back the next day, no one knew anything about it, or so said the low-paid security guards. Although it wasn’t her fault, Elyse felt really bad for the man so she now made sure that nothing was left behind.

She handed a brochure to each person and quickly explained the history of the building that was originally constructed as a place for storing trees during the winter. Thus, its name of Orangerie – it housed orange trees. When Claude Monet offered to donate eight large canvases of water lilies to the city of Paris, he directed that they be placed in such a manner that they could be “studied” in a flowing manner – not just hung flat against the walls as in the Louvre and most other art museums and galleries. The layout of the ground floor was re-designed with its oval rooms to accommodate the artist’s wishes, while later renovations created space below ground for other impressionistic paintings.

“Most people,” Elyse continued as she led her group toward a quiet corner, “think that the Orsay is the only museum with Impressionist paintings, but you’ll see some nice works downstairs by Renoir, Cézanne, and Picasso. Make sure to use the toilets downstairs because they’re clean and they’re free, and then let’s meet back up here in one hour.”

Most people looked at their watches, mentally noting the time.

There was a buzzing in Elyse's purse as she walked to the glassed wall on the right to enjoy the sunshine. She unzipped her Kate Spade purse and pulled out her iPhone to read the message. "Great," she mumbled out loud as she re-read the email, realizing she'd have to make some adjustments in the tour schedule. Her Wednesday wasn't off to the best start, but she was used to interruptions like this.



2



The television news reporter was standing outside the famous pyramid entrance at Musée du Louvre. “You can see the long line of people waiting to get inside the Louvre here on a beautiful Wednesday right at twelve noon.” As the camera panned away from the reporter to show hundreds of people queued up to buy tickets for the world’s largest art museum, the reporter turned to her left and squinted as the sun’s rays bounced off the pyramid’s glass triangles and hit her squarely in the eyes. Normally she would be wearing her Michael Koss sunglasses – they were in her purse – but she had to keep her soft green eyes available to the camera when she was out on a shoot. The cameraman worked the focus back to her, and the young talent spoke confidently into the round eye of the expensive lens.

“There are quite a few groups waiting in line, including some school groups, and it seems that taking your own photo using the selfie stick is quite the thing to do. The big news right now, however, is that we just received word that the National Museum Workers Union has declared that they will be holding a work stoppage tomorrow – they didn’t call it a strike, but that’s essentially what it is – to protest the se-

curity conditions inside many of the city's museums. And it appears that the Louvre just might be impacted the most."

The reporter looked down at a paper and read, "According to a representative from the union, and I quote, 'The conditions under which these young hoodlums enter the museum at no charge and are able to then harass and commit acts of thievery and disrespect to French citizens and tourists alike are not acceptable.' The representative went on to say that 'the National Police should photograph everyone who commits a crime and then make those available to the museums' who can add them to their facial recognition databases. We'll have a full report on this story and the impact of the stoppage during our six o'clock news. We're back with more news after this message," the reporter continued as the camera faded out.

As the news of tomorrow's strike was heard around the city, mobile phones were ringing as the leaders of a small group of rebels recognized the opportunity that was just handed to them. There was the one who was called their Commandant, a title normally given to a male leader. But she'd earned the title through surreptitious acts that went unnoticed by most citizens. She was sharp, and her talents went far and wide throughout all of Paris.

A simple text message, begin operation repatriate, was sent to a group listing, but not by the Commandant because she was at her full-time job. But she felt her phone vibrate as the message was received and she pulled the phone from her pocket to read it. She quickly hit the Delete button and returned the phone to her pocket. The look from her co-workers invited a response. "Somehow my mobile number got on

a junk messaging list and I get offered a free trip or something else ridiculous almost every day,” she said.

“You know we have the resources to find out where it’s coming from and who’s sending them,” one of the men responded. “Want us to look into it? All we need is access to one of the messages.”

“I just delete them,” she said. “They’re really not that big of a deal. But, thanks.” The team continued its discussion as the Commandant’s brain began to process the series of events that would now be underway. Her eyes subconsciously began to float in counter-clockwise oval patterns.

“Speaking of messages,” the team leader replied, “I just got a message that the National Museum Workers Union has called a strike for tomorrow. They’re complaining again about the security conditions in the museums and they’re pointing the finger at us. They think we should provide digital photographs of everyone we arrest so they can use facial recognition to monitor who’s entering the museums and keep tabs on them.”

“Well, that will be a heyday for invasion of privacy lawsuits, especially when most of those hoodlums don’t have a permanent address and they’re under age,” Marie said as she re-focused on the group discussion. “Many of those museums don’t even have security cameras that work most of the time, and yet they want to add more work. These museums are to be enjoyed, not secured like some Las Vegas casino where everyone is being watched all the time.”

In addition to her role as a rising star in the detective ranks of the French National Police, Marie was a strong advocate for personal rights. Her ancestors had fought for

theirs, and many of them had paid the ultimate sacrifice, and she was determined to continue that fight even though she knew she was walking a thin line, a most thin line indeed.

Marie was energized; was it the text message she'd received, or was it the arrogance of the union throwing the blame of rude behavior and petty crimes from those committing the crimes to the police? She continued, "The union should focus its efforts on the alliances it has with the national museum department and get them to update their security systems. They're so antiquated that it's surprising there hasn't been another major theft from those museums."



3



The nine were seated around three long tables outside a restaurant in a little hidden plaza. Elyse had taken her group of eight for a strolling discussion through the Tuileries Garden after their time in the Orangerie. Because the oval rooms with Monet's water lilies were designed to be contemplative, she didn't give any narration about the paintings. But now as they sat and were enjoying some refreshing beverages – some with beer; some, wine; most with water – she told them how Monet realized he was losing his eyesight and so he created the scenes to capture the different plays of light.

After the waiter took their orders, Elyse continued with her descriptions of art, gardens, and Paris. "The main difference between French and Italian gardens is the presence of statues in the French gardens. That might be why there are more well-known Italian sculptors than French because the Italian works were primarily for benefactors or placed into museums. Rodin is probably the most famous French sculptor, and he's primarily known for two of his works, three at most. But when we go to the Rodin Museum, you'll see a lot of really good pieces by him in the gardens."

“You had mentioned how Paris spirals out from the center,” one of her group started. “Would you explain that a little more?”

“Of course,” Elyse replied. “When you look at a map of Paris, you see the numbered areas – they’re called *arrondissements* in French; they’re like your ZIP codes in the States – they start with number one at the center of the city just north of the Seine. Then they go in a clockwise fashion like the spirals of a snail shell until they get out to twenty, which is on the outskirts of the eastern edge of the city. And then as if to put its arms around the city, there is a major road, called the *Périphérique* that envelops the edges of the outer *arrondissements*. Paris wasn’t always as large as it is today; the central areas, the first through the eight *arrondissements*, were the original extent of Paris; and then as the city grew, the outer areas became more residential, which is also why they’re the bigger ones.

“One interesting point of each *arrondissement* is that the residents elect a mayor for their district, and then all of the city’s residents vote for the overall mayor of Paris. So as you wander around the city, you’ll see that many of the services are provided locally within the district itself. Ah, some food,” Elyse remarked as the waiter began delivering plates to the hungry travelers. It had been a busy morning with lots of walking, taking the bus, combined with the unusually warm weather. It felt good to sit down in the shade.

“I’ve noticed a lot of one-way streets; any particular reason for all of them?”

Elyse set down her fork. “I think it’s just a holdover from when most of the smaller streets that we see today were

routes taken by horses and buggies. As motorized cars came into use, they couldn't widen the streets since the buildings were already there, and so it really wasn't practical to have cars going both ways on them. It does make it difficult for emergency vehicles trying to make their way through traffic as the cars don't have any place to move."

"*Merci*," the inquisitive traveler said as he returned to his lunch plate.

"Oh," Elyse interjected. "I received an email while we were in the Orangerie that there's going to be a strike tomorrow and all the national museums will be closed. That's one thing you have to get used to here in France. Strikes are fairly common, but the good news is that they're usually announced so you do have some advance notice. What this means is for us is that we'll have to make some adjustments to our schedules for tomorrow and Friday. I'll take a look at our plans once we're back at the hotel, and then we can discuss them later at dinner tonight. The good news is that the Louvre is open at night on Fridays, so maybe we'll pick that up since we won't be able to go in it tomorrow." Elyse paused as she thought about the upside to the situation. "You know what," she said in an upbeat tone. "That's actually good though as it's not as busy on Friday night as it is during any regular day." She returned to her meal, washing it down with some bottled sparkling water.

The other travelers didn't seem to be fazed by the news of tomorrow's strike. One of the many reasons they'd given for going on a tour was so they didn't have to worry about the scheduling and re-scheduling of activities. As they sat in

the shade of the large umbrella tree, the eight of them quietly consumed their meals; nine if you counted Elyse.



4



Wednesday afternoon continued as most days do on the Châtelet to Gambetta bus in Paris, bus line 69. Its eastern ending point was also the terminus for a few other lines, but most tourists took the line because of its interesting route. With its western endpoint at Châtelet, the line actually continued further west, through the Louvre, crossing the Seine River, passing in front of the Hôtel national des Invalides and making a U-turn in Champ de Mars, a perfect spot for those wanting to go to the Eiffel Tower. The bus then goes back across the Seine and runs alongside the river until it angles left into Place de la Bastille. This famous area, the former location of the infamous prison where the 1789 French Revolution began, now contains the July Column commemorating the Revolution of 1830, atop which sits a golden winged statue of Mercury facing west. Restaurants abound in this area along with the new opera house.

Many visitors have been known to hop on the bus and just ride around and see the sights as it travels through many of the city's landmark areas. The last stop near the Père Lachaise Cemetery provides a convenient entrance to the final resting place for many notables, French and otherwise.

The cemetery was originally outside the city walls, and no one wanted to be buried there even though Napoleon had closed other cemeteries inside the city due to their unsanitary conditions. But when he had the remains of famed lovers Abélard and Héloïse moved there, it all of a sudden became the place to be. Well, the final place to be.

Visitors today flock to see more recent decedents than the famed early-resident couple who were moved there over six hundred years after their deaths. Among the most visited graves are those of Oscar Wilde, Jim Morrison, Molière, Edith Piaf, Frédéric Chopin, Maria Callas, Sarah Bernhardt, and more. The cemetery also contains numerous war and holocaust memorials, plus there's a wall that will always remind the French people of the atrocities that had been brought against its own citizens. The Communards' Wall along an outer edge of the cemetery is the location where one hundred forty-seven members of the Paris Commune – the remaining few of the once-stalwart resistance – were lined up, shot, and thrown into an open trench at the foot of the wall. The date of 28 May 1871 would never be forgotten by the French.

And definitely not by descendants of the Communards.



5



The text message, begin operation repatriate, generated a lot of activity. The members of the group knew that the signal to start would probably be sent without any other advance notice, yet it still came as a surprise when the message was received. Preparations had begun months earlier with the precision and caution of a stealth attack. No more than two members could ever be seen together outside of their secret meeting locations. Everything that was bought was purchased in small quantities with cash using small denomination bills. No store was visited more than once, and each person wore a pair of glasses with nondescript frames. Those who didn't normally wear glasses had clear lenses in place; it was nice having an optometrist who also believed in the cause.

Louis clocked out of his job at the Sorbonne Library and calmly walked out into the bright sun. He walked up the street to his apartment and entered as he did every day. This time, however, he quickly changed clothes into an outfit that looked like many other male twenty-somethings in Paris – solid, dark colors with no identifying names or patches. He then quietly pulled the short book case aside to reveal a small

square opening in the wall, roughly three feet on a side. He balled up his pants with his identification and put them inside as he removed a large duffel bag. He looked at his phone, checked for any last minute messages and, seeing none, powered it off. He set the phone on top of his pants, knowing that he was cutting off any outside contact; it was time to enter stealth mode.

The dust on the bag made him sneeze, and he stood up and carried the bag into the bathroom where he brushed off the dust and the cobwebs into the wash sink. His allergies were getting the best of him and he sneezed a couple more times. He turned on the faucet to wash the dirt down the drain as he set the bag down on the closed toilet lid. "Let's just hope it's all here," he said quietly as he pulled the zipper open. It had been several months since he'd assembled the bag, and there'd not been any changes to the operational plans, so he expected that all the contents would still be okay. He opened the bag and took out a "new" pair of glasses, two Metro T+ tickets, and four Ten Euro notes. He'd be out for the evening without carrying any identification, but he knew he'd need some extra tissues. He opened the cabinet and took the bottle of antihistamine tablets out and set it on the counter. He opened the bottle and took one tablet, popping it into his mouth and swallowing it without any water. He'd take some more later, but first things first.

His nerves were racing madly; he knew this was going to be a monumental evening – success or failure. He looked at his watch and realized he needed to get moving, so he scanned through his bag one more time. He went through his mental checklist and it was all there. Louis crossed him-

self as he closed his eyes and thought about his mom; would she ever understand? Probably not was the answer he always had for that question.

Picking up the bag, Louis went back into his bedroom and pulled the black backpack from under his bed, one of several packs that he'd bought last month at one of the flea markets. He took the items, one by one, from the duffel bag and strategically placed them inside the backpack; he didn't want the contents to set off any alarms when he went through the museum's security.

Once he was certain that he had everything in place, Louis returned the now-empty duffel bag to its hiding place, pushed the bookcase back into its position, slipped on the backpack, and headed out the front door. "*Bonjour*," he said to one of the ladies who also lived there as she was entering the apartment building. She was carrying a small sack of groceries; it was common for Parisians to shop for some items daily.

"*Bonjour, Louis*. You're home early today," the lady replied as she smiled at the nice young man who held the door open for her, the same as he did for anyone entering through a door he was using. Louis was that type of gentleman. His mother had raised him properly to show respect to everyone, not just to the elders. His mother wondered why a smart young girl had not snagged him yet; some of his friends wondered if there was another reason he'd not yet married. Louis was definitely straight; he was just too devoted to a cause that couldn't be compromised with someone else who might not feel the same way he did. Louis just

smiled at the nice old lady and continued on his way to the stop for bus number 91.

He waited patiently at the bus stop as he knew he had a long night ahead of him, a very long night. The bus appeared and he blended in with the other passengers as he inserted the Metro T+ ticket into the machine and it beeped as it validated and stamped the ticket. *One hurdle passed.*

He rode the bus for four stops and he got off, one stop short of his actual transfer point. He could have ridden a little farther, but the instructions were to not go on the exact route that would make the most sense. So he got off and walked the short distance down to the busy Gare d'Austerlitz. There was always so much activity around this train station, as there was around most of the stations in Paris.

Louis had lived in Paris for most of his adult life so he knew the bus routes, the Metro routes and the RER train routes. The 24 bus would be coming by soon, and if he missed that one, it would only be another five minutes until the next one came along. He wasn't in a hurry, and he was doing his best to remain calm as if it were any normal day in beautiful Paris.

The bus arrived and Louis boarded, using his second Metro T+ ticket. He'd already discarded the previous one, and this ticket would also soon find its way into the trash. He could've used the previous ticket to transfer, but he didn't want any possible connection. This part of the route wasn't very crowded so he was able to move toward the back of the bus. He didn't expect to see Vladimir on this bus; he should have been coming from another direction – was something

wrong? The two made eye contact and then looked away from each other.

As the bus passed Île Saint-Louis, several passengers, obviously tourists, poked each other and pulled out their cameras as the Notre Dame Cathedral started to come into view on the right side of the bus. Realizing the opportunity to blend in with the crowd, Louis looked to the right and seemed to gaze at the magnificent structure that he'd seen thousands of times. "Just another building," he thought.

The bus seemed to crawl along next to the Seine River as it made its way down the busy road that changed its name every couple hundred yards. Stop after stop after stop. Louis couldn't help himself; he had to look at Vladimir with a look that asked, "Are we ever going to get there?"

They did; the bus made its stop just past Musée D'Orsay before it would continue its route, crossing the Seine to Place de la Concorde and beyond. Louis and Vladimir exited the bus along with others and looked around as if they were some of the many tourists taking in the views of the area. Vladimir tore his ticket into four pieces and just dropped them to the ground, while Louis walked over to a trash receptacle and put his ripped ticket into the bag. Vladimir had taken the lead and so he was the first one to walk toward the museum entrance; Louis just continued to look toward the Seine while glancing around to the museum. He eventually turned around and slowly wandered over to the former train station, trailing slightly behind a group of ten.

Vladimir and Louis approached the museum separately, keeping their heads tilted down as they approached the ticket booth and smiling at the attendants as if they didn't speak

any French. They each paid the 11 Euro entrance fee with a ten and a five, took their change and tickets, and entered the museum that's been heralded as the finest collection of Impressionistic paintings in the entire world.

Louis and Vladimir knew that, of course, and that was one the reasons they were there today. That and the three-word text message they'd each received a few hours earlier. Concerned as his bag was sent through the X-Ray machine, Louis breathed a sigh of relief as he saw it coming toward him. He calmly retrieved his bag and walked toward the large bag check area. He then saw the sign, paused, and politely asked the guard, "*Est-ce sac d'accord?*" ("Is this bag okay?")

"*Oui, monsieur,*" was the reply. That was a relief; now they didn't have to worry about retrieving their bags later in the evening. Louis didn't know if it was the time of day or if it was a new policy that they didn't care about the size of backpacks. It really didn't matter to him; there was just one question left in his mind. The museum closed at six; where was he going to hide when the museum closed and all the security personnel were gone for the evening?

Vladimir was nowhere to be seen; he'd already made his way into the museum and was mixing in with the crowds. Louis looked around; it was beautiful museum. He thought it only fitting that he'd take one final look at the artwork as the visitors would view them.

No one else in the museum realized they were seeing many of the pieces of art for the very last time. It was sad in a way, but they were doing what they knew they had to do. As Louis walked around he made sure he didn't look up at

the security cameras. Thousands of people visited the museum every day, so it wouldn't be unusual for him to be there; he just didn't want to look too obvious by having many shots of him looking directly into the cameras. That would be unusual and would be a good reason to put his face high on the list of possible suspects after the thievery.

Louis spotted Vladimir on the escalator and he went to catch up with him. He didn't walk faster than any others; he just headed directly to the escalator. "*Pardon moi,*" he said to the man who'd turned and bumped into him. The man just smiled and continued chatting with his family. *Tourists.*



6



Five thousand miles to the east of Paris was six time zones away and a completely different culture. Earlier in the day, Alfred Dunningham, PhD, was enjoying a delightful visit to the Beijing Mathematical Society headquarters. Not many Americans were allowed full access inside the halls where significant mathematical research was being conducted by China's top mathematicians. The Chinese clearly wanted to keep their research and discoveries secret until they were ready to reveal them to the world. And then they'd reveal only what they wanted the world to know.

But the leadership of the BMS didn't regard Dunningham as "any other American." He had earned their utmost respect the previous year in Paris when he openly shared his McLandish Award with the Chinese delegation which he felt was more deserving of the award than he was. Even in mathematics, politics apparently still played a role, something that he considered completely ludicrous.

The professor didn't understand most of the research the Chinese were conducting even though it was explained in perfect English by his translator-guide. Dunningham's work was primarily in Number Theory, but he was mostly known

around the world because of his use of mathematics to solve mysteries. It was that ability that solved a series of murders in Sydney, Australia, thus earning him the award last year. And it was at the awards ceremony where he became endeared to the Chinese, and a few other delegations, with his selfless acknowledgement of the progress and contributions from the Chinese. Not surprisingly, the French weren't among those who applauded him.

"Professor," one of the Chinese mathematicians began, "You left Paris quite suddenly last year, and we never heard if something was wrong or if your wife was ill."

"Thank you for your concern," the always kind and mild-mannered professor responded. "There was a cruise ship in the Mediterranean that had passengers disappearing each day the ship was in port. They'd brought this Interpol agent on board, and he thought he saw a number pattern that was similar to the one that was the basis of solving those murders down in Sydney."

"Ah, yes," sighed a few of the men. They were all natives of China and they had a decent command of the English language, although many times they'd just smile and nod. It was a polite way of participating in a conversation that they didn't really understand.

Dunningham continued with his story. "The Interpol agent had part of the number pattern correct, but it was even more complicated than that. We were eventually able to figure it out, and it was just in time as the ship was pulling into port the following morning." He paused as he thought about explaining all the logic but figured that might make it even

more confusing for them. "It all worked out, even though it did cut down on our time in Paris."

"Did your wife enjoy the cruise at all, even though it was work for you?" The curious local raised his eyebrows as he asked his question. He'd been practicing the question in his head so he could ask it in perfect English, and he succeeded.

Dunningham turned to the man to acknowledge him. "Yes, she did. They gave us a beautiful cabin with a nice verandah that she sat on and read her magazines almost every day. As I recall now we did have one day, maybe it was two, that it was quite stormy. But overall it was pleasant and I can see why people like to go on cruises."

The men continued their tour of the facilities. While there had been much advancement in the People's Republic of China, the inclusion of women in many areas was still lacking. This was especially true in the sciences, ranging from mathematics to chemistry to medicine. The women who wanted to pursue an education in those fields typically moved to more open countries, such as Australia, the United States, and to several places in Western Europe.

Courtesy prevailed as the five men walked down the long corridor. The Chinese mathematicians would normally be chatting away and puffing on cigarettes, but in deference to their distinguished visitor, the cigarettes were left in their offices and the only speaking they did amongst themselves was in English. They would acknowledge their peers in Chinese as they passed by, but they knew that speaking in a language that Dunningham didn't understand would be rude.

"Professor," one of them began as they stopped before entering a lab that was secured with a cipher lock. "Do you

think you'll be going back to Paris? Does your wife like to shop there?"

"Oh, she's not really a shopper," Dunningham replied as he looked directly at the inquisitive man. "She likes Paris a lot, but then she likes almost any place where she can sit and enjoy reading a good book or one of her many magazines. But I can't recall the last time she bought anything for herself on one of our trips."

"I see," the young man said as he smiled and nodded. He didn't really, but he knew that was the proper response.

The man leading the tour entered the code on the lock and they all stepped into a room where some of China's most advanced mathematical research was being done. Very few people were ever allowed in here; this area was as secure and held secrets just like some of the rooms in the White House. Stealing a quick glance around the room, the professor made a mental note of how empty it seemed to be. It appeared that even those with access to the area still weren't allowed to know anything about any work other than their own.



7



Traffic seemed busier on Paris's main roads on Thursday morning as the museum strikes had many visitors desperately trying to adjust their plans for the day. The Metro lines were also busier along with heightened levels of frustration. "I told you we shouldn't have waited so long before we went to the museum," was overhead in many conversations throughout most of Paris. Tensions seemed to be running at full pitch at the Louvre, not unusual as it received the most visitors on any given day.

Not everyone, however, was aware of the strike. A family of four crossed the street after walking along the Seine River. As they went through the archway leading into the open area near the Pyramid, the young boy poked his sister in the arm. "I win," he exclaimed. "You said the lines would be a mile long, and there's hardly anyone there!"

"Ow," the older sister replied, feigning injury from her slightly built sibling. "Mom, he hit me."

"What did we tell you two?" the father intervened. "We only have a couple days left here, so let's keep hands off each other. Come here, Bobby," the dad said as the outstretched hand told the young boy to move over to his dad's side.

"I wonder why all the people are leaving so early," the mom said as the four of them seemed to be swimming against the tide as so many people were heading away from the museum's entrance.

"Perhaps there was an early opening that we didn't know about," the dad replied. "But it sure looks a lot better than what the guide books say. And with our museum pass, we can skip right past that short line."

"Can we go to the swords and axes first?" Billy asked as he was now on his best behavior.

"He got to pick first the last time," his sister entreated. "I want to see the Mona Lisa." Taylor knew they would be seeing the Mona Lisa anyway, but she was tired of her little brother always being able to be first. She could have pulled her pre-teen pouting act, the one that usually worked in her favor, but she knew her mom would give into Billy's whining first. She decided to try a different approach. "The books say the crowds around the Mona Lisa get bigger in the afternoon, and I need to get up close so I can describe the painting's brush strokes in my diary for school."

"We'll go see the swords and axes, Billy," their mom said. "But your sister is right about the crowds and even you said you wanted to see the Mona Lisa. So we'll go to it first and then work our way to whatever you want to see."

Billy yanked his hand out of his dad's grasp as they continued to walk toward the Pyramid. "That's enough," his dad said sternly. "Now let's go" he continued as he held his hand back out as Billy, reluctantly and with a forced tear rolling down his saddened face, clutched his dad's hand.

The line they'd seen was being kept back from the stairway by a theater-style velvet rope. "How come they're not letting anyone in?" the dad asked as approached the small group that they'd thought was the short line.

"The sign," said a man with his German accent. "It says they're closed today," he finished as he pointed to the sign that was attached to the roping.

The dad read aloud the sign, "Le Louvre is closed today to protest the security conditions inside the museums that endanger the health, safety, and enjoyment of our visitors." He looked at some of the others who were standing there looking equally bewildered. "What does that mean? Will they be open tomorrow?" he asked the small crowd.

"The strikes are very common here in Paris, *monsieur*," one young lady said in a decidedly French accent. "Since the sign says they are closed for today rather than until future notice, they should be open tomorrow. But," and she paused, "they might strike again tomorrow just to show the power of the unions here in Paris."

"So does that mean that only the Louvre is closed today?" asked the mom.

"Oh no, *madame*. All the national museums are closed down today. It was announced yesterday by the union that all the museums would be closed today, just like the sign says."

"If you knew they were closed," the mom continued with a puzzled look on her face, "why did you come?"

"It does seem out of place doesn't it?" the French woman replied. "I had made plans to meet some friends here who were coming from Germany, and I had no way to contact

them to tell them of the situation. So we're just now trying to figure out what we're going to do today."

"Do you have any suggestions for us since we fly home on Saturday?" The mom was hoping that this woman, who appeared to be a local, could help them come up with a new plan for the day.

A few suggestions later, along with some hastily scribbled notes on a map, the family of four headed to the nearby bus stop to make their way toward Sacré-Cœur.

Meanwhile, around town, and unknown to most everyone else in Paris, groups of brazen thieves had used the advance warning of a strike to their advantage. Though no guests would be coming into the national museums, there were still a few staff members inside who were doing routine chores. There were also some areas inside the museums that were visible to the outside world. This meant the thieves had to maintain a quiet and invisible presence until it got dark outside.

Each team was well prepared for its specific assignment; it was the waiting and lying low that was beginning to get on their nerves. They had been cautioned against bringing in any phones, mp3 players, tablets, etc., that might send out an audio signal that could be picked up by some of the newer security systems. It was an inconvenience, but they'd invested a lot of time, energy, and money to get to where they were; nothing was going to interfere with their meticulous plans.

Louis cautiously moved around in the lower levels of the Orsay to limber up after the restless night of being curled up under a draped table in the van Gogh exhibit. Vladimir had a little more freedom on the fifth floor since there wasn't as

much security up there. Both men knew, however, that they still had to be careful and not get too relaxed even though it was widely known that the normal security alarms were shut down during the daytime hours, even when a strike has forced the closure of the entire museum.

Their orders from the Commandant had been to wait until eight o'clock in the evening before they were to commence their operations. So wait they did.

Louis looked at his watch; he'd never seen time go by so slowly.



8



Back in Beijing, Professor Dunningham's mind was elsewhere as he watched the man open the cipher lock so the five of them could go into the top-secret area. It wasn't so much the deftness of his hands as much as it was the sound of the lock's opening. He'd heard that "click" before, and so his neatly organized and compartmentalized mind started sorting through the data.

He remembered that he'd been looking out at something when heard the distinctive noise, and it wasn't terribly long ago. He began to search for an image that would bring it all into focus when he saw the reflection of a large-dialed clock in the mirror. That did it; he knew where he'd heard that click before. He and his wife Sylvia had been in the Orsay Museum in Paris, on the top floor, and he was looking out through one of the large clocks that adorned the exterior of the former rail station that operated trains from Paris to Orleans.

"Are you coming, Professor?" one of the men asked. The four of them had started through the doorway, but Dunningham was still standing there, seemingly lost in thought. Even though the cipher-locked door was already behind sev-

eral layers of security, the lock itself was just one of the mechanisms used to secure the area. There was no sign or other indication, in Chinese or any other language, to state that there was a time limit for which the door could remain open. But if it stayed open past that limit, the door would automatically close, an alarm would sound, and the door could not be re-opened for at least twenty minutes. A titanium-grade pocket door grate would seal the opening if the door were forced to remain open. Other security features were in place that weren't even known to the few highly intelligent individuals who were entrusted to do their most secretive work inside the lab. But trust was spread around only so far in this building. "Need to know" was a key ingredient to access and to information.

Dunningham turned quickly as he followed the men inside the lab. He heard the click again as the door was closed by the least senior researcher, one who might be the research director in any other organization. The Professor's mind darted back to the Orsay. He remembered turning his head to the source of the click, and it was a door that led to a small outside top-floor terrace that had an outstanding view of the Seine River and the Tuileries Gardens. He also recalled looking at his watch and seeing that the door's click coincided with the watch hands being equidistant from the 6 on his watch's dial.

He and Sylvia had planned to return to the museum to see if his calculations on when the door would open were correct – calculations that only one whose life revolved around mathematics would enjoy. They never had the chance to return. He was called – Interpol was able to find them in

Paris – by a cruise line’s CEO with a plea for help. It seems that a passenger was disappearing each day that one of their ships was in port, and someone thought there was a mathematical sequence connected to the disappearances.

Instead of returning to the Orsay Museum, they flew to Cyprus the next day to meet the ship.

In Beijing, the five mathematicians continued their tour of the labs. The American professor listened intently to his hosts, but his mind kept wandering back to Paris. Would he ever have the opportunity to return to the Orsay and check out his lock theory?



9



The rain didn't dampen the spirits and excitement at the Thursday evening art show at Paris's Petit Palais. No one other than the leaders of tonight's daring thievery would have recognized the double irony of what was happening. The timing was purely coincidental that the museum worker's strike occurred on the same day as a showing of major art works from around the world was taking place. And while major art was being displayed in one part of Paris, major art was being displaced in other parts of the City of Light.

Although there were no actual connections between the activities, there would undoubtedly be those in the media who would state their case for the linkage. In the modern world of twenty-four hour media and communication, writers and producers everywhere were always looking for some "angle" to make their stories stand out from the rest.

In addition to the champagne and wines that were readily available inside Petit Palais, other talented artists were providing melodic and appropriate background music. A solo pianist was playing a piece that most people recognized, yet few could name and even fewer could provide the description. *Pictures at an Exhibition* was composed by Modest

Mussorgsky in honor of his friend and painter Viktor Hartmann who'd died from an aneurysm at the age of thirty-nine.

A mutual friend and influential Russian art critic organized a showing of about four hundred Hartmann pieces, including some owned by Mussorgsky. Just four months after viewing the exhibition in 1874, Mussorgsky wrote the piano tribute to his friend in a style that represented walking among the paintings with varying paces and moods. The orchestral version of *Pictures at an Exhibition* is more widely performed than the original piano version, with the one by Maurice Ravel being the standard. Virtuoso pianists do, however, perform Mussorgsky's original tribute to draw attention to their style and ability.

Such was the case tonight in Paris as a young pianist who was conducting research at the Sorbonne selected the particular piece to pay his respect to the other artists who were on display. Many of the guests unknowingly were altering their paces as the pianist changed keys and tempo from one movement to the next. The composer had this in mind as he wanted to portray the process of strolling through an art collection, recognizing that some pieces would evoke different emotions that would cause people to alter how they worked their way throughout the items on display.

A key component of the pianist's current studies included psychological research into the effects music had upon people. So his choice of playing *Pictures at an Exhibition* was intentional, and he was able to install video cameras throughout the hall to record how people's actions changed as he went through the fifteen movements. He would be very pleased when he analyzed the recordings. Most of tonight's

guests did indeed display subtle changes, supporting the pianist's key hypothesis that the behavior and actions of individuals and groups could be influenced through music.

Underlying all the musical factors of key, tempo, and mood was the study of mathematics, and one who was certainly aware of its effects was a numbers virtuoso himself. Currently in Beijing, Professor Alfred Dunningham was enjoying his tour of the Beijing Mathematical Society headquarters, but he was looking forward to a quiet dinner with his wife Sylvia.



10



Unaware of the art-world activities taking place on the opposite side of the Seine River, Vladimir moved around with growing confidence on the fifth floor of Musée d'Orsay. He felt he could have used a regular flashlight as no one outside would be able to see him or the light, but the strict orders from the Commandant were to use a black-light laser that would not give off any concentrated heat signatures. His body did, which is why he wore a special black body suit that kept most of the body heat inside. Special high-tech gloves that aided dexterity were part of their uniforms as were the thick masks and night-vision goggles. One drawback of the uniform was that Vladimir was getting overheated, so he did the best he could to stay cool by limiting any rapid or extra movements.

He knew it was raining outside and he was looking forward to getting outside to take off the body suit and cool down. But first things first. He and Louis had specific items that they were to take. This heist wasn't an amateur smash-and-grab robbery; their targets were specific and they were to take them in a certain order.

“You get careless when you’re not focused on being neat,” the Commandant had drilled into them many times as they practiced their various skills. “And carelessness,” she continued, “leads to leaving a trail of evidence that could destroy our ultimate mission.”

Part of their training was the ability to be blindfolded and reach into their bag and pull out specific items on the first try. “Everything has a place, and everything should be in its place,” was another of the Commandant’s favorite sayings. She wanted there to be no guess work and no wasted effort. She knew the teams would have sufficient time to accomplish their tasks, but anything other than precision would lead right back to carelessness. And she had no tolerance for that. Vladimir had voiced some objections to some of her requirements; one pointed question from her silenced Vladimir and any others who might have argued with her. “Are you committed one hundred percent to the cause? If not, I’ll find a replacement.”

Vladimir scanned his list and headed to the first display case that held eight bronzes by Edgar Degas.

Meanwhile on the main floor, Louis did some limbering exercises and then went into a meditative pose. He was prepared physically and mentally to carry out his assignments even though he knew there was significant risk involved. “Nothing great comes without the willingness to make great sacrifices,” was another of the Commandant’s favorite phrases.

Even though his targets were in alcoves, Louis knew that his biggest exposure would come when he had to move to the far end of the building and ascend the stairs to the fifth

level where he would meet up with Vladimir. He'd always admired Vincent van Gogh; he never thought that he'd actually be stealing some of the master's greatest works.

"You're not stealing anything," the Commandant once told the team. "You're borrowing them to further the cause." Louis knew that the French National Police wouldn't look at their actions as "borrowing," but he had to put the potential consequences out of his mind. The Commandant had a saying about that, too. She had lots of favorite sayings.

Louis's first target was *Starry Night Over the Rhône*, painted in 1888.

Careful research had been done to learn everything about the security at each location. The French National Department of Museums made the job of stealing much easier by implementing the same security systems across all the museums in Paris. Their logic of this implementation was that it made it easier to maintain the systems and to install upgrades as necessary. One thing they didn't take into account was that the knowledge of the systems also made it easier to loot the museums. The Department also didn't know that there would be an inside person who was sympathetic to the cause and who provided detailed descriptions of the security systems and how to override them.

The one main system that couldn't be bypassed was each building's main security system. That was controlled with several fail-safe mechanisms that required multiple passwords, each known only to one person. The operatives would have to disable each item's system or remove the item without triggering an alarm.

Had they wanted to, the organization could have cleaned out every major museum in Paris, leaving only some of the minor works on display.

Their cause was not about financial gain. They had loftier plans that allowed them to focus their vision.

Louis viewed the darkened van Gogh Gallery with awe and with caution. He knew the story behind the first painting, how it had been painted a year before the more famous *The Starry Night*, and he was humbled to actually be close enough to touch it. In fact, he would touch it while removing it from the frame. He re-read the instructions on disabling the security system. Motion sensors in the wall meant that he wouldn't be able to pull the frame away from the wall or to move it very much from side to side.

He removed the small electronic device from his bag, pressed the *Power* button, selected the *Glass-A3* setting, and gently pressed it to the glass. Designed to neutralize specific frequencies of sounds and vibrations, the small black box was a nemesis of security departments around the world. The full-size suction cup held the device in place and the sensors touching the glass began to relay signals to the device. Louis waited for the LEDs to change from red to green; the device was now ready to neutralize any sounds from the glass.

The glass cutter was the next item pulled from the bag. He knew he had to cut the glass close to the edge of the frame without actually jarring the frame too much. This was one activity that would have worked better with two people, but the Commandant knew that involving more people increased the risks, and there were already enough of them.

Louis had practiced cutting glass so that wasn't going to be his biggest concern. At some point he would have to hold the neutralizing device in order to keep the glass in place; that would require a little more coordination. Even though there were twenty-five van Gogh paintings on display in the Orsay, Louis was quite relieved that he didn't have to take all of them. As strange as it might have seemed to others, he actually loved art. *This is just a job*, he had to keep reminding himself. And it was for a noble cause.

He stepped back and took one last admiring view of the landscaped painting. He knew so much about Vincent van Gogh that it didn't seem strange to him that the colors of the sky and the stars in this painting were identical to the colors in the later painting, *The Starry Night*, which had been on permanent display in New York's Museum of Modern Art since 1941.

One last meditating inhale and Louis slowly let out the breath. He was now ready. As his right hand began to position the glass cutter in the upper right hand corner of the glass, he noticed that his hand was shaking; he was more nervous than he thought he would be. *Mon Dieu*, he muttered to himself and he withdrew his hand. It wasn't the technique that got to him; he'd done this in practice dozens of times.

He knew he had the correct glass cutter thanks to the information from their inside source. Not all framing glass has the same thickness, density, and chemical structure. Most amateurs thought that glass was glass, and they'd botch an easy cutting job by using the wrong cutter or by not realizing that different glasses emitted different frequencies. As with computer hacking and cybercrime, it seemed that the thieves

were always one step ahead of the professionals whose job it was to safeguard art. Of course, having a trusted person who was able to provide you with the secret details of security made it easier to pull off jobs like those being done tonight in Paris.

Louis recomposed himself, positioned the cutter in the upper right corner of the glass and began to slowly apply pressure and pull down on the cutter. He paused slightly when he heard the electronic device send out a short beep-beep signal. He resumed his careful pulling of the cutter when he recalled that the device would recalibrate itself after receiving the initial signals. The LEDs were green, meaning that the frequencies received were being neutralized. Steady pressure and a consistently slow pull was the plan.

The top-to-bottom right-side cut was completed; it was now time to do the top left-to-right cut. Staying focused, Louis placed the cutter in the top left corner, stole a glance at the LEDs, and then began to pull the cutter to the right. So far he hadn't had to worry about the glass breaking or falling to the floor. He now had completed two of the four cuts and he realized that perhaps he should have started on the left side so that the final cuts would be on the right side instead of the left side. It hadn't been a problem in practice, but the practice sessions weren't on multi-million-dollar paintings in one of the world's foremost impressionist galleries. Nor would failure during practice doom the operation and lead to his arrest.

It was too late to worry about making changes on this painting; he had to complete the task and then move on to the next one. He knew he could safely pull down at least

halfway on the glass before having to provide additional support for it with his left hand. He started to pull down with the cutter in the top left corner, going a little slower this time. The LEDs were still green, so Louis knew he was okay. He reached his left arm over his right and applied direct inward pressure on the black box and its suction cup. He didn't want to push the glass into the painting, but he also didn't want the glass to lean outward; it was a delicate balancing act.

Louis completed the third cut and he immediately began the fourth and final cut, the horizontal one along the bottom of the frame. This time, however, he had to make sure that the glass stayed perfectly in position – not falling inward, outward, or downward. This was certainly the most precarious position that he would encounter. The device beeped again but the LEDs remained green as Louis knew he had no choice but to complete the task. As his right hand and the cutter reached the final corner, his left hand felt the gravitational pull of the glass as it wanted to drop.

Breathing both a sigh of relief and one of confidence, Louis tightened his grasp on the black box and pulled it and the glass straight out from the painting's frame. He knelt slowly as he allowed the glass rectangle to touch the carpeted floor and he leaned the glass back toward the wall. The green LEDs told him he was still okay and he powered down the device, releasing the suction hold on the glass.

Step one was now completed and it was time to remove the painting from the frame, a decidedly more difficult task. And this was only Louis's first painting of the evening. He stepped back to admire the painting once more. Like looking

at gorgeous girl who happens to be your sister, Louis knew he'd never be able to look at art the same way again after tonight.



11



Vladimir's tasks on the fifth floor weren't as challenging as Louis's, although they carried their own set of risks. The security details revealed that the removal of five percent of the glass on any one panel would trigger an alarm. Optimal sizes, shapes, and locations of pieces of glass to extract had been carefully determined and practiced. Even though he'd read them many times, Vladimir reviewed the instructions for using his equipment and he began the sequence to attach the suction cup to the display case.

He heard a noise approaching rapidly from behind him just as he pressed the *Power* button on the black box. He instinctively dropped the device and jerked his head to the left as a sparrow, one of the museum's natural residents, flapped its wings just a few feet over Vladimir's head as it made one of its many evening flights through the galleries. He mumbled something that was more audible than it should have been.

One of the features of the museum's security system when it was first installed was a set of auditory sensors. These were quickly and quietly de-activated after the first night of their use. The system designer had not taken into account

the noises made by the various clocks as well as the birds that flew around at night. Modifications to the filters and frequencies had been proposed, and some of the changes were implemented. But it seemed that there were always new sounds that were setting off the alarm. The auditory alarm system was eventually eliminated and the project manager was given a new assignment, and it didn't include a promotion.

Reaching back down for the device, Vladimir pressed the *Power* button, selected the *Glass-B1* setting, and gently pressed it to the glass. Prior to his training for this assignment, he wasn't aware that there were different types of glass, each with its own specific properties. The glass used on the display cases was different from that which was used to frame paintings. And there were even different types of that glass. In theory, only those in the security department were aware of these glass types and their properties. Knowing these crucial details was just one reason why having a person on the inside was so valuable to the planning for the operation.

Cutting the initial opening in the glass display case went as planned and Vladimir reached in with his right hand for the first Degas bronze. "What the ...," Vladimir uttered before he realized he shouldn't be saying anything. The security information said the statues were just sitting in the cases; they weren't supposed to be secured to the case, but this one wouldn't budge.

He pulled his hand back out, leaned down so he could see the underside of the case and focused his flashlight beam on the base of the statue. There weren't any alarms wires, but

he could see what looked like a small amount of adhesive between the glass and the statue base.

Swearing silently, Vladimir reached inside his bag to read the instructions for this situation. He first attached the black-box device with its suction cup on the underside of the display case, using the same *Glass-B1* setting. He then retrieved a flat-bladed device that looked like a fancy putty knife, reached back inside the display case and slowly slid the blade around the edges of the statue until he could feel the adhesive begin to release its grip.

Vladimir had to operate slowly as the hole in the glass wasn't large enough for both of his arms to fit inside. So he had to go slowly rather than risk toppling the statue; this was going to impact his schedule, but he knew he couldn't afford to be sloppy and risk the entire operation. He could tell that he was making progress in sliding the blade between the glass and the statue and he felt the object move slightly. Vladimir slid the blade back out and gently set it down inside the display case. His free right hand now grabbed the statue at the base and moved it slowly in the horizontal direction rather than lifting it up in case it wasn't completely freed.

Success; the statue was no longer affixed to the display case. Breathing a little faster than normal, Vladimir carefully rotated his hand until the statue was horizontal and he could bring her and his hand out through the opening in the case. He looked at the bronze, smiled, and thought, "So this is what Degas thought a young dancer looked like," as he was now holding one of the most famous bronze statues in all of the world. *Petite danseuse de 14 ans* (*Small Dancer Aged 14*)

was no longer on display in the Musée D'Orsay. She was being put into a cloth bag for her next journey.

With the first statue now retrieved, Vladimir continued his work to extract the rest of them. Having four statues inside a single display case dramatically reduced the work to get the statues. A separate case for each statue would have quadrupled the number of holes to cut in the cases, severely increasing the risks involved.

Sometimes the curator's desire to display a grouping can backfire, just as it was doing tonight. The Commandant didn't have the Degas bronzes on her original hit list, but when she saw that they could get four or more in not much more time than it would normally take to get one, it became an easy call.

According to Vladimir's watch, it took a little over eighteen minutes to cut the hole and extract the first statue. It took only seven minutes to get the next three: *The Tub*, *Standing Horse*, and *Schoolgirl*. Vladimir smiled at his progress. He carefully wrapped each Edgar Degas masterpiece in a soft cloth bag and placed them in his sturdy extraction bag. He was now in possession of millions of dollars of art that could fetch him a fortune on the black market.

Vladimir headed to the next case. This one would be even easier as there were eight bronzes all within a forearm's reach once he created the ideal entry hole. Strange thoughts ran through his head as he looked at his next targets.

Why would a man create bronze statues of women sitting on the toilet?

And why so many of them?

Was he a perverted individual?

Was he trying to perfect some particular technique?

Art historians – and Vladimir certainly didn't consider himself to be that knowledgeable in art – had been asking those questions for decades. Not just of Edgar Degas, but also of Pablo Picasso and all his drawings and paintings of nude women in all sorts of angles and positions.

Back to the tasks at hand, Vladimir applied the suction cup device, set the proper settings, and began to create the etchings that would allow him to reach inside and remove all eight statues. He knew he would be done with his assignments before Louis; the efficiencies of removing several statues at one time could not be replicated when removing paintings from their frames.

In less than one hour, Vladimir had taken every bronze statue that Musée D'Orsay had put on display for the world to see. His extraction bag was fully laden, and his job now was to wait for Louis to come up from the main floor. The two men would then share their contents so Vladimir wasn't carrying all the Edgar Degas bronzes and Louis carrying all the van Gogh paintings. This part of the plan not only enabled partial success should one of them get caught, but it also distributed the weight between the two men as the twelve bronzes were significantly heavier and bulkier than the van Gogh canvases.

Empty glass cases with carefully cut extraction holes are all that would now be seen – not that the public would actually see the desecration. Some unauthorized photos would undoubtedly find their way out through social media.

The sparrows continued their flights through the fifth floor while Vladimir let his mind wander. The major step in

his work was done, so he could afford to think of something besides cutting glass and stealing bronze statues.



12



Louis's tasks on the second level were decidedly more difficult than Vladimir's. Each target required the removal of the glass and then extracting the painting from the frame. There were many items throughout Paris that the Commandant had to pass over as the paintings themselves weren't on a canvas or other material that could be easily cut out and removed. She'd told herself and the team that this operation wasn't about money; it was about the cause, and the impact would be just as strong even without some of the best artwork in the world.

Fortunately for her, all twenty-five of Vincent van Gogh's paintings in the Orsay were on canvas and could be easily cut from their frames. Louis had specifically been told to cut as close to the frame as possible so as not to damage the artwork itself or the artist's signature. It was an instruction from the Commandant that wasn't really necessary, but she didn't want to leave anything to chance.

Louis reviewed his list and placed a checkmark next to the paintings he'd already removed:

Starry Night Over the Rhône ◆

Self Portrait, 1887 ◆

Self Portrait, 1889 ◆

Bedroom in Arles ◆

The Church at Auvers ◆

Doctor Gachet's Garden in Auvers

Portrait of Dr. Gachet

Marguerite Gachet in the Garden

Imperial Fritillaries in a Copper Vase

Asleep on the Haystack

Louis was half-way done; he paused to make sure he was staying calm. And there were still more on his list. Some of the van Gogh paintings had been “temporarily removed,” but his list was current. As he scanned the list and the paintings on the wall, he saw that they were all there. Louis was pleased to know that he would be able to complete his assignment. He was also happy to see that his list was in the same order as the paintings; that made his job much easier. He figured he’d be done in a little over an hour, giving him enough spare time before the scheduled rendezvous time with Vladimir. There were two departure times, and both of them looked odd.

The first departure time from the fifth floor of the Orsay was at 9:13:50 PM and the second was at 10:09:13 PM. The Commandant had told Vladimir and Louis that they had to be out by the second time even if they had to leave some of the items behind. The two men had also been told that if one of them wasn’t there by the second departure time, that the one who was there was to leave the museum and continue with the operational plan.

When asked about the strange times, the Commandant had replied that the outside doors near the top-floor clocks were scheduled to automatically open at mathematically calculated times such that the minute hand and the hour hand were exactly equidistant from the numeral twelve. The Commandant had given the answer in such a manner and tone that the men knew to not ask any more questions. "It's a mathematical oddity that's known only to their security team," the Commandant said in hopes to ease the men's mind. "And to us, of course," she added.

What the Commandant didn't know was that this mathematical timing was also known to Professor Alfred Dunningham who didn't consider it to be an oddity. He thought it to actually be quite beautiful in its symmetry. *There's always beauty in numbers*, he would often say.

Louis continued with his methodical work: first removing the glass and then the painting. His analytical mind thought that the whole process could have been done in a different order, but that would have required more people, something the Commandant clearly didn't want. He had to force himself to keep a clear mind and not get distracted by the monotony of the process. All Louis had to do to re-focus was to tell himself, *these are Vincent van Gogh paintings that I'm touching, something that very few people in the entire world have ever done*. Louis's mind paused for a moment. *Or might ever be able to do again*, he added as it sunk in what was happening tonight.

He allowed himself to think into the future, maybe what the newspaper headlines would be or what the news stations would use as their lead in. He processed it all and came up

with a perfect headline; *Art Thefts in Paris*. He liked it; too bad he wasn't a news reporter.

Louis got his mind back to the task at hand, and he almost laughed out loud as he thought about what he was doing – cutting glass; cutting canvas; stealing some of the world's most famous art. It wasn't really funny, per se, but the process was getting quite routine, something which the Commandant had warned all of them to be aware of.

In his mind, Louis knew that he should look at the specific security details of each painting before he began his work to remove the painting from the frame. But each one so far had been the same: use setting *Glass-A3* on the neutralizing device, while using the black-handled glass cutter. Complacency had begun to set in with Louis, and, yes, the Commandant had a saying about that, too.

There were only two more paintings to go, and Louis would be done with his initial assignment. All that was then left to do was to meet up with Vladimir and the two of them would wait until the proper time leave the museum. They would still have to scale down from the top of the former train station and make it to the safe house. But the hardest part would be over.

Louis pressed the suction cup against the glass, pressed the *Power* button, and had just started to make the first cut of the glass when the flashing red LEDs brought him back to the present moment. He froze in fright.

Had he tripped an alarm?

Would he be caught with the cut paintings in his bag?

Did he just bring down the entire operation?

He lifted the cutter off the glass and saw that the LEDs changed from flashing red to solid green. Louis listened intently for the sound of any alarms or any other persons in the museum, and he breathed a sigh of relief as he heard nothing. Nothing except the heavy beating of his heart as he realized that he'd been sloppy. He'd made the assumption that the painting *Imperial Fritillaries in a Copper Vase* was like all the others, but it wasn't.

The 1887 painting looked so much like van Gogh's famous *Sunflowers* painting that it had been placed behind much thicker glass. Louis thought about the reaction that the Commandant would have if she'd seen his reckless actions. *Focus* was the only word that came to him and it was an action he knew he had to do. He paused, closed his eyes, and let his breathing slow back down.

Louis opened his eyes, set the glass cutter down, pulled the papers from his bag, and flipped the page over and saw the instructions. He had the wrong device setting and the wrong glass cutter. Disaster had been narrowly averted.

He pulled the correct cutter from his bag, adjusted the setting on the device, and proceeded to cut the glass. Once the glass was removed, he carefully cut the canvas as he'd done on the other paintings. The same setting and cutter were also to be used for the last painting, but Louis noticed that a poor matting job left the painting too close to the frame. He wouldn't be able to remove the glass and cut the canvas without damaging the painting itself.

He looked at his watch; he didn't have much time. Quickly reading through the security instructions, Louis found the code that would allow him to remove the frame

from the wall. He walked to the corner where he saw a keypad device; would it work?

Louis hesitated for a moment before he entered the seven-digit code, saw the light on the keypad turn green and he then hurried back to the painting. He carefully lifted the frame up and then away from the wall. He heard a beep from the direction of the keypad and he quickly looked that way. The solid green light started blinking and then it turned solid red.

Holding his breath, Louis then remembered that the light had been solid red before he'd entered the code. "It's okay," he thought to himself as he exhaled. This one wouldn't fit in his bag so he put it under his arm, grabbed his backpack and headed for the stairs to go meet up with Vladimir. He'd find something later to conceal the framed *Asleep on the Haystack*.

His priority now was to get out of there.



13



As the partying continued at Petit Palais, members of the organization continued with their operations. Some of the members were in the famous museums while others went after some of the smaller galleries and exhibitions around the city. The targeted pieces of art were definitely an eclectic mix, an oddity that would baffle the investigators as well as the news media. That wasn't the Commandant's primary reason for her selections, but it was a quirk that evoked a sly smile every time she thought about it.

Many of those in attendance tonight at Petit Palais were surprised to see some of the senior officers from the French National Police in their full dress uniforms. The dignitaries were all smiles as they mingled with the guests. They were there on a social basis as well as to re-build the tarnished image of the Police. Recent incidents involving racial, political, and religious profiling had severely damaged the once impeccable view that French citizens had of this elite unit.

It was a social affair for most of the officers, but not for all of them. Police Detective Marie Laurent was strolling through the exhibition casually taking photos with her mobile phone. She had the full suite of uniforms, but she rarely

wore them as her duties in the department were better performed in civilian clothes. As a descendant of a famous French actor, or so she claimed, she wore very nice outfits that seemed to come right off a fashion show runway. *Bonsoir* was her greeting to the other socialites she encountered; Marie was gracious; she had striking looks, and she was in full command of her presence.

Marie was also monitoring social media on her phone as she wandered around. She saw that the hashtag *#PetitPalais* was trending and so she looked at some of the postings. She knew not to type anything specific into search engines but she did go to several news outlets to see if there were reports of any unusual activities. She smiled as she didn't notice any. She also monitored the secret department website for anything of interest. The only thing of note was the arrest of a few young men for spraying graffiti on some of the work stoppage signs. It was just another normal rainy Thursday evening in Paris.

Not exactly normal but that's how it appeared to the outside world at the moment. Marie continued her strolling, looking at the artwork, mingling with others, and listening to the music – a string trio was currently playing.



14



To the east of the swanky activities at Petit Palais a homeless man was meandering around the Louvre. His clothes were tattered hand-me-downs that didn't fit him properly, but they did provide some warmth and protection from the elements. The covered walkways were providing shelter from the rain as the slumped-over man shuffled along, oblivious to anything else that was going on. He knew every little alcove and pocket of safety that this grand set of buildings could offer.

It was dark even though the covered walkways were lighted; the light coverings had darkened with age, dirt, graffiti, and bird droppings. Even though the old man's sight was diminishing, he was aware of his surroundings, and he noticed any slight change. He'd just turned the corner when he saw a sliver of light from the first doorway. His eyes flashed open, at least as much as they could, and he hurried to the opportunity.

His mind no longer processed thoughts as fast as it used to when he was a successful bookseller along the Seine. That was then, and this was his life now, roaming the streets of

Paris finding a meal here and there, and sleeping wherever he could.

As feeble as his mind had gotten, he still knew that an open door at Le Louvre should signal an alarm. And that alarm would mean armed police officers, so he stayed outside even though he knew it would be warmer and calmer inside. He made his way to one of the columns about thirty feet from the door as he awaited the rush of the gendarmes.

But the gendarmes never arrived. The old man didn't know how long he'd been leaning against that column; the watch he wore had stopped running a long time ago. His hearing wasn't as good as it used to be, but he was sure he didn't hear any alarms. And he didn't see any flashing lights or approaching security guards.

What did he have to lose? If he were caught inside, the worst thing that could happen to him would be that he was arrested and placed in a warm dry cell where he would have a cot and a blanket for sleeping and three hot meals given to him every day. He didn't see any downside to going in.

His eyes glanced from side to side as he slowly made his way to the entrance. He wondered why the door was left open, or at least he thought that was what he was thinking about as he approached it. He turned sideways to slip inside, being careful not to touch the door. He quickly looked around; he didn't see anything that would tell him to get back out.

It had been many years since he'd been inside the Louvre, and he contemplated wandering around as if he were on a guided tour. As he started walking down the hallway, a man in all black clothing burst past him and ran out the door. As

the door was pushed farther open, an alarm began to sound. The old man's instincts took over and he hustled out the door as fast as he could.

He went to the next doorway and huddled down as if he'd been there all night. The lights and sounds and the security guards that he'd been expecting earlier began to arrive. He knew they'd question him, not that they'd believe much of what he told them. He closed his eyes as if he were asleep.

He tried to listen to the guards' conversations, but the alarms were too loud. He squinted through his old eyes as the guards went past, but they didn't seem interested in him or anything that he might have seen. The door was closed and the guards left; they at least had a comfortable place where they'd stay warm and dry. The old man closed his eyes and slept.



15



The slender man in all black walked calmly down Rue de Rivoli in Paris' swanky fourth arrondissement. The late Thursday evening rain didn't seem to bother him at all as he carried the garbage-bagged package under his right arm. The blare of sirens seemed to be coming from all directions at once — sirens from buildings and from the automobiles of the French National Police.

He glanced upward as he thought he heard the repetitious sound of helicopter blades coming in his direction. The spotlight on the helicopter's undercarriage was moving back and forth, and the man in black saw the bold POLICE name as it buzzed overhead and continued on toward Le Louvre.

"Umbrella, *monsieur*?" the shopkeeper asked as the man stepped up into the covered walkway that also served as additional storefront space for many of the shops along the predominantly tourist area. Most stores were closed on Thursday evening, but a few of the enterprising businesses knew their chances of getting more tourist business increased with the lessened competition.

"*No, monsieur,*" the man replied without looking over as he continued his easterly direction walk toward Place de la Bastille. But that wasn't his destination tonight.

"What are all the sirens for?" the shopkeeper asked.

"I don't know," said the man as he slightly increased his pace to further his distance from the shopkeeper and his questions. He could hear the sound of a siren as it was getting closer and closer to him. His heart started beating rapidly and he clutched even tighter at his package. The coat's upturned collar helped to protect him from the chilly rain, but that wasn't his main concern. The natural reaction would have been to turn his head and look toward the direction of the approaching siren, but his instinct told him not to. *Just keep walking*, he told himself.

He moved the package from under his right arm to under his left arm so it was farther from the street. As he did so, the bulk in his backpack caused the bag to open slightly, revealing wood, perhaps a picture frame? The sudden movement caught the attention of the police in the car, and the car suddenly turned off the side street and headed in the direction of the on-coming traffic. The man's pace picked up even more as the car's headlights and the flashing red and blue lights framed him between the arched pillars of the covered walkway.

Cars braked and taxis honked their horns as the driver of the police car seemed oblivious to the others that were going in the correct direction. The man in black moved to the extreme inside part of the walkway and walked as hastily as he could without breaking into a run.

“Stop!” yelled one of the police officers as the car jerked to a halt with lights flashing and the siren still disturbing the normally peaceful evening just a few blocks away from the Seine River.

The man looked over his right shoulder and saw the two uniformed police exiting the car. He broke into a run and had to weave his way in between the few shoppers along the way. He reached the next street, took a quick glance to his left, and then back over his shoulder toward his pursuers.

The empty Rue Pavée was familiar to him, and he knew it would be safer to go along the uneven sidewalk rather than in the open street with cars heading at him. The rain had slowed and he ignored the puddles as he ran north toward the Marais district. He glanced over his shoulder again and saw only one officer. Was the other one coming from another direction? Was he going to be trapped by them? Where did the other one go?

He soon had his answer as he heard the sound of the speeding police car, flashing lights and siren still on. He was a fast runner, but no one could outrun a police car. Cars swerved to the side as the oncoming police car approached them.

Bullets were fired and the man in black heard them whiz by him. He felt a jolt and he realized that one of the bullets had hit his bag, but he wasn't going to stop and inspect the contents. There would be time for that later, but only if he escaped this hot pursuit.

He made a quick left on Rue des Rosiers, counted the nineteen or twenty cars parked along the street, and then he made another left on Rue Ferdinand Duval. He stole a

quick glance over his left shoulder as he turned; he didn't see his pursuers, but he did hear a crash. He stepped next to the building and slowly peeked back around the corner and saw that the police car had been hit by a delivery truck. Feeling safer, the man set his package on a dry spot, leaned it against the building and darted across the sidewalk to the first parked car. He could see the two police officers, one in the car and one in the street. He was safe for now. But he knew not for long.

He grabbed his package and quickly made his way down to the narrow passageway next to the Synagogue. One quick look to make sure no one had seen him come down the street, and he knocked on the second wooden door, using the knock he'd been told to use. The door with the *Je suis Charlie* sticker was opened, and the man in black quickly went inside.



16



The thick walls of the old building kept out most sounds, but the rhythmic beating of the helicopter's blades could be felt even before it was heard. The police officers who'd been chasing the man in black must have notified Dispatch of the suspicious man who ran from them. He'd been calm earlier; then he reached a heightened sense of danger, and now he was calming back down.

"Did they see your face?" the lady asked Louis after he told her of his narrow escape.

"No," he replied. "I tried to stay in the shadows as much as possible, plus having my collar turned up in the rain didn't look out of place. I hope the package is okay and the bullet didn't hit the target."

"I've looked at it," she said, "and everything's fine. You're just lucky that the bullet hit the frame instead of you. Why don't you warm up by the fire and plan to stay here tonight. It'll be much safer for you to leave in the morning after worship. You did a fine job, Louis; they'll be proud of you," she offered as she placed her hand on his shoulder in a reassuring manner.

“*Merci*,” Louis replied as looked into her eyes and tried to envision her as someone other than a compatriot. If they’d first met under different circumstances, that might have been possible. But for now, they’d remain just friends committed to the same cause. Maybe someday it could be different, but for now, no.

Outside the black rainy night in Paris continued to be pierced by the sounds of sirens. What had taken place earlier that caused such a commotion was unprecedented in history. Not just in Paris or in France, but nothing like that had ever happened anywhere in the world. An intricately planned siege on art galleries and museums throughout Paris had resulted in the theft of more than a hundred pieces of art; the total number wouldn’t be known for days, maybe even weeks. The total loss was bound to be in the hundreds of millions of Euros, maybe more, a catastrophic hit to the art world.

The main question that would be tossed around on radio and television was, “Who was the mastermind behind such an audacious act?” Various militant groups would be named as possible suspects, including the group responsible for the attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, the weekly satirical magazine.



17



There was hardly a conversation around Paris the next morning that didn't include a mention of the art thefts. Everyone, including writer and painter Robert Gilot, seemed to speculate on who could have pulled off such a heist. He was at his regular mid-morning spot in Montmartre's Place du Tertre, working on his latest masterpiece, a cityscape of rooftops. It was a common theme for the artists here at Paris's highest point, but he knew his was special.

Robert was born in San Francisco, California, where he lived for most of his life and attended college at Berkeley. He'd just turned forty-two and had lived in Paris for the past four years. He introduced himself to everyone with the French pronunciations of *Robert* with the silent *t* and *Gilot* with the first letter sounding like *zh* and a silent final letter. No one questioned whether that was his real name or if he was French. He portrayed himself as French and he seemed to get along with everyone.

He'd sold a few paintings here and there, but he hadn't sold anything substantial, nor had he sold any of his stories. While he appeared to be the quintessential modern French painter working in the small square where the actual famous

painters used to paint, his main source of income was from the internet activities that he would do in the evenings when he didn't have company. His apartment was decorated in a Bohemian chic style to further his image as a successful French painter.

The computer was out of view, hidden away in his bedroom. He'd converted the second bedroom into a studio where he could paint while the sun came through the southern windows and bounced off the pastel-colored walls. He would occasionally change the colors depending on which painter he felt like emulating. He'd long changed from Claude Monet, but the walls were still covered in the light hues of blue and yellow. He kept a drop cloth beneath his easel on the wooden floor, and he liked to stand as far away from the easel as he could so as to envision himself creating the artwork as he painted it. But the painting and the writing were really just a front for his real pursuit.

While at UC Berkeley, Robert, or whatever his name was then, became friends with a fellow student from Saudi Arabia who was quite proficient with computers. He showed Robert how to set up and run online businesses that he could operate no matter where he was. Most of the businesses were legal, although he knew it would take only one mistake and everything would come crashing down.

"Bonjour," Robert said to the passing tourists who'd apparently just come from Basilica Sacré-Cœur. "I painted all these pieces myself, and any one of them would be a nice item to take home with you as a reminder of your wonderful stay here in Paris," he continued in his best French accent. The couple stopped, looked briefly at his paintings, and then

resumed their walk around the square. Robert didn't really care if they bought one or not, although the prices for art supplies had been steadily rising, and so it would be nice to sell a painting every now and then to help pay for his paints and canvases.

No one knew of Robert's real source of income, or at least he wasn't aware of any one who knew of it. He knew he could have easily done his online businesses during the day, but as a California boy he liked being outside in the sunshine. And while the weather wasn't always the best in Paris when compared to California or other locations in Europe, he still loved his new home. He had to leave some things behind, including some special friendships, when he moved from California, but that was a sacrifice he was willing to make to be able to live in France and especially in Paris. He was able to write, to paint, to socialize, and to live in the most fantastic city in the world. In his mind, there was nothing better than that.

Robert continued placing dabs of paint on the canvas as he created images of light and distance. An older couple speaking German between cigarette puffs paused as they looked at Robert's paintings. "That was quite something last night, wasn't it?" the man asked in his strong accent.

"Ja," Robert replied as he casually looked up. He had a pretty good sense about who might be a buyer and who was just wandering around. These weren't buyers. Robert went back to his work.

"Do they know who did it?" the man continued.

"I have no idea," Robert answered without taking his eyes off the canvas. Not only were these people not going to

buy anything, they smelled strongly of cigarettes. He didn't want to be rude, but he wasn't in a chatty mood this morning. "May I interest you in one of my Paris originals?"

"No; we're just looking," the woman said as she pulled on her husband's arm to get him going.

"Have a good day," Robert said in a slightly mocking tone as the couple walked away. "*Auf wiedersehen*," he added as he resumed his painting.



18



The normally placid Friday routines in Paris had been altered due to the thefts of art from the galleries and museums the previous evening. But the French people are resilient and they're able to rebound from seemingly insurmountable setbacks. Life must go on, and it does in Paris. And usually in a grand style.

Louis, the man in black who'd evaded the two men from the French National Police, had changed clothes and calmly walked out of the Synagogue and went on his way. He'd done his job and now it was time for him to resume his normal life.

Fortunately, not every gallery had been burglarized. Claudette Bouchet watched the news as a matter of routine last night, and she was glad she didn't receive any phone calls from the security alarm service or from anyone else. She'd been tempted to head into town when she saw the news, but as Art Director of Galerie Pierre, she rationalized that it would be better for her to have good night's rest before going in the next morning. Feeling nervous, she took a sleeping pill and slept so soundly that her alarm clock had been ringing for almost twenty minutes when she finally awoke.

Her gallery had been spared and so her Friday was quite the normal day for her. She went about her regular routine, reviewing the week's sales and inquiries, and then she called some of her friends at other galleries to ask the painful question. Yes; some of them had been hit. Claudette sympathized with them and said she'd help them in any way that she could, although there's not really much one can do in such a situation.

"Bonjour," she said as she acknowledged a young couple as they entered the gallery. "Welcome to Galerie Pierre," she continued. "I'd be happy to answer any questions." She went back to her work as the couple walked around the ground floor, stopping in front of several art nouveau pieces. The woman looked at her companion who pursed his lips and shook his head.

They walked by her desk as they headed for the steps to the upper floor. "That was really something last night," the woman said to Claudette. "Did you have anything taken?"

"No; we were one of the fortunate ones." Claudette knew she didn't want to say much as there was certainly the possibility of a second wave of robberies, either by the same people or copy cats.

"That's good," said the young man as the couple began ascending the stairs.

"Oui," Claudette responded.

"Oh, look at the whimsy," the woman said as she reached the top of the stairs. Claudette listened to the pattern of their walking as they made their way across the length of the long room. There was silence for a moment and then she thought she heard a strange pattern. It sounded as if they

were going in separate ways around the room, and their pace seemed to have increased. She clicked the security camera icon on her computer and the two-by-two screen opened. The man was looking up at the security camera in the corner while the woman was walking around the edge of the room.

Claudette pushed back her chair, and started walking toward the staircase. As she started to go upstairs, the couple quickly met near the top of the staircase and began to walk back down. "Did you see anything that struck your fancy?" Claudette asked as the three of them stopped on the stairs.

"Oh, it's all nice," the woman said after a slight hesitation. "We're just on a break from work and we need to be heading back." The woman nervously looked at her watch, and then glanced quickly at the man.

"Yes, uh, we need to be going back to work. You have a very nice gallery. Thanks for letting us look around," the man said as he began to continue down the steps. "How late are you open?" he added as an afterthought.

"We're open until six during the week," Claudette answered as she turned and slowly walked back down the steps. "Enjoy the rest of your day," she said as the couple made their way to the glass front door.

"You, too," the man said as he held the door open for the woman.

"Well, at least chivalry's not dead," Claudette said to herself. "Even though they did act a bit suspicious." She returned to her computer, looked at the security camera photos and selected two that were good identification photos of the couple. She clicked the Print button and heard her print-

er hum as it began to pull the paper and print the photos. *Just in case*, she thought.

As she put the two photos in her drawer, she placed a phone call to the gallery owner to tell him about the couple.

"You're just being extra cautious," the owner told her. "There's nothing wrong with that, and I'm glad you are concerned about the gallery. But we'll be okay. Just continue to do what you've always done so well. In fact, why don't you close up early if you don't have any appointments?"

"*Merci, Pierre*," Claudette said. It was going to be a stressful day for her, even though the real stress was being scattered throughout other galleries all around the city. "Maybe I'll close around four if that's okay."

"Of course, it's okay. You know that I never question anything you do," Pierre responded.

"*Merci. Merci*," Claudette said as she fought to hold back her emotions.

"Stop at the store and buy a nice bottle of red wine. Go home and relax. I'll open for you in the morning, and then we can talk when you come in." Pierre LaCroix was more than an astute businessman; he was truly a caring person.

Claudette continued to watch the couple through the glass door; it certainly didn't appear that they were in a hurry to "get back to work." She open the security camera icon and watched the complete footage of the couple's time upstairs; there wasn't anything unusual except for when the man looked straight into the security camera. Claudette got up and went to the front of the gallery as if she were going to adjust a painting. She quickly scanned the sidewalks but didn't see the couple.

Her nerves were definitely on high alert today. Did she have reason to be concerned? Should she be?



19



The news stations in the United States were using terms such as “Heinous,” “Audacious,” “Calculated,” and “Bold” in their descriptions of last night’s thefts of art in Paris. All sorts of values on the artwork were being tossed around; hundreds of millions of dollars, a billion dollars or more, incalculable, priceless. No one actually knew because a complete inventory was not yet available, but sensational statements typically receive the most viewer attention, which then drives ratings.

The headlines on one of the morning newspapers in Boston boldly asked, “**Another Gardner Hit?**” in reference to the robbery of thirteen pieces that were stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990. Two men in fake police uniforms were able to get inside the Gardner museum, tie up the two guards on duty, make two trips to their car, and then leave with an interesting assortment of art. In most cases, the paintings were cut out of the frames; the empty frames are still on the walls today, over twenty-five years later.

A five million dollar reward had been offered for the safe return of the Boston art, but none of it has surfaced since

that early Sunday morning on March 18, 1990. A valuation of five hundred million dollars was placed on the thirteen pieces back in 1990, and some have speculated why only those thirteen items were taken. A painting by Johannes Vermeer, worth two hundred million dollars at that time, was untouched, leading to the notion that the thieves were amateurs who didn't know the values of the various items on permanent display in the museum.

Several references to the Gardner robbery and yesterday's thefts in Paris were trending topics on social media. Many news outlets were using the hashtag *#Gardner* in their headlines along with *#ParisArtThefts*. The time was ripe for almost anyone with a theory on the thefts, especially for those who could tie the two of them together with a reasonable-sounding explanation.

"So you think there is a definite connection between yesterday's robberies in Paris and the Gardner Museum heist from over twenty-five years ago?" The morning radio news announcer, barely a teenager when the latter occurred, asked his phone-in guest.

"Of course," the unnamed person replied. "The early reports that are in from Paris said that some of the paintings were cut out of their frames just like in Boston. And the Paris thieves could have taken much more than they did, again just like at the Gardner." The man's thick accent sounded Bostonian, but he didn't identify where he lived.

The newsman was happy to have a strong-opinioned person on the phone; the station's marketing manager had told everyone that their interviews had to be edgy, opinionated, even slightly alienating. The station didn't appeal to every-

one in the Boston area, especially the conservatives, but there were enough liberals that certain advertisers appealed to.

“The FBI and local police have said that the most likely persons to have committed the Gardner robbery are now dead, or if they’re not, they’re crippled and in nursing homes. And if it is the same group, don’t you think they would have learned from the Gardner heist and just cleaned those museums out of everything they could grab?”

The phoner was not to be dissuaded; he wouldn’t use the word ‘conspiracy,’ but that’s essentially what he was describing as he continued to re-formulate the few available facts into a re-cast version of the same stuff.

The announcer actually liked guests who talked about conspiracy theories because that would really get the phone lines ringing. But this morning’s guest wasn’t adding anything new as he rambled on. “Our next guest is a former FBI agent who has some inside knowledge that he’s going to share with us. Stay tuned to hear this exclusive interview; we’ll be back after this short announcement from our sponsors.”

“That guy was a bit of a nutcase, wasn’t he?” the producer said as he entered the studio.

“He was good for a while, but then he just started repeating himself.” The news announcer got out of his chair and walked over to the coffee station and poured another cup of steaming coffee into his mug. “How were the numbers?”

The producer also walked over to the coffee station and got some fresh coffee. “They were pretty good to begin with, but then they trailed off as he started to repeat his story. You cut him off at the right time.”

“Our advertisers should like this next guy. He and I have chatted before about the Gardner theft; there’s nothing really new to tell, but he still makes it very spellbinding.” The announcer walked back to his desk, set the coffee down, put the headphones on, and flipped the switch to go live once the producer switched on the green light.

The light turned green. “Welcome back to our Friday morning broadcast where we’re discussing the art thefts in Paris yesterday and wondering if there’s a connection with the 1990 half-billion dollar heist from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum right here in Boston. Our next guest is a former FBI agent who knows a lot about the Gardner heist. For security reasons, we cannot reveal his name, but I can guarantee you that what he says is real.” There was a slight pause, and then he continued. “Thanks for calling in. The question that seems to be on everyone’s mind today is if there’s a connection between the art thefts in Paris yesterday and the historic Gardner Museum heist in 1990. You spent some time with the FBI, and you were even on the Gardner investigative team for a while; what’s your professional opinion?”

“Thanks for having me on your show,” the older gentleman said. “First off, what occurred yesterday or last night in Paris was indeed horrible. The only good news, if you can call it that, is that I’ve not heard of any innocent people being physically hurt. So that’s good.” The caller took a breath before he continued.

“I listened to your previous caller, and I can understand how he drew a connection between the thefts in Paris and the Gardner Museum heist in 1990. There are similarities;

that's for sure. And since neither the Paris thefts nor the Gardner heist have been solved and there aren't any definite suspects in custody, no one can say that what the gentleman said wasn't correct. In my many years with the FBI, however, we had to have more than just similarities between two crimes to say that they were connected."

The announcer cut in. "It almost sounds as if on one hand you're saying that the previous caller might be correct, but yet you're hedging your bet against that. Is that right?"

The former FBI agent was used to this type of question. "I understand what you're asking, so let me lay it out quite clearly. From the scant information we have, and let me remind you that none of it has come from official police sources, it does appear that there are some similarities. For instance, some paintings were cut out of their frames in Paris just as some were here in Boston. And like what happened here, more valuable artwork was left behind and lesser items were taken. But similarities in the absence of concrete evidence do not make a connection. Could they be connected? Yes, they could. But I'd say that the likelihood that they're not connected is over 99 percent. The reason I say that is because there are some things I know about the Gardner case due to my former roles within the FBI. I can't reveal what those things are because that case is still under investigation."

"So that's an interesting point," the announcer interjected. "You said the Gardner heist is still under investigation, yet there's not been any breakthrough and all the original suspects are now dead or incapable of doing much for themselves. Is the federal government, in other words, you and I, paying for the investigation when the items belonged to a

private institution? Why isn't the Gardner museum footing the bill?"

"I don't have that answer, and I honestly don't know how active the FBI is in it right now, especially since the statute of limitations has expired."

"Now that's an even more interesting angle. If the statute of limitations for the Gardner theft has passed, why wouldn't someone just come forward and say, 'I have them.?' " The announcer already knew the answer but it was a good lead-in for the former FBI agent.

"Good question," the agent said. "The statute of limitations for the robbery has expired, so no one can be arrested for the actual theft of the artwork. However, it is illegal to possess stolen property. So if anyone said they have them or even just one of them, no matter how it was obtained, then that person can be arrested for possession of stolen property. That person, as naïve as it sounds, could honestly not know that the work had been stolen. He, or she, could have purchased it in full faith just as you or I would buy a car, a piece of furniture or stereo equipment without asking if the seller had the legal right to sell it. But stolen property is stolen property no matter how many hands it's gone through. And even if you've obtained a piece of stolen property through what you think is a legal transaction, you still don't have the right to possess it. At a minimum, you'll usually be required to hand over the stolen property without being compensated for it."

The conversations continued throughout the USA as well as other parts of the world where "first world" problems included things like art thefts, latest releases of wine, and

which actor or singer is in the news for something unrelated to their actual work. It was still early on Friday morning in the USA; there was much work to do in Paris, France.



20



The one place where calm was clearly not in play – not counting the museums and galleries that had been burglarized – in Paris on Friday was at the French National Police headquarters near the Hôtel de Ville. The distinctively blue-, white-, and red-striped cars and vans surrounded the buildings and were parked two abreast on the streets. Traffic was hampered by the blockage, but there were plenty of officers outside to direct drivers around the barricades and vehicles. A few horns were honked because of the inconvenience, but for the most part the Parisian drivers accepted the situation for what it was. They'd heard the news, and they'd seen the reports, so they knew why traffic was heavy in that area. But there weren't many alternatives around Rue de Rivoli, the main artery running along the northern side of the Seine River.

Last night's festivities at the Petit Palais had been quickly forgotten when the first alarms began to alert police and other security forces. It wasn't unusual to have an alarm go off; sometimes it was a false alarm. So the first one to go off didn't create much of a stir; there were the standard protocols for tending to the alarm. But once alarms were sounding

in several museums and galleries around the city, there was definite cause for concern.

Police Detective Marie Laurent had been at the art showing at Petit Palais, mingling with socialites and government officials. She was also monitoring social media and the private police network for any “unusual activities.” Not particularly a social butterfly, even though she was quite capable of dressing up and appearing quite stunning, Marie left the party early saying she wasn’t feeling well. It was on her way home that the alarms had begun to sound and her phone was abuzz with messages. She’s considered going to her office, but she knew that the information available right away would still be incomplete. A good night’s sleep would be better.

Back at Police Headquarters, Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc convened an elite group of officers and detectives in the conference room adjacent to his office. Many of them would’ve taken the afternoon off to get an early start on the weekend, but they all knew that this Friday was unlike any other they’d ever seen in Paris.

“Okay, here’s what we know for now,” LeBlanc began as the noise in the room subsided. He passed out a sheet of paper to each person, and then read from his sheet, adding additional commentary that wasn’t in the bulleted list.

“Orsay, Louvre, Picasso, and a couple smaller galleries. It’s possible, of course, that others were also hit. I would expect we’ll hear from any others today.

“Two officers chased a possible suspect last night. They lost him, however, when their car collided with another vehicle and the suspect darted down a couple narrow roads.

“No one has claimed responsibility. There’s been a lot of chatter on social media, but nobody’s pointing to any group or organization that might have been behind it

“The mayor’s requested an update by noon. Do any of you have anything that you’ve heard that we could tell the mayor?”

The ten men and two women around the table looked at one another. Heads were shaking back and forth; there was no information to offer. Detective Marie Laurent spoke up.

“I was at the Petit Palais affair last night, and everything seemed normal.”

“I heard you went home early,” LeBlanc said.

Marie paused and took a big swallow before responding. “It must’ve been something I ate; my stomach wasn’t feeling well so I did call it an early evening.” Her investigative background told her not to add any superfluous information.

LeBlanc continued. “You’re looking well this morning. So aside from the food issue, how was the event?”

“I thought it was quite good,” Marie answered quickly. “The art was displayed well and the guests seemed to respond to it and to the music. Does anyone else find it to be a strange coincidence that last night’s thefts were on the same evening as a big art showing at Petit Palais?”

There were several nods around the table as side conversations began to take place.

“Actually, Detective,” LeBlanc started again, “there’ve been some rumors that the thefts were linked with the work stoppage by the National Museum Workers Union.” A stunned look came across Marie’s face as her eyes opened wider and then she looked quizzically at the Chief Inspector.

"Really?" she asked. "The strikers did it?"

"We don't know that," he replied. "But whoever did it seemed to have had advance knowledge and planning. It appears to have been well organized so it couldn't have been a spur-of-the-moment decision. Wouldn't you agree? Any ideas?"

One of the male detectives responded to LeBlanc's question that partly seemed rhetorical in nature. "Since it doesn't appear that any alarms went off until late in the evening, the thieves obviously didn't trip them going in. So maybe they were inside jobs? What about security personnel who could enter the museums without setting off the alarms?"

"That's a good point; take a note to check the alarm logs to see if any of the alarms were overridden. And don't just ask if they had been; get the original logs before anyone could possibly alter them. Certainly an insider who could override an alarm would know how to change the log, so let's get them here right away. In fact, go dispatch a team right now to gather those logs."

"Yes, sir," the male detective replied as he left the conference room.

"Any other ideas?" LeBlanc asked.

Marie spoke up. "Has anyone questioned any of the Workers Union leaders? The work stoppage was apparently to draw attention to poor security; could the thefts be the steroids version of calling attention to poor security?"

"How would they get in?" an officer on the opposite side of the table asked.

"Well," Marie began, "they're the ones who called the stoppage, so they would have known when they were going

to do it. That would certainly give them ample time for planning such an operation.”

“That’s a good point, Detective, but it doesn’t answer his question about getting in without being noticed or setting off an alarm.” Chief Inspector LeBlanc liked Marie Laurent’s work even though he felt that at twenty-nine, she was still a bit too young for the rank of Detective.

LeBlanc knew he couldn’t step into every personnel decision that was made around the country. Was her promotion because of her stunning looks or being related to a famous acting family? The Chief Inspector was still old school and having a hard time accepting the fact that women were as capable of doing police work as men. He knew he was biased, but he also knew to keep it to himself.

“I don’t have the answer to that, Chief,” Marie replied. “I was just raising the point that went along with your comment about advance knowledge and planning. Maybe it is just a coincidence that the thefts and the work stoppage were on the same day. But if it’s not purely a coincidence, then the union is the only one to have known when the stoppage was going to be. That would then give them the time to do the necessary planning.” She paused to see if there were any comments; there were none. “Obviously I’m not saying that they committed the thefts, but I would put them at the top of the list for now unless anyone else has other ideas.”

LeBlanc looked around the room; some heads were nodding, two of the officers were writing something on the sheet of paper with the bullet points. “Who has high-level contacts with the union?”

A male detective at the far end of the table raised his hand slightly. "I do, Chief. I'll try to get a meeting with him this afternoon." He paused, looked at fellow-detective Marie, and continued. "I understand what the detective is saying, but I think that would run counter to the objectives of the union. If they were, in fact, responsible for the thefts, they would be disbanded so quickly and all the strides they'd made for their workers would be tossed to the winds."

Detective Marie Laurent was used to being rebuffed by her male counterparts and she usually took it in stride. "The chief had asked for suggestions, and no one else was offering any. I never said I thought the union was responsible, I just said it was a coincidence that could play out perfectly with timing, advance planning, and making a point about security. If any of you men have better ideas, I know the chief would be happy to hear them." She wasn't taking it in stride today.

"Okay, detectives," LeBlanc jumped in. "I appreciate what both of you have said, and in defense of Detective Laurent, her logic makes perfect sense." He turned his attention to the male detective. "Get with your contact and get me proof that they had nothing to do with it and then we can scratch them off the list." He turned back to Marie. "Is that okay with you, Detective?"

"Yes, it is, Chief. Anything you say is okay with me," she replied as her lips revealed a slight smile while she avoided looking across the table.

The male detective contained his glare, wrote something down, pushed his chair back from the table and crossed his

arms. Anyone reading body language would conclude that his participation in the meeting was now over.

While the various Police departments were following up on leads, there was a flurry of activity on the opposite side of the Seine River. It seems that the Orsay Museum was hit the hardest of all the major museums. There was activity all over as museum staff, insurance investigators, and police were inside scouring for any sign of evidence to identify the perpetrators. Members of the media were not allowed in the museum despite their protestations of reporting on one of the most significant events in the history of Paris. When the media asked why they weren't allowed inside, they received a simple, though non-explanatory, response, *Non*.

Three teams were dispatched to level zero, with one team on each side and one in the central area. Two teams were dispatched to level two, one for each side, and one team was sent up to level five. It didn't take long for the team leader on level five to call on his radio down to the investigative team room on the first level below ground.

"This is Team Leader on five. Some of the glass cases have been emptied," was the first transmission.

"Roger that, Five," the lead investigator answered. "What's the damage?"

“Definitely not a smash and grab job; the cases that were hit have clean cuts; the holes look big enough for a man to reach in and grab the pieces. So far, the ones we’ve seen that have been hit all had Degas bronzes.”

“Roger, Five. Don’t move or touch anything; just photograph everything as it is and come down to the team room when you’re done.”

“Roger; it shouldn’t take us too much longer up here.”

The teams on the main level, level zero, were winding their way through all the galleries and temporary exhibits. One of the staff members was feeling anxious as the team approached the Claude Monet paintings. They were his favorite, especially the *Blue Water Lilies*. He admired the expansive *Water Lilies* at the Orangerie and the way that they were displayed on the curved walls, but he worked at Orsay and so the lilies here, though not on as grand a scale, were more spectacular. A sense of relief came across his face as his eyes immediately caught sight of the Monet as the team entered the small gallery.

The three teams on level zero continued their initial inspection; nothing was found out of place, not even in the small café at the end of the hall. The team leads called in to report that they saw nothing out of place, and they were told to report to the team room.

The team on the south side of level two quickly found damage, but they weren’t able to call it in; their radio wasn’t working. One of the police officers ran to the other side of the level searching for the other team. Because the center area was open to the main floor below, he had to run around

the perimeter of the level. "Where are you?" he shouted. "We need to use your radio."

"We're in the third door down on your left past the salon," came the reply.

The officer hustled down to gallery number fifty-nine and stopped to catch his breath. His normal duties didn't include much running; he spent most of his day riding around in a car. The team leader on that side was walking out to the terrace to meet the officer as he approached. "What did you find?"

"van Gogh," the out-of-breath officer replied. "Can you call it in?"

"Sure," the other man replied as he pressed the Call button on his radio. "This is Team Alpha on level two calling in for Team Bravo. They're reporting damage in the van Gogh gallery. Over."

The response was immediate. "Roger that, Alpha. We're sending a new radio up for Bravo. Put them on, please."

The Alpha team leader looked at the officer who was gasping for breath. The man's face was flushed and a glazed look was in his eyes. Alpha pushed the Call button again. "This is Alpha; we have a medical emergency here on two. The officer from team Bravo is having problems breathing. Send a medical team immediately; I think it's his heart. Out." The man dropped the radio and helped the overweight officer to a nearby bench. He helped the officer sit down and loosened his tie and began to open the buttons on his shirt; it was full of sweat. "Get me some water," the man yelled out to anyone who could hear him. The radio was still where he

left it, and he didn't want to leave the officer whose eyes had the look of fading away.

"Hurry with the water! Where's that medical team?" Alpha shouted as loud as he could; his screaming didn't seem to have an effect on the officer; his breathing was becoming shallower and shallower. "Hold on, pal," he said in a soft voice as he removed the dark blue tie and opened his shirt all the way. He'd never seen a man die; not many people die inside museums. He didn't want this police officer to be his first one.

Footsteps were rapidly approaching from the left as one of Alpha's team members sprinted out from the gallery clutching a bottle of water. "Sorry; I already drank some of it."

"That's okay," the team lead replied. "Get the radio and find out where more water is."

The other man turned and went to pick up the radio.

The medical team sprinted toward the Alpha lead and the officer. "Let's lay him down on the bench," one of the medics said as the three of them gently leaned the man's torso down on the solid marble bench. "No; don't put anything under his head or neck. We need to have the airway as open as possible."

Alpha slowly pulled his rolled up jacket off the bench with his right hand as he held the man's head still with his left. He looked and saw one of the medics pull a sharp instrument from his bag.



22



Back over on the Right Bank of the Seine, investigators and senior museum officials were painstakingly going from hall to hall in Le Louvre looking for thefts and damage. As one of the largest museums in the world, and the one most visited, the Louvre contains many halls and galleries. Thus, it's not a simple task for any security team to canvass the entire area. But that's what they had to do.

Not only was the task to go through the Richelieu, Sully, and Denon wings, there were four floors in each wing. The Museum Director had requested a total of thirty-six teams so there would be three teams on every floor in each wing. Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc could barely hold back his laughter when he heard that request; he said he would provide a total of twenty-four officers. That was more than he thought he could spare, but he did so only because it was Le Louvre.

The area on the ground floor adjacent to the inverted pyramid was a perfect location for the investigative team to establish its team room. All the radios were equipped with new batteries and the twenty-four teams, each consisting of a police officer, a museum employee, and an outside securi-

ty agency guard, were dispersed to their assigned areas. Two of the Louvre's thirty-five thousand objects of art on display – probably the two most famous “museum women” in the world – were on everyone's mind.

Team Sully Zero Alpha headed directly to the southwest corner of the Sully wing. Aphrodite, better known as *Venus de Milo*, had been moved from its placement in a central hallway because of the traffic congestion that was typically around this ancient Greek sculpture. Her new location allowed better access without being a traffic barricade for those wanting to get to other displays. The Greek Antiquities section was the ideal place for Aphrodite to stand in her glory and majesty.

As the team got closer to the statue, they slowed down as if they'd been given an order. But they'd slowed down in fear of seeing her defaced. She was already missing both arms, yet the gracefulness of her draped legs made most observers not focus on the missing arms. As the team walked around in awe and reverence, a feeling of relief came across their faces. She'd not been touched. The team leader looked around, and each person nodded that it was okay for him to radio in that she was fine.

The team paused, re-assembled, and then went back to the beginning of the Greek Antiquities section to start their systematic counter-clockwise sweep of the southern portion of the Sully wing. They noticed an empty pedestal next to the *Colossal Statue of Ramesses II*, photographed the empty pedestal and its nameplate, and continued north along the eastern hall. They reached the stairwell, which marked the

center of the building with its windows facing east over the former protection moat.

"Find anything missing?" Sully Zero Alpha's team leader asked Sully Zero Bravo's team leader, whose team had just completed its search of the northern half of this wing's floor.

"There was one place where it looked like a vase was missing, but there were no signs of brute force or any chip marks, so maybe it had been taken off display for maintenance reasons."

"Same here. I'm not sure why anyone would want one of those old vases anyway. It's not like they're all that valuable; besides you couldn't fence it and get much from it."

"How's Aphrodite?" the Bravo team leader asked.

"She's fine," Alpha responded with a pleased look on his face as if he were the one to ensure her safety. "She was our big concern, of course, but we didn't see anything out of the ordinary around her."

"That's good," the Bravo team leader responded. "I wonder what else they'll want us to do."

"Help some of the other teams, perhaps," Alpha replied. "I wonder how it's going over at Orsay and some of the others."

"That's true," Bravo said. "For all the noise that's been created, we sure haven't seen much."

The Sully Zero teams were working their way back to the team room when a transmission came over their radios.

"This is Denon One Alpha. The *Mona Lisa* has been attacked, but she's still there. There's evidence of drilling and some explosives, but the old gal is still smiling away. It seems she's gotten the best of them."

“Roger that, Denon One Alpha. Are there any tools or other objects in the area that might have been left behind out of frustration?”

“Negative. There aren’t any chips or other fragments on the floor. These guys definitely didn’t want to leave any traces behind. How often do we hear of burglars cleaning up after themselves?” The Denon One Alpha team leader was feeling a bit smug as if he himself had just single-handedly foiled the theft of the world’s most famous painting.

“What about the back wall?” the Louvre investigative team leader asked. “Any marks back there?”

“One moment,” the Mona Lisa leader replied as he started to walk behind the painting’s back wall to where the real access was. “I’m in the back now. I see a few small chips of wood on the floor.”

“Get some photos of this area,” the leader said to the team’s photographer.

The area’s team leader resumed his conversation with the overall leader. “The lock seems secure,” he said after pulling on the door handle with his non-gloved hand. “Is there anything else you want us to do here before we search the rest of the wing?”

“Negative; *merci*,” the leader replied.

The teams continued their searches, taking from sixty to ninety minutes to search each designated area. They all congregated back at the team room under the inverted pyramid on the main floor, level zero, when they’d completed the search of their areas.

“I guess this beats being out on the streets,” one of the uniformed police officers said to a comrade.

"That's true," the other officer replied. "I actually saw some of the museum that I'd never seen before. I've never been all that interested in the Middle Ages, but at least I can now say I've seen that part of Richelieu."

"Thank you for your diligent work," the Louvre leader said in a loud voice as he attempted to gain control of everyone. "Let's take this slowly, by wing, by floor, by team. I'm taking notes, and I'm not trained in shorthand, so please talk slowly."

That remark elicited a chuckle from most of the men and from all of the women.

"Before we get started, I want all the photographers to go over to the officer on my right who will download all the files from your cameras while you wait for him to return the disc to you. For the reports, let's start with Richelieu Negative One Alpha. Remember, tell me what you saw, not what you think happened."

The teams started giving their reports, noting missing items along with anything that seemed out of the ordinary. Most teams had nothing to report; the common theme of missing items was an empty vase pedestal. The Denon One teams were the only two teams to report anything of importance.

The Denon One Alpha team leader paused as if to get everyone's attention before he repeated what he'd radioed in earlier about the attempts at the *Mona Lisa*. No one seemed surprised as it was the painting that anyone breaking into the Louvre would probably go after.

The empty pedestals, not an uncommon occurrence in any museum, along with the attempts at the *Mona Lisa* were the only reported anomalies from the teams.

It would be learned later that there were a few areas that weren't canvassed by any of the teams.

Claudette emerged from the Pigalle Metro station not even thinking about last night's thefts. She liked that about the underground system; her mind was able to float off to anywhere because she wasn't able to see the real world that lay above. Her underground journey allowed her to venture off to any place she desired. On her trip home today she'd been thinking about the bottle of *vin rouge* that Pierre had suggested; that, a baguette, and a warm bath would definitely help her relax. She felt a slight Mona-Lisa type smile come across her face.

The calmness she was feeling as she left the train car was quickly erased as the sounds of the locals penetrated her sanctuary. There were times when the "Pig Alley" nickname for this area was quite appropriate; today was one of those times. Two of the ladies offering their "services" were arguing over whose area that particular piece of the park was. Claudette really despised this area, but her apartment was close by, and it was a really good apartment with an outstanding view of the highlights of the western part of Paris. Unfortunately, this was the most convenient Metro station

for her, so she'd learned to focus on where she was going rather than what was going on in the area.

She tried to block the women's profanity-laced screaming from her head as she quickly walked up Boulevard de Clichy and then turned right on Via des Platanes. As she stepped into the neighborhood boulangerie, Isabelle called out to her. The owner quickly came out from behind the counter and threw her arms around Claudette. The remaining flour on Isabelle's apron became dust in the air whirling around the two friends.

"Bonjour, Claudette. It's so good to see you." The owner hugged Claudette as if the two hadn't seen each other in years. But Claudette's normal working hours meant that she wouldn't be coming home until after six-thirty, a time when the bakery was beginning to close for the evening. "It's so good to see you; is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine, Isabelle." Claudette replied. "The gallery is fine; we were one of the fortunate ones. It was a slow day and Pierre told me to close early, and enjoy a nice bottle of *vin rouge*. Plus I get to have one of your baguettes during the week whereas I'm normally too late coming home."

The two women glanced up to the television set perched on a platform on the wall above the cash register.

"That's all they've been talking about today," Isabelle said as the newscast that was playing on her television was about last night's art thefts. "But I'm glad you weren't hit," she continued. "Have you heard anything else about who was behind it?"

"Absolutely nothing," Claudette answered. "I called some friends and most of them were also spared. Based on what's been reported, there had to have been a big mastermind behind all of it. I'm just thankful; the artwork is all insured, of course. But just the fact of someone invading your personal space is hard to accept."

The newscast continued, "We have an exclusive on-scene report from one of the smaller galleries that was robbed last night. Here is our reporter Jacque DeVau."

"We're here at Galerie du Monde with the owner who says he's a bit surprised by what happened last night."

"Yes, Jacque," said Philippe Fermet. "While it was indeed very tragic and upsetting that someone broke into our gallery last night, it does seem strange that the one piece that was taken wasn't the most valuable piece that was on display. The *Seaside Landscape* piece by Marc Chagall that was taken is certainly an interesting piece and it's highly collectible. But its value pales in comparison to other pieces that were right next to it." The gallery owner paused, but ever so briefly that the reporter who started to say something was abruptly cut off. "So it is a bit odd why they took just that one when they could have taken many others that were much more valuable. But we are very thankful that only one piece was taken." Philippe Fermet was enjoying the attention his gallery was receiving through the television interviews.

News reporters typically liked the people they were interviewing to answer in very short phrases. Long sentences, especially when there were more than one or two, were a real anathema to most news people. They wanted the camera to be trained on them, not on the subject they were interview-

ing. Those people were just an excuse for the reporters to be in the field and have their faces in front of the camera. The person who was the focus of the camera was the most important person at the time.

The reporter sought to regain the attention of the camera. "So what was the value of the piece that was taken in comparison with other pieces in your gallery? Are we talking thousands or tens of thousands of Euros?"

"I'd like to be able to answer that question," the gallery owner replied, "but our insurance company has suggested that I not talk about the value of the pieces in our gallery. I'm sure you can understand the reason why. But as every gallery owner, art collector, and art lover knows, even a minor piece by Marc Chagall is valuable and highly collectible, so your estimates are in the ballpark. I will say though that we're very happy that the thieves were quite neat and didn't cause a lot of damage to the gallery."

"*Merci, Monsieur Fermet,*" the reporter broke in. "We'll now go back to the studio for more news. Reporting live this is Jacque DeVau."

"Cut," said the cameraman who also served as the director for the field news stories as the reporter walked toward the news van. Philippe Fermet took the reporter's rude behavior in stride and went back into his gallery

Isabelle stepped behind the counter and put a baguette into a bag. As she brought it out, Claudette began to open her purse for the one Euro coin. "This one's on me, *mon ami,*" Isabelle said. "Now go get that bottle of *vin rouge* that Pierre told you to enjoy. I'm so happy to see you. Let's get

together sometime soon," she continued as she hugged her friend.

"*Merci*, Isabelle," Claudette replied as she accepted the small sack. "I'll give you a call when things settle down from all this." She started walking toward the door when she turned back to Isabelle. "That is odd what the gallery owner said about the thieves taking only a minor piece when there were other more valuable ones."

Isabelle thought about Claudette's remark and then commented, "Maybe it wasn't about the money; what do you think?"

"I've never heard of any thefts that weren't about the money. What are you thinking, Isabelle?"

"I don't know; it just doesn't make sense to me."

"Me, neither," Claudette responded. "*Au revoir*," she continued as she turned and went out the door. She turned right and continued the short walk up Via des Platanes to her apartment building.

Noises were coming from all directions in the eerily empty Musée d'Orsay. Museum officials were running up the escalators to the fifth level to look at the empty cases that once held some of Edgar Degas's most famous bronze sculptures. One of the members from Team Alpha on level two had reached that level's restaurant; he called out, "The only water is in a locked case. Do you want to break into it?"

"Why is he going to break in to get water?" one of the medics asked the Alpha lead.

"The officer looks like he needs water."

"No water," the medic quickly replied.

"What?" the lead questioned.

Both medics looked intently at the questioning man and in near unison repeated in stern voices, "No water."

The team lead was stunned; he thought that the police officer needed water. He was perspiring heavily and he was gasping. He nodded his head and turned toward the end of the hall. "Negative!" the lead yelled down the hall. "No water, come on back."

The man in the restaurant shook his head back and forth and muttered to himself, "Hurry; get water. Then don't get

water. Hmmm.” He lifted the glass cover off the left-over pastries and grabbed one that was laced with chocolate as he headed out of the restaurant. Not sensing any rush, he walked back at a leisurely pace as he munched on the now-crisp pastry.

The medic who’d taken a needle out of his bag waited patiently as the other medic cut the officer’s shirt to expose his arm. The first medic then plunged the needle into the man’s arm and gently pressed the plunger to release the medication into his system. The officer was still perspiring but his breathing began to slow down in just seconds after the needle had been pulled back out.

“The reason for no water,” the administering medic began, “is that we might have had to do a tracheotomy and the water might come back out or it could exacerbate the problem. If his breathing hadn’t been so labored, then the water would have been a good idea.”

“I see,” the team lead said.

“Sorry to have jumped on you; it was nothing personal. It’s just in situations like this, we have to make the decisions, and sometimes they’re life or death situations. And in those cases, there’s no time for discussion. He’ll be fine in a bit. You can put the jacket back under his neck to relieve a little of the pressure.”

The radios blared. The medic turned his down, but the Team Alpha lead on level two left his on; it was his counterpart on the southern part of the level. “This is Team Bravo on level two. The van Gogh gallery has been hit very hard. We haven’t counted them, but there are a lot of empty frames in here. Suggest immediate assistance. Over.”

“Roger that, Bravo Two. On the way.”

Sounds that normally were not heard now reverberated with ease throughout the mostly empty former train station. More than one set of footsteps could be heard running up the escalators from the main floor. “It’s this way,” the museum director said as the two men reached the second level. A fourth of the way down the hall was the entrance to the gallery that held most of the museum’s van Gogh paintings. The two men slowed to a walk as they reached room seventy-one.

“What do we,” the museum director stopped in mid-sentence as he quickly surveyed the carnage inside the Post-Impressionism Gallery. He continued with an expletive. Then he followed it with one more. What he saw was disastrous; whoever did it knew that they were hitting at the heart of the Orsay Museum.

“Ten of them have been taken; the glass has been cut and carefully placed against the wall, and then the canvases have been cut from the frames. That’s for nine of them; one was just taken off the wall, frame and all.” The Bravo Two team leader was telling the museum director the obvious facts. Whoever did it knew what they were doing and how to do it.

“Isn’t there a tracking device on each painting?” the team’s police officer asked in a condescending voice.

The museum director looked at the officer, thought about using one or two more expletives, but breathed out a big sigh instead. “This information is never to leave this building, or even this little gallery here. Yes, we have tracking devices on each piece of art, but the RFID device is on the

frame, not on the canvas. Oh, *Mon Dieu*, they cut the canvases. We'll never be able to track these paintings, some of the most important paintings in the world." The director paused. "I need to sit down," he added in a somber voice.

Out of respect for the situation and the director, no one said anything as the dejected museum director sat on a bench, put his head in hands, and took deep breaths in through his nose and out through his mouth.

After a couple minutes that must have seemed like an eternity, the team leader tried to offer some encouraging information. "We did find a glass cutter that was left behind. Perhaps we'll get some fingerprints off it." The upbeat sound of his voice was quickly shot down by the director.

"Do you think these people would be so foolish as to leave fingerprints? And you can buy a glass cutter anywhere. No, the paintings are gone; they're gone forever," the Museum Director said in dismay as he realized that the significance of Musée d'Orsay had just been erased as quickly as if it were footprints in the sand being washed away by the next incoming wave.

"Do you want us to clean this up?" the lead asked in a soft tone, trying to break the awkward silence.

"No," the museum director replied. "Let's leave it as it is for the insurance teams. Do you have pictures?"

"*Oui*," the lead replied.

Thinking he could brighten the situation, the Bravo Two lead continued. "Since everything has an RFID device on it, then the bronzes that were stolen can be easily tracked. Right?"

The Museum Director let out another heavy sigh and he looked up at the team lead. "No; that's not possible. They were in fool-proof cases, so there was no need to tag them."

No one stated the obvious, *The cases obviously were not fool-proof.*

"Even if they'd been on the bronzes," the director continued, "they could have been scraped off. It was the glass case that was supposed to be the protection."

Once again, the team lead had something to say. "The glass cutter seems to be a high-tech one. There are different settings that can be switched on. Is that significant?"

The museum director responded immediately upon hearing about a high-tech glass cutter with settings. "Yes; it means that the thieves had inside information about the frequencies of the different glasses. Cut the glass with an ordinary cutter and it will set off an alarm. Or if you use a cutter that's not set to match the frequency of the particular glass, that will also set off an alarm, since the glasses emit different frequencies based on thickness and composition."

"We've already bagged and tagged it," the team's police officer cut in. He thought that being assigned to this activity at the Orsay was going to provide some recognition for his work, or at least there would be some excitement, but he quickly realized that there wasn't much to do here. What a waste of his normal day off.

The radios came to life again. "We're on level five, and we think we know how the thieves got out of here."

The museum director took his radio, pushed the Call button, and replied. "This is the director; what do you have?"

“You know that clock that’s on the eastern side up here? Well, there’s a door to the right of it that leads out to a grated area. We looked out there, and there’s a rope tied to one of the horizontal railing bars. I think that’s how they got out of here.”

“Is the door ajar?” the director asked.

“No,” was the reply from the fifth level. “We pushed on the bar, but the door wouldn’t open.”

“That’s because it will only open at certain times,” the director responded. “It can’t be forced open without breaking the glass or the framing.”

“None of that’s broken,” the team lead on level five lead answered and then paused as he looked for any signs of information from his team. There was none. He spoke back into his radio, “So how’d the thieves know when the door could be opened?”



25



Claudette left the boulangerie and continued her normal walk uphill toward her apartment. It was a steep hill that would eventually lead up to Sacré-Cœur at the highest point in Paris if she were to continue on past her apartment building. The baguette's aroma wafting out of the paper bag prompted Claudette to increase her pace so she could get home, take some cheese out of the refrigerator, and enjoy them both with a nice glass of wine.

Her boss, Pierre LaCroix, had suggested that she leave work early today and pick up a nice bottle of red wine, a *vin rouge*. Because she was getting home earlier than normal, the small corner shop was still open, and Claudette went in and found a soft Bordeaux for the evening's enjoyment. It had been a rather nerve-racking day even though their gallery, Galerie Pierre, had not been hit in last night's robberies. As Claudette approached the main apartment door, she was more aware of her actions because of last evening. She always did a quick scan of her surroundings before entering her code to open the main door. She clutched her bag, the baguette, and the wine as she looked around. There was no one.

She started to enter her code when a man suddenly appeared in her peripheral vision. She pressed the Cancel button and turned around so her back was to the door and she could watch the man as he walked by going downhill. "*Bonjour*," the man said as his stride continued unbroken. The loose ends of the light blue scarf around his neck seemed to wave goodbye to her as she stared at him, not knowing why his face or his voice seemed oddly familiar.

Still unnerved by all the recent events, Claudette couldn't even mutter a response. She took in a big breath and then let it out slowly as she worked to regain her composure. The afternoon's bright sun warmed her face as she briefly closed her eyes. She turned toward the door, entered the code, and heard the click of the lock. She pushed open the door, stepped inside, and felt safe once again. The comfort and familiarity of the courtyard were like a mother's arms holding a child and keeping her secure from all harm.

That security and comfort quickly vanished as she walked up the dimly lit staircase. Claudette knew there was nothing to worry about, but then that's how the art world had felt up until last night. There have been robberies since the beginning of time; even Paris, France, was not immune. But last night's thefts were more unnerving from what wasn't done rather than what was. From the few reports she'd heard, the thieves could have taken more than they did. So why didn't they? Good question.

She reached the landing on the third floor, put a key into the door lock, and started to turn the key to the right. The normally simple quarter turn was blocked. Had they changed the locks again without telling her? She tried it

again, but with no success. She pulled the key out of the lock and then noticed that she'd used the wrong key; that was the key to her front door. She breathed a sigh of relief, adjusted her set of keys and inserted the correct key. She heard the customary release of the lock as she turned the key, and she felt the door open to her hallway that was the main entrance to the five third-floor apartments.

Upon entering her front door, Claudette set the bags on the closest table and then locked the door and set the dead-bolt. She hung her keys on the hook by the door, and carried the baguette and wine into the kitchen. She was a person of routines, and it was the routines that provided her with comfort in strange and troubling times.

Claudette turned on the television on the way into her bedroom to freshen up and change into a comfortable outfit. The news story was about the robberies, something that was totally expected. That WAS the news, and it would continue to be the headlines for quite a while.

Sitting in an overstuffed chair in the living room, Claudette tore off a piece of the baguette, spread some Gruyere cheese on it and took a bite. She savored the taste of the fresh baguette and the cheese as she slowly chewed them and then took a sip of the deep red wine. Now she could relax; she was safe in her apartment and she would soon take a warm bath that would melt away all of the day's worries.

The news camera switched to Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc standing outside the Police Headquarters. Claudette didn't recognize any of the others, particularly the attractive young female next to LeBlanc; her stunning looks were a sharp contrast to the stern formal appearance

of the Chief Inspector, a typically French male. Even though LeBlanc was talking, the camera man seemed more interested in the female. He kept LeBlanc in the frame as he zoomed in on her.

She was neatly dressed in a fashionable dark dress; it was hard to tell if it was black or a dark blue, perhaps a navy blue. She wore a brightly patterned Hermès scarf around her neck, and her hair was pulled up in a very attractive coiffeur. Her demeanor was one of confidence and style. The Chief Inspector continued to talk as the female's name appeared on the screen: "Detective Marie Laurent."

The name was familiar to Claudette, but her mind was wondering more why she was just standing there next to LeBlanc. Was this young female detective leading the investigation into the biggest theft of art in Paris? Claudette took another sip of the wine and then shook off that notion. Certainly one of the more senior officers around LeBlanc would be in charge.

"Even though we are still in the early stages of gathering information on last night's audacious assaults on numerous galleries and museums around Paris, we have been able to identify several persons of interest. Due to the sensitivity of the matter, we aren't able to release those names as we don't want to reveal anything that might jeopardize our ability to capture all those who were involved."

The Chief Inspector continued talking without actually revealing anything that most Parisians didn't already know. The officers surrounding LeBlanc stood stern faced; all except Detective Laurent whose confidence and stature didn't appear police-like. She wasn't doing anything to draw atten-

tion to herself; it was the camera man who was generating interest in her by slowing down as the camera panned across the row of standing officers.

Claudette took the last sip of wine from the glass and got out of the chair to go to the kitchen. LeBlanc made some comment about how much the police knew, although they couldn't yet disclose any of it. She shook her head as she mumbled, "They only wish they knew that much." Carrying the wine glass in her right hand, Claudette grabbed the wine bottle in her left and headed toward the bathroom to draw a warm relaxing bubble bath.

In a small apartment on the Left Bank, Louis was also watching the news. He was listening intently to what Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc and any others had to say. He was relieved when the picture shifted from outside the Police Headquarters and returned to the news studio. Louis's normal evening activities would typically include a stroll down Boulevard Saint-Germain to have a coffee or a beer in one of the small cafés, but his instructions were to remain in his apartment tonight. Hearing nothing on the news to concern him, he turned off the television, retrieved a philosophy book, poured a glass of wine, and began to read from Jean-Paul Sartre.

Louis wasn't going to take a warm bath to relax; he had Monsieur Sartre plus a nice Bordeaux to ensure that his evening would be calm. And relaxing. And uneventful.



The weather the next morning was cool and breezy, somewhat apropos for the tension that seemed to be the general mood around Paris. The morning newspapers ran several articles about the thefts along with some personal stories of those affected, including some of the small gallery owners. There was no new factual information even though the official word from the National Police was that “updates were forthcoming soon.” That was just a stalling technique, one that most Parisians were accustomed to hearing.

Saturday mornings in Paris are different from most other mornings, particularly Monday through Friday, as the avenues and boulevards are filled with shoppers and those enjoying a coffee. The streets are typically filled with the weekday office workers, but not on this day of the week. While much of the chatter was about the thefts, many people were just going about with their own normal Saturday routine. There was nothing they could do about the art that had been taken, and since the National Police were saying that they had identified several persons of interest, unnamed as of yet, the general thinking was that the investigation would be wrapped up rather soon.

The trendy and expensive stores along Avenue Montaigne in the ritzy eighth *arrondissement* had been on high alert since the news of Thursday's art thefts broke. Security was especially heavy at the Harry Winston boutique given that it had been robbed of tens of millions of dollars in diamonds and other jewelry first in 2007 and then again in 2008. The store had installed metal detectors long ago in the doorways, as had many high-end shops, and it wasn't just at the jewelry stores.

The sidewalk in front of Harry Winston's was roped off with only a narrow walkway available on the sidewalk. This would normally draw an immediate reaction from the local police departments, but not this time. The two private security guards on duty were armed, something that was quite unusual in France. They attempted to display a sense of calm demeanor, but their presence along with the cordoned off area didn't really give off a welcoming picture.

"*Bonjour, madame, monsieur*" one of the guards said with a smile as a handsome couple strolled by arm in arm. The avenue was considered by the locals to be the stateliest place to go for a leisurely walk. The gentleman continued the quiet conversation with his wife as he tipped his hat to the guard. The genteel life was still alive in parts of Paris.

A shiny steel-grey Bentley moved slowly to the curb and parked in front of the boutique at number 30. The tuxedoed driver emerged from the front and deftly moved to the passenger side and opened the rear door. He stood near the rear of the doorway and held out his gloved left hand for the car's sole occupant. "*Merci, François,*" the over-dressed portly woman said as she stepped out with her head held high.

Money was still in fashion in Paris and especially along Avenue Montaigne.

The security guards immediately focused their attention on the new arrival. They were new to this assignment, and their instructions were that no one was to park in front of the store. "Pardon me, sir, but you aren't allowed to stay parked there," one of the guards said as François escorted the lady to the velvet rope.

"*François?*" the lady asked as she didn't understand why the rope wasn't immediately removed for her.

"Your car, sir; you can't park there," the insistent guard continued.

The boutique's massive glass and brass door flew open as the store manager hurried outside to greet one of his best customers. Both guards immediately turned around as they heard the door open. The manager said something in French and the guards stumbled over themselves as they removed the rope for the lady and her driver.

"*Bonjour, Madame Rousseau,*" the manager said as he greeted her with a smile and a nod.

"*Bonjour, Philippe,*" she replied as she extended the top of her right hand to the condescending and consummate salesman. The store manager took her hand gently and gave it a welcoming kiss. He expected that business was going to be down this weekend because of the art thefts; her visit could change all of that immediately.

The store manager turned to one of the guards, said something quickly to him, and the guard immediately went outside the rope and stood tall beside the beautiful vehicle. Most cars wouldn't be allowed to remain there, even on a

normal day. Today wasn't a normal day, but then Madame Rousseau wasn't just a normal person. Philippe escorted her into the boutique as his assistant manager went to prepare a special cup of coffee for François.

One part of the "normal Paris" was in play.

A beautiful young lady in her late twenties was strolling down the other side of the avenue. Her hair was down and flowing in the gentle breeze. She was a window shopper as she walked along with her small clutch purse. The silk scarf perfectly complemented her Dior skirt, blouse, and jacket. Her gait was slow and casual; she didn't appear to be shopping for anything in particular.

She stopped in front of Dior at number 29, flicked her wind-blown scarf to the back, and shook her head as she looked at the "latest fashions." She wasn't sure who was designing their outfits, but she knew she could do much better, and she had the pedigree to prove it.

A woman in her mid-forties stopped in front of one of the other Dior windows and smiled as she looked at the combinations they were presenting. Her outfits weren't Dior, but she looked nice. She turned to her right just as the late-twenties woman was turning to her left to continue her Saturday walk.

"Bonjour," the mid-forties woman said.

"Bonjour," the Dior-outfitted younger woman replied.

"Quite a deal with the art thefts, wasn't it?" the elder woman continued.

"I guess so," the younger one replied. "I haven't paid that much attention to it."

The other woman looked intently at the Dior-dressed woman — the scarf wasn't Dior; it was Hermès. "Didn't I see you on the television last night?" she inquired as her eyes were registering a sense of recognition.

"*Moi?*" the younger one replied in astonishment as her entire frame tightened. "You are too kind," she blushed as she continued, "to think that I've been on the television." She started to resume her walk when the other woman continued.

"No, I'm sure it was you I saw last night."

"Thank you for the compliment, my dear lady. But I'm quite certain that I wasn't the one you saw," Marie Laurent said as she flipped her hair back, rewrapped the scarf around her neck, and walked away.

"Are you sure?" the older lady called out to no avail as Marie picked up her pace and intently walked toward the Seine and made a swift right turn into a shop that she'd never even noticed before. She'd been planning on doing some shopping at Dior, but perhaps today wasn't a good day for her to be out in public.

The older lady took one more glance down the avenue as she stepped inside Number 29 even though she knew the prices were a bit steep for her. "I deserve a splurge," she thought to herself as she scanned the store for dresses in a style (and price range) that she would like.

Marie wandered around the small boutique for a few minutes and then walked out, looking to her left to make sure that lady wasn't back out on the sidewalk. She needed to avoid any further interaction with the inquisitive one.



Coffee, pastries, and idle chit-chat were being liberally dispensed and consumed about three miles west of the high-priced shops for the Madame Rousseaus of the world. Place de la Bastille is always a bustling area with its numerous restaurants, brasseries, and cafés, plus the Opéra Bastille and two Metro stations. Not as popular as the much larger Place de la République with its expansive pedestrian area, Place de la Bastille has long been a popular starting point for many parades, marches, and sporting event processions.

On this Saturday morning, however, all the intersecting roadways were devoid of people except for those obeying the traffic lights and crossing only when the light turned green. Perhaps because of the area's ties with revolution, police officers were on every corner when they weren't patrolling back and forth to make their presence clearly known to those who were enjoying their Saturday morning coffee and conversation.

"Where were you last night, Louis? I thought we were going to meet up along Boulevard Saint-Germain." The young man, dressed in all black including his out-of-style beret, looked at his friend as they shared a baguette in the

pedestrian area west of the opera house directly overhead of the Canal Saint-Martin. The man flicked the ashes off his cigarette as he took a drink from his bottle of juice.

"I was really tired and I wasn't feeling all that well," Louis responded. He pulled loose another piece of the baguette and began to slowly chew on it. "Also," he continued as he moved the bread to the right side of his mouth, "I'd turned on the television and it was interesting what the national police were saying about the art thefts. You know, whoever planned and pulled them off certainly must have had a big pair of brass ones because those museums have got to have some pretty top-notch security systems." Louis paused slightly then deflected the conversation. "What'd you do?"

Louis's friend took in a long draw on his cigarette and then slowly let the smoke escape from his mouth. He glanced to his left, saw the three policemen, and turned back toward Louis. The sight of policemen in the area was nothing new since it's been an area of drug dealing and other illegal activities, but those are typically in the evening hours. "I went to Café Noir and sat outside having a beer while I waited for you. I was about to leave when a female friend came by, so we sat there for another hour or so. Honestly, after a short time, I'd forgotten that I was even waiting for you to show up."

A quick gust of westerly wind grabbed Louis's paper napkin and carried it away. He started to retrieve it when he saw that one of the policemen was bending down to retrieve it. Louis quickly snapped his head back to the left and intently focused his eyes on his friend.

"What's up?" his friend asked.

"Oh, nothing," Louis replied. "I thought I saw something."

The friend looked to his left; the policemen were approaching. "You did; one of the policemen must have grabbed your flying napkin, and he's bringing it back to you."

"He's what?" Louis remarked as he looked and saw the three men in blue walking directly toward him.

"It's nothing; he's just bringing your napkin back. They've got nothing else to do with so many of them out here today."

The policemen were about twenty paces from the two young men when Louis dropped his baguette and said, "Let's go" as he stood up and started to run in the opposite direction of the officers.

The confused friend dropped his baguette, took one last sip of his juice and put it down. He leapt up, and started toward Louis. He turned around and saw two of the policemen running after them; the other one had pulled out his radio and was yelling into it.

"Hey," yelled one of the officers, the one with the napkin. "I just wanted to give you your napkin. Where are you going?"

Louis looked to his left once he'd reached the wall; his friend was almost there.

"What are you doing, Louis?" the friend yelled. "He's just bringing back your napkin."

"Stay if you want," Louis yelled back at his approaching friend. "But I'm not." He looked over the wall and saw that it was about a fifteen foot drop down to the bridge platform and then another twenty feet or more down to the grass

alongside the canal. He hoisted himself up on the ledge, took one more look at the officers, and jumped down to the platform.

Louis grimaced and let out a yell of pain as he landed on the solid cement. He didn't look back up to see if his friend was coming or not. Louis looked down at the grass and hoped that it would be a softer landing than the one he'd just experienced. It was farther down; he could break his legs on this if he didn't land properly. He knew that he had to be ready to let his knees bend as soon as he hit ground. Otherwise his lower legs would bear the full brunt of the fall, quite possibly breaking or at least splintering the fibula and possibly even the tibia. He knew he had to jump; there was no other place to go.

"Louis," his friend called out just as Louis jumped from the ledge. He rolled as soon as he hit the ground, but the grass wasn't as soft as it had looked from above. His right ankle hurt; he'd sprained it, but now wasn't the time to worry about the pain. If he were caught by the three men in blue, his pain would be much more than merely physical. He couldn't run as fast as before, but he started hobbling past the houseboats tied up along Canal Saint-Martin.

Stopping to catch his breath, Louis looked back and saw that his friend had jumped down to the ledge; he couldn't just stay there. After letting out an expletive reminiscent of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid when they jumped off the cliff into the rushing river, the young man jumped down to the grassy area. He hurt both of his legs on the landing, but he got up and started limping toward Louis. He wasn't even sure why he was following after Louis; they'd

done nothing wrong. The policeman was just returning his napkin; they weren't going to be cited for anything.

"Wait for me, Louis," the friend yelled out.

"Come on," Louis replied as he turned and kept going toward the Seine River.

Back up on Place de la Bastille, the policeman who still had the napkin in his hand, shook his head as he saw the two young men hobbling and limping along down a dead end area. "There are stairs they can use to come back up from where the boats are, but we can walk over there before they make it back up. I don't know why they're running, but they've got no place to go."

The other officers chuckled as the first one dropped the napkin in a trash bin and they continued on their patrol of the area. "Didn't one of those guys have on all black? Wasn't that what one of the suspects from the other night was wearing?"

"Look around here, man," said the first officer. "Notice how many are wearing all black; it's what they wear in this area of town."

The late afternoon sun created the perfect Saturday setting for a quiet tête-à-tête, enjoying a glass of wine, and talking about anything but the art thefts. Robert Gilot had called Claudette Bouchet on her mobile phone early last evening expecting to reach her at the gallery or on her way home. But when his call went to her voicemail, he left a message inviting her to his place for wine at sunset and quiet conversation. The two hadn't talked in over a year, and so Robert was pleasantly surprised when she called him in the morning and said she'd love to come over after work today.

The unspoken rule at Place du Tertre is that your space is your space provided you are there by ten or have left a note saying what time you will be there that day. Robert wanted to put on the best impression for Claudette so he didn't go paint today. He called up his normal housekeeper who said she couldn't come over today, but she gave him the name of someone who could be there right away.

Robert called the replacement housekeeper who, unfortunately, spoke only French. He was finally able to convey what he wanted, gave her his address, and the elderly lady was there within forty minutes. She went about fastidiously

cleaning the kitchen, the main room, and the bathroom while Robert swept the patio and placed the chairs into the “right positions” for tonight’s evening on the patio.

He set up his main painting area with a theme of brightly colored eveningscapes to reflect a serious artist. He was hoping to get Claudette interested enough in his work to promote a one-man show or even commission some works from him. He heard the sound of the other bedroom door being opened.

“Madame, non!” Robert shouted as he pivoted quickly to keep the housekeeper from entering his “work area.”

It was too late; the door was ajar and the housekeeper stood there motionless.

“Monsieur!” she exclaimed as she pulled her hand up to her mouth. She pulled the door closed and headed to the front door where she stood with the palm facing up from her outstretched right hand.

As Robert entered the front room, her eyes locked onto his. She didn’t say anything; he probably wouldn’t have understood it anyway. But he knew what the hand gesture meant. She’d been there about two hours; forty should be sufficient. He pulled out his wallet, and placed two Twenty Euro notes in her hand. She looked at the notes, then back to Robert, and she raised her eyebrows and tilted her head slightly to the left.

Robert placed one more twenty in her hand, which didn’t faze her at all. He looked into his wallet and pulled out the last two notes that he had, two Five Euro notes. He put those in her hand and then showed her the empty wallet.

“Okay,” she said as she stuffed the money into her purse, swiveled around, opened the door, and quickly walked away.

Two thoughts ran through Robert’s mind as he watched her round the corner and disappear from view. Would she say anything to his regular housekeeper, and how would he get some cash in case Claudette wanted to go out tonight? There was nothing he could do about the first thing; but he could do something about the second.

He went back to the forbidden room and dug through a desk drawer until he found a mobile phone. He used this phone only when he had to be sure his call couldn’t be traced back to him. He punched in some numbers, began talking in Italian, and then he listened as the other person spoke. “Grazie,” Robert said when the other person was done.

He put the phone back into the drawer and looked at his watch. He was told to make the delivery in thirty minutes and it would take him at least twenty minutes to get there. It was going to be tight, but he’d have to do it to get some quick cash. He opened the closet door and found what he needed on the third shelf. He grabbed it, closed the door and left the room. He locked the door, something he should have done before the new housekeeper came over. He pulled on a light jacket, put the item in the right pocket and headed out the front door. He left his regular mobile phone inside. Just in case.

The strikingly handsome man strode confidently through the front door at Galerie Pierre. The top two buttons of the soft-toned orange shirt were open and the cuffs were rolled up on his sporty jacket. His stride and demeanor

reflected a sense of security and power; he walked around the front room as if he owned the place.

Claudette had been in the back room and did not see him come in. As she returned to her desk, she certainly saw him. A man in his late fifties showing signs of success in all that he did. "*Bonjour, Pierre,*" she said to Monsieur LaCroix, the gallery's owner. "What are you doing her? I thought you were going to Brussels."

Pierre LaCroix just smiled. "You mean I need an appointment to come into my own gallery?" He paused slightly. "The art in Brussels can wait another week for me. I decided to stay in town, give you some breaks. You've been doing a lot of work and Thursday night had to have affected you. Why don't you head out early and I'll finish up here. It's been too long since I was here on a weekend afternoon. I'll open on Monday for you, so don't come in until noon."

"But, Pierre," she started to reply.

"No buts," came his retort. "You were on a burnout path, and I was the one causing it. I don't want you to quit or have a nervous breakdown, so I want to give you a little time away from here. I'm not looking to bring anyone else in because I don't think there is anyone else in Paris who can manage a gallery the way that you do. So it just means that I'll be spending a bit more time in here. After all, I certainly didn't start out as a gallery owner; I was working as a salesman and worked my way up to sales director and then gallery manager before I was finally able to open my own gallery. I think it will be fun to re-live some of those days."

"Why are you so kind to me, Pierre?"

“Claudette,” he began. “Life is a two-way street. Some people are going one way while others are going the other way. There needs to be a balance in everything we do. You have helped me very much and I know that I can entrust anything I have, everything I have, to you. You care more about this gallery than any of my own family members do. All they see are paintings that are worth money. Money; that’s all they see. You’re different. You see the passion that comes with collecting art, with looking at it and into it, and that’s how you and I connect. You’re not an employee to me; you’re that balance, the force that makes it all come together and make sense.” Pierre LaCroix stopped. He’d just poured out more true emotion to Claudette than he had ever displayed to any other person, not even to any of his family members.

Tears began to form in Claudette’s eyes. What she just heard surpassed anything else she’d ever heard. This man, Pierre, the gallery owner, cared more about her than any man she’d ever dated. She blinked her eyes, causing tears to begin streaming down her cheeks. She sniffled as she threw her arms around him.

“Go,” Pierre said as he pulled her arms from around his neck. “Go have a good Saturday evening in this beautiful city that we are so lucky to call ours. I’ll see you at noon on Monday; okay?”

“Merci, Pierre. Merci.” Claudette struggled to get those words out of her mouth without having more tears flow. She went into the toilet area, washed her face, and made sure she looked presentable. She went into the back room to get her purse and coat and came back out front to see Pierre engaged with a customer. She could tell that he liked being

back in the action, and not just as the gallery owner. She quietly walked past and then out the front door. The brilliant sun warmed her as she walked to the Metro station.



29



Robert was nearly out of breath as he returned home; the transaction went smoothly, and he now had some cash. He looked at the clock and saw that he had forty-five minutes until Claudette said she would arrive. He needed to relax, but he also knew he needed to take a shower, not just to clean up but to also help wipe away some of the memory of the housekeeper's discovery.

Meanwhile just a short distance away Claudette was lounging in her living room as she listened to some soft music. She had poured a small glass of White Bordeaux and was sipping it very slowly. She'd told Robert that she would be at his place at seven, but that was when she thought she'd be at the gallery until it closed at five. The temptation ran through her head to call him and say that she could arrive earlier, but she knew that wasn't a good idea. He could be busy with other activities and then she'd be interrupting them. Or perhaps he wouldn't have everything ready until a few minutes before she arrived. If she showed up early, that would throw off his schedule and it might also make her appear eager.

No, she'd just stay at home and then arrive fashionably late, maybe five or ten minutes past seven.

Claudette looked at the television and thought about turning it on, but she reasoned that most of the local news would be about the art thefts, and she didn't want to think about that. In fact she was already tired of the whole thing. She knew that she and Robert would talk about art, but it would be in a positive manner. All the talk on the art thefts was casting a negative light on the city and the museums and galleries that were hit. She took another sip of the wine and closed her eyes as she leaned back slightly to rest her head against the top of the sofa. It was when her eyes were closed that she realized that the music on the radio was romantic melodies. Was that an indication of how the evening might turn out? She immediately dismissed that silly thought. Romance was not what she had in mind when she accepted Robert's invitation.

"It's seven o'clock and here are the main news stories in Paris and around the world." The soft music was interrupted by the top-of-the-hour announcement. It broke the mood that Claudette was in, but it also served the purpose of prompting her that it was time to leave for Robert's. She picked up the remote control from the end table and pushed the OFF button. She was glad that she was able to silence the news before it started.

Claudette took the last sip of wine while heading to the kitchen. As she walked into the bedroom she looked in the full-length mirror, and she liked what she saw. The dress was chic enough but not too fancy or revealing. She wanted a demure appearance without looking too standoffish. The dress was perfect.

After brushing her teeth and checking her lipstick, she picked up her purse and a small cloth wine bottle sack. Even though Robert had invited her over for wine and a small dinner, she thought it would be a good idea to take a bottle of wine. She knew of a store that was right on the way to his place.

Ten minutes later she was standing at Robert's open front door. The beautiful evening weather made it desirable to have as many doors and windows opened as possible. It wasn't common for Parisians to leave the front door open, but Robert wasn't one hundred percent Parisian.

"*Bonsoir, Robert,*" Claudette called out. Even though the door was wide open, a clear indication that she could enter, she preferred to respect the boundary and wait outside until she was invited in. She heard some light jazz music coming from inside. *That sounds nice,* she thought.

She heard the movement of someone coming to the door before she saw him round the corner. "*Bonsoir, Claudette. Entrez, s'il vous plaît,*" Robert said with a broad smile on his face when he saw her. "Have you been standing there long? I was out on the patio and I didn't hear you walk up."

Even though she'd been invited inside, Claudette remained on the porch because Robert was right at the doorway. "I just got here; sorry I'm a few minutes late. I got caught up in watching the news and didn't realize what the time was." Claudette was holding the wine sack and her purse in her left hand, leaving the right hand free.

Rather than taking her right hand and kissing it, Robert stepped out on the porch, put his hands gently on her bare

shoulders and gave her a light kiss on the right cheek. It wasn't an aggressive move, just a friendly greeting.

As Robert stepped back, Claudette held out the wine sack. "I brought a chilled white wine."

Robert took the wine and stepped further back allowing space for her to enter. "Thank you; this should go quite well with the cheese plate. Come on in and I'll close the door."

Claudette stepped into the entry way and looked around at the intriguing art work on the walls. As he closed the door, Robert continued, "It's been a while since you've been here. I've changed up some of the art work on the walls. None of it's that interesting, though. Want to sit out on the patio? It's quite nice out there tonight?"

"That sounds good; is there anything I can do to help?"

"I think I've got it covered; thanks." Robert led the way to the patio and Claudette set her purse on a small table in the living room as she followed him. He was right; it was very pleasant on the patio. The slight breeze helped to offset the warmth of the early evening sun. She still heard the jazz music, but she didn't see a radio as she looked around.

"The music?" she asked.

Robert smiled. "The large flower pot on each end of the patio has a built-in wireless speaker. They use Bluetooth to connect with the audio system in the living room. Pretty neat, huh?"

"That's nice," Claudette replied as she moved to one of the chairs that had a small table between them. The wine glasses were already on the table indicating that was where they would be sitting.

"Have a seat while I open the wine and bring out a cheese plate. Would you prefer a baguette or some biscuits?"

Claudette thought for a moment as she turned her head slightly. "How about the biscuits; that sounds like a nice change." Robert turned to go back inside and Claudette sat down. She was feeling comfortable.

She wasn't really sure what to think when Robert had called her since they hadn't seen each other in over a year. She knew he did some painting at Place du Tertre, but she didn't think he was all that serious about it. Most of the painters there now did "tourist art," things that would appeal to the tourists who came to Montmartre area for one day, or maybe even just a couple hours, during their stay in Paris. But on his call, Robert said that he had some ideas in mind for both commission works for Galerie Pierre and also for putting on a one-man show at the gallery.

"Enjoying the view?" Robert asked as he came back out carrying a tray with a couple of cheese plates, a bowl of biscuits, and the opened bottle of White Bordeaux.

"Most definitely," Claudette replied. "I can't wait to see what it looks like at sunset."

"You're right. The sunsets are spectacular. I could put together an entire display of sunset photos and paintings just from what I've done standing right here." He set the tray down on the empty chair and moved the cheese plates and biscuit bowl to the table. "How about if I pour some wine and then take it back inside to stay chilled in the fridge?"

"Good idea."

He poured the wine and took it and the tray back to the kitchen as Claudette waited for him to return before tasting

the wine. It was the same one she'd had at home just before coming over so she knew she'd like it.

Robert returned to the patio, picked up his glass and held it to her. "*Santé*," he said as they clinked their glasses together in a customary toast. He took a sip, smiled, and sat down.

The sun continued its gradual descent toward to the horizon as the two drank wine, ate cheese and biscuits, and talked art. In typical fashion, Robert dodged all of the questions about his activities by diverting the answer into a different direction.

With the wine freeing up her spirit and willingness to talk, Claudette talked about being born in Paris, but moving to New York City to study art. After graduation she relocated to Florence, Italy, hoping to absorb some of the mastery of the great artists such as Botticelli, Michelangelo, da Vinci, and Caravaggio. Her roots summoned her back to Paris where she studied some more and happened to walk into Galerie Pierre one day just as the Art Director and the owner were having a shouting match. The Art Director stormed out, and Pierre, the owner, asked her if she was looking for a job.

"I was stunned," Claudette continued with the story. "I wasn't really looking for a job even though I needed one to support myself. And that's how I ended up working for Monsieur LaCroix."

"So do you still do any painting or is working at the gallery enough art for you?" Robert waited briefly for an answer, but saw that none was coming immediately. He picked up the empty plates and bowl along with the two wine glass-

es and took them into the kitchen. Knowing that he needed to use the toilet, he thought she might also, so he went back to the patio. "The toilet is back through the living room and to the right. It's the one with the opened door. You can't miss it."

"*Merci*," Claudette acknowledged as her bladder was telling her that it was ready to be emptied. As she stood up she realized that she was feeling a bit tipsy from the half-bottle of wine without much to eat. Fortunately Robert hadn't noticed her walking as he'd already gone back into the kitchen. She made her way to the door, held the frame to steady herself, and then carefully stepped over the threshold and managed to walk to the designated room.

Once inside, she closed the door, locked it, and went to the sink. She looked in the mirror and saw bloodshot eyes. One of her many traits was her smooth skin. She didn't wear makeup, maybe some occasional eyeliner plus lipstick, of course. But going au naturel allowed her to splash water on her face without worrying about ruining any makeup. She turned on the cold water tap, the one marked F for *froid*, leaned over the sink and cupped her hands under the faucet. The cold water felt good. She splashed some on her face, and then did it again. After gently wiping the water from her face, she continued with the main reason why she was in there.

The cold water on her face helped, and Claudette was able to walk back to the patio without feeling as if she might stumble. She smelled the delightful pasta as she got to her chair, and she noticed that the white wine glasses had been replaced with red wine glasses that were filled halfway.

"Pinot Noir," Robert said as he saw her looking at the wine.

"A great choice with pasta," she replied.

"*Grazie*," he replied, suddenly realizing he responded in Italian rather than in French.

"I didn't know you spoke Italian," Claudette said.

"I don't," Robert fumbled for a reply. "Pasta, Italiano, vino; you know, all those Italian things." He paused. "Enjoy the pasta and the wine."

"*Grazie*," Claudette said with a wry smile on her face.

The delightful evening continued as they ate, drank more wine, and talked about art. Claudette said that she'd talk with Pierre about Robert's ideas but that she wasn't sure if he'd approve of them. "I understand," Robert said.

As if they hadn't had enough to eat or drink, Robert topped the evening with a fresh fruit Zabaglione and a bottle of champagne. The sun had set quite a while ago, but the outside weather was still pleasant. The temperature had dropped, but the alcohol they'd consumed helped to keep them warm.

"I really should be going," Claudette managed to say after practicing it in her head several times so she could say it without stumbling over the words.

"I'll walk with you," Robert offered.

Claudette thought about that for a moment and realized that it was a good idea given the time in the evening and how much she'd had to drink. "Walking me home, but that's all; okay?"

"Of course," Robert replied. "If I'd thought of anything else I would have offered you my second bedroom to stay in."

Claudette looked at him and smiled.
It had been a good evening.
Now she just needed to get home.



30



“*M**on Dieu*,” Claudette mumbled as the morning’s sun sneaked its way through the narrow slit in her bedroom blinds and hit her squarely in the face. She had no idea what time it was; she wasn’t even sure that she knew where she was. She tried to lift her throbbing head to check the surroundings, but that was too painful. She groaned again as she turned over to hopefully see that the other side of the bed was still neatly made. Claudette breathed a pleasant sigh when she saw the pillow still plumped and the sheet and blanket just as it had been last night.

She gently turned her head back to the left and used an arm to push her slumping body into a somewhat upright position. Even that slight movement made the blood rush from her head and she put both hands down to stabilize herself. Once she felt that she could stand without needing help, she stood up and went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror.

“You look so charming, my dear,” she said mockingly. It wasn’t a good look. “What did I have to drink last night?” She turned on the cold water, leaned her head over the sink and began to catch the water in her cupped hands and splash

it on her face. She repeated this several times. The cold water wasn't relieving the headache, but it was helping her to awaken. Strong coffee and a couple tablets would slowly wipe away the pounding in her head.

She patted her face dry and went to the kitchen to brew a cup of coffee. Returning to the bedroom to get dressed, she began to recount what she'd had to drink last night. One glass and half bottle of White Bordeaux plus a half bottle of Pinot Noir; that was certainly more than she normally drank, but that shouldn't have caused the headache she was feeling. She saw the dress that she'd worn last night and saw a small bulge in the pocket. As she pulled the champagne cork out she knew why she felt that way. She loved the taste of champagne but the bubbles always gave her a headache. "I need to learn how to say *'Non,'*" she thought.

A pair of comfortable pants, a loose sweater, and a pair of slip-on flats made up her outfit. She could almost taste the delightful smell of the cup of coffee that was waiting for her as she returned to the kitchen. Her normal Sunday morning routine was to go downstairs to the neighborhood grocery store and buy a newspaper and then have coffee. Some days she would go to a nearby café, but not today.

In fact, her entire routine was different today. She had to have that first cup of coffee before she felt that she could face anyone or anything else. She carried the cup carefully into the living room and set the cup on the end table. Plopping down onto the soft sofa, Claudette picked up the coffee and began to savor the taste and the caffeinated effect it had on soothing her head.

She remembered that Robert had offered to walk her home; how did she manage to make it home? She'd have to call him later today and apologize because she just knew she had to have been stumbling all the way home. Not a good impression.

Once she was feeling better, Claudette went down to the local store and bought a newspaper and some pastries. The headline on *Le Monde* was just about what she'd expected: "Thefts Paralyze Museums & Galleries." That was probably stretching the truth a little, but headlines are meant to sell papers, and that exaggeration certainly would help to empty the racks faster than on most Sundays.

Claudette was not paying much attention as she left the store and headed back to her apartment. Even though her head was feeling better, her eyes were still a little blurry, but she could clearly tell that a man was standing outside the main entrance to her apartment. She stopped where she was; rearranged the items so her purse was between the grocery bag and her body, and then slowly walked as she maintained her focus on the man.

The man suddenly turned and started toward her. Claudette froze in her tracks.

"*Bonjour, Claudette,*" the familiar voice called out. I tried to phone you this morning to see how you were feeling, but all I got was your voicemail.

"*Bonjour, Robert,*" she answered as she continued toward him. "My head is not functioning all that well this morning. I guess I haven't turned my phone on yet. Sorry about last night. Would you like to come up for coffee and a pastry?"

"That sounds swell; want me to carry that for you?"

"Thanks" she said as she handed him the pastries and newspaper. She entered the code for the main door, and pushed on it when it clicked. The two didn't talk as they made their way up to her apartment.

Upon entering she went to make another pot of coffee as Robert sat down on the sofa. "Robert," she began. "Last night wasn't a true indication of how I behave. Everything was beautiful; it's just that my body loves the taste champagne, but it doesn't handle it very well. I don't even want to know, well I do but not really, what I was like as we walked back here."

"Don't worry about a thing. We actually took a taxi; you weren't in much of a condition to walk, so a quick ride over was much better. And it was my fault for continuing to pour the wine and then having champagne with the dessert. Also, nothing happened when we got back here. I asked you if you were okay, and you said you might take a bath. I suggested that you not take a bath as it could be dangerous, but instead maybe get into a night gown or even just crawl in bed as you were. You said you were fine and so I left and walked home."

A look of relief came over Claudette's face, not that she thought anything had happened or that Robert would take advantage of her. "Did I give you a goodnight kiss?"

"No, but that's okay," he replied with a slight smile on his face. "You told me many times what a good time you were having, so that was enough for me."

Claudette walked over to Robert, leaned down and gave him a warm kiss on the lips. "Thank you. Not just for dinner and a good evening, but for taking care of me."

“Thank you for listening to my rambling about all the art projects and other things I’m doing.” He paused, took in a big breath through his nose, and raised his eyebrows. “May I help you with the coffee and pastries?”

“Sure” she replied.

Later as they sipped their second cup of coffee, Robert read from the headlined article, listing the items stolen and their values. “How can they place values on the one-of-a-kind paintings by van Gogh? I can see the Degas bronzes as they’re a little bit alike, but the van Gogh’s aren’t for sale.”

“It’s a bit like the real estate market. They develop comparable values for pieces that would be considered similar in the art world, although it’s clearly not a very exact science.”

“Over three hundred million Euros they’re saying. What do you think they’d fetch on the black market? Maybe fifty million if they could even be sold. I mean, who would buy one of these famous paintings knowing that you couldn’t ever put it on display?”

Claudette leaned back into the sofa and let out a big breath. “The people who’d buy these have such a huge ego that they’d pay much more than fifty million for all of them. Not that one person would probably buy all of them, although there are certainly plenty of people who could. But if one of the paintings was valued at twenty-five million, some egomaniac would pay thirty just to be able to say he paid more than it was worth.”

“It’s a crazy world out there.”

Claudette shook her head in agreement with Robert. She cringed slightly as her head was still a little tender from last night. But she was definitely feeling better.



31



Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc looked around the room. It was Sunday afternoon and he had a full staff working diligently when they'd normally be enjoying the weekend at home or in the country with family and friends. He had a dedicated team and that was one of the reasons that he attributed to his success.

"It's made by Bausch and Lomb, Chief," one detective said as LeBlanc approached. The detective was wearing gloves as he held up the high-tech glass cutter that had been left behind in the Orsay.

"I thought they made contact lens solutions and eye drops," LeBlanc replied somewhat facetiously.

The detective ignored the tone and continued. "They've been designing small-volume high-technology items ever since President Kennedy challenged the Americans to land a man on the moon before the end of the 1960s. While NASA was developing new technology that didn't have any back-up or fail-safe plans, a small skunk-works team within NASA started reaching out to companies they knew could keep quiet about these supporting products that they hoped they'd never have to use. The official product that Bausch

and Lomb was working on was an eye drop solution and applicator that could be used in zero-gravity or weightless situations. They actually did develop that, but it was mostly a cover for the real reason why they were working with NASA.”

“Why did NASA need specialized glass cutters?” Le Blanc asked, still not sure how this was all going to tie together.

“The best that I can tell is that there were specialized formulizations of glass being made by a different company that could withstand the heat and pressure, and in case of an emergency, they needed to be able to escape through the windows if there was no other way to get out.” The detective paused, but he started right back up when he noticed that the Chief Inspector was ready with another question. “And the reason that NASA didn’t have the glass company make the glass cutter was because that would have shown the possibility of failure.” The detective continued to explain the details of the glass cutter, noting how simple it was to use.

“Good job, Detective. Just one more question. How would the thieves know what to get and which settings to use?”

“I have several theories about that, but I think we’ll have to pursue that a little deeper and quieter within the National Museums system. Right now I’m trying to figure out where they bought them. I tried calling Bausch and Lomb in the U.S., but they’re closed for the weekend. It’s not listed in their online catalog, so either they still don’t acknowledge that they made it, or perhaps they don’t manufacture it any longer.”

“Are there any other online sites that might carry it?” LeBlanc still had more questions even though he’d said he had only one more.

“It’s one of those items that aren’t very visible because of what they can do, as we just saw on Thursday. I’ve reached out to one of my underground contacts to see what he can find in the spy rings or the mob worlds. But as sophisticated as these guys were, except for actually leaving the cutter, I doubt that we’re going to get a name or a photo of someone buying it. It probably went through several channels and across country lines before it ended up here in Paris. I’ll pursue, but a more likely path is to find out the name of every person who knows the specifications of each piece of glass that was cut.”

“And what about the paintings? Do you think that a special knife was needed to cut the paintings out of their frames?” LeBlanc didn’t sound hopeful.

“No, Chief; any canvas knife would do it.”

“That’s what I thought,” LeBlanc moaned as he turned and walked away.



32



Three weeks passed without any significant new leads or information. The media, of course, stated what progress was being made, although the “anonymous sources couldn’t provide any specific details on the grounds that they weren’t authorized to release that information.” Most people took that to mean that there wasn’t any real progress, but the media had to report something and they wrote up anything that the National Police told them.

Six thousand miles away, the 272-foot mega-yacht *Lucky Twos* was anchored off the mile and a half jetty outside of Port Klang, Malaysia. The private party on Saturday night was in full swing as the yacht’s flamboyant owner Ahmad Sayid was making the rounds with a voluptuous woman on each arm. As the developer and owner of the Kuala Lumpur Tri-Sphere Towers, rivals to the famous Petronas Twin Towers, Sayid’s wealth was beyond question. How he got his original wealth wasn’t beyond question, however, as it was well known that he controlled the gambling in all of Malaysia even though it was technically managed and overseen by the Malay government. One of the popular rumors was that he used solid gold bars as ballast in *Lucky Twos*. No one who

tried to prove the existence of the gold bars was ever seen again.

Sayid liked to be called “The Student” even though his university career consisted of two years’ of living off his parent’s wealth as a party-going playboy at the University of Malaysia, while not attending any classes as a student. His parents eventually got tired of all the media reports on Ahmad and they officially withdrew him from the university, gave him a large lump-sum life endowment, and cut him out of their lives forever. The Student leveraged his parents’ gift into bribes and racketeering, eventually gaining operational control of two small casinos. It was while running these two casinos that he learned how to skim profits and how to bully his rivals into paying him for protection.

It was only a matter of time, albeit almost eleven years, before he was collecting “protection payments” from every casino in the country. He tried to expand his operations into other countries, but a small-caliber bullet that clipped his left ear was enough to convince him to be satisfied with his wealth that was growing by millions each month. He liked to point out his left ear to everyone he met as he explained that he was protecting a member of the royal family from abduction when he was shot. Most people knew that was a lie, but they went along with it.

In keeping with his need for security and privacy, The Student required all guests on his yacht to surrender their cameras and mobile phones when they came aboard. The devices were kept in a secure area; he just didn’t want any photos shot or videos recorded. Most people obliged, but a few would object saying they needed to be reached in an emer-

gency. The Student always had a ready answer; "My staff will take the call and relay the message to you."

Each guest had been personally introduced to Sayid since some of them weren't known by him but had been referred by personal friends. Proud to show his memory, as well as his taste in beautiful women, Sayid would be sure to seek out those new guests later in the evening and call them by name. Most of the guests were impressed; that's how he liked it. Playing up to his ego was usually repaid with special "favors."

"Good evening, Mr. Wan," Sayid said as he approached the Roulette table. "Are the numbers treating you fairly tonight?"

Musa Wan stood up from the table as his host greeted him. "The numbers have been good, Mr. Sayid. It's a pleasure to be on your yacht, and I must say that you have some very interesting pieces of art." Wan smiled as he nodded to acknowledge the two women with Sayid.

"Oh, are you an art collector?" Sayid asked.

Wan had been introduced to Sayid only as a high roller who favored an empty Roulette table. "No, I don't collect art, Mr. Sayid. The type of art I like is too expensive for me. So I just enjoy looking at it." What Ahmad Sayid didn't know, nor did anyone else that night know, was that Musa Wan was an art dealer for high-wealth clients. He knew his art, but he also knew to keep that information to himself.

The Student smiled. "Excuse us," he said to the two women who promptly left the area. "Come with me," he then said to Wan. "Don't worry your money is safe; there are so many cameras around this ship that even I couldn't steal

from myself if I wanted to." He laughed at his self-effacing joke.

Musa Wan politely laughed as he followed Sayid away from the Roulette table and into a closed-door salon that was apparently open to guests by invitation only. The polished teak walls were barely visible because of all the art hanging on them. There didn't seem to be any particular organization or systematic way in which they were hung or grouped.

"These are some of my favorites. What do you think?"

Musa Wan nodded his head as he gazed at some of the most expensive art that he'd ever seen. "What about humidity?" Wan asked without realizing he might be giving away his true identity.

Ahmad Sayid's ego was too large for him to recognize the question as being from someone who truly knew art. The high humidity on most sailing vessels would completely ruin the precious paintings, etchings, and aquatints. "Those heavy doors enable a closed system that precisely controls both the temperature and the humidity in this room as well as monitors the adjacent rooms. It's amazing what you can do with enough money; right?" Sayid laughed again at his own joke.

"I wouldn't personally know about that, Mr. Sayid, but from the little I know about fine art, they all look in very good condition. I'm sorry; I mean they're all in excellent condition. Do you mind if I?"

The Roulette player was interrupted by an eager and ego-driven host. "Go ahead and take a closer look at them. May I offer you a drink while you're looking?"

The art dealer now saw his opportunity to be in this private room all by himself. Of course there would be cameras watching him all the time, but at least he wouldn't have his host hovering over him. "Gin and Tonic would be excellent, and I'll keep it away from the art."

"I'll have one brought right into you, Mr. Wan. Please excuse me as I greet more of my guests." Ahmad Sayid was amazingly polite as he walked out of his floating private gallery that held tens of millions, if not a hundred million, dollars of art.

"Thank you, sir," Wan said as his host left the room. As soon as he was alone he started to walk over to the one piece that particularly grabbed his attention when he scanned the room earlier. He resisted the temptation go over to it as he knew that he was being watched on camera and his sudden movement to that piece would draw suspicion. So he had to slowly work his way around the room, looking at each piece.

He didn't hear the butler enter the room and so he was slightly startled when he heard him. "Your Gin and Tonic, Mr. Wan. It's made with Nolet's Reserve; I hope that's acceptable to you, sir. I can bring you a slice of imported lime if you'd like, or if you'd like more ice or Tonic."

"This is more than acceptable; thank you" Wan replied. He couldn't tell if the golden color of the drink was from the lavish gold-trimmed glasses or from the natural hue of the gin that's distilled with saffron. He'd never had any of the Nolet's Reserve, reportedly the most expensive bottle of gin in the world.

The butler discreetly left, and Wan, the art dealer, continued his journey around the room. He knew he had to

move fast as he didn't think he'd be allowed to stay in the room by himself for much longer. He took a sip of his drink. "Wow; excellent," he said as he enjoyed both the flavor and the finesse in which it had been prepared. He set the drink down on a small table and then purposely turned toward one particular painting.

He walked slowly toward it as he deftly put his right hand inside his coat pocket. He wasn't allowed to have his mobile phone, but no one suspected that a button on his coat would be a camera. He slowly pushed the small button in his pocket as he took one slow step after another toward the target. He recognized the painting. He recognized most of the paintings in the room, but this one stood out from the others because of its notoriety. Most paintings have a substantial amount of blank canvas between the paint and the matting. This one had no more than a half inch of blank canvas. He pushed the button several more times and then continued on to other paintings, keeping his hand in his pocket until he returned to the table to retrieve his drink.

Musa Wan stood in the middle of the room, took a sip of his drink, and then turned around to take one last look at all of the paintings. He knew he'd never be in here again; he wanted to capture the memory for one last time. He left the room and returned to the Roulette table only to find someone else playing at what was supposed to be his private table. "Oh well," he thought. "I'm still a winner tonight."

He looked at the croupier who responded with a professional look that indicated, "I know it's supposed to be your table, but you weren't here and he came up." He handed Wan

his chips and raked in the chips from the table as the ball landed in green zero.

Musa Wan took his chips to the cashier who counted them and paid out a very large sum to this man who had the looks of a shrewd accountant. Accountant, no; shrewd, yes. Wan's contact had told him that he might find a surprise on the yacht tonight. He certainly had, and now he wondered when he might be able to leave without attracting too much attention.



33



Ahmad Sayid wanted his guests to stay on the yacht for hours past midnight; this meant that Musa Wan didn't get back to his hotel until four-thirty on Sunday morning. He slept well knowing that he'd won money at Roulette and that he taken pictures of one of the Vincent van Gogh paintings that had been stolen from Musée d'Orsay several weeks earlier.

Even though Wan was a reputable art dealer, he knew that it was important to have contacts who weren't as reputable as he was. He had those contacts, but he wasn't in his home territory and knew that it would appear quite suspicious if he went out asking questions that would vet out the right people. After breakfast he used his disposable mobile phone, not the one he took on the yacht last evening, to place a call to one of his trusted contacts at home. If anyone would be able to put him in touch was someone locally who could help him, he knew Jimmy could.

Jimmy wasn't his real name, of course, but that's what everyone called him. Jimmy came through with the name and address of someone who could send an email using a masked IP address. Musa Wan knew that he was treading on

dangerous ground, and if Ahmad Sayid ever found out he would not hesitate to kill him.

Wan left his hotel and turned right along Jalan Perak. The sidewalk was rather busy for a Sunday and he found that he was having to weave in and out as most of the pedestrians were focused on their mobile phones rather than where they were walking. His instructions were to walk three blocks and then make a sharp left turn on Jalan Kia. The man's shop was on the right just past the BBC Restaurant.

Walking as briskly as possible but not wanting to draw attention, Wan pretended to be window shopping as he walked along. He had downloaded the image files from his clandestine camera to his laptop computer and then copied them to a brand new memory stick; that memory stick was now in his inside jacket pocket. He stopped in front of the BBC Restaurant and took a look at the menu that was out front. He wasn't planning to eat; he just wanted some time to make sure that he wasn't being followed.

Paranoia almost got the best of Musa Wan; he thought about turning around and heading back to his hotel and tossing the memory stick into a garbage container along the way. He had a good life; if anyone, especially the ruthless Ahmad Sayid, found out that Wan was the man responsible for alerting the authorities about the stolen van Gogh, that would be the end of it all.

A flash of light caught his attention; he looked up from the menu and saw the reflection of a gold Mercedes Benz pulling up to a stop right behind him. Had he been followed from his hotel? Were his actions caught on video last night on the yacht and Sayid knew that Wan had photographed

the stolen painting? He was about to turn and run when he saw an elderly lady step out of the car and flip the loose end of a fur back around her neck. He looked back at the menu, took a deep breath, and then he knew what he had to do. He turned to his left and went to the small shop next door to the restaurant.

The seven-hour time difference between Malaysia and France meant that the emailed photographic images arrived at Interpol headquarters in Lyon early on Sunday morning. The man that Jimmy told Wan about was happy to help. Some of Wan's Roulette winnings helped to pave the way to make sure that the man "never saw Wan" and wouldn't be able to recognize who brought in those images to send in an email. "He looked Malaysian, but that's all I can recall," the man would later say when he was being questioned.

The masked IP address wasn't as masked as Wan, Jimmy, or the local helper thought it would be. While the man at the internet café had masked it to appear to come from Bangalore, India, the IT staff at Interpol routinely ran background checks on all incoming emails to determine exactly where they originated. Two calls to their Interpol contacts in Kuala Lumpur were all it took to pinpoint the location of the originating email.

A black car pulled up in front of the internet café later that afternoon and two men in dark suits got out of the car. They could have been hit men for the mob based on the way they looked. They did a quick scan of the area, and then walked into the shop. To call it a café was an over statement. There were computer parts scattered all over with one old VT-100 terminal sitting on a makeshift table in the corner.

“Are you the owner?” one of the Interpol agents asked as the man came through the curtain that separated the front from the back.

“Yes,” the man said somewhat nervously. He saw a bulge at the right waist of each man’s suit coat. They couldn’t be here to rob him; there was nothing of value in the store.

“Did you send an email this morning with image files attached?” the first man asked.

“I send emails every day,” the owner replied, evading the actual question.

The two men reached inside their coats, causing the shop owner to throw hands up in the air. “Don’t shoot. I’ll give you anything you want. All I have here are old computer parts.” The frightened man’s voice had just gone up an octave.

The two men pulled their hands out of their coats and revealed their Interpol badges. “Relax; put your hands down,” the second agent said. “We’re not going to shoot you. We’re from Interpol, and we’re here to ask you some questions about an email that was sent from here earlier today.”

The shop owner was relieved, although he was concerned that Interpol had figured out where the email actually came from. He would have to find some other IP masking programs; obviously the one he was using wasn’t all that good.

The first agent pulled some papers out his pocket and approached the man. He showed him the email first. “Do you have a record of people sending emails from here?”

“No records; people pay in cash to send them,” the man replied.

"From that old terminal in the corner?" the agent asked.

"Yes," the man said excitedly, hoping that would sidetrack the questioning.

"That's just a terminal," the agent said. "There's no place for them to attach any files. I'm guessing you have a much better system in the back, one that's more sophisticated. Right?"

The man hesitated, his excitement dropping as quickly as it had built up. "Yes," he said slowly.

"Then let's go see it."

The man turned around and led the agents through the curtain to an area that looked just as disorganized and cluttered as the front. The one difference was the computer tower, keyboard, and monitor sitting on the old desk.

"Do you send emails from here?"

"Sometimes I do."

"Such as when someone needs to attach files like these images?" the agent continued as he showed him the copies of the photographs of the stolen van Gogh painting. The printouts of the files were unmistakably those that Musa Wan had taken last night on the *Lucky Twos* yacht.

"Yes; but I didn't do anything wrong. A man came in and asked me to send an email with some files attached. There's nothing wrong with that." The shop owner was feeling confident now, bordering on being a bit cocky.

The first agent looked at the second agent who nodded slightly. "We're not saying you did anything wrong, but if we don't get the answers we need we just might have to take you in for further questioning. And the problem is that we're a

little backlogged and so you might be downtown for a week or so before we're able to get back to you."

The second agent, playing the good guy in the bad guy — good guy routine, then spoke. "But we see that you're wanting to cooperate and help us, so let's see if we can get the answers to a few of our questions and then we can leave. Okay?"

"Okay," the owner replied hurriedly, his bravado suddenly on the decline.

The questions continued and so did the answers.

He'd never seen the man before.

No; the store is not equipped with security video.

He paid with cash, small bills that have already been given out in change to other customers.

He took the memory stick with him.

The email and images have already been erased from the computer; that's standard for all customer emails.

He looked Malaysian, but that's all I can recall.

No; he didn't say where or when he took them or got them from someone else.

The Interpol agents realized that this man was either very clever or he didn't have any other information that would be useful to them. The second agent, the good guy, scanned through several folders on the computer, ran a resident hidden program; all to no avail. He shook his head. "Let's go," he said.

The first agent took a card out of his pocket and handed it to the shop owner. "If for some reason you suddenly remember anything else, call me."

"I will," the man said. The two agents walked back through the curtain as the man watched them get back into the black car and drive away. He breathed a huge sigh of relief as he stepped back, lifted an old box, removed the Styrofoam and cardboard inserts and quickly started to erase files from the shiny new laptop computer.

Musa Wan's files were now gone for good, except for those that Wan still had on his memory stick. *Bedroom in Arles* was still onboard *Lucky Twos* and it might never be seen in public again.



The line outside The Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia, was longer than normal for a Monday morning. The nice weather was certainly a contributing factor as the wind chill along the Neva River can be downright nasty when it's cold and windy. Several dozen school children were standing as patiently as possible along with cruise ship tour groups, other tourists, and a few art students as they all awaited the ten o'clock opening at what was once part of Katherine the Great's Winter Palace complex.

The doors were opened promptly at ten, and the throngs began to make their way inside. The ship tours had pre-paid tickets and were allowed to enter first on the left side, while those without tickets had to wait on the right side. It didn't take long before everyone was inside. The tour guides began their way toward the main staircase, some going up to the left and others to the right so they weren't talking over one another. Two of the graduate art students, a twenty-five year old male, Mikhail, and a twenty-four year old female, Katarina, walked past the tour groups as they were headed to a specific gallery. They wanted to be able to do some sketch-

es while it was still quiet and relatively empty inside their gallery of interest.

Mikhail and Katarina had been inside The Hermitage many times. Their university ID cards granted them free admission, something they utilized quite often. Their plan for today was to work on detailed perspective sketches, and they headed directly to the third floor where the largest collection of vases and statuettes was displayed. "Oh, no," Mikhail said as he saw the rope blocking their entrance. Even though the gallery was temporarily closed, the two students observed a lot of activity.

"What's going on?" Mikhail asked one of the workers.

"We're moving the vases to a new room where they can be displayed with others that are currently scattered around." The worker was more helpful than Mikhail expected.

Mikhail grimaced as he looked at Katarina. They could go to a different area and work on other sketches, but their mental preparation had been for the vases and statuettes. "Want to go for a coffee?"

"Sure," Katarina replied. "But why don't we head out through the Small Hermitage and then see if we can just walk out through the New Hermitage without getting caught. It's worked before."

"Okay," Mikhail said and they headed through the Raphael Hall toward the Small Hermitage. Holding their sketch books as if they were taking notes, they continued to walk on toward the New Hermitage just like they belonged there.

"Stop!" one of the guards said as he saw them walk into an off-limits area.

"It's okay," Mikhail said as he quickly showed his university ID card as if it granted him unlimited access. "We're checking for walls where the paper has come loose. We're planning to test a new adhesive, and we need to find some areas that aren't in the main tourist galleries."

"No one told me about that," the baffled guard replied.

"I understand," Katarina chimed in. "You would think the ones who need to know would be among the first ones they tell. What happened to the old days when things worked like clockwork?"

"*Da*," the guard replied as he sat back down and went back to reading his newspaper.

The adventurous pair continued on through the restricted area. "The old days?" Mikhail asked as he looked at Katarina.

"Sure; you remember them, don't you?" Katarina responded with a laugh. The two had only a short way to go until they would exit into the square with the tall Alexander the First Column in the middle.

"Careful," came the voice down a narrow passageway. The two students stopped and listened to see if they could tell which way the source of the voice was going.

"Where are we going with these?" another voice asked.

"They're to go into the vault for his private collection," the first voice responded.

Mikhail and Katarina looked at each other. Mikhail held a finger up this mouth as he peeked around the corner. His mouth opened wide when he saw what the two men were carrying. He turned back toward Katarina and motioned for her to take a look as he stepped back.

"What?" Katarina mouthed in silence as she saw each man with a small glass case, about one foot cubed, maybe a little taller than the width. She stepped back and asked quietly, "Are those what I think they are?"

"Degas?" Mikhail responded in a soft whisper.

"Let's get out of here," Katarina said as she slowly leaned back to look around the corner one more time. "All clear," she said to Mikhail as she hurried past the opening and headed straight for the door.

"Wait," Mikhail said as she was about to push the door bar. "It's probably armed, but I read about a small button on top of the mechanism that will disable the alarm. I'll press the button and you push the bar when I nod my head."

"Okay."

Mikhail, not a tall person, stretched up on his tiptoes and felt around along the top of the door mechanism. He found the red button, pressed it, and nodded for Katrina. "Okay," he said.

She pushed the bar and the door opened without an alarm going off. She quickly stepped outside and Mikhail followed. He gently closed the door and grabbed her arm. "Let's go mix in with that group over there, and then we'll figure out our plan. But we don't want to be out here in the open by ourselves."

The two quickly walked over to a large group where the leader was explaining the various uses of Palace Square and the government buildings that form a broken semi-circle on the far side of the square away from The Hermitage. Mikhail's German wasn't that good, but he understood enough of what the tour guide was saying. The group headed

toward the Alexander Column, and Mikhail and Katarina kept with them. The tour guide explained how the column was quarried from a single piece of red granite weighing over six hundred tons from Finland. She continued on as Mikhail glanced back to see if anyone was coming out of the door they just exited. No one. They'd made it back outside without being noticed.

The guide stopped at the column to tell the group about Alexander and why he was so popular. Mikhail touched Katarina's arm and the two slowly walked away from the group toward the opening between the government buildings that led to some restaurants and cafés.

Mikhail chose an outdoor table and sat so he could look through the openway toward The Hermitage. "Two coffees, please," he said as the waiter approached. They sat in silence until the waiter returned with their drinks.

Mikhail paid the waiter, took a sip of the hot drink and looked at Katarina. "Are we sure those statues were ones that were stolen in Paris?"

"They looked like it to me," she responded. "Plus the workers said they would be going into the vault for the private collection. I know that's just circumstantial, but why else would you need to put two statues into the vault unless they were stolen?"

"But who do we tell?" Mikhail responded.

Katarina responded with a wry smile on her face. "Let's see, we could tell that police that we were in a restricted area without permission; we lied to the guard who stopped us, and then we overheard two workers say they were taking two

items into the vault for the private collection. They should believe us, right?"

I'm pretty sure that would get us a one-way ticket to Siberia. No thanks." Mikhail picked up his cup and slowly drank the rest of his coffee.

"What ideas do you have?"

"Interpol. We can send a letter to them in Moscow and tell them what we saw. We don't have to sign our names, but we can describe the two bronzes that we saw and what we heard. If they don't want to do anything about it, then there's nothing else we can do."

A skeptical look came across Katarina's face. "You don't think that the Interpol office in Moscow isn't already bought and owned by the Secretariat?"

"The main office in Lyon? We can't send an email; those can be traced. Outgoing letters are being censored once again, so we can't do that. I don't know, but we have to do something."

"I've got an idea," Katarina said with a smile. "Are you done with your coffee?"

"Yes," Mikhail said as Katarina was getting out of her chair and heading back out to the street. "Where are we going?"

She kept walking as Mikhail picked up the pace to catch up with her. "Souvenir shopping; let's go find some postcards."

"Postcards?" Mikhail asked as he lifted his eyebrows in disbelief.

"Follow me," she said as she continued her hurried pace. "Here's a good place right here."

Postcards are in abundance in that area as many tourists and tour groups don't stop in the shops in The Hermitage before they leave. And once they're out, they're not allowed back inside. Many of the shops take advantage of that act and charge a premium for the cards, but they also sell stamps, something The Hermitage gift shops don't do.

Katarina turned the revolving rack until she found a card with an aerial view of the entire Hermitage complex. "This is the perfect card," she told Mikhail as he still didn't have any idea what she was thinking. She bought the card and one international stamp and headed back outside. "Let's sit over here," she said.

Mikhail followed her and they sat at another outdoor café.

"I'll take a wine this time," she said as the waiter was coming to their table.

"Two white wines," Mikhail said to the waiter, hoping to get some explanation from Katarina.

Mikhail had the money in his hand as the waiter brought two glasses and a small carafe of white wine to the table. Mikhail poured the wine as he saw Katarina writing something on the card. He squinted his eyes, but couldn't make out what she was writing.

Once she was done she handed the card to him. It read, "The schoolgirl and the small dancer are having a good time as they are settling in to their **new** private vault home," and it was addressed simply to "Orsay Museum, Paris, FRANCE."

"How is this going to help?" Mikhail asked as he took a sip of the wine.

Katarina smiled at her ingenuity. "The two Degas pieces we saw were his *Schoolgirl* and *Small Dancer Aged 14*. We saw them in the New Hermitage and they were being taken to the vault for the private collection. I think they'll be able to figure it out with the photo on the front of the card. I don't think we can write much more or the card will never leave the country." Katarina was satisfied with her plan. She licked the stamp and put it on the card. She'd mail it at the first post box she saw.

"I'm glad that gallery was closed today or we wouldn't have seen those bronzes. It's amazing how one disappointment can lead to something good." Katarina smiled again; she was happy with the way the day turned out.

"Very true," Mikhail added. "Want to go for a walk along the river?"

"Of course," she replied as she stood up and held out her hand for him. Mikhail clutched her hand and the two skipped along, like school kids themselves, through the square toward the Neva River.



35



Robert was at his normal spot at Place du Tertre on Monday. He was inspired by both his talk with Claudette about some commissioned pieces for her gallery and a possible one-man showing. For now, however, he decided to cash in on the art thefts and create “resemblance” pieces that would appeal to the tourists. He’d brought an old book from the Orsay that included all ten of the stolen van Gogh paintings.

He’d done a hasty rendition of *Starry Night Over the Rhône* last night that he had out on display along with an article about the thefts. He was now working on a *Self Portrait*; it was hard to tell if it was 1887 or 1889. “Get your Vincent van Gogh souvenir; you might never see it again,” he said to a middle-aged couple as they stopped to look at his paintings.

“What’s this one?” the man inquired.

“It’s *Starry Night Over the Rhône*,” Robert answered. It was actually painted a year before he did the more famous *The Starry Night* painting. Of course that one was done while he was in an asylum house.

“How much?” the man continued.

"It should be two fifty," Robert answered. "But it's Monday and I'm in a good mood, so I'll let you have it for one fifty."

"That's way too much. I can get a poster for under twenty."

"Oh sure," Robert countered. "A poster that cost them a dollar to make and it took no real energy, intellect, or talent to create it. It's just a copy; this painting is one of a kind; it's a whole lot prettier, and it's the exact size of the original. You'll have a hard time finding any other paintings that are exact size original paintings of his works. I'll go one twenty-five."

The man looked at his wife who shrugged her shoulders. "It's nice," the man said, "but it is a bit big to carry around and to get on the plane back home."

"I'll do an even hundred if you take it right now." Robert was really trying to make the sale. "If you want a smaller one, I'll do one tonight that is half-size, making it fifteen by eighteen inches. It will take several hours because of the intricate layers that are needed. The best I could do on that would be seventy-five, and I'd need a deposit now on it."

The man looked at his wife again, and she nodded her head. "Okay; here's twenty. Same time tomorrow?"

"I'll be here starting at ten, so come by any time after that. What's your name?"

"Johnson, Sam Johnson."

"Thank you Mr. Johnson; I know you and the wife will like it." Robert put the twenty in his shirt pocket and continued with the *Self Portrait*. The larger head confirmed that Robert was currently working on *Self Portrait, 1887*, painted while van Gogh was in Paris. He'd work on the smaller paint-

ing tonight – actually he'd finish the small one that he'd already started creating.



36



Life was slowly returning to normal in Paris. It had been a week since Robert sold that painting to the Johnsons. The museums were back to their regular schedules although some of the rooms were still closed to the public. The smaller galleries that were hit were actually trying to use the thefts at their locations as a benefit. One gallery had a huge poster, “Come see what the thieves left for you!” It was tacky, but it was drawing people inside.

The Interpol agents in Kuala Lumpur were still looking for the *Bedroom in Arles* painting. They thought it would be easy to find once they started spreading the word through their informants’ network that there was a significant reward for its recovery. There were a few responses, but none of them panned out to be credible. They’d even returned to the internet café where the images of the stolen painting had been sent from; the owner continued with his same answers even when he’d been presented with the reward offer. Yes, he might have been able to pick out the man in a lineup, but to describe him would be impossible to do. And he honestly didn’t know where the photographs had been taken. The only person who knew where the painting was and might re-

motely disclose it was the mystery man, Musa Wan, but he wasn't talking to anyone about it.

The increased police presence at all the major museums in Paris continued with both uniformed and plain-clothes officers. All deliveries to the museums had police accompaniment and they were all scanned. Today's mail delivery at Musée d'Orsay included a few requests for pictures from school children, the usual marketing brochures, and one postcard, unusual in that it was a postcard from The Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. It wasn't addressed to anyone in particular, simply to Orsay Museum, Paris, FRANCE. It would normally go to the Marketing Department, but one mail clerk read the neatly printed message on the back and laughed.

"Check out this message on the back of a postcard from The Hermitage." The amused mail clerk continued. "It says 'The schoolgirl and the small dancer are having a good time as they are settling in to their **new** private vault home.' Why would someone send a postcard from Russia talking about a dancer and a school girl moving into their new home?"

"Wait a minute," another clerk said. "Weren't two of those bronzes that were taken called *Schoolgirl* and *Small Dancer Aged 14*?"

"I would have no idea," the first clerk responded. "I don't pay any attention to that stuff; it's beyond me."

The second clerk took the postcard and looked at it. He was actually interested in art and was going to the university in the evening to study art. This job as a mail clerk was just that, a job and a way for him to be around art. "And the per-

son who sent it emphasized the word 'new' for some reason. I'm calling Security."

"What a waste of time," the first clerk replied.

The second clerk picked up the phone and dialed the number for Security. "This is the mail room, and we got a postcard in today that I think might have a message on it about two of the bronzes that were stolen. Would someone come down here and take a look at it?"

Getting down to the Basement (labeled Level -1 on diagrams) at the Orsay isn't an easy task. It took ten minutes before the winded Head of Security, the Museum Director, and the police officer on full-time assignment in the museum to reach the mail room. The first mail clerk just shook his head, thinking that this silly postcard could have anything to do with the major thefts that occurred about a month ago.

"Let's see what you've got," the Head of Security panted.

The mail clerk/art student showed them the postcard. "The front is an aerial view of The Hermitage in St. Petersburg. That's no big deal until you read the message on the back. Even though they could all read, the clerk read it out loud, "The schoolgirl and the small dancer are having a good time as they are settling in to their **new** private vault home.' Notice the emphasis on the word 'new'? Let's look at the front again," he said as he turned the card back over.

He continued, "All the buildings are named, and this square one in the upper left corner is called 'New Hermitage.' The sender emphasized 'new' to tell us that he or she is referring to the New Hermitage. I think this person is telling us that the *Schoolgirl* and the *Small Dancer Aged 14* bronzes were being taken to, or were stored in, the private vault in the

New Hermitage.” Feeling proud of his discovery, the clerk put the card down and waited.

The Museum Director looked skeptical. “Why wouldn’t the sender just tell us that? Why be cryptic about it?”

“Censorship has taken a huge resurgence in Russia; a card saying anything about the stolen bronzes would never make it out of the country.” The police officer was aware of recent events in Russia where censorship led to arrests and imprisonment.

“What do we do?” the Head of Security asked.

“No one is to know about this,” said the Director. He turned to the police officer. “Not even any of your colleagues or supervisors. Got it? This must stay with the four of us.”

The mail clerk cleared his throat. “Excuse me, Director, but there are actually five of us who know about this.”

“Oh,” the Director reluctantly acknowledged. “Get your buddy over here.”

The mail clerk put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. The other clerk was on the far side of the large room, but he heard the whistle and turned around. He was waved over to the group by all four of them.

After the Museum Director repeated the direct statement to all of them that nothing was to be said about this to anyone, he took the card and placed it inside his coat pocket.

“What now?” Security asked.

“It’s an Interpol matter; I’ll contact them in Lyon and ask them to send Russian-speaking agents to St. Petersburg.”

“Why not just contact Interpol in Moscow?” Security continued.

"They're all corrupt in Russia," the Director responded. "The problem they're going to have is to convince the head of the museums to open the private vault. Given that the museum is owned by the state it means that technically the vault is the personal property of the President of Russia. This isn't going to be easy. But at least it's something more than we had to go on yesterday."

The Museum Director dismissed them but pulled the second mail clerk aside to talk with him. "How did you figure that out?"

"I'm studying art at the university in the evening, and the names of the stolen bronzes have been burned into my brain. It just took a little deduction to put the pieces together."

The Director thought for a moment. "Are you happy working in the mailroom? I'm sure we could find a more suitable place for you."

"For now, this is good. It allows me to focus all my energy on my studies. But I definitely appreciate the thought."

"Thanks again," the Director said as the two men shook hands and the Director headed back to his office to contact Interpol's main headquarters. He knew some of the questions that would be asked, such as fingerprints, postmark, etc. It was the first solid lead they had.

Actually, it was the second lead in the case, but the Museum hadn't been told about the painting photos in Kuala Lumpur. Interpol liked to keep some things to themselves.



A dossier had already been created at Interpol headquarters in Lyon, France, on the stolen works of art. The emailed photographs from Kuala Lumpur of *Bedroom in Arles* were the first informational items following the descriptions of all the items that had been taken in Paris. The scans of the postcard from St. Petersburg were the next items to be included. The actual postcard was delivered late yesterday afternoon in a secure package sent by Antoine Moreau who was technically assigned to the Lyon headquarters but in practicality did most of his work in Paris.

Contrary to popular belief, the staffing at Interpol is quite sparse; it relies on support from local police agencies to provide most of the primary ground work and detective activities. But since one of its main purposes is to battle piracy and the illicit trafficking of art, all leads having to do with the Paris thefts got immediate attention. Alerted by Moreau that the postcard would be arriving, the art team was in place when the package arrived.

All packages coming into Interpol are scanned in a bombproof facility; a near-fatal mailroom explosion in 1993 led to the building of a new facility where all incoming items

would be processed before “going upstairs.” Though this new facility was not in the same headquarters building, the secure steel and concrete underground transit system ensured safe scanning and delivery of all packages and other materials, including the bags of coffee, the boxes of tea, and the fresh croissants each day for the break rooms.

Alexandre Couture and Eva Loudin were waiting for Moreau’s package when Inspector General François Dubois entered the room. “*Bonjour, monsieur,*” the two agents said as the tall Dubois walked in. Always the gentleman and one appreciative of the sometimes-dangerous work taken on by his staff, he walked over and shook their hands. “Passports ready?” Dubois asked.

“Always,” Alexandre replied. Born in France, both Couture and Loudin had each spent many years in the USSR prior to its dissolution and becoming the Russian Federation. They were both fluent in Russian and they had accents that would place them as being born in Moscow. After all, that’s what their Russian passports said. Their teamwork in Russia usually had them traveling as a married couple, Ivan (Иван) and Vera (Вера) Petrovych (Петрович). Their cover was that they were art dealers from Moscow whose clientele included many of the major collectors around the world.

Even though Russia was a member nation of Interpol, Inspector General Dubois didn’t feel that he could trust the Russian agents to track down the Degas bronzes if they were indeed in St. Petersburg. “Trust goes only so far,” Dubois said as the package was brought into the room and the delivering agent had left. “We trust all our agents and inspectors,” he continued, “but there is a limit on what information they

really need to know. If they know something that they don't need to know, it might get them into harm's way at some point, or it might compromise an investigation."

"We definitely understand that," Alexandre replied. "Let's take a look at this postcard to see what mysteries it holds for us." The circular stamp on the wrapping indicated that the package had been securely scanned and subsequently logged into the system. Nothing came in, or went out, of Interpol headquarters without at least one entry into their massive database.

Eva Loudin's family moved from the countryside into Paris shortly after she was born, so she felt like she had lived there most of her life. Her father was a doctor; her mother was an artist, and her life as an only child was a very privileged one. She attended private schools where her interest in classical languages and art history was nurtured. After graduation from the University of Paris-Sorbonne, Eva spent two years as a Resident Fellow in St. Petersburg where she learned Russian while cataloging the works in the Winter Palace, aka, The Hermitage. Going back to search for the bronzes there would be like a homecoming for her. As she thought about returning to that area, foremost on her mind were the cafés where she would sit and enjoy a Russian coffee on a cold day — the coffee wasn't as good as Parisian coffee, but any hot coffee was good on those cold Russian days.

Alexandre picked up a pair of scissors and began to cut the outer wrapping from the package. He then slit along the top, making sure he didn't damage any of the inside contents.

"Shouldn't we put on gloves?" Eva asked.

"It's not necessary," Alexandre replied. "That card has already been touched dozens of people from Russia to Paris to points in between. Besides, I'd expect Moreau to have put it inside a plastic case.

"See?" Alexandre said as he opened the package and pulled out the plastic-encased postcard. The card looked just like the scans that had come in from Paris. He offered the card to the Inspector General who shook his head and pointed to Eva. She would be working the case; he could always see the card later.

Looking at the aerial view of The Hermitage buildings brought back all sorts of feelings to Eva. There were the good ones where she was up close to so much amazing art and the history behind it. And then there were the bad feelings when she knew that the people of Russia were being oppressed just as much, if not more, than when the Bolsheviks launched their revolution in 1917. The Russian people, the everyday people that you'd meet on the streets – they were people just like the Parisians, the Italians, the Americans, the Chinese and the Japanese – the Russian people just happened to have the unfortunate situation to be born into a suppressed society. Eva couldn't change that part of it, but she could do something to not let that suppression and oppression grow even further.

She turned the card over and read what she already knew, "*The schoolgirl and the small dancer are having a good time as they are settling in to their **new** private vault home.*" As she turned the card back over to the front, she pointed to the upper left area of the set of buildings. "This one is called the New Hermitage; it was opened in 1852, and it was built

specifically to house the museum collections. Since I spent a considerable amount of time in there doing my research, I did see the vault that was used to house some particularly valuable items, such as diamonds and jewels, Fabergé eggs, and even some amazing vases. So it wouldn't surprise me if some of the stolen Degas bronzes were taken there." She paused as reality set in. "Gaining access to that vault, however, won't be easy. Just like many of the jewels and estates in England are considered personal property of Her Majesty, the collections in The Hermitage are considered to be the personal property of the President of Russia."

Inspector General Dubois spoke up. "Your job isn't to retrieve the bronzes; I just want you to find them, and anything else that might be there, and let me know. We can put enough pressure on him to get them back but we must be two hundred percent absolutely positive that they're there. Does that work for you?"

"Absolutely," Eva answered.

"Of course, it does," Alexandre chimed in.

"Good," Dubois said. "So what's your plan?"

"We'll take a train tomorrow into Budapest, and then stay a day until we take a different line into the Ukraine. From there, we'll fly on Aeroflot from Odessa into St. Petersburg. Odessa's not as busy as Boryspil or Kiev, so it's easier for us to mix in with the locals." Alexandre looked at Eva who nodded her head in approval. They'd worked as a pair before, and even though they were posing a married couple, their relationship had never moved beyond a professional nature.

Dubois noticed the slight smile on her face; he wondered if he should be concerned about them. He thought

about it briefly, but then realized they were the best two he had for getting into Russia and getting the job done. Her intimate knowledge of The Hermitage would be invaluable if they were to locate those two degas bronzes: *Schoolgirl* and *Small Dancer Aged 14*.

"Good luck," Dubois said as he once again shook their hands.

"Your desk or mine?" Alexandre asked.

"Mine," Eva answered as she clutched the postcard that she hoped would get them close to the statues.



38



Three more weeks went by with no progress on the case. Tuesday's mail delivery to Musée d'Orsay contained the normal stack of marketing brochures and other unsolicited materials. There was also one round mailing tube that was addressed to the Museum Director and it was marked PERSONAL. Sensing the importance of the contents inside the tube, Jean, the mail clerk/art student picked up the tube and rushed it up to the Director's office.

"I have an item marked PERSONAL for the Director and I'd like to give it to him," Jean said as he entered the office. The secretary looked at the mail clerk and replied with a disdainful tone, "Just leave it here; I'll make sure he gets it."

"I'm sure he will, Ma'am, but he told me to personally deliver anything that looked like it might have to do with the thefts." That was a bit of a lie, but she would never know. "So I'd like to take it to him."

"What is it?" she asked.

"All I know is it's a mailing tube with something rolled up inside. I haven't opened it because it says PERSONAL on it." Jean wasn't going to let this government servant treat him

with disrespect because he was “only” a mail clerk. “Will you tell him that I have something for him?”

Just then the door to the Director’s office opened, and Jean seized the opportunity.

“Hello, Director. This just came for you and I knew you’d want me to bring it to you right away.”

“What is it?” the Director asked.

“The scan shows something rolled up inside, and it appears to be made up of a heavy material, like a canvas.” Jean utilized some of his art training to make an educated guess on the contents. He’d gotten the Director’s attention when the postcard arrived from St. Petersburg; he wanted to capitalize on that.

“Come on in,” the Director said as he motioned him into his office and shut the door. “I’m terribly sorry, but I never got your name.”

“It’s Jean, sir.”

“Well, have a seat, Jean, and let’s see what’s inside here.” The Director pulled a small knife out of the top desk drawer and carefully cut the tape around the cap. As he pulled the cap off, he looked inside and saw a rolled up painting canvas. He reached inside, turned the canvas slightly to make it smaller by tightening the roll. He then pulled it out, and the canvas tried to spring back to its flattened position. He carefully put his hands on the edges to hold down the painting.

Jean immediately recognized the painting. The edges were a bit rough, but there was no mistaking it. This was one of the stolen van Gogh paintings.

“Oh, my,” the Director said. “It’s *The Church at Auvers*. Almost two months have gone by; I never thought I’d see

it again." He looked at Jean, seated calmly but definitely amazed at the return of one of the paintings. "Were there any more packages down there?"

"No, sir," Jean replied. "Just this one. May I?"

"Of course, young man. Come on over."

Jean got out of the chair and went to the Director's side to admire the painting. The brilliant blue sky had some of the same swirls as van Gogh had put in his famous *Starry Night* paintings which had been done one to two years before this one. The path marks were similar to one of his *Wheat Field* paintings. This painting was definitely a combination of works he'd previously done while adding a few new features.

The Director took his hands off the painting and it rolled up partially. He got out of his chair, went to the door and opened it. "Call the Head of Security and ask him to come here right away," he said to his secretary.

"Of course," she replied as she smiled thinking that the impudent mail clerk had pushed his luck just a little too far. She would gladly call Security if it meant getting back at the guy from the mail room. Who'd he think he was, anyway?

Jean thought he saw something on the back of the painting as it tried to roll itself back up. As the Director walked back to his desk, Jean said, "I thought I saw something on the back. Would you mind?"

"Sure," the Director replied as he picked up the roll, turned it over and started to spread it out. Two light black symbols were on the back of the canvas. "Those are new," the Director said as if anticipating Jean's question. "Let's take it over to the table, but first we should put on gloves."

Opening the bottom drawer in his desk, the Director pulled out two pairs of white cotton gloves and handed one pair to Jean, and then put a pair on his hands. Jean followed the Director over to the small table near the window. "Want to put these books over on one of the shelves?"

"Sure," Jean replied as he stacked the four art books and placed them on one of the many overstocked shelves that lined the west wall of the Museum Director's office.

"*Entre vous*," the Director said as he heard a knock on the office door.

Jean looked up to see the Head of Security stick his head inside the doorway.

"Close the door and come over here," the Director said instead of offering a greeting. "Do you remember Jean? He's the fellow from the mailroom who called us about the postcard from Russia that had the cryptic message on it? Look what just came in the mail today." The Director lifted the canvas and showed the van Gogh painting. His gloved hands were now touching some of the actual painting, but the gloves were providing the proper protection.

"Wow," the Head of Security replied. "Where'd it come from, and what are those marks on the back?" he asked.

"The markings on the tube indicate it might have been shipped from Miami, Florida," Jean answered. "And we were just about to look at the back." He looked down at the table and saw that it hadn't been dusted in a while so he pulled his handkerchief out of his back pocket. "Let me wipe off the table before we roll it back out," Jean added.

“Good idea,” the Director commented as the Head of Security gave a small nod to him. They both saw a lot of potential in this young mail clerk/art student.

“Here; I’ll help” Jean said as the Director was placing the canvas upside down on the table as the canvas wanted to naturally curl back up. Jean held down two corners while the Museum Director held down the other two. Jean had never seen the back side of an actual Vincent van Gogh painting; he was awe-struck by van Gogh’s notes and scribbles. But what were those symbols written with a dark black paint in the corner? The three men squinted their eyes, looked at each other, and then looked again at the symbols: $\gamma \zeta$.

Jean figured they were a recent addition as the paint looked new and fresh, and there was even some texture in the symbols. Certainly that texture wouldn’t be there on the back of a canvas that was painted one hundred twenty-five years ago. The symbols certainly garnered the attention of the Head of Security and the Museum Director.

The Head of Security just looked at them as the Museum Director’s mouth opened wide. “Those are new,” he said. “Why would someone put those on the back where they’d typically not be seen, and then send the painting back to us?”

“They certainly look like Greek letters to me,” Jean offered as he tried to recall what they were and if they had any special meanings in the art world.

“They are,” the Director replied. “The two Greek letters, assuming that’s what they represent, are gamma and zeta. But for right now,” he continued, “they could mean almost any-

thing. I'm just glad to see the painting here and that it appears to be okay except for the cut canvas."

The Head of Security turned his head a bit as he looked down at the symbols. "Why would someone write Greek letters on the back of a van Gogh painting – one they've successfully stolen – and then send the painting back to us? That seems not only strange, but also a little careless to me."

"I don't recall that van Gogh ever went to Greece," Jean said as his brain strained to pull up any knowledge of Vincent van Gogh that he'd stored away.

"No, he didn't," the Director answered. Greece wasn't a place for artists to visit and get any inspiration. There are some beautiful places, but we know about them today mostly because of the ease of flights into them or cruising in the islands. But those weren't available over a hundred years ago, so if they are Greek letters, then they have to have some other meaning and not really in reference to van Gogh himself."

"May I?" Jean asked as he pulled his mobile phone from his pants pocket.

"No phone calls," the Head of Security voiced sternly.

Jean chuckled. "Of course not," he said. "I was going to take a photo of the symbols, then a photo of the church itself, and do some research in the university library for any connection between them."

"I'd prefer not," the Director responded. "Our Research Department definitely has more on van Gogh in its archives than any other museum or library in the world, except perhaps for the van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. We certainly appreciate your diligence, Jean, but I think it's better if we keep this in house."

"I understand," Jean replied as he put his phone away. "May I see the front one more time?" he asked.

"Of course," the Director says as he turned the painting over. "Not a word to anyone," he added as Jean admired the painting before he headed out of the office to return to the mail room. Even though he wasn't able to take any photos, the images of the symbols and the names of the Greek letters were burned into his brain and he would write them down as soon as he got back to his desk.

The secretary looked up from her work as she heard the Director's door open, hoping to see the mail clerk being escorted away by Security. But it was just the mail clerk.

Jean looked at her and smiled as he confidently walked by her. "Have a good day," he said as her face began to turn into a frown and the door closed behind him with the Head of Security still inside with her boss.



39



“Are you about ready to clock out?” the mail clerk yelled across the room to Jean, mail clerk cum art student. “All the mail has already come in for the day, including that one tube you took.”

“You go ahead and leave,” Jean replied. “DHL hasn’t been here yet, and their app shows that the truck is just a few blocks from here. I’ll stay if you want to leave. Besides I don’t have a class tonight, so I don’t mind.”

“Fine with me, Jean. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“*Au Revoir, Luc,*” Jean said as his co-worker clocked out, grabbed his personal belongings, and used his badge to open the door to the outside noises and commotions. As the door was opened, Jean could hear the distinctive sound of the yellow truck with red lettering. The DHL truck was approaching the Musée d’Orsay delivery entrance. Jean knew the sounds of the delivery trucks that made regular stops at the museum, much like dogs that can associate sounds with the vehicles that make them. Sure enough, the DHL truck appeared in the delivery door window.

Jean smiled to himself; he was glad he stayed.

As he unlocked and opened the door, Jean saw the familiar driver carrying two objects. "Just this tube and a rather bulky box," the driver said as he set the two items on the table along with his clipboard.

Jean looked at the tube. *Could it be another van Gogh?* he wondered. He checked the parcel number with the one on the delivery manifest; it matched. He then saw the small box, about twelve by twelve by twelve; *One of the Degas bonzes?* He checked its number against the manifest, and it too matched. Jean signed the manifest, shook hands with the driver, and closed the door as the driver left to continue on his run for the afternoon. Jean picked up the box; it was a bit heavy for the size of the box. There certainly was something of weight inside it.

Jean put both parcels on a cart and rolled the cart over to the scanning device. The scanner looked pretty much like the scanners used at airports to scan hand luggage and bags. This one was a little more sophisticated than those at the airports; the exact security enhancements were a secret known only to the manufacturer and the museum's Head of Security.

Having a sense for what might be in these new deliveries, or at least hoping so, he put the tube on the belt by itself and pushed the red *Démarrez* (Start) button. Unlike the scanners at the airports that just showed a display of the contents on a screen, this scanner provided a printout of the scan and a sheet with a description of the likely contents. Once the two pages had printed, he removed the tube and then put the box on the belt and pushed the button. He retrieved the four printed pages, looked at them, and his eyes opened

wide. He was right. It looked as if another van Gogh painting and one of the Degas bronzes had just been returned.

Jean set the four pages and the two parcels on the cart and rolled it over to his desk. He picked up the phone and punched in the number for the Museum Director.

"This is the office of the Museum Director," the secretary said in a cheerful voice.

"Yes; hello again. This is Jean in the mail room. Will you please connect me with the Director? There are two new packages that just arrived that I know he will want to see immediately."

Jean could almost feel the cheeriness in her voice dissipate as she heard his. She liked to be a gatekeeper, one who controlled who had access to her boss, the most important person at Musée d'Orsay. But then this lowly mail clerk seemed to be able to get his attention so easily. She thought about lying and saying he'd already left or was somewhere else in the museum, but she knew she couldn't cover that lie.

"Just a minute," she said as she put Jean on hold.

Jean wondered which painting was in the tube and which bronze was in the box. The bills of lading showed that the box was sent from Jakarta, Indonesia, and the tube was sent from Boston, Massachusetts, USA. *How'd they get there, but more interestingly, why are they being sent back?* Jean was sure he'd never know the answers to those questions.

"The Director said for you to come right up," the secretary said in a curt voice as she came back on the line.

"*Merci, madame,*" Jean replied, as one who always displayed proper manners. He hung up the phone, went and picked up an empty box and put the two parcels and four

pages of printouts in the box, and headed up to the Director's office.

While Jean was heading upstairs to the Director's office, other DHL drivers were delivering parcels to other galleries and museums in Paris that afternoon. Some of them were tubes, just like the one that had been dropped off with Jean at Musée d'Orsay.

Were the stolen pieces of art being returned?

If so, why?



40



Television stations around Paris were beginning their evening broadcasts with stories labeled “Breaking,” “Exclusive,” and “Only on....” Some of the smaller galleries that had been broken into had called the National Police or various news agencies to report the returned items. As the calls to the police were routed to Chief Inspector LeBlanc, he asked the callers to not tell anyone else until they could come by and check out the items.

Most of the gallery owners were naturally quite relieved to have their artwork sent back to them, even though they’d been cut away from the frames. Having a piece of art that was slightly damaged was more valuable than not having the piece at all. In fact, some owners were already working on plans to capitalize on the art thefts to increase the prices on their works. The excitement of having the art returned led a few gallery owners to call the media, even though they’d been explicitly requested not to.

Once the calls to his office died down, LeBlanc placed a call to Musée d’Orsay. He had the number for the direct line to the Director’s office, a line that bypassed his secretary.

"*Bonsoir*," the Director said as he picked up the phone and pushed the infrequently used line. "This is the Director speaking."

"Good evening, Director. This is Henri LeBlanc, Chief Inspector for the French National Police. I'm glad that you're in the office and picked up the phone."

"Good evening, *Monsieur LeBlanc*. It's been a rather busy day that is keeping me here. How may I help you?" Even though he'd also been instructed by LeBlanc to contact him immediately if any of the stolen art was returned, he hadn't yet done so. There was still more investigative work he wanted his Research Department to do before the police got involved. Besides, it wasn't as if the thefts had just occurred yesterday and the police were working on some hot leads. It was also no secret that the directors of most major museums in Paris didn't like or trust the French National Police.

The Director put his right index finger up to his pursed lips as he looked at mail clerk/art student Jean. Jean nodded his head, and the Director touched the phone's Speaker button. The background noise from the police station suddenly filled the room.

LeBlanc spoke up; Jean had never heard his voice live, just on the television. "Well, in case you've not heard any of the evening news, as I'm guessing you wouldn't since you're still there at the museum working, we've had some breaks in the case and I thought you'd like to know."

"That's excellent, Chief Inspector," the Director said through a fake smile. "Congratulations on your outstanding work. Your men are to be congratulated." The Director was usually a very warm, caring, and honest person; but when it

came to people he didn't like, he could be as intensely false as his distaste for them.

LeBlanc's voice didn't indicate that he had picked up on the sarcasm. "Yes, I will tell them. Most of the information, however, has come from the galleries where the stolen art has been returned."

"Oh, really?" the Director questioned.

"Why, yes. Many of the gallery owners have called me to report the return of their artwork and the television stations are reporting that news tonight. So, I was wondering," LeBlanc continued as the Director looked over at Jean, smiled, and nodded his head. He knew what was coming. "I was wondering if perhaps you've been too busy to call me if any of your stolen art had been returned. I would think that if some of the pieces were being returned to the smaller galleries that they might also be coming back to the world famous Musée d'Orsay."

"Oh that is good news, Chief Inspector," the Director began to respond without actually answering his query. "I can imagine that those gallery owners are so delighted to have their art back, able to put it back on display, and perhaps even raise the price because of the notoriety. I'll have to turn on the news as soon as I get home this evening. Thank you very much for letting me know this good news, and I'll certainly call you as soon as I have something to tell you. Good night, Chief Inspector." The Director disconnected the line before LeBlanc could reply or re-inquire about the Museum's art.

"Nice work," Jean said as he nodded his head affirmatively to the Director.

“Merci. LeBlanc’s a fool,” the Director replied. He’s from Lyon, and he always thought he’d become a star at Interpol. He interviewed at Interpol headquarters several times, but never got hired. Now that he’s Chief Inspector here in Paris, he always tries to outdo the Interpol agents, which he’s never able to do. Plus, he’s really made enemies with most of the art world because he’s said that art collectors are a bunch of foolish boors. So why would we want to help him?”

“I wonder if the news stations are reporting anything about symbols or Greek letters on the back of those other pieces that have come back.” Jean’s inquisitive nature sprung to action. He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out his smart phone.

“No calls, remember?” the Director said as he thought that Jean was going to call someone. No one yet had said anything about letters or symbols on the back of the paintings, and the Director didn’t want that important piece of information to be leaked out. At least not yet; not until they were able to glean some more information about them.

“Of course not,” Jean replied. “I’m going to program my television to start recording two of the news programs in case they mention anything else about the returned paintings.” He opened an app on his phone, typed in a few numbers, and then put the phone away. “I don’t have class tonight, so I’ll watch the television and see if anyone is saying anything else besides the fact that they’re glad they’re back. Personally, I find it hard to believe that an owner wouldn’t mention it if there was some writing on the back. After all, that’s more newsworthy and it would help to draw more

people into the galleries to see both sides.” Jean paused before continuing. “Quite a brilliant marketing ploy actually.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way, Jean. That is quite good.”

“What are you going to do when he calls back?”

“I’ll either tell a lie for the good of the entire art world, or I’ll stall him as I just did. That man is not the most brilliant; how he rose to become Chief Inspector is beyond me. That young female detective that seems to be at his side during the news conferences has got to be smarter than he is. I’ll bet she knows more about this case than he does. It almost appears that she’s leading the investigation, but he never says that.”

Returning to the opened tube and box, Jean and the Director looked at the items that DHL had delivered. The tube held *Self Portrait, 1887*, and the box contained Degas’ *The Tub*. The latter was one of his many bronzes depicting women bathing or sitting on the toilet. This short, squatty piece had a large rectangular base with a woman reclining while bathing.

The men put on white gloves, opened up the curling van Gogh, turned it over on the table, and held it in place by the four corners. Sure enough, there were two new symbols written on the back: *α α*.

“Alpha alpha?” Jean inquired. “Sir, do you mind if I start keeping a list of the art works and the symbols that are on them?”

“Not at all, Jean. I think that’s a good idea.”

So Jean began the list.

First on the list was van Gogh's *The Church at Auvers* and the symbols $\gamma \zeta$ (gamma zeta)

Next was the *Self Portrait, 1887* with the symbols $\alpha \alpha$ (alpha alpha)

Completing the list for today was the first Degas bronze to be returned: *The Tub* with the symbols $\epsilon \eta$ (epsilon eta).

"Would you like me to make a copy for the Research Department?"

"You read my mind, Jean. *Merci*. Are you sure you want to stay in the Mail Room? There must be a place in Research that could use you." The Director couldn't understand why this young man, a seemingly intelligent art student, preferred the Mail Room to a more professional environment.

"Right now, this is a perfect fit with my class schedule. But once I graduate I just might look to see if there are any openings in Research or Archival for me."

"There will always be a place for you, Jean. You have my word on that," the Director said as he extended his right hand.

"*Merci*," Jean replied as he shook the Director's hand. "I'll take notes on anything that the other galleries reveal on the news tonight. It could be interesting. Good night," Jean said as he headed to the door.

"Good night, Jean," the Director replied. "Excellent work, young man. Don't forget what I said; you have a place here."



41



Jean's bus ride home was uneventful except for the chattering that was going on about the reports of the works of art that had been stolen and were now being returned. "One gallery owner said his was rolled up inside a tube and shipped back via a delivery service," one lady said to her friend.

"Can you believe that?" her friend replied. "The thieves successfully break into galleries and museums all over Paris, steal art, and then they ship it back. You're much smarter than I am, but that doesn't make much sense to me."

"I don't get it either, but maybe the National Police have more information than we're actually hearing."

"That's true. And did you hear that one fellow say that the thieves had written something on the back of the canvas; like a note or something?"

"*Oui*," the first lady replied as the bus came to a sudden stop. The doors opened and Jean exited the bus before he could hear any more of what she was saying. He knew he had the news programs being recorded and he'd be able to watch and re-watch the news so he could write down all the information that the gallery owners were saying.

Jean climbed the stairs two at a time, increasing the tempo as he got nearer to his floor. He unlocked the door and saw the red light on the recorder telling him that recording was taking place. He was amused when he'd hear some of the older generation talk about "taping programs." VHS tapes were no longer being used by most people to record and play programs; digital recording was the current technology. Jean could have rented a start-of-the-art Digital Video Recorder from one of the local television stations or cable companies, but he preferred a DVR that he could look inside and be confident that no one had inserted any spy cams or other surveillance equipment. Jean wasn't paranoid, just cautious.

He uncorked the half-empty bottle of Bordeaux wine that he'd opened last night, and poured some into the glass on the kitchen counter. He grabbed the extra baguette from yesterday and squeezed it; the crust was rather hard. After moistening a paper towel, Jean wrapped the towel around the baguette, put it into the microwave oven, and pressed the *30 Secondes* button.

As the tray in the oven was turning around, Jean pulled the small notebook from his backpack, the notebook where he'd written down the returned artwork and their symbols. The four beeps told him the oven was done, and he opened the door and picked up the toweled baguette.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he exclaimed as the heated moistened towel was too hot, and he dropped it back onto the tray. He grabbed a clean plate, picked the baguette back up, and put it on the plate; it was already cooling down. As he walked over to the couch, he grabbed his wine glass and notebook.

He switched on the TV, selected one of the channels that was currently being recorded, and pressed **PLAY**. The newscast had already begun by the time he'd started the recording while at work. The main story, of course, was the returned art work. And the symbols on the back of the canvases.

"And now we turn our attention to one of the smaller galleries, Galerie du Monde, and its owner Philippe Fermet." The camera's attention moved from the reporter to the smiling Fermet. He was once again in front of the camera, and he was planning to leverage this opportunity as he had done when he was interviewed shortly after the robbery. "You seem to be a happy man, Monsieur Fermet, much happier than the last time we spoke with you."

"Yes, I am, *merci*," Fermet began. "Today was a very delightful day when we received an unexpected package and it contained *Seaside Landscape*, the Marc Chagall painting that had been stolen that night when all of Paris was shaken up. The canvas will need a little repair work, but the main painting area on the front looks fine, although I'm sure we'll want to give it a thorough examination before it goes back on display."

"What kind of repair work, and can you describe the condition of the work?" The reporter had let Fermet dominate the filming the first time; he wasn't going to let that happen again.

"Well," Fermet began, "for one thing, they cut the canvas from the frame after using a glass cutter to expose the canvas."

The reporter cut back in. "That's interesting. You said they used a glass cutter to remove the glass and expose the canvas. Since they'd already managed to break into your gallery, and were able to get back out of it, without setting off the alarm, why wouldn't the thieves just take the painting in its frame? Wouldn't a Marc Chagall painting be more valuable on the original entire canvas and in the nice frame with glass?"

Philippe Fermet smiled a wry smile. "I can tell you've covered many police investigations because you're asking the questions that I've heard many times from police detectives. Let me tell you what I think." Fermet paused, knowing he had the reporter and the TV audience waiting for his answer. "First, the painting was returned today as we already said. It was rolled up in a tube, which is certainly much easier to ship from anywhere in the world than a decent-sized matted and framed painting. And since it was returned, it seems pretty clear to me that the theft was not about the painting itself or a ransom demand since I never received one." Fermet paused again. He was certain the reporter would ask the right question.

And he did; the reporter unwittingly played right into the gallery owner's hand. "So why do you think the painting was returned if the theft wasn't about a ransom demand or the painting itself?"

Fermet warmed to the glow of the camera lights and the attention. "If the thieves had just wanted the painting, they could have taken it as you said, except for one small detail. Every gallery and museum embeds RFID chips into the frames so they can be tracked even when they're just being

moved within their own walls. If someone steals a framed painting, it can be tracked through GPS positioning. These thieves were smart, so why couldn't they have just removed the RFID chip? They might have been able to, but some are set to trigger an alarm if removed. But," Fermet paused again.

"I think the real reason they took the painting out of the frame, and then sent it back to us, is that they're trying to send us a message."

"What kind of a message?" the reporter asked. He wasn't prepared for this particular direction for the interview.

"We were, of course, very excited when we opened the package today and saw the Chagall inside. We'd had no previous notice that it would be returned us; there'd been no communication from anyone regarding the painting. So when we pulled it out of the tube, we immediately laid it out flat so we could see the painting itself. And it looks fine. Quite by accident, we let go of the canvas, and as it started to roll back up, we noticed a marking on the back." Once again, Fermet paused, but this time the reporter didn't say anything.

Fermet continued. "There was a symbol on the back of the painting written in a black paint. Our best guess on the symbol is that it's a letter from the Greek alphabet. It's a curly one that we looked up online and it appears to be the letter zeta. We don't have any idea what that would mean, but that of course is secondary to the fact that it's back now."

"Have you heard from any other gallery owners or museums about symbols being written on the back of their returned items?" The television reporter got off-track as he became interested in this new turn of events.

“I’ve not yet had the opportunity to talk with anyone else about the symbol or letter or what it might mean. Right now, we’re just happy that Chagall’s *Seaside Landscape* is back here at Galerie du Monde, and we will, of course, cooperate fully with the authorities as they continue their investigation.”

As Jean watched the interview wind down, he wrote down Galerie du Monde, Chagall and *Seaside Landscape*, zeta. His wine glass was empty so he got up to refill it. After pouring the wine, he went into his study, powered on his computer, opened the browser, went to Wikipedia and printed a copy of the Greek alphabet. He knew some of the meanings behind a few of the Greek letters, but he didn’t know much about zeta.

Jean watched several hours of news, while recording the names of the works of art, artists, and more Greek letters. His list was getting longer. Most Parisians knew only about the ones being reported tonight; Jean and the Museum Director had information about three others.

Monsieur Fermet was on the right track; the symbol – the Greek letter – it **had** to mean something. But what could it mean? And did it matter that there was only one letter on that canvas where all the others had two letters? Jean’s curiosity had him go back to the computer, after refilling his wine glass, and doing some more research on Greek letters, any modern meanings, and any use in recent police reports.

The next morning's newspaper headlines and stories were all about the stolen art that had been returned; of minor importance was any mention of the Greek letters. Noticeably absent from the articles was any information from Musée d'Orsay, the single location that was hit the hardest in the thefts. The Director had still been able to dodge the questions from the Chief Inspector without giving any direct answers. He knew, however, that now that paintings were showing up at other galleries and museums that he couldn't keep quiet for much longer.

One of the newspapers headlined an article, "*Sont Ils Réels?*" – Are They Real? Several "experts" were quoted as doubting that the returned paintings were actually the real ones that had been stolen. But those statements were being refuted by the gallery owners who said that the cut canvases were close, if not exact, matches with the patterns in the emptied frames. The police took a neutral position saying that "more investigation needs to be performed before any definitive decisions can be made."

Downtown at the French National Police headquarters, a flurry of activity was taking place now that the first real

leads had come in. "Alright, we need to get the teams out and dig more into these symbols or letters that are on the backs of the returned paintings." Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc was feeling the pressure; the largest thefts of art in European history occurred in his jurisdiction, and his officers hadn't produced any tangible evidence.

Now that paintings were being returned, the French National Police was springing back into action with teams visiting each gallery and museum that had been robbed. They were just as curious as others as to the meaning of the symbols that had been painted on the backs of the paintings. The questions that were being asked by everyone were, "Why were the paintings being returned?"; "What do those symbols mean?"; "Who did it?" None of those questions were really new questions for the police; with the exception of the first one, those were fairly standard questions in any investigation.

Across the Seine, the morning's mail had been delivered at Musée d'Orsay. Mail clerk Jean had read the morning paper as had most Parisians, and so he wasn't surprised when more tubes were delivered. The Director had called the mail room earlier in the morning instructing them to contact him immediately if more works of art were returned. Jean would have done it anyway, but the Director wanted to make sure it was quite clear. Based on the latest developments, he expected another phone call from the Chief Inspector, or perhaps even a personal visit, and he knew he'd have to tell the complete story this time.

Jean scanned each tube, printed off the pages of information, and collected all the items to take up them upstairs. He

was surprised at the friendliness of the secretary when he arrived at the Director's office this time. She was actually pleasant to him and addressed him by name. Jean took it all in stride and responded to her as if she'd always treated him this way. That was far from the truth, of course.

She got up from her desk and went to the office door. "The Director is expecting you, Jean. Please go in," she said as she opened the door.

"*Merci, Madame,*" Jean replied with a smile as he carried the box with the valuable tubes and the scan printouts into the Director's office. The Director stood up as Jean entered, as did the other gentleman in the office. "*Bonjour,*" he said to the Director and the other man as he set the box down on the floor by the table that they'd used before to lay out the paintings.

"*Bonjour, Jean,*" the Director said to Jean as he stepped out from behind the desk to greet the mail clerk/art student. "I see that we have hit the jackpot this morning," he said as he saw many tubes in the box. The two shook hands, and then the Director turned toward the other man in the room. "Jean, this is Claude Roget, he is our Director of Research and one of the foremost experts in art authenticity in the entire world."

"*Bonjour, Monsieur Roget,*" Jean said as the Research Director walked over and shook Jean's hand.

"*Enchanté,*" (Nice to meet you) the Research Director said in a genuine voice. "The Director has told me many nice things about you, and we'd be happy to have you join our research team any time you want. I know you're taking classes at the University, and we'll have a position open for you

whenever you're done with your studies, or even before that if you'd like to switch from the mail room."

"That's very kind of you," Jean replied. "For now, I think it is best that I continue in the mail room until my studies are over." He paused for a moment, and then continued in a light-hearted manner. "Besides, I would have missed out on all this excitement if I weren't in the mail room."

"So true," Roget replied.

"I see we have quite a few new tubes this morning, Jean. Shall we take a look?" The Director pulled out three pairs of gloves, and the two older men put theirs on, while Jean waited for the knife to carefully slit open each tube and the one heavy box that was at the bottom; then he put his gloves on.

The Director reached into the first tube and carefully pulled out the canvas. The Research Director had been informed about the Greek letters, the symbols, on the backs of the other canvases that had been returned as well as on the one bronze statue. All three men immediately saw the symbols on this one as it came out of the tube. Jean had been studying more about the Greek alphabet, so he immediately recognized the two letters: κ ζ .

"Kappa zeta," Jean blurted out. Once he said 'zeta,' he remembered that it was the solo letter that was on the back of the Chagall at Galerie du Monde. He thought about mentioning that, and the others that were on the news last night, but he didn't want to add any confusion to what they were doing right now. There were more tubes with more canvases, and there was the box with a bronze inside it.

After looking at the back of the canvas for anything else, the three men carefully turned it over to reveal *Starry Night Over the Rhône*. This pre-cursor painting to van Gogh's *The Starry Night* was certainly one of the highlights of their collection, and both directors gasped when they saw it.

Monsieur Roget pulled a small magnifying glass out of his coat pocket and did a quick scan of the painting. There were a few indications that he looked for that told him that this was indeed the original painting, completed in September 1888, just nine months before Vincent van Gogh painted the more famous work from his asylum room. Roget looked at the Museum Director, nodded his head, and smiled.

Both men then looked at the canvas one more time to see if there was any damage to it. Aside from the damage from cutting the canvas from the frame, and that was done very neatly, there was nothing else wrong with the painting. It would look nice again once it was re-matted and framed.

Jean took a piece of paper from his pocket; it was his listing of the paintings and the symbols. He added this painting along with kappa and zeta. The list was getting quite long and his curiosity was continuing to increase. He took the other tubes out of the box, and the three men went through the same routine of pulling the canvas out of the tube, inspecting the symbols on the back, and then turning the canvas over.

Jean added more paintings and symbols to his list, including the Degas bronze that had been returned today. Overall, there had been seven paintings and two bronzes returned to Musée d'Orsay. All but one of the van Gogh paint-

ings were back, but only two Degas bronzes so far. Jean wondered if there had been any news about the two bronzes mentioned in the postcard from St. Petersburg, Russia.

"I'm going to call Chief Inspector LeBlanc," the Director said after he and Roget talked about the paintings, the bronzes, and what they would do to re-assimilate them into their collection.

"Security concerns me," Roget said after Jean had left the office. "How would someone know how to cut the glass that is supposed to set off an alarm unless they knew about each type of glass and what settings to use to neutralize the cutting?"

"Do you think it was an inside job?" The Director asked.

"That would be an obvious answer, but I don't think so because of all the others that took place that night." Roget's skills as a Research Director and his knowledge as a premier authenticator naturally led him to be inquisitive. "I don't think it was an inside job, but I do think that whoever did it had some help from the inside. How else would they know how to bypass the alarms and other systems that are in place?"

"We need to keep that thought to ourselves," the Director responded as he picked up the phone to call Chief Inspector LeBlanc and tell him of the art that had been returned.



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Back in the mail room, Jean pulled out the paper that he'd been writing on – the art work, the artists, the Greek letters. He was trying to make sense of it all. Director of Research Claude Roget had said that everything returned to Musée d'Orsay were the original pieces. Paramount in Jean's mind, as well as in most of those in the know, was "Why?"

Why would the brazen thieves who'd gotten away with an extreme heist be returning the canvases and the bronzes? The addition of the Greek letters – some were calling them symbols – on the backs of the canvases and the bottoms of the bronzes had to have some meaning. Most Parisians so far only knew what had been reported on the news stations. Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc of the French National Police was on his way to the Museum Director's office. He would be utterly surprised when he got there and saw all the items that had been returned to Musée d'Orsay. There were still some that had not been returned, but there was optimistic hope that all would eventually be sent back.

Something was running through Jean's mind; something seemed familiar as he looked at the list. It wasn't the letters

themselves, or the fact that most of the items on his list had two Greek letters and only one had one letter. He was certain that the symbols were indeed Greek letters; there was just too much consistency for them to be anything else.

There were no other deliveries of note that afternoon, and Jean was quick to clock out and leave when his shift was over. He caught the bus as he hurried home; there was something he wanted to do. He had a thought running through his mind that he needed to check out; it might explain the Greek letters.

Once home, Jean began to scan his bookshelf; reading always seemed to give him inspiration. It wasn't reading that he wanted to do this time, but he felt there was something about the books that was pulling him. He looked at his art books; no, that would be too obvious. He didn't see how philosophy would play into the pattern, if there was a pattern. Travel? No. It was when he started to look at the fiction novels that he felt a mental pull. His novels by Dan Brown were stacked next to each other.

He pulled *The Da Vinci Code* from the shelf and began to flip through it. As the pages opened and he saw Robert Langdon's name, it came to him. The novels by Dan Brown that feature Robert Langdon have to do with cryptography, symbols, and the hidden meanings behind them.

So there is a hidden meaning to the letters, Jean thought to himself. *Now the key is to understand what they mean, which will tell us why they're being returned*, Jean continued thinking. He sat down at the computer, updated the table with the new entries from today, and then started doing some sorting of the table. He noticed that there were a few

duplicated entries; he tried making words out of the letters; nothing was coming to him. He printed the file; perhaps an idea would come to him if he just let it alone for a while.



Arriving at work early the next day, Jean wrote out a short note and took it to the Museum Director's office. Neither he nor his secretary was there yet, so he left the note on her desk along with a wrapped Godiva chocolate. The note said, "I think I have uncovered the first part of the mystery with the Greek letters. Jean." He was certain he'd get a call right away.

And he did, but it was from the secretary thanking him for the chocolate and telling him that the Director would be arriving soon if he wanted to come up and wait for him. It was slow in the mail room so Jean went upstairs and met the Director just as he was coming down the hall.

"*Bonjour, Monsieur,*" Jean said as he approached the Director.

"Good morning, Jean," the Director replied. "I had a text message saying you've uncovered part of the mystery. I can't wait to hear it, and I'm sure the police would be interested also." The two men continued walking to the Director's office suite where his secretary was filing some papers as the two entered.

"*Bonjour*," the Director said to his secretary who was surprisingly pleasant this morning.

"Good morning, sir. Hello, Jean. Thanks again for the chocolate. How'd you know that I love Godiva?"

"Who doesn't?" Jean smiled as he replied and the two men continued to the Director's private office. The Director left the door open so the secretary could bring in his coffee.

"Would you like some coffee, also?" the secretary asked Jean as she set the Director's cup on his desk.

"Thank you, but no," Jean replied to the secretary.

"You had a call from the Chief Inspector who'd like you to call him this morning," she said as she started to leave the office. "I've printed out your schedule for today; is there anything else you'd like for now?"

"No, that will be fine for now. *Merci*," the Director answered as he took a sip from the steaming cup and looked at his schedule. "Have a seat, Jean, and let's hear what you've uncovered."

Jean sat down in the chair next to the Director's desk and laid out his theory behind the Greek letters and how he saw a connection to Robert Langdon in the Dan Brown novels. The Director seemed quite interested as he listened and nodded his head a few times. "What's still missing, however," Jean added, "is just exactly what the letters mean. I know it's there. Whoever sent them back wouldn't have done it if they didn't want to tell us something."

"Are you comfortable with talking with the police? I think you're on to something that they've not gotten yet." The Museum Director was beginning to think more of this young man whose inquisitive nature and sharp mind just

might help solve the mystery of who masterminded the art thefts and why they're being returned.

"Anything I can do to help," Jean replied.

The Director smiled as he picked up the phone and placed a call to Chief Inspector LeBlanc. "Thirty minutes will be just fine," the Director said after a brief conversation.

It seemed like a quick thirty minutes when there was a knock on the Director's door. "Shall I?" Jean asked.

The Director nodded his head while talking on the phone, and Jean went and opened the door.

"Oh, hello," the puzzled Chief Inspector of the French National Police said as Jean opened the door. LeBlanc was expecting to be greeted by the Museum Director. "I'm Monsieur LeBlanc, Chief Inspector of the French National Police, and this is Monsieur Moreau from Interpol. The Director is expecting us."

"Come right in; he's on the phone right now," Jean said as he stepped out of the way for them to enter. "I'm the one he mentioned on the phone with you, Chief Inspector."

"And what is it that you do here?" LeBlanc asked as he looked at the young man's name badge.

"The name's Jean," the astute mail clerk said as he noticed the glance. "I currently work in the mail room during the day, and I'm attending the university in the evening studying art history."

"And you've come up with a theory about these symbols?" LeBlanc continued.

"*Oui, Monsieur*," Jean answered as the Museum Director concluded the phone call.

"Chief Inspector, thank you for coming over here so soon," the Director said as he stood from behind his desk.

Chief Inspector LeBlanc was looking less enthused as he just heard that it was a mail room clerk's idea that brought him here. "Director, this is Interpol Agent Antoine Moreau who's assisting us on the case," LeBlanc curtly replied. "Now what's this theory that was so important to pull us from headquarters?"

The Director didn't like LeBlanc's attitude. He wasn't terribly fond of him on a good day, but LeBlanc's tone this morning was definitely having a souring effect on the mood in the room. "*Bonjour, Monsieur Moreau,*" he said politely to the Interpol agent. Then to both men, he continued, "I think you'll like what Jean has uncovered. He's an art student who I hope will move into our Research Department once he completes his university studies.

Jean took his cue from the Director, and handed a copy of his compiled table to the Chief Inspector and to the Interpol agent. "Now I know I don't have all the information that your offices have available, but based on what I've heard on the news, plus what's come back here at the Orsay, I think there's a pattern that's similar to something we've seen before." Jean paused as the two men looked at the paper. Moreau looked interested, while LeBlanc clearly dismissed the idea.

The Director noticed LeBlanc's indifference; that made him even more defiant in wanting to promote Jean and his idea.

"As I looked at these Greek letters, I was looking for a pattern, but I didn't find one except that the highest letter

used is lambda, the eleventh letter in the Greek alphabet. Think about this. If you wanted to send a message, you wouldn't be able to do that while using just the first eleven letters in an alphabet; right? So there has to be more to it than that. I think there's a connection similar to how the character Robert Langdon pulls back the shrouds of symbols in some of the novels by Dan Brown, such as *The Da Vinci Code*, which had some highlights here in Paris at Le Louvre."

Jean paused for any response. LeBlanc's eyes kept their distant look, while Moreau's showed interest.

"And that's it?" was the disdainful response from LeBlanc.

"I think he's on to something," Moreau retorted as he looked over at the Chief Inspector. "What else do you think, young man?"

The Museum Director smiled as the Interpol agent showed genuine interest in what Jean was saying. That, and the fact that LeBlanc wasn't interested at all, made the Director happy.

"Unfortunately, I've not been able to take it any further," Jean replied. "The letters can't be used to make words, but then having a total of eleven letters or symbols makes it difficult to translate into being numbers unless there's some number system of base eleven." Jean felt he was on the right track, but he knew he didn't have anything additional to offer.

"Numbers, an interesting idea," the Interpol agent said. "Now I'm not much of a fan of Dan Brown's novels, but he does tell an interesting set of stories with, as you say, the Harvard professor who traces the symbols through various twists

and turns in the plot.” Moreau paused as he closed his eyes and thought. He rubbed his forehead and continued.

“Letters becoming numbers that become a symbol for something else, and it’s a professor who solves the mystery. This is coming together now. Yes, I see it.” The Interpol agent nods his head, stands up, and walks over to Jean’s chair and shakes his hand. “Excellent job, young man. Excellent!”

“*Merci, Monsieur,*” Jean replies as he awkwardly gets out of his chair to stand up.



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“Well, what is it?” the Chief Inspector asks, all of a sudden showing an interest.

Interpol Agent Moreau started in a methodical voice. “There was a case of a passenger going missing each day that a cruise ship was in port in the Mediterranean. Interpol was called in because of the international nature of the case, and I was the agent assigned to it. Initially, as we looked at the days of the week when the passengers went missing along with some other data, we thought we saw a mathematical pattern. There was a pattern, but we were looking at it the wrong way. It then took some convincing but we were able to contact this mathematics professor who not only conducts seminars worldwide on solving mysteries and crimes through mathematics, but who had helped the police in Sydney, Australia, solve the case of a string of murders there. Actually, he was here in Paris at the time we got a hold of him. We were able to get him to join the ship where he and I collaborated on solving the case, which we did. And it was just in the nick of time, right before the cruise ended. I think we need to get him involved in this case.” Moreau stopped to let that information sink in.

“So what you’re saying,” Chief Inspector LeBlanc began, “is that Interpol wasn’t able to solve the case but a math professor did?”

Moreau recognized LeBlanc’s slight, but he ignored it as he responded. “We worked together on it, but it definitely was the professor who pulled it all together. He did it in Australia; he did it again in the Mediterranean; he’s my bet for solving this one here in Paris. Unless, of course, the Chief Inspector has another plan that he’s not yet told us.”

LeBlanc didn’t like the direction of the conversation, but once he’d called Interpol, there wasn’t much else he could do. “So who is this professor and how do we contact him?” LeBlanc felt like he was losing control of the investigation, which he was.

Moreau reached inside his coat and pulled out his mobile phone, typed in a few words, and looked up. “His name is Alfred Dunningham, and he’s a Professor of Mathematics in California. I just happen to have his home telephone number.”

“Chief Inspector,” the Director began. “Do we call the professor, or do you have another approach?”

LeBlanc let out a heavy sigh; he didn’t like being upstaged, especially when this scenario began with a lowly mail clerk. “Go ahead,” LeBlanc reluctantly replied. “Wake him up; it’s two thirty in the morning there. I’m sure he’ll be happy about that.”

“We’ll probably just get his answering machine,” the Director said. “What’s the number?” he asked Moreau.

The Director wrote down the number, picked up his phone and dialed the number. The phone rang five times in Napa, California, before the answering machine took over.

The distinctive voice of Professor Dunningham was instantly recognized by Moreau. "Hello; we're the Dunninghams and we're not able to answer the phone right now. Please leave your name, phone number, and a brief message. Thank you."

Click.

That was the end of the recorded message. Moreau went over to the phone; he was the only one in that room who was known to Dunningham. "Good morning, Professor. This is Interpol Agent Antoine Moreau calling from Musée d'Orsay in Paris, France. We apologize for the early morning phone call, but it's urgent that I speak with you right away. If you recall, we worked together recently as you solved the mystery of the disappearing passengers from the cruise ship in the Mediterranean. I'm sure you're aware of the art thefts that have occurred here in Paris. Some of the art has been returned and there are symbols or Greek letters on the backs of the canvases. We've identified somewhat of a pattern," Moreau paused as he winked at the Director, knowing that Dunningham's specialty was number patterns.

Agent Moreau left his own mobile phone number as the number to call back "as soon as you get this message."

"I bet he'll be reluctant to call even though it was Paris that we pulled him from last time," Moreau said as the Director hung up the phone. "I'll have Lyon try to find him. If he's outside the country, we'll have him found in no time. That's the beauty of passport identification." After a brief pause, he

continued. "If you don't mind, I'll call headquarters right now and start the search. I hope he is out outside the USA because that will make it much easier to locate him than if he were somewhere in the States."

Moreau stepped over by the window and called Interpol Headquarters in Lyon. Since they'd worked with Professor Dunningham before, they already had a lot of his personal information on file; his passport number and his personal mobile number were the most important assets.



“If you don’t mind, Chief Inspector, I think I’ll stay here for a while. I’d like to talk some more with the Director and this young man about the Greek letters and maybe even about the glass and the cutters that were used to steal the items.” Interpol Agent Antoine Moreau was quickly learning of Chief Inspector LeBlanc’s complete disdain for the art world, especially the collectors. It was becoming clear to Moreau that LeBlanc was purely a figurehead in the investigation and that the young female detective was the one he’d have to rely on for actual police work.

“That’s fine,” LeBlanc replied. “I have some real work I can be doing back at headquarters.” As he started to stand, he continued, “Don’t worry I can find my way out,” and he went to the door, opened it, and kept walking. He didn’t bother to shut the door.

“Quite the pleasant man,” Moreau said in a sarcastic voice. “He’s let his Inspector-Chief ego get in the way of doing real investigative work. If the professor is to be located, we should know something straight away. With all the information being stored in the cloud and with immediate access to it, there’s no hiding from the authorities any more.

“What about those high-tech glass cutters that were used to open up the painting frames and the cases holding the bronzes? How would anyone know what was needed?” The Interpol agent switched the focus of the conversation.

At that point, Jean stood up. “If you’d like me to leave, I’m sure there’s some work for me to do downstairs.”

“No, Jean, that’s fine. But why don’t you close the door?” The Director was including this mail room clerk in some of the most sensitive discussions around the entire case of the art thefts. Jean had certainly gained the Director’s complete trust, and he wanted the Interpol agent to also see what talent this young man possessed.

Jean smiled as he went to the door and closed it. “Thank you for your confidence in me, sir, but perhaps I should call Luc and tell him where I am.”

“He knows you’re here; he’ll call if he needs you. Relax. Now,” the Director said as he turned toward the Interpol Agent, “what were you saying, *Monsieur Moreau*?”

Moreau turned his head to the side, set his chin in the fist of his right hand, and let out a deep sigh. “Analyzing these symbols, the Greek letters as you’re saying, is a bit intriguing. Don’t take this the wrong way, young man, but that’s not something I’d normally see from someone working in the mail room.”

Jean smiled wryly; he was used to those comments. They were meant well; they were just awkward and he didn’t know how to respond. So he didn’t.

The Director did. “He’s going to school at the university studying art, and I’ve already told him several times that we would gladly find him a position inside the museum perhaps

in Research, but he said he wants to stay where he is until he completes his studies.”

“I think we’d be interested in him at Interpol if he wants to continue his investigative work in art,” Moreau responded as he looked toward Jean. “Whatever you choose, young man, I know you’ll do well.” He turned his attention back to the Director. “Those high-tech glass cutters; what do you know about them?”

The Director cleared his throat; this was a very sensitive subject. “When the van Goghs were framed, they used special glass that would reflect ultra-violet rays as well as other harmful light sources. Even though we say no flash photography, people still do; some people don’t even know how to turn the auto flash off on their cameras.

“As it turns out, it wasn’t really the glass cutter that was so high-tech to foil the security systems, there was a small electronic device that was held on by a suction cup that we think was used to neutralize the effects of the cutting. We’ve looked at the pieces of glass that were cut away from the frames and we could see the residue from the suction cup and very small marks where the electronic leads would touch the glass to send out the neutralizing signals.”

“Interesting,” Moreau said as he scratched his head. “How would anyone know to do that?”

“Good question,” the Director replied. “Clearly there had to have been some sort of inside information about the security systems provided to the thieves. And there would have to have been some upfront planning to have all those thefts take place on the same night, just after a major work stoppage. Whoever orchestrated all of this has some connec-

tions very high up in places, and it wouldn't surprise me at all if the police weren't a part of it."

"Really," Moreau queried. "I know that LeBlanc is basically a buffoon, but do you think he'd participate in something like that?"

"I don't think he's smart enough," the Director answered. "But he has some pretty smart people under him. That, however, won't answer the question of who provided the details of the security systems and how to override the special glass that they cut into."

Moreau started to say something when his mobile phone began to vibrate and emit a low buzzing sound. "Excuse me," he said. "I think we might have our answer from Lyon about the professor." The Interpol agent answered his phone and listened intently to what he was being told. "Sure, I'll wait a minute to be connected," he said with excitement in his voice.

He covered the phone with his hand and whispered, "They've located the professor in Beijing; they have him on the phone right now, and they're going to connect him through to my phone. Isn't technology great?"

Both the Director and Jean nodded their heads. They both knew that technology was great when it gave you what you wanted. But when something goes wrong, or it loses power or data, it can be extremely frustrating.

Moreau's eyes flashed wide open as he heard Professor Alfred Dunningham, PhD, come on the line. "Yes; hello, Professor. This is Interpol Agent Antoine Moreau in Paris, but you may better remember me as Pierre Dubois, the chief marketing officer for Holiday Cruise Line, when we worked

on that case on the ship in the Mediterranean.” Moreau paused to let the information sink in.

He then listened as the professor was saying something to him. “Right, she was quite the tricky one indeed. How’s the weather there in Beijing? It’s quite nice here in Paris.” He paused to listen again.

“Yes, I’m sure you are quite curious about why I’m calling and how we found you in the first place. We’ll discuss that latter item later offline, but here’s the reason I’m calling.” Moreau went on to explain the details of what they knew in the case of the art thefts, and the curious nature of the Greek letters on the artwork that had been returned.

“When you joined the ship in the Mediterranean you said you wanted to get back to Paris where we pulled you from. Well, here’s that chance to come back.”



47



Less than a mile east from Musée d'Orsay on the Left Bank of the Seine River, afternoon lunches and repar-tees were in full swing along Boulevard Saint-Germain. It didn't matter what day of the week it was as the bars and brasseries were busy every day; especially on a beautiful day like today.

Marie Laurent was in a typically chic outfit, not really the normal clothes for a police detective, but she was more than a police detective. Being the relative of a famous actor, she felt she needed to keep up the image. How she afforded all her clothing, jewelry, and accessories wasn't exactly clear, but then she normally did lead a rather quiet life.

She didn't have a steady boyfriend even though her natural beauty caught everyone's eye as she went past. This lack of a steady beau caused many people to question her personal life, but she never let that bother her. She knew who she was and that was all that mattered to her. Marie strolled into a large department store along the boulevard and went into the toilet. She didn't need to relieve herself before having lunch with Louis; she needed to change her appearance.

The recent television interviews with the French National Police brought Marie's face into view more than she preferred. Her role as the lead detective on the art thefts case had her standing in front of the camera alongside Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc almost every day.

She pulled a dark-haired wig out of her large handbag and pulled it over her hair, tucking the loose pieces up inside. She then took a brightly colored scarf out of the bag and wrapped it around her neck, tying it in a large knot. Last to come out of the bag was a large pair of dark sunglasses. She was now ready to head back out into the public where hopefully she wouldn't be recognized by anyone. She flushed the toilet, pulled on the lid so it slammed down against the hard plastic seat, and then turned on the water faucet. She let it run for a while as she played with her wig so it looked just right. Turning the water off, she took a couple paper towels from the dispenser, wadded them up and tossed them into the waste basket.

Marie walked slowly and tall as she left the store, turned left and made her way down to the place where she and Louis had arranged to meet. As she walked into the brasserie she spotted Louis seated at a booth near the rear. His back was to the wall so he could see her come in and he waved to her. Marie smiled as she weaved her way through the tables and chairs, all the time keeping her sunglasses down over her eyes, not an unusual thing for Parisians to do. For many, style was more important than functionality. In this case, it was remaining incognito. Louis had never seen Marie in the wig before, but she had told him about it and the scarf she was going to wear.

Louis stood up as Marie approached and they greeted each other as good friends in the standard Parisian way, right cheek to right cheek and then left cheek to left cheek. The waiter had already delivered *une carafe d'eau* (a carafe of water, or table water versus pricey bottled water), and Louis signaled to him to now bring the glasses of white wine; it was too early in the day for *vin rouge* (red wine).

The two engaged in idle chit-chat while the waiter was bringing the wine and taking their order; they both ordered the special of the day, the Croque-monsieur. The ham and cheese with a bit of a flavor twist was served with a small mound of coleslaw salad and a few fried potatoes. “*Santé*,” Louis said as they touched their wine glasses together.

“*Santé*,” Marie responded. The cool crisp taste of the White Burgundy wine was very refreshing, particularly on a day that was a bit warm. She was also warm because of the wig and the scarf that was just a little too tight around her neck. But comfort was of secondary concern to her right now.

“Any problems?” Louis asked.

“None,” Marie replied in a soft voice. “The Chief Inspector doesn’t have a clue about anything, and he’s letting Interpol run the investigation. We’re in it for the public view just because people expect the French National Police to be the ones to solve the case.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Louis said as he saw the waiter approaching with their two plates. “*Merci, Monsieur*,” he said with a smile to the waiter who set the plates on the table and then left. “*Bon appétit*,” Louis offered as he started to cut into his sandwich.

Marie had already put a bite of the salad into her mouth so she just nodded her head, smiled, and continued eating.

“Do you think they’ll be able to decipher the message?” Louis asked softly.

“Probably not,” she replied. “There’s certainly not anyone smart enough at our headquarters to figure it out, and I don’t think Interpol has the manpower or the depth to do it.” She paused, then continued, “They might need some help.”

Louis nodded his head as he ate his sandwich mixed with a few of the potatoes.

“Are you worried?” she asked as she stopped chewing and looked up from her plate.

“Not exactly worried, but I do wonder what would happen if they make the connection on who actually did it. They could put me away for a long time”

“You’re safe,” Marie said with a calm, reassuring look.



Professor Dunningham continued to listen as Interpol Agent Moreau explained a little more about the Greek letters and the mail clerk/art student who determined there was some pattern in their use, which is why Moreau wanted the professor to come to Paris. "There is a morning non-stop flight from Beijing to Paris on Air France that we can book you and your wife on," Moreau added. "Okay?"

"Well," Dunningham replied somewhat hesitantly. "We already have some plans for tomorrow morning, and I have one more meeting with the fellows at the Beijing Mathematical Society in the afternoon, but I guess we could fly out the next day. We were planning on heading east for home, so I'll have to let Sylvia know we're going west instead."

A smile came across Moreau's face. "Thank you, Professor," the ebullient agent said. "Your tickets will be waiting for you at the airport; you'll be on Air France flight 125 leaving Beijing at nine in the morning and arrive at Charles de Gaulle at one fifty in the afternoon. As usual, we'll have an agent meeting you and your wife right outside baggage claim to take you to the hotel, and I'll be there at the hotel to greet you."

Moreau paused as the professor was repeating some of the information while he was writing it down. "Yes, that's correct. Thank you again, Professor, and we'll see you in two days. *Au Revoir*."

It was about thirty-nine hours later when Air France flight 125 pushed back from the gate at Beijing Capital International Airport. The two Business Class cabins in the white sleek Boeing 777-300ER were almost filled to capacity, and the Dunninghams were fortunate to be assigned the last open pair of angled seats in the center at the rear of the second cabin. The Professor was sipping his glass of chilled champagne and Sylvia was reading one of her ever-present magazines as the plane taxied down the tarmac toward runway 19.

He handed his empty glass to the meticulously dressed and coiffed flight attendant as she walked down the right aisle. "Is there anything else I can get for you as we take off?"

"No, thanks," the polite professor said as he looked up at her. He glanced over at his wife who was deeply entrenched in her article. A slight smile came across his face as he reflected on her flexibility to go anywhere and everywhere with him. She never questioned why someone would call him out of the blue and he would agree to go help solve some mystery using his genius mathematical logic and mind.

Here they were going again. Instead of flying to San Francisco and taking an Uber ride to their home in Napa, they were heading in the opposite direction to help Interpol and the French National Police. Sylvia didn't always understand when Alfred would give her an explanation; actually it was a rare occurrence when she did understand it. But she

would smile and nod her head anyway as if she did. He knew she didn't, but that was okay.

The hum of the twin General Electric GE90-115B turbofan engines began to build as the plane started its roll down the 12,500-foot runway. The thrust from the powerful engines pushed them against the back of their seats, and Alfred could feel the plane begin its rotation into the air. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath in through his nose.

The image of Interpol Agent Moreau came into his mind. There were some of the things that happened on that cruise ship in the Mediterranean that he never figured out, but they had managed to solve the mystery behind the missing passengers. It was too bad that he and his wife had to leave Paris for that case, but they were now heading back to Paris.

Dunningham opened his eyes and saw that Sylvia was looking at him with a pleased look on her face. She knew her husband was a brilliant mathematician, but she admired him because he was a caring person. They had a nice home in wine country in Napa Valley – in fact, they lived in the middle of five acres of Shiraz grapes – where they could live quietly and peacefully while he taught at Northern California State University. But it was his passion for numbers and the logic behind their patterns that compelled him to travel and help solve intriguing mysteries through the use of mathematics.

He smiled back at her and leaned forward to give her a kiss. The tight seat belt kept him from actually reaching her cheek, but he gave her an air kiss anyway. She blew a kiss back to him. He was able to reach her right hand with his

outstretched left hand and he clasped her hand. She was an amazing wife who never questioned any of his quirky behavior; she attributed it to numbers that were always floating around inside his head as he tried to make sense of out of them and figure out what the pattern meant.

A little squeeze of her hand and then he pulled his hand free. He reached into his inside coat pocket and pulled out the printout of Greek letters. Agent Moreau had mentioned that only the first eleven letters were on any of the returned canvases and bronzes. *Why eleven?* he thought. He knew he wouldn't be able to come up with any starting logic without more details. He folded the sheet in half, put it back into his coat pocket, and breathed a relaxing sigh; they had another ten and a half hours to go.

Air France flight 125 was still over the western regions of Russia when the first postal deliveries were being made in Paris. While most of the stolen artwork had already been returned, there were still a few missing items. Three canvases were delivered in tubes to three of the smaller art galleries, and two small somewhat-heavy boxes were delivered to Musée d'Orsay.

In the mail room, Jean pulled the two boxes from the delivery and took them to the scanner. Only four of the eight stolen Degas bronzes had been returned; perhaps these were the last two, accounting for the two that were probably in The Hermitage vault in St. Petersburg. His eyes widened as he saw the scanned contents of the first box; he hit the **PRINT** button and the two pages came out of the printer. Jean scanned the second box; it also held a bronze statue. He let out a loud yell, "HOORAY!"

Across the room Luc lifted his head, looked in Jean's direction, and hollered to him, "What is it?"

"Two more of the Degas bronzes. Wait until the Director sees these. We just have the two in Russia to get back."

"Like that'll ever happen," Luc muttered in a softer voice.

"What?" Jean asked.

"Nothing," Luc replied.

"I'll be back," Jean yelled as he gathered up the two boxes and the printouts. He headed toward the door while Luc got back to his routine chores.

Minutes later Jean was at the Director's office; "*Bonjour*," he said as he smiled at the secretary. "Is the Director in?"

"Yes, but he's on the phone right now," she answered in a pleasant voice. "Won't you please have a seat? Some more surprises?"

"Two more of the Degas bronzes," Jean replied. "Just two more to go, and we think we know where they are," he continued without realizing he probably shouldn't be saying anything – not even to the Director's secretary.

"How did you figure some of it out? Were you a detective?" she asked wondering how someone like him would be working in the mail room.

"I'm studying art at the university," Jean replied. "The job in the mail room fits in with my class schedule."

"He's off the phone now," she interrupted as she arose from the chair and knocked on the door.

"*Entrez*," the Director called out, so she opened the door as Jean was getting up.

"Jean is here" she said into the private office.

Jean was already at the doorway when he heard the Director say, "Send him in."

"*Bonjour*," Jean said as he entered the room.

"*Bonjour, Jean*. Two more boxes?" the Director asked in an excited voice.

"*Oui*," Jean replied as he set the boxes on the table.

The Director got his knife and slit open the boxes. *Standing Horse* and *Spanish Dancer* were the two bronzes that had not yet been accounted for. Seeing these two boxes reminded the Director that he'd not heard anything from Interpol about the two bronzes they went to look for in St. Petersburg. "Jean, would you write a note for me to call Interpol to see what progress they've made in St. Petersburg?"

"Certainly," Jean said as he walked over to the Director's desk and wrote a quick note on the pad of paper. "From the scans they look like *Standing Horse* and the *Spanish Dancer*, although the printout shows a composition of materials that's a little different from most of his other bronzes." Jean's depth of knowledge was coming out, and he wasn't doing it to show off. He was truly interested in the art and he wanted to know everything about it that he could.

The Director pulled the packing material out of the first box, followed by the bronze. He held it by the base in his right hand and looked at the sculpture. It looked like *Standing Horse*, but it wasn't the original; it was too rough. "You're right, Jean. This isn't a Degas. Someone made a copy of *Standing Horse*, but this isn't ours." He put it back in the box and pulled the statue out of the second box.

Jean got closer and looked with anticipation.

"Same thing. It looks like *Spanish Dancer*, but it doesn't have the smooth lines and the wear of the Degas," the Director said. "Someone made copies of the two and sent these back instead." He laid it down in the box, went back to his desk, and sat down in his chair.

"Well, the good news," Jean began, "is that the originals are probably close by as they were mailed here in the six-

teenth *arrondissement*. Maybe someone there remembers who mailed these boxes two days ago.”

“Good point, young man. Let me call our friends at the police and have them go inquire.”

“Don’t forget that you also want to check with Interpol on the bronzes in St. Petersburg,” Jean said as he walked to the door.

“Right. Thanks, Jean” the Director said as he picked up the telephone and began to punch in the numbers for Chief Inspector LeBlanc.

Air France flight 125 from Beijing touched down at Paris Charles De Gaulle Airport right on schedule at ten minutes before two in the afternoon. As the principal hub for Air France, the airport is the busiest one in France and second only to London's Heathrow Airport for all of Europe. The traffic on the ground today was busy as usual, but the passengers didn't notice it as the plane never came to a full stop as it taxied from its landing on runway 27 Left and worked its way toward the terminal for international arrivals requiring Customs and Immigration inspections.

The messages on the P.A. system were initially in French, followed by English and then Chinese translations. Professor Dunningham listened intently during the French messages, but the only words he understood were "*Paris*" and "*Merci*." He didn't even bother to try to listen to any of the Chinese messages; the Asian languages were so different that he knew he'd never be able to understand any of them.

There was a break in the announcements. "Well, dear," the professor began, "we can catch up on those sites we didn't get to see the last time we were here but got pulled away."

“Yes,” Sylvia replied. “That will be nice. Do you think we’ll be able to go back to the Orsay? Remember that clock thing that you wanted to check out?”

“Oh, I remember that, of course,” Alfred replied as he instinctively looked at his watch. “I’m sure we’ll get to the Orsay although I’m not sure which exhibits and areas might be closed or roped off due to the robberies. But,” he paused slightly before continuing, “I’m sure that we’ll be able to go up to the clock on the fifth floor.”

Sylvia’s eyes widened as she thought about the fifth floor coffee shop. “The pastries up there,” she started. “They’re the best,” and a smile came across her lips as she recalled the pastry with chocolate drizzled across the top. She was unaware that her tongue did a sweeping motion from the left to the right of her top lip as her mind processed the memory of that tasty pastry.

Alfred just smiled; his wife didn’t require, nor demand, much to make her happy. But it was seeing the simple things that pleased her that made him happy.

A sudden jerk. The plane had stopped. The seat belt light was turned off, and people started unfastening their seat belts and standing up. A flight attendant was standing in each aisle at the rear of the second Business Class cabin to ensure that the passengers in the forward cabins were able to exit the plane first. Professor Dunningham didn’t care; he knew they’d all have to wait at Baggage Claim anyway, but it was the way that Air France treated their Business Class passengers.

Another message over the P.A. system in French as people were retrieving their bags from the overhead bins. Alfred

didn't even bother to try to understand any of it. He knew the English version would be next. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport. Your checked luggage will be at carousel fourteen in approximately twenty minutes. As a reminder, all passengers must be processed through Customs and Immigration here in Paris regardless of your citizenship as the flight originated in China. Please have your passport and completed forms ready to hand to the agents. Thank you for flying Air France, and welcome to Paris." The Chinese version of the message was next.

Alfred got their carry-on bags from the overhead bin and followed his wife into the left aisle and they headed toward the forward door next to the galley separating the two Business Class cabins.

"*Merci*," the flight attendants said as Sylvia and Alfred turned left and stepped out of the plane into the jet bridge.

"Thank you," Alfred replied; his mind had not yet switched into the French mode. He wasn't fluent by any means, but he was able to respond to certain sayings and phrases in several languages, and French was one of them. But they'd just come from China where English was the only language he could use and so he wasn't quite ready. But he'd get there.

Flying into Paris and going through Customs and Immigration was normally pretty easy, but Alfred and Sylvia were coming in from Beijing, and all flights from the People's Republic of China required extra screening. As seasoned international travelers, Alfred and Sylvia knew to take it easy and go with the flow. By the time they made it through the Im-

migration section, carousel fourteen began turning and bags were being deposited onto it.

Alfred got a cart and put their carry-on bags on it. "Why don't you stay here with these bags while I go get our checked bags?" he said to Sylvia as he rolled the cart to her.

Sylvia was tired from the flight, and she nodded her head as Alfred walked toward the far end of the baggage carousel. A few minutes later he rolled their two checked bags toward their cart and he arranged all four bags on it and headed toward the Customs line.

"*Bonjour, Monsieur,*" Alfred said as he handed their passports to the Customs agent.

"*Bonjour,*" the agent responded as he took the passports without looking up. Once he saw that he'd been handed two United States of America passports, he altered his glance to see the professor and his wife. "You're Americans and you're coming from Beijing?" the agent asked without actually asking a complete question.

"That's correct," Alfred replied.

"What were you doing in China?" the agent asked.

"We were visiting the Great Wall and some of the other touristy things there," Alfred said as he gave a squeeze to Sylvia's hand. She knew not to say anything when he did that.

The agent flipped through the pages in the passports. He stopped when he noticed the China visa in Alfred's passport. Most people would get an L visa, a tourist visa. Alfred's was an M visa, the visa that is issued to those who intend to go to China for commercial and trade activities. The agent looked up and at Alfred. "Your visa," he began. "It's not a tourist visa; it's a business visa. What were you doing there?"

Alfred smiled, pulled out his wallet, and then extracted a business card. He handed the card to the agent. "I'm a mathematics professor and I'd been invited to teach classes in China several years ago; that's why I have the M visa. But my wife has the tourist visa, and we were there just on holiday as I said earlier."

The agent looked at the card: Alfred Dunningham, PhD, Professor of Mathematics. He looked again at Alfred and then at Sylvia. "And you?"

"I'm his wife," Sylvia responded. "We went to the Great Wall; have you ever been there? It's really amazing when you see how tall those steps are and . . ."

She was cut off mid-sentence by the agent who stamped their passports, handed them to Alfred, and waved them on through. Alfred grabbed the passports, smiled at the agent, and exited the secure area as the glass doors opened.

As they walked into the masses of waiting people, Alfred saw a man in a suit holding a printed sign, "Dunninghams." Alfred grabbed Sylvia's hand as he first looked around and then walked toward the man holding the sign. Alfred wasn't a paranoid person, but he knew to take precautions. He approached the man. "For whom are you waiting?" he asked.

The man in the suit turned his head first to the left and then to the right, and then back at Alfred. "As the sign says, sir. I'm here to pick up the Dunninghams."

"And if I say we're the Dunninghams, how do you know we really are?" Alfred continued. "But more importantly," he added. "How do I know you are the one who is supposed to pick us up?"

“Well, Professor,” the agent said as he smiled. “I was told to expect such a confirmation from you. No one else would ask such questions.” The agent turned to Sylvia. “Welcome to Paris, Mrs. Dunningham, or should I say, welcome back to Paris.” The agent reached inside his coat pocket and pulled out his Interpol ID badge and showed it to Alfred, who nodded his approval. “Agent Moreau is waiting for you at your hotel. Please follow me to the car,” the agent added as he turned toward the terminal exit.



51



While the Dunninghams were being driven from the airport to their hotel in Paris's swanky eighth *arrondissement*, a team of detectives was looking at a wall of papers. The papers were printouts of the images of the Greek letters from the returned pieces of art. They'd seen them before, the individual images as well as the collection of them.

"Well?" Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc asked; he'd instructed them to use any and all resources to come up with meanings of the letters. That's what they were now called — letters, not symbols. There was a consensus among the detective force, but mostly from the museums directors and staffs, that these were indeed letters from the Greek alphabet. The big questions now were, "Why Greek letters?" and "What do they mean?"

"They're clearly letters from the Greek alphabet," Detective Marie Laurent chimed in. "So whoever pulled off the heists and then returned them is trying to send us a message. Our job is to figure out the pattern. It doesn't take a genius to know what these letters are," she continued with a slight pause — a jab at the Chief Inspector. "Here's what I recommend. Let's create a database with the following pieces of da-

ta in it: the piece of art; where it was taken from; the order in which it was returned, and the letters on the item. Once we have all that data, we can then have the computer print out all the possible combinations and permutations. Once we look through those results, we should have our answer.”

The team of detectives and senior officers were silent. Marie had just presented a workable solution that none of the others had thought of. They just stared at her; some of them for her beauty, but some of them were actually in awe of her police work. One of the male detectives raised his hand.

“Yes?” Marie asked.

“But not all of the works have been returned; won’t that throw off the results?” The smug man smiled slightly; he’d caught her.

“You’re exactly right,” she responded quickly. “And it would be helpful if we had all of the items back in the galleries and museums where they belong. But we don’t. And in fact, we’re lucky to have any of them back. These people, whoever did it, could have just kept all of them. But they’re sending them back, well at least most of them so far. So for now, we just have to use the information that we have.” Marie paused; the man’s smugness vanished. “I’m open to any other suggestions if you have them.” The room was silent as she scanned it for any sign of contribution; there was none.

“Okay, then,” she continued as she looked around the room. “I’d like two volunteers to create the database, put in the information, and then print out all the possible combinations and permutations. Who wants to do that?”

Three people raised their hand, two of them somewhat reluctantly, and Marie went to talk with them. As she was doing that, Chief Inspector Le Blanc stood up. "I think Marie's on the right track here, and the printouts that you come up with should be very helpful to the mathematics professor who has flown into Paris to help us and Interpol on this case."

"What?" Marie interrupted her discussion with two of her volunteers as she heard LeBlanc's statement. "Why wasn't I informed of this? And who's this mathematics professor?"

"I'm sorry, Marie," LeBlanc began. "I know that you're running the internal investigation from the police point of view. But given the magnitude of the case, Interpol is the one who is really in charge, and they've decided to bring in this professor from the USA who's solved numerous cases around the world through the use of mathematics." LeBlanc paused slightly as he caught the glaring look from Marie. "We're the ones, I mean you're the lead here for the outward presentation to the French people. But Interpol has the overall command of this case. Don't worry; they'll still have to run everything through you."

Marie's face began to flush and she stared intently at the Chief Inspector whom everyone knew was completely incompetent in his position as the head of the Paris division of the French National Police. How he got there had been the subject of several rumors. But it wasn't unusual for people in bureaucratic jobs in France to get promoted based on seniority; that's how LeBlanc got there.

Marie loosened the scarf around her neck as she felt the need to cool down. Hearing that Interpol was bringing in a professor to help them solve the case wasn't good news. It was good news as far as solving the case was concerned, but it wasn't good news for some; it could undermine "the mission." She continued her discussion with the two geeks who were going to implement her database project.

"Let's also include the pieces that haven't been returned. Pick a different letter for those pieces, and do an A/B run where that one letter is used for all the missing pieces. Then do another run where you use a different letter, number, or whatever you want for each of the missing pieces. Since we don't know exactly what we're looking for, we need to consider all possibilities. Any questions or other suggestions?"

The two young men looked at each other, then to Marie. "*Non*," they replied in unison.

Marie thought for a moment before asking, "How soon do you think you can get the printouts to me?"

"Two hours," the boyish one said as he was caught looking somewhere besides at Marie's eyes.

"Coffee and macaroons if I have them within ninety minutes," she said. Marie was used to men not always looking at her eyes when talking with her.

A bit embarrassed, the one young man smiled and turned to the other man, nodded, and said, "We can do that."

"*Merci*," Marie responded as the two men got up and headed toward their desks.



As the sleek black car pulled to a stop in front of Le Hôtel Majesteux, the smartly dressed attendant rushed out to greet the hotel's latest guests. He waited for the driver to open his door. "*Bonjour*," the attendant said as the driver began to step out of the car. "May I?" the attendant added as he reached toward the door handle of the rear door on the driver's side.

"*Oui*," the driver responded as he went around the car to open the other door. The smell of freshly baked breads and pastries invaded their noses as the Dunninghams stepped out into the warm Parisian sunshine.

"Welcome to Le Hôtel Majesteux, Professor and Mrs. Dunningham," the attendant said in his perfect English and French accent. "Your host is waiting for you in the lobby," the attendant continued as he motioned for them to enter the hotel while he went to retrieve their luggage.

"It's a professional service," the driver said as he shook his head sideways refusing the modest tip that Alfred was holding out for him. "We should be the ones to tip you for your help."

"Nonsense," the professor replied. "Who wouldn't want to come to Paris at this time of the year?"

"Moreau is waiting for you inside, and I know he's anxious to get talking with you. Here's my card; I'm your driver while you're here. If you need anything, just call me." The agent turned his head and nodded to the almost-invisible man in the hotel window before getting into the car and driving away.

Alfred grabbed Sylvia's hand as they followed the attendant into the luxurious hotel. The sounds of a delightful chaconne melody wafted through the air as they entered the lobby and felt the rush of cool fresh air. Alfred looked to his left and saw the smiling face of Interpol Agent Moreau, his cohort in solving the mystery of the disappearing passengers on a cruise ship in the Mediterranean Sea.

"I have your keys," Moreau said as he approached the couple and shook hands with Alfred. "You look as charming as always, Mrs. Dunningham," he effused as he reached for her hand and kissed the top of it in a typical French manner.

"It's Sylvia, please, Monsieur Moreau," she said as she slightly nodded her head.

"Then you must call me Antoine," he replied.

The two smiled as Alfred looked around the paneled lobby, appreciating its old world feel and charm. "It looks as if they patterned this after Versailles," he said to Moreau.

"In fact, I think they did model it after the palace there. Too bad they didn't have room for any of the gardens," Moreau answered. Handing the room keys to the attendant, he continued. "Why don't you two head up to your suite, fresh-

en up if you'd like, and I'll be waiting down here for you so we can have a bite to eat."

"Certainly," Alfred replied as he motioned for the attendant to lead the way. "We won't be long," he said to Antoine as they headed toward the elevator.

True to his word, Alfred and Sylvia stepped out of the elevator no more than ten minutes after they'd first entered it. Agent Moreau was thumbing through some papers when they approached, catching him slightly off-guard as he wasn't expecting them to return so quickly.

"That was fast," Moreau said as he felt their presence and looked up at them.

"I told you it wouldn't take us very long. Nice suite, by the way. It almost reminds me of the one on the ship," Alfred added. "Although I don't think we need to worry about refrigerator magnets containing listening devices here. Did you ever figure out who was doing the bugging on the ship?"

"Not really," the Interpol agent replied. "I left the ship when you did, and it really wasn't an Interpol matter. I think it was the Head of Security because he didn't like that fact that we were brought in to resolve something that should have been his responsibility. We've put the case into a monitor mode, but we haven't heard much from either the cruise line or the authorities on land. It's clearly not a priority anymore; unlike this current situation."

Alfred smiled and crossed his arms. "I was wondering when you would get around to it."

Antoine looked at his watch. "I think holding off for twenty minutes shows a bit of restraint; right?"

The professor nodded his head as he smiled slightly. "Now, what about that lunch you promised?"

"There's a great brasserie right around the corner."

"Is that okay with you, dear, or would you prefer to eat here at the hotel?" Alfred deferred to his wife who would never object to any decision he made anyway.

"Whatever Antoine suggests is fine with me; after all, he does know this city much better than we do," Sylvia replied in her typical demure manner.

"Good; let's go," the Interpol agent said as he led the way out the door.

As the three of them came back into the hotel lobby, their pace was much slower than before they had eaten. "I had forgotten how tasty the food was at the brasseries," Alfred said as he patted his stomach.

"I'm sure the food would have been just as good, or maybe even better, in the restaurant here as they do have a Michelin star. But you'll have more than enough opportunities to eat in there, and I'm sure you'll enjoy it just as much." Moreau paused for a moment before continuing. "Would you two like to take a rest before you and I get together, Professor?" The Interpol agent was ready and eager to get into the current case.

"Do you mind, dear?" Alfred asked Sylvia.

"Of course not," she answered. "That is why we're here."

Alfred smiled at his wife and turned to Antoine. "I'll be back down in a couple minutes."

"No rush," Antoine replied.

Once again, Alfred clasped Sylvia's hand, the two of them headed to the elevator, and Antoine dropped down

into one of the overstuffed chairs. He closed his eyes as he leaned his head back. His mind was processing images of the stolen artwork when the impact of the lunch made him wander off into sleep.

"Sleeping on the job, eh?" Alfred said as he exited the elevator and approached the sleeping Antoine.

Startled, Antoine quickly shook his head as he opened his eyes to see the Professor's smiling face. "I closed my eyes for just a few seconds ... how long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to have grabbed your folder and walked away," Dunningham replied.

"That's not good," Moreau replied. "Well, where are you comfortable talking about the case?"

"Wherever you want," Dunningham replied. "After all, I'm just a mathematics professor, and you're the one who's a spook. This is fine right here if it's okay with you."

The Interpol agent looked around; the lobby was practically empty. Plus he'd had his team do a clandestine electronics sweep of the place yesterday — in particular, the Dunningham's suite — so he was okay with meeting and talking here. "This will be fine," Moreau said as he motioned for Dunningham to sit down. "Would you like a coffee or some tea, or a sparkling water?"

"I'm fine; thanks," the Professor said as he sat down in an adjacent chair. He set his folder down on the table; his was a plain manila folder whereas Moreau's was bright blue with a neat printed label on the tab. The tab on Dunningham's folder was simply penciled, PARIS. "Where do you want to start?" he asked as he settled in to the comfortable

chair, wondering if that was how Louis XIV felt when he was at Versailles.

Moreau wiggled his body and attempted to sit upright in the chair that made it almost possible to do so. "I was thinking of the night of the thefts. It was a Thursday evening; there had been an announced National Workers' strike for that day; it was raining, and there was a 'Pictures at an Exhibition' concert and art showing at Petit Palais that night. Something tells me that there has to be some coincidence that all of that happens at the same time that an apparently well-orchestrated string of art thefts happen through the city."

Dunningham nodded his head. "But if there hadn't been any art thefts, would those things still seem like a coincidence? No one would even be talking about them. And the rain? Heck, it rains almost every time I'm here; I almost think that it's a given in Paris anymore."

He continued. "I don't think the day of the week is significant on its own. What do we know about the strike, and what about the art showing?"

Moreau opened his file folder, thumbed through a few sheets until he found the one he wanted. "The National Museum Workers Union announced on Wednesday that they were going on strike the next day. So there could be some coincidence with that. But we still wouldn't know if it was just a coincidence or if there was a relationship between the strike and the thefts."

"You're right there, my friend," Alfred chimed in. "There's a big difference between a coincidence and a relationship. If we knew that someone used the knowledge of

the planned strike to set the thefts into motion, now that would be a solid relationship.”

“There certainly was some planning that went into the thefts. They all occurred the same night, all over the city,” and Moreau paused. “And every one of them bypassed the elaborate security systems. That is too much of a coincidence for me.”

“I agree,” Alfred said. “What about the art exhibition? What do we know about that?”

“It was an open affair, meaning we don’t really have a guest list, plus some people paid cash, so there’s no record of their attendance.” Moreau looked through a couple more papers before continuing. “Some of the police force were there, as well as many other dignitaries; but I don’t think it is as big of a coincidence as the announced workers’ strike.”

“Okay; that seems logical to me. What have we found out about the pieces that have been returned? And what about the symbols or letters that are on them?” The mathematics professor was getting into full detective mode.

“The police are working on that; I had a message that they expect to have an analysis of the art and the symbols completed in an hour or two. They’re actually calling them letters now.”

“They certainly all appear to be Greek letters to me,” Alfred said.

“Well, it’s all Greek to me,” Antoine replied.

The old joke fell flat.

The noise and commotion inside the Police Headquarters died down as Interpol Agent Antoine Moreau and Mathematics Professor Alfred Dunningham walked through the frosted sliding doors into the heart of the investigative activity. Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc was the first to recognize them and he rushed to greet them.

“Ah, Professor,” LeBlanc offered. “It’s such a pleasure to meet you, and to have you working here with us and with Interpol. How was your flight from Beijing?”

Dunningham replied in a straight-forward manner. “The flight was in an aluminum tube filled with foul-smelling people. The food was moderate, but we landed safely, and after all, that is the most important thing. Wouldn’t you agree?”

LeBlanc didn’t know how to respond. He was just making small talk, but the learned professor was actually describing the answer to his question. “So, you two have worked together before?” he asked, referring to the Interpol agent.

“Yes, we have,” Dunningham again directly answered the question without offering any additional information.

Antoine Moreau caught on that the professor wasn’t going to be giving out more information than what was actually

being asked of him. He smiled slightly as he enjoyed the interaction, knowing that LeBlanc was way out of his league in trying to out-logic the esteemed mathematics professor.

“So, Chief Inspector,” Dunningham began. “Obviously there are a lot of questions to be answered, but I’m wondering, what is your top question? What is the question, that if we answered it, you would be able to move forward quickly because it was the one piece of the puzzle that you need?”

“You’re right, Professor; there are many questions we’re hoping to get answered.” LeBlanc hesitated slightly as he saw Marie Laurent begin to walk toward them. “The key question is ‘What are they trying to tell us?’ After all, they got away with the thefts; so why would they be sending them back to us, and sending some hidden message?”

“Sometimes we have to work backwards; start with the end and work toward the beginning.” The professor’s answer didn’t make sense to the Chief Inspector. But the Interpol agent knew what he meant. Moreau smiled as Detective Laurent approached. He nodded to her, and waited for LeBlanc to do the introductions.

“Professor,” LeBlanc began, “I’d like you to meet Detective Marie Laurent; she is not only the lead detective on the case, but she is also leading the entire investigation.” He paused as she and the professor shook hands. “Marie, this is Mathematics Professor Alfred Dunningham from the U.S. You might have read about some of his work in using mathematics to solve some recent police cases around the world. In fact, he and Agent Moreau worked together last year to solve a beguiling mystery on a cruise ship in the Mediterranean.”

Marie forced a smile as she continued to grasp the professor's hand. "It's indeed a pleasure have you here to help us, Professor."

Dunningham smiled as he nodded his head to Marie and she released her hand from his. He rubbed his right hand fingers into his palm as he felt moisture following their handshake. "Yes, Monsieur Moreau and I worked together on that case, and it's good to be back here in Paris."

"So you've been here before?" she asked, making small talk. Marie was trying her best not to let her nervousness show through her unusually tense nature.

"Yes," Dunningham replied. "My wife and I were here enjoying some of the sights and the many museums when I was called away to work on the cruise ship. There was actually some unfinished business I wanted to look into at your Musée d'Orsay. In fact, you might even be able to help me; but that's another matter.

"If you'd like to follow me, gentlemen," Marie began, "we can go over some of the details on the case in a conference room where we have information on display."

Moreau and Dunningham turned to follow her as the Chief Inspector turned to head in the opposite direction. The professor shot a puzzled look to the Interpol agent who just shrugged his shoulders. "He's not joining us?" Moreau softly asked Laurent.

"He would if the media were here," Marie responded after looking back over her shoulders. "I think he regrets putting me in charge of the investigation because he knows what it will mean to solve the case." She paused briefly and

then continued. "He's still a bit old school when it comes to gender equality."

"It will be good for everyone once the case is resolved," Alfred said as they approached the closed door.

ART THEFTS CASE DETECTIVES ONLY read the sign on the door. Marie entered a five-digit code on the cipher lock, and the tell-tale click unlocked the door as it opened slightly. Marie opened the door fully and the overhead lights automatically turned on as she entered the room. Agent Moreau motioned for the professor to enter next, and Moreau followed, closing the door behind him.

The walls were covered with large sheets of easel paper, some with hand-written notes, some with photographs of the stolen art work, some with pictures of the Greek letters from the returned items, and some with computer printouts. *Impressive work*, Dunningham thought to himself. *This young detective is certainly doing a thorough investigation.*

"Any general questions before we get started, Professor?" The cool air in the windowless conference room helped Marie feel more comfortable and at ease.

"Yes, I do have one question," the Professor replied. "How many pieces in total were taken, and how many are still missing?"

"Let's take a look over here," Marie said as she walked over to one of the over-sized sheets of paper and began to point to the printed table of information.



“**T**o the best of our knowledge,” Detective Laurent began, “there were a total of twenty-four major pieces along with about twenty additional minor pieces that were taken. We have a feeling, based upon some confidential information, that more were stolen at some of the smaller galleries. Most of the ones we’ve talked to have not been willing to say they were hit; they just say that their windows were broken but nothing was taken. We don’t believe them, of course, but there’s nothing we can do about it.”

Professor Dunningham walked over to the sheets containing photographs of the stolen items. “Of the twenty-four major pieces taken, how many are still missing?” He continued to look at the photographs on the wall with Marie about ten feet behind him.

She began walking toward Dunningham as Moreau nodded his head slightly as he was once again privy to the workings of a super-intellectual mind.

“Missing?” she asked as a prelude to her response, thinking of the proper phrasing. “Eight are still missing,” she said rapid fire.

Alfred stepped to the side and looked at a printout of the returned pieces and their respective Greek letters along with some other notations. Without looking at her again, he asked, "And how many have come back with the letters on them? Oh, never mind, I can count them." He pointed at each one on the list that had Greek letters next to the name of the item, moving his hand down as he looked at each item.

"Eleven," he said. "That's odd, and I don't mean anything about eleven being an odd number. You said that twenty-four were taken and that eight of them are still missing. Twenty-four minus eight is sixteen, and yet this sheet shows only eleven of them being returned. Eleven from sixteen is five; what about the other five?" The Professor turned his head sharply to the left to look straight at Marie.

Moreau smiled slightly as he knew that no matter how sharp she was as a detective, she was no match for Dunningham's wit when it came to numbers, simple or complex.

Marie cleared her throat. "Well, you're right," she said haltingly as she moved toward another sheet on the wall; the heading on the sheet said, **CONFIDENTIAL AND SENSITIVE**. "Those five are listed here; we're not releasing any information about them because of the very sensitive nature about them."

Interpol Agent Moreau had known about three of the five "sensitive" pieces; he wasn't aware of the others. His eyes opened wider as he began to walk toward Marie. *How come I'd not been told about the other two?* he thought to himself.

Marie pointed to the first two pieces on the sheet. As she did, she reached into the attached envelope and pulled out a few sheets of folded paper. She pulled her hand away from

the sheet on the wall and used it to open and hold the folded sheets. This is a copy of a postcard that was sent from St. Petersburg, Russia, to the Louvre. The front shows a nice aerial view of The Hermitage Museum complex of buildings, and on the back is a cryptic note that we believe has to do with two of the still-missing pieces.

Alfred read the note out loud: "The schoolgirl and the small dancer are having a good time as they are settling in to their **new** private vault home." He looked at the front of the card again. "So before you tell me your hypothesis, let me tell you what I think you're thinking. You are still missing several of the Degas bronzes from the Orsay, and you think that this note is telling you that two of them — namely *Schoolgirl* and *Small Dancer Aged 14* — have been whisked away to Russia and are being stored in the private vault in the New Hermitage building." He paused, but not long enough for Marie to interject anything. "But what you don't know is who sent the card; whoever saw the pieces knew they were stolen from the Orsay, and how would they know they were going into the vault? Am I close?"

Moreau smiled again as Dunningham had nailed it spot on.

Marie glanced over to Moreau. "Did you tell him that?"

Shaking his head while he still had a slight smile, Moreau replied, "Not at all. Exacting deductive reasoning is just one of his many brilliant aspects."

"You are one hundred percent correct, although we're not the ones who came to that conclusion; it was someone at the Orsay. As I understand from Monsieur Moreau, Interpol has sent two undercover agents who are fluent in Russian

and have Russian identities to St. Petersburg to see what they can determine. So at this point we don't consider them missing; it's just that they are not here."

"That's two of them; what about the others?" Dunningham asked as Moreau moved in a little closer so he could hear about the ones he hadn't been aware of.

Marie pointed to the one painting on the sheet. "We have information on this one van Gogh — *Bedroom in Arles* — that came to us from Interpol. It seems a mysterious person in Malaysia sent some photos to Interpol's office in Lyon. The sender has not been found or identified, but agents in Kuala Lumpur are on the lookout for him, and they're keeping a tight watch on the shop where it was sent from."

Alfred leaned in and took a closer look at the photographs. "That paneling, it looks a little unusual, don't you think?" he asked as he looked at the Interpol agent.

"Our people in Lyon think it looks like ship paneling, and there's certainly no shortage of boats, ships, or yachts in the KL area. But they just can't go boarding everything that's afloat and ask to search the insides for a multi-million dollar stolen piece of art. And that's if it is indeed on a ship."

Moreau looked at Marie as he was about to reveal a piece of information that would be new to her. "Our people on the ground are posting cryptic messages online in the hopes that the person who sent these photographs will offer some more information. If we just knew where it was, we could go in and intercept it without having to reveal the source of our information. But so far, there's not been anything since these photographs were received."

"So that's three pieces that have Interpol involvement," Dunningham said as he looked back at the sheet.

Marie took the hint. "Two bronzes were returned, and they looked like the stolen *Spanish Dancer* and *Standing Horse*, but they were fakes. I guess you could say that, technically, they are still missing, but at least we have some connection with them."

"Why would someone return a fake to the place from where it was stolen? Did they think that the people at Orsay wouldn't know the difference?" A slight smirk came across Alfred's face as he looked at the pictures of the Bronze fakes.

Marie had asked herself the same questions. "Those are good questions that we can't answer. Unless they thought that no one would notice the difference, and that eventually they would be able to sell them without raising much attention."

Alfred scratched his head as he thought out loud. "They steal easily identifiable art work from some of the most well-known museums in the world, and then they return some of them, while also sending back fakes. These people are either extremely bright, or extremely stupid. And right now I don't have an idea which one it is," he said as he chuckled to himself.

"Or," Moreau chimed in, "someone else made the fakes and sent them in."

"Or someone else made the fakes and sent them in," Alfred repeated. "That's brilliant, my friend," he added as he nodded to Antoine.

“That’s an interesting idea,” Marie said. “Make and send back fakes, and then try to ingratiate yourself with the real thieves. A soft form of blackmail; I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Now what about these painted letters that were on each item that has been returned?” Alfred asked as he stepped toward the large printout on the wall where he saw columns of Greek letters.”

“Yes,” Marie said as she followed him. “This is the list of the eleven real items that have been returned that had the letters painted on them. These are in the order of the dates they were received by the museums or the galleries.”

Alfred scanned the list; his forehead wrinkled as his eyes squinted to look at the listing. “Most of the returned items were from the Orsay; that’s interesting given the other places that were hit.” Alfred closed his eyes as he swiveled his head to the left. His eyes popped back open as he looked at Marie. “How did you say that the thieves got out of the Orsay?”

“There’s a door to an outside walkway on the fifth floor that requires a security code to open. But when we checked all the logs, no security code was ever entered. So we don’t know how they go out because it hadn’t been pried open or forced open in any way that we could tell.”

A smile came to Alfred’s face. “You mean that door close to the large clock overlooking the Seine?”

Marie looked startled. “How do you know about that door?”

“We were there right before I got contacted by this man to go help him on a Mediterranean ship.” He paused slightly. “There’s something I wanted to check out about that door, and if I’m right, I know how your thieves managed to open

it without a security code or using any force. All it took was just a simple turn of the handle. But let's get back to the letters."

"Here's the printout of the eleven returned items," Marie said as she pointed to the table printout on the wall.

| | | | |
|--|------------------|--------------|--------------|
| van Gogh — <i>The Church at Auvers</i> | Musée d'Orsay | γ gamma | ζ zeta |
| van Gogh — <i>Self Portrait, 1887</i> | Musée d'Orsay | α alpha | α alpha |
| Degas — <i>The Tub</i> | Musée d'Orsay | ε epsilon | η eta |
| Chagall — <i>Seaside Landscape</i> | Galerie du Monde | ζ zeta | blank |
| van Gogh — <i>Starry Night Over the Rhône</i> | Musée d'Orsay | κ kappa | ζ zeta |
| Degas — <i>Victorian Woman</i> | Musée d'Orsay | θ theta | α alpha |
| van Gogh — <i>Doctor Gachet's Garden in Auvers</i> | Musée d'Orsay | η eta | ε epsilon |
| van Gogh — <i>Marguerite Gachet in the Garden</i> | Musée d'Orsay | ι iota | η eta |
| Miró — <i>C'est la vie!</i> | Galerie du Seine | λ lambda | α alpha |
| van Gogh — <i>Asleep on the Haystack</i> | Musée d'Orsay | β beta | δ delta |
| van Gogh — <i>Imperial Fritillaries in a Copper Vase</i> | Musée d'Orsay | δ delta | β beta |

"May I have a copy of this, please?" Alfred asked Marie. "No one outside of this room will see this, not even my wife."

"Sure," Marie said. "We'll go to my office, and I'll print one for you. Is there anything else you want?"



Professor Dunningham stepped back and scanned everything that was on the walls. “I notice that there are no references to where the items were located at the time of the thefts. Assuming that they hadn’t been moved since my last time in Paris, I’m surmising that the Degas bronzes were in the glass cases on the fifth floor, and the van Goghs were in their alcove in the Impressionist area on the main floor. Is that correct?”

“You have a good memory, Professor,” Detective Laurent replied. “And the two that have been returned to those small galleries were in their main showrooms. But as the one gallery owner said, the Chagall that was taken wasn’t the most expensive piece on display. Plus they only took that one. And then returned it. Are you thinking that their locations were significant?”

“I have no idea at the moment if their locations were significant or not; just seeking as much information as possible. Agent Moreau has some knowledge of my methodologies, and one of my philosophies is that you can always disregard some information if you don’t feel that it’s relevant. But if you’re missing something, it can be very dangerous to make

it up just because you think that's what it might be or could be." Dunningham looked at Moreau. "Wouldn't you agree"?

Agent Moreau nodded his head in assent. "Of course, I do. You were invaluable in apprehending that woman on the ship right before the cruise was over. And you undoubtedly saved some insurance company a lot of money. Did you ever contact them for a fee for saving them all that money?"

Dunningham shook his head. "No; that's not why I do what I do. Besides, there's no way of knowing if she would have ever actually pulled off that hoax. Some people think they have the perfect plan for the perfect crime. I've not seen as many criminal acts as you two, but I know I've never seen a perfect crime. I do have a philosophy on that, but that's not what we're here for."

Marie's eyes opened wider as she heard Alfred's last statement. "I'd be interested in hearing your philosophy on the perfect crime sometime, Professor. That is, if you wouldn't mind sharing it with me."

"I'd be happy to, Detective, although I did say 'a perfect crime,' and not 'the perfect crime.'"

Moreau caught the difference; Marie's mind was too otherwise engaged to notice the difference. "If there's nothing else that you two would like to discuss now, how about if we go to my office so I can get you that printout, Professor? Is there anything you'd like, Moreau?"

"*Non, merci,*" Moreau replied as Marie led the two men out of the room. As she pulled on the door knob to secure it, the sound of the cipher lock reminded Alfred of the lock on the door on the fifth floor of the Orsay Museum. *Maybe Sylvia and I can go up there tomorrow for some pastries, and to*

check out the timing on that lock, he thought as the three of them headed down the brightly lit hallway.

The large brown envelope was simply addressed with a printed label:

Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc
French National Police Force
Paris

There was no return address, but its postmark revealed that it had been mailed from the post office across from Place de la République. “Want me to send it down to have it checked for fingerprints, Chief Inspector?” the clerk asked as he brought the envelope to LeBlanc.

“Well, young man, if you don’t think your own fingerprints and everyone else’s who has handled this would get in the way, then that might be a good idea.” LeBlanc’s sarcasm didn’t resonate with the young clerk who was hopeful of obtaining a job as a detective on the force after he was finished with his university studies. “But, as it is, that’s not going to do any good now. What you can do,” he continued before he thought better of the idea. “Never mind. That will be all; thank you,” he said to the young man.

“Of course, Chief Inspector. Want me to close the door on the way out?” The young man was doing his best to be

professional and respectful to the most senior officer, while LeBlanc was doing just the opposite.

LeBlanc waved his arms in a dismissive gesture. "It's fine just the way it," he said as he looked at the envelope. Aside from the label and the postmark, there was no other information on the envelope; at least there was none on the outside. As the clerk turned around and left the Chief Inspector's office, LeBlanc picked up the phone and punched the numbers 4, 6, 7, and then put the phone to his right ear.

"Forensics," was the simple answer on the other end of the line when the phone was answered.

"LeBlanc here. I just received a large envelope, and I'd like someone to come up here to bag the contents and preserve it for fingerprints, etc., and to check for any foreign substances."

"I'll send a team up there right away, Chief Inspector." The man didn't wait for a response from LeBlanc; he hung up the phone and called two of the team and told them what to do. They were at LeBlanc's door in six minutes.

"*Entrez*," LeBlanc said without taking his eyes off the computer screen as he heard the knock-knock on the doorframe. Turning his head toward the entrants as he heard the sound of a rolling cart, the Chief Inspector was pleased to see the Head of Forensics accompanied by one of the newer forensic analysts.

"*Bonjour*, Chief Inspector; this is Victor Durand who recently joined our team after graduating from the University and the Police Academy. He has quite a strong background in Chemistry and Biological Sciences. I think he is perfectly suited to run the analyses for you." The Head of Forensics

nodded to Victor who stepped forward to shake hands with LeBlanc.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Chief Inspector," Victor began as the two men faced each other.

"Thank you, Victor," Le Blanc replied with minimal sincerity. "What are those papers?" he asked as noticed the sheets in Victor's left hand.

Victor looked toward David, his superior, who nodded to him. Victor took the cue. "It's standard practice that we scan all incoming envelopes and packages for explosive devices, anything that could harm someone. Our noninvasive chemical analysis is among the best in the world, but we're always glad to personally check any items as they are being opened. These papers are the printouts from the scans of your envelope. As you see, it appears that it's just a standard envelope with two or three sheets of paper inside."

LeBlanc looked at the printouts, then up at David, and handed the papers back to Victor. "Quite the envelope for just a few sheets of paper," LeBlanc said.

"It does seem a bit unusual," the Head of Forensics replied. "But perhaps the mystery will be revealed when we see the inside of the envelope," he added as he put his hands into a pair of sterile gloves.

The young analyst also put on a pair of gloves as David reached for the envelope. Victor peeled the seal off a large plastic sleeve and held it open as David carefully placed the still-sealed envelope inside the sleeve. Victor continued to hold the sleeve in his two hands as David picked up a knife and opened it to reveal a razor-sharp blade.

David used the knife to slit the sealed flap of the envelope, and he closed the knife and set it back down on the cart. He pressed the Power button on the compact state-of-art Chemical Analysis machine on the cart. Once the Ready light turned to green, David unlatched the hook holding the sensitive probe, pulled the probe and its connecting wire from their stationary positions, and removed the protective cover from the probe.

Victor held the plastic sleeve and envelope open for David as he carefully inserted the probe inside the envelope, making sure that the probe didn't make contact with anything. David kept his focus on the probe while Victor watched the display. Various descriptions and readings appeared and disappeared as the machine ran through its analysis. Finally the machine beeped; David withdrew the probe, put the cover back on the probe, and then set the probe back into its cradle and flipped the connecting latch back in place. The machine then printed the results of the analysis as the single sheet began to emerge from the machine's side.

Even though Victor was closer to the printout than was David, he let the Head of Forensics retrieve the sheet and do a cursory scan of the results. "Nothing unusual, so far," he said as he handed the sheet to the Chief Inspector.

David then picked up another plastic sleeve, unsealed it, and as Victor held the envelope open wide, David carefully removed the first sheet from the envelope. Victor then set the envelope in its sleeve on the cart, and picked up the new sleeve and opened it for David. He slid the sheet into the sleeve, closed the sleeve, and resealed it.

The pair repeated the process for the second sheet; it was blank. Victor was tempted to look at the first sheet but he handed it to LeBlanc instead.

"Hmmpf," LeBlanc grunted as he read the short note, and then handed it back to David.

"Ouch," David replied as he read it. "Sounds pretty sassy to me. We'll take it back to the lab and run tests on the paper, chemical analyses to see where the paper has been recently, and, of course, check for fingerprints. But given the tone of the note, I doubt there will be any worthwhile fingerprints on the paper; certainly not from the sender. Do you want to make a copy of it before we leave?"

"No; I'll remember what it says," the Chief Inspector replied. "How long will it take to get your results?"

"To get everything run on it will take at least until noon tomorrow, even if I have someone work all night. But we'll contact you right away if we find anything significant." The Head of Forensics knew his chances of uncovering anything helpful to the case were slim, but odder things have happened. "We'll let you know tomorrow," he said as he and Victor pushed the cart out of the Chief Inspector's office.

"A blank second sheet seems a little odd, doesn't it?" the young Victor asked the Head of Forensics as they walked down the hallway to the elevator.

"These are tricky people; it has to mean something. Perhaps our tests will reveal some of their secrets," David replied as they reached the elevator door and he pressed the Down button.

“Those arrogant bastards!” Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc yelled as he slammed his right fist down on his desk. “You’ll be sorry when we catch you!”

Just then Detective Marie Laurent was passing by his office and heard LeBlanc’s outrage. She stopped and looked into his office. “Something wrong, sir?” she asked in the coolest demeanor.

“They’ve just raised the stakes,” he replied.

“May I?” she asked before stepping into his office uninvited.

“Of course, you may come in. Have a seat,” LeBlanc said as he stayed seated.

Marie stepped into the office, leaving the door open, and sat in one of the two chairs at an angle to his desk. “Who are ‘They,’ and what did they do?” she asked.

LeBlanc worked on composing himself. A large envelope was delivered to me today; inside the envelope was a note that said, *‘Having Trouble Deciphering the Symbols?’*

“May I see it, and why didn’t it come to my desk?” Marie asked.

"It's in Forensics right now; they're running tests on it to look for fingerprints or chemical traces of where the paper's been. As for it getting to your desk, it will once they're done. But it was addressed to me, which is why it was delivered directly to me." LeBlanc answered in a much calmer tone.

"I agree; that is showing a lot of arrogance. It's like they're taunting you."

"How'd it go with that mathematics fellow?"

"He's a pleasant enough chap," Marie replied. "He definitely is exacting; answers only what is asked — nothing more, nothing less. He asked for a copy of that chart of the returned items with the letters on them."

"Did you give it to him?" LeBlanc asked.

"Yes; Moreau was with him, and I would have had to give it to Moreau if he'd asked for it. If this guy is as clever as Moreau says he is, we should know something soon." Marie paused before continuing as she stood up to leave. "Would you mind having Forensics send me a copy of the results of their tests on that envelope and the sheets of paper inside?"

LeBlanc hesitated slightly as he heard Marie's question. "Of course; they said it would be around noon. And you'll let me know what the professor comes up with, won't you?"

"Of course, sir," Marie replied as she left LeBlanc's office and headed toward her own. Henri LeBlanc sat alone in his chair, thinking about what he had just heard.

It wasn't unusual for there to be signs outside Musée d'Orsay as Elyse brought another tour group to the museum the next morning at opening time. Normally the signs highlighted current exhibitions or upcoming activities, but the current signs reminded guests that parts of the museum were still closed because of the thefts.

"I thought some of the items had been returned," one of the group said to Elyse as they approached the GROUP ENTRANCE.

"I think it's just a precautionary measure while they're making adjustments for the displays," Elyse replied. "While it is a shame that we won't be able to see everything, there's so much here that you can't take it all in on just one visit anyway." She paused as they reached the entrance and stood in the short line. "Everyone get your museum pass out and be ready to open your bag as we go through the security line. Any questions before we get inside?"

A voice from the back of the group asked, "What if we want to head out on our own? When and where will we all meet when it's time to leave?"

"Let's get inside first," Elyse answered. "I'll go over our plan, and then we'll also talk about dinner. Is that okay?"

"Sure," the voice replied.

One by one, each tour member showed the museum pass to enter with Elyse being the last one as she showed her tour guide license. As the small group gathered after retrieving their items from the scanner belt, Elyse said, "The van Gogh exhibit on the main floor is closed, but the guard said the fifth floor is completely open.

"We have three hours in here. For those who want to come with me, I'll show you the main highlights of this great museum that used to be the railroad station at the end of the Paris to Orleans line. That will take about two hours, and then you will have an hour on your own. No matter what you do, we need to meet at the steps right over there," she said as she pointed to her right, "at exactly one o'clock. "Any questions?"

"Should we eat here or are we going to lunch after we leave?" asked one of the middle-aged women.

"We're going to take a ten-minute walk to a small brasserie for lunch once we leave here," Elyse said. "Anything else?"

Most of the group shook their head, and Elyse began walking toward the double staircase up to the main floor. "Those of you who want to go with me, we'll work our way slowly up to the fifth floor. If you want to head out on your own now, remember, one o'clock right here."

One man, the one from the back of the line out front, and a woman went in opposite directions as the others continued to follow Elyse.

“There was some talk of displaying the remaining van Goghs in a separate area, but I don’t think they felt the available area was secure enough,” Elyse began as she turned to the right for the Impressionist area. The tall makeshift walls kept even the most curious eyes from seeing inside the van Gogh alcoves. Elyse stopped and told the group about van Gogh, his life, his time in Arles, and some of the stories about his paintings.

One o’clock came quickly as Elyse waited patiently for the last two stragglers to show up so they could head to lunch.



59



Across the river, Professor Alfred Dunningham and Interpol Agent Antoine Moreau had spent the morning talking with the detectives on the case. Moreau took some written notes, while Dunningham mentally noted a few critical pieces of information. Detective Marie Laurent didn't have much to add to the conversations; she was rather quiet today and her hair wasn't as attractively coiffed as it usually was.

"Detective, would you like to join the professor and me for lunch around the corner?" Moreau was hoping that getting her out of the office and away from Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc would open her up and get her to be more talkative. It was a good tactic, but it didn't work.

"Thank you, no," she replied. "I have a lot of paperwork to catch up on; so I'll pass on lunch today. But I will work with you in the conference room when you get back. And your bags will be secure in there while you're gone."

"That sounds good, Detective," Dunningham chimed in. "I don't think we'll be gone for long," he added as he and Moreau headed out for lunch.

The din of conversation was at the same level in the Detective's area when Dunningham and Moreau returned. They headed directly to Detective Laurent's office when they encountered her in the hallway. "Are you two ready to huddle up in the conference room?" she asked as she seemed more animated and her hair looked as if it had been made up while they were gone.

The two men looked at each other and nodded. "Let's do it," Dunningham said.

Marie turned around and walked to her office to retrieve her case notes while the two men followed her as she walked with a pronounced step-by-step motion that accentuated her figure and her graceful movements. Older and much older than she, Moreau and Dunningham couldn't help but notice her walk and the looks from the men in the office as she went by.

"Come in, gentlemen," she said as she entered her office but stayed near the door. As they walked into her office, she quietly closed the door behind them. "Have a seat, please," she added as she went to her desk chair and sat down.

"How was lunch?" she asked.

"It was quite delightful," Dunningham offered. "Did you get your hair done while we were out?"

Marie smiled. "That's very kind of you to notice, Professor. But, no, I just went into the ladies' room and worked on it myself." She paused while the two professional men sat in silence. Moreau was a trained interrogator; he knew that whoever spoke first lost negotiating power, although right now he had no idea what that would be. The math professor was straight business; he was that way most of the time any-

way. If he's not asked a question, there's no reason for him to say anything. The silence continued; Marie, even though she was a trained detective, broke the silence.

"I just wanted to talk with you two before we went into the conference room," Marie began with a slight hesitation. "I think you two realize that the Chief Inspector and I don't really see eye-to-eye on so many levels. And honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if that conference room didn't have a bug or a camera in there recording everything that goes on in there."

"What about here?" Moreau asked.

"I've had three different teams scour this office and install bug-blocking devices," Marie responded.

"Isn't that being a little paranoid?" Moreau continued.

"It's not paranoia when you're dealing with an incompetent Inspector Chief as in LeBlanc," she replied. "He's put me in charge of this investigation, but I am quite confident that he would be willing to make the break-through announcement if he's able to steal it from me."

"That wouldn't surprise me, either," Interpol Agent Moreau said as he knew it was important to gain her confidence. "What would you like from us?" he asked.

"You, Agent Moreau," she began as he interrupted.

"Please call me Antoine," he said. "It will make for a much better working relationship when it's just the three of us. We can be formal when others are around."

"Okay, Antoine. *Merci*. When we're in the conference room, or even if it's just the two of you, I know it would appear somewhat ludicrous on tape if no one was saying anything or if everything was somehow cryptic. But if there's any

way to minimize the outright findings, I would appreciate it." Marie was very down-to-earth; her self-confidence had given way to appeasement.

Is she looking for a favor from us? Dunningham thought as he continued to look at her without actually staring.

Moreau looked at Dunningham as he kept his elbows down but lifted his arms with the palms facing the ceiling as if asking the professor what he thought about her statement, her appeal.

"I'm fine with that, Detective," Dunningham said as he turned his head from Moreau to face Marie.

"Same here," Moreau said as his eyes widened.

"Thank you, gentlemen," she said as she exhaled a big sigh. "This has been a very grueling investigation; if it had just been the thefts that would have been one thing. But now that some of the pieces are coming back, and with the letters on them, that is turning this into a completely different situation. The media is all over us to come up with answers. And, of course, good ol' LeBlanc keeps saying that we're getting close and we'll have it all completed in just a few days. The man is an idiot, a total idiot!"

In his many studies of criminal activities, Mathematics Professor Alfred Dunningham, PhD, had made observations that typically associated certain people, their characteristics and their actions, to the crimes. Dunningham was wondering right now if Detective Marie Laurent, the one leading the investigation, could have had something to do with the art thefts. He quickly dismissed that thought as there would be no reason to pull off an amazing heist and then start sending them back.

Unbeknownst to Dunningham, Interpol Agent Antoine Moreau was wondering something along the same lines. He, too, then realized she was too smart to compound one outrageous act with another one.



60



Marie pushed her chair back as she began to stand. “Well? Shall we?” she said as the two men got out of their chairs.

Always the gentleman, Dunningham went for the door and opened it. Moreau waited for Marie to exit the room, and he then gave a quizzical look to Dunningham as he walked out. The professor raised his eyebrows in a responding questioning expression. “Lights?” he asked.

“They will turn off automatically in a minute once you close the door,” Marie responded.

As he pulled the door shut, Dunningham could hear the cipher lock engage. A slight smile emerged as he remembered that he still needed to return to the fifth floor at the Orsay and check out his theory on the cipher locks there that lead to the outside area. If his theory held, then that could also provide a clue to how the thief or thieves got out of the museum without setting off an alarm.

The three of them didn’t engage in conversation as they walked down the hallway to the special conference room. From now on, all of their conversations would be held in pri-

vate as much as possible. Marie entered the code on the door lock as they reached the room, and the door clicked open.

As they stepped inside the dark room, the lights automatically turned on to brighten the room. Marie returned to the door just as Moreau was getting ready to close it. "If you two want to go ahead and get started, I have a few things to attend to. You have my mobile number, Antoine, if you need to reach me. If I'm not here by the time you're ready to leave for the day, just go ahead and leave the room and it will lock by itself when the door is closed. Do you need anything else?" she asked as she stood in the doorway.

The two men looked at each and shook their heads. Moreau responded for them, "I think we have everything we need, thank you."

"Alright; maybe you'll have it figured it out by the time I get back," Marie said as she stepped out of the room and pulled the door closed.

"Well," the Interpol agent began, "that was a little strange."

"Agreed," Dunningham offered as he stepped over to the printout on the wall.

| | | | |
|--|------------------|--------------|--------------|
| van Gogh — <i>The Church at Auvers</i> | Musée d'Orsay | γ gamma | ζ zeta |
| van Gogh — <i>Self Portrait, 1887</i> | Musée d'Orsay | α alpha | α alpha |
| Degas — <i>The Tub</i> | Musée d'Orsay | ε epsilon | η eta |
| Chagall — <i>Seaside Landscape</i> | Galerie du Monde | ζ zeta | blank |
| van Gogh — <i>Starry Night Over the Rhône</i> | Musée d'Orsay | κ kappa | ζ zeta |
| Degas — <i>Victorian Woman</i> | Musée d'Orsay | θ theta | α alpha |
| van Gogh — <i>Doctor Gachet's Garden in Auvers</i> | Musée d'Orsay | η eta | ε epsilon |
| van Gogh — <i>Marguerite Gachet in the Garden</i> | Musée d'Orsay | ι iota | η eta |
| Miró — <i>C'est la vie!</i> | Galerie du Seine | λ lambda | α alpha |
| van Gogh — <i>Asleep on the Haystack</i> | Musée d'Orsay | β beta | δ delta |
| van Gogh — <i>Imperial Fritillaries in a Copper Vase</i> | Musée d'Orsay | δ delta | β beta |

"Did you notice anything peculiar on this," Dunningham asked.

"Nothing other than most of the returned items were from the Orsay," Moreau replied.

"Yes, that is a bit peculiar, but that also makes sense given that it was the place that was hit the hardest. So, mathematically speaking, it should have the majority of the returned items. But nine out of eleven is even pushing the bounds of statistics in this case." The Mathematics Professor was in his element when talking about numbers. "But that's not what I thinking about. Take a look here," he said as he pointed to the third column of the printout.

A grin came across Moreau's face as he knew that the professor was close to solving the case, or at least was headed down the right path. He stepped closer to the printout. "Greek letters, so?" he asked.

“As you look down this column,” Dunningham started as he pulled his finger down the third column, the first one with the letters. “You see that none of the letters are repeated, but there are some repeats in the last column, even a blank space.” He turned from the wall, went to his satchel, and pulled out a piece of paper. “Now look at this.”

| | | | |
|--|------------------|--------------|--------------|
| van Gogh — <i>Self Portrait, 1887</i> | Musée d'Orsay | α alpha | α alpha |
| van Gogh — <i>Asleep on the Haystack</i> | Musée d'Orsay | β beta | δ delta |
| van Gogh — <i>The Church at Auvers</i> | Musée d'Orsay | γ gamma | ζ zeta |
| van Gogh — <i>Imperial Fritillaries in a Copper Vase</i> | Musée d'Orsay | δ delta | β beta |
| Degas — <i>The Tub</i> | Musée d'Orsay | ε epsilon | η eta |
| Chagall — <i>Seaside Landscape</i> | Galerie du Monde | ζ zeta | blank |
| van Gogh — <i>Doctor Gachet's Garden in Auvers</i> | Musée d'Orsay | η eta | ε epsilon |
| Degas — <i>Victorian Woman</i> | Musée d'Orsay | θ theta | α alpha |
| van Gogh — <i>Marguerite Gachet in the Garden</i> | Musée d'Orsay | ι iota | η eta |
| van Gogh — <i>Starry Night Over the Rhône</i> | Musée d'Orsay | κ kappa | ζ zeta |
| Miró — <i>C'est la vie!</i> | Galerie du Seine | λ lambda | α alpha |

“By sorting the table using the third column as the key, you will see that the letters are in alphabetical order.” Dunningham was in a zone, totally focused. “Actually, the English word ‘alphabet’ comes from the first two Greek letters, alpha and beta.” Dunningham began to read the letters in the third column from the top to the bottom. “Do you know the Greek alphabet?”

“Can’t say that I do, Professor,” Moreau replied.

“Well,” the professor continued. “These are the first eleven letters in the Greek alphabet. Think about this: art is

being returned after an apparently successful heist, and the thieves have painted letters in inconspicuous places. Why? They are trying to tell us something. Would you agree?"

"Definitely."

"Okay. While it's not impossible, it's highly unlikely that it would be a pure coincidence that the eleven pieces that have been returned are marked with the first eleven letters of the Greek alphabet. Now, they weren't received in that order and maybe they were meant to arrive in order, but I think we can put that aside for now." Dunningham continued to look at his new printout.

Moreau slowly nodded his head as he was looking at his copy of Dunningham's sorted table. He knew from his previous work with the professor that the obvious solution to a problem wasn't always the most visible one. "So, if this order is important, then what about the letters in the last column? They're not unique; in fact, alpha is there three times, and there's even a blank. Do the letters make two five-letter words separated by a blank space?"

"Excellent observation, my friend," Alfred said as he nodded his head in approval. "I don't know or I would have already revealed it. Two five-letter words make sense when you look at the column and keeping them in order. I thought of that also last night, but then these don't seem like words I would know. So I added another column to this table, this time using English letters based on their equivalence to the Greek letters." He retrieved another paper-clipped set of papers from his satchel, removed the clip, and handed one copy to Moreau as he looked at the other. "Oh, I updated some of the formatting to make it look cleaner."

| | | | | |
|--|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---|
| van Gogh — <i>Self Portrait, 1887</i> | Musée d'Orsay | α alpha | α alpha | A |
| van Gogh — <i>Asleep on the Haystack</i> | Musée d'Orsay | β beta | δ delta | D |
| van Gogh — <i>The Church at Auvers</i> | Musée d'Orsay | γ gamma | ζ zeta | F |
| van Gogh — <i>Imperial Fritillaries in a Copper Vase</i> | Musée d'Orsay | δ delta | β beta | B |
| Degas — <i>The Tub</i> | Musée d'Orsay | ϵ epsilon | η eta | G |
| Chagall — <i>Seaside Landscape</i> | Galerie du Monde | ζ zeta | blank | |
| van Gogh — <i>Doctor Gachet's Garden in Auvers</i> | Musée d'Orsay | η eta | ϵ epsilon | E |
| Degas — <i>Victorian Woman</i> | Musée d'Orsay | θ theta | α alpha | A |
| van Gogh — <i>Marguerite Gachet in the Garden</i> | Musée d'Orsay | ι iota | η eta | G |
| van Gogh — <i>Starry Night Over the Rhône</i> | Musée d'Orsay | κ kappa | ζ zeta | F |
| Miró — <i>C'est la vie!</i> | Galerie du Seine | λ lambda | α alpha | A |

"Sorry for the bad joke, Alfred, but it's still Greek to me," Moreau said as he looked at the two five-letter "words."

"I agree, Antoine. I put those combinations into all sorts of programs to find some meaning, and I came up empty. I even looked to see if they were notes and meant anything in the music world." There was a short pause. "Again, nothing," he said as he put the paper down on the table in the center of the room.

"You'll come up with it; you're so close, I'm sure," Antoine said as he stepped over to Alfred and put his right hand on the professor's shoulder and gave him a short reassuring squeeze. "I know your brain is always working on it, so why don't we let that happen as you tell me about your trip to Beijing that I interrupted."

The men sat down and began chatting. The conversation centered around mathematics, of course, as Alfred's mind

was working the current problem while still managing to hold a completely coherent conversation.

Antoine was talking about his first time to the Forbidden City in Beijing when Alfred's head jerked to the right.

"I've got it!" Alfred exclaimed. "I don't know what their eventual meaning is, but I know what that fourth column is."

"See, I knew you'd get it." Antoine responded. "What do they mean?"



61



A few miles away on Boulevard Beaumarchais, the dividing line between the Third, Fourth, and the Eleventh *Arrondissements*, a special exhibition had just gotten underway at Galerie Pierre. Art Director Claudette Bouchet had arranged for her friend Robert Gilot to put on a one-man showing, which consisted primarily of his cityscapes and other touristy paintings from his normal spot in Montmartre's Place du Tertre. Encouraged by his sale to the Johnsons of his rendition of the stolen *Starry Night Over the Rhône*, Robert made several renditions of all of the stolen works.

The sign in the window said it all: **Limited Engagement: Stolen Artworks Revisited by Paris Artist Robert Gilot.** "Welcome to the gallery," Claudette said as visitors came in the door; for many of them, this was the first time they'd even seen a reproduction of many of the famous works by van Gogh, Chagall, Miró, and others.

Invitations had been sent to many notables in the city, including the directors and staffs of the places that had been hit by the thefts. Some thought that was a bit cheeky, but Claudette reasoned that the publicity would also help them.

Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc, Detective Marie Laurent and other ranking officials at the French National Police had also received invitations. Marie wanted to attend, but RSVP'd that she felt she needed to stay at the office to work on the case.

There were, however, two plain-clothes officers who casually entered the gallery about fifteen minutes apart. Claudette didn't recognize them as police, but her keen eye told her they weren't locals who just happened to be walking by the gallery. Their mannerisms and gait were too similar for it to be a coincidence; she walked over to one of the officers. "Hello, I'm Claudette, the Art Director. I don't believe I've seen you in this area before. Are you here for the exhibition, or did you just happen to be walking past?"

The officer's eyes darted back and forth as he slowly pulled a small leather case out of his shirt pocket. He then opened the case slightly to reveal his badge. "We got word that someone associated with the thefts might show up," he said softly.

"Really?" Claudette replied also in a soft voice. "Someone at headquarters thinks whoever got away with the thefts would be bold enough to come to this exhibition?"

"Bold or crazy," the officer replied. "I mean they got away with the thefts, and now they're sending them back while apparently including messages on them. I wouldn't put it past anyone that brazen to be here. That's why my partner and I came in." He glanced to his left to the man whose appearance was similar to his. "Of course, if you see anyone suspicious, you can alert us or call this number," he added as he pulled a card from the leather case and handed it Claudette.

"Thanks," she said. "Perhaps you could blend in a little more if you went and chatted with the artist; he's quite an interesting man." Claudette grinned and nodded her head to the other officer who saw them talking. "Let me know if you have any questions," she said as she stepped to greet some new visitors to the gallery.

A small group of twenty-somethings had been outside looking in at some of the exhibition's paintings. "They look pretty much like the originals," one of the young men said.

"With all the books available, including at the museums themselves, there's a lot of information available about the paintings. With a little practice, I could probably paint them, also," added the young man.

"Are we going in or not?" the impatient gal in the group asked.

"Of course," replied Louis as he reached for the door handle. Claudette's face froze suddenly as she saw the group come in. Seeing a group of young people, all dressed in black, instilled fear in most shop owners. These weren't teenagers, the typical hoodlums, but a group of them dressed alike, couldn't be a good thing.

The police officers also saw the group enter the gallery, and one of the officers slowly made his way toward the group. As he got closer, the police officer thought he recognized Louis. He didn't pull out his badge; he wanted to start with casual conversation. "Excuse me, young man," the officer began. "You have the looks of a celebrity that I saw doing a shoot just right down at Place de la Bastille a few weeks ago."

A crazed look came across Louis's face. "Sorry; you must be thinking of someone else," he said as he turned toward the officer. Then half-joking, and mostly to his friends, he continued. "Okay, so I do have the looks of a model, but I haven't done any shoots in a while." He smiled as he turned to walk away.

"Well, let me put it this way," the officer said as Louis began to walk away with a slight limp. "Instead of a photo shoot, how about if I place you and your friend here in the same area, but you ran as I approached you." The officer reached into his pocket to pull out his badge. "I was in uniform that day, and you bolted as you saw me walking toward the waste bin near you." He paused as Louis stopped and turned around. "Do you remember now?" he asked with a smug look on his face. "And I see you're still limping from that stupid thing you did by jumping off the bridge down to the canal area. Want to talk? We can do it here or at the station. Your choice."

Louis tapped his head with a couple fingers on his right hand. "That day," he said. He stammered some before continuing. "Well, you see," he started as his mind raced to develop a story, a believable one. "I had been smoking a joint and I was afraid you were coming over to arrest me."

Claudette was watching the interaction from a distance. She wasn't able to hear the conversation, but she could tell it was more than just a casual chat.

"And so for that you ran like the devil was chasing you?" the officer asked.

"Yeah; stupid, right?" Louis tried to make light of it.

“And dangerous,” the officer added. “You could have broken your legs on that jump.”

“It almost felt that way,” Louis conceded.

“And that’s the only reason you ran?” the officer continued.

“Right,” Louis said as he nodded his head.

“So you’re not here for any other reason than to look at the art?” The officer paused. “Or does it bring back memories for you?”

“No memories,” Louis replied. “The four of us had a coffee down the street near the same place where you saw me, and we decided to just go for a stroll on a nice afternoon. Is that okay?” he asked with raised eyebrows.

The officer looked to see that Claudette was watching them. “Okay,” he said. “Just for your sake and for ours, also, don’t do anymore foolish stunts. I don’t want to chase you down. Got it?”

“I sure do, officer,” Louis said as he extended his hand and the officer did too. They shook hands, and Louis and the group walked around for a few more minutes before leaving the gallery and heading back toward Place de la Bastille.

Claudette breathed a sigh of relief as the group of four left.

“Numbers,” the Mathematics Professor said in response to the Interpol Agent’s question. Sitting next to each other in the conference room, Dunningham opened a file on his laptop. “Come take a look at this,” he said to Moreau who rolled his chair next to Dunningham’s.

| Ancient | Byzantine | Modern | Value | Ancient | Byzantine | Modern | Value |
|---------|-----------|--------|-------|---------|-----------|--------|-------|
| A | ā | A' | 1 | I | ī | I' | 10 |
| B | ḃ | B' | 2 | K | ḱ | K' | 20 |
| Γ | γ̄ | Γ' | 3 | Λ | λ̄ | Λ' | 30 |
| Δ | ḍ | Δ' | 4 | Μ | μ̄ | Μ' | 40 |
| E | ē | E' | 5 | N | ṇ | N' | 50 |
| Ϝ | ϝ & Ϟ | Ϝ' | 6 | Ξ | ξ̄ | Ξ' | 60 |
| Ϛ | ϛ & Ϝ | ΣΤ' | | Ο | ō | Ο' | 70 |
| I | ī | Z' | 7 | Π | π̄ | Π' | 80 |
| H | ḥ | H' | 8 | | | | |
| Θ | θ̄ | Θ' | 9 | Ϟ | ϟ & Ϡ | Ϟ' | 90 |
| | | | | ϣ | ϣ & Ϥ | ϣ' | |

“Look at these numbers and how they correspond to Greek letters,” Dunningham continued. “Now we don’t need to worry about any of the larger numbers as eta is the highest

letter in that fourth column. So we just need this first part of the table.” Dunningham manipulated the file to display just the numbers one through nine.

| Ancient | Byzantine | Modern | Value |
|---------|-----------|--------|-------|
| A | Ἀ | A' | 1 |
| B | Β | B' | 2 |
| Γ | Γ | Γ' | 3 |
| Δ | Δ | Δ' | 4 |
| E | Ε | E' | 5 |
| Ϝ | Ϝ & Ϛ | Ϛ' | 6 |
| Ϝ | Ϝ & Ϛ | ΣΤ' | |
| Ζ | Ζ | Z' | 7 |
| H | Η | H' | 8 |
| Θ | Θ | Θ' | 9 |

“One of the interesting things about these Ionian representations is that the number six doesn’t translate into any of the Greek or Byzantine letters that we are aware of today. Also, they didn’t have way to represent a null value, or what we call zero today. So about the only way that can be done is by using a blank space where you would expect a numeric value.” Dunningham stopped and looked at Moreau.

“Seems to make sense to me,” the agent said in response to Dunningham’s glance. “So where does that take us?”

“Well,” the professor said. “Let’s replace the letters in that last column and see what that gets us.” He brought back up the file with the last table he’d created. He clicked the cursor in the last cell of the first row, A, replacing it with a 1. He

continued down the column. “Instead of a D for delta, we’ll use a four. Remember that there isn’t a number six, so zeta is seven, eta is eight, and a blank is zero.” He continued to work down the column until he had his updated table.

| | | | | |
|--|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---|
| van Gogh — <i>Self Portrait, 1887</i> | Musée d’Orsay | α alpha | α alpha | 1 |
| van Gogh — <i>Asleep on the Haystack</i> | Musée d’Orsay | β beta | δ delta | 4 |
| van Gogh — <i>The Church at Auvers</i> | Musée d’Orsay | γ gamma | ζ zeta | 7 |
| van Gogh — <i>Imperial Fritillaries in a Copper Vase</i> | Musée d’Orsay | δ delta | β beta | 2 |
| Degas — <i>The Tub</i> | Musée d’Orsay | ϵ epsilon | η eta | 8 |
| Chagall — <i>Seaside Landscape</i> | Galerie du Monde | ζ zeta | blank | 0 |
| van Gogh — <i>Doctor Gachet’s Garden in Auvers</i> | Musée d’Orsay | η eta | ϵ epsilon | 5 |
| Degas — <i>Victorian Woman</i> | Musée d’Orsay | θ theta | α alpha | 1 |
| van Gogh — <i>Marguerite Gachet in the Garden</i> | Musée d’Orsay | ι iota | η eta | 8 |
| van Gogh — <i>Starry Night Over the Rhône</i> | Musée d’Orsay | κ kappa | ζ zeta | 7 |
| Miró — <i>C’est la vie!</i> | Galerie du Seine | λ lambda | α alpha | 1 |

“What kind of code is that?” Moreau asked.

“I don’t know if it’s a code, or exactly what it’s telling us,” Dunningham replied. “But the presence of two eights says that we’re not dealing with days of the week. And unless there are going to be more items returned, we’re dealing with eleven numbers. Eleven is a prime number, and it’s one too many to make a nice pyramid of ten items with four at the base and one on the top.”

Dunningham stepped to the white board and picks up a dry-erase marker. He starts to write a sequence of numbers on the board. **0.14285714...** “No,” he said as he looked at the column again. “It’s close; but it’s not the decimal representation of one-seventh.”

“What about this?” Moreau said as he stepped up to the board. “You said the order was important since we have the first eleven letters of the Greek alphabet and there are no repeats. So if we start with alpha and go through lambda, writing down the equivalent numbers for the second letter associated with them, we would just write those numbers out in a single string.”

“Good point,” Dunningham said. “Will you read off those numbers for me, top to bottom?”

Moreau looked at the laptop and begins reading the numbers. “One, four, seven, two, eight, zero, five, one, eight seven, one.”

Dunningham was writing the numbers on the board as they were read to him: **14728051871**

He inserted commas and then read out, “Fourteen billion, seven hundred twenty-eight million, fifty-one thousand, eight hundred seventy-one.” Does that mean anything to you?”

“No,” Moreau replied as he returned to the board. “But this does,” he said as he used his hand to erase the commas. He stepped back from the board, nodded his head and smiled. “I know who is responsible for the thefts!” he exclaimed.



63



Sirens wailed as the police cars sped away from headquarters, heading toward the edge of the twentieth *arrondissement*. Even though she was the lead detective on the case, Marie Laurent wasn't answering her mobile phone, leaving the task to Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc. He ordered two cars to each of the five entrances of *Cimetière du Père Lachaise*, Père Lachaise Cemetery.

His car was headed down Rue de Rivoli at a high rate of speed toward Place de la Bastille passing by the new opera house and finally heading up Rue de Charonne. The road name changed to Rue de Bagnole upon leaving the eleventh and entering the twentieth district. He slammed on the brakes as a bicyclist with ear buds firmly implanted in his ears was oblivious to the sirens and pulled away from the Alexandre Dumas Metro stop directly into LeBlanc's path. "*Sacré Bleu!*" screamed LeBlanc as the car narrowly missed the rider who continued on as if that was a regular occurrence.

Professor Dunningham and Interpol Agent Moreau were thankful they were in a following car when they saw the near accident ahead of them. LeBlanc regained his com-

posure and continued to the next left at Rue de la Réunion for the short jog to the entrance gate. The second car followed, and soon Dunningham and Moreau were exiting the rear seat of their car.

"It's to the right," Moreau said as they entered the cemetery and walked briskly to catch up with LeBlanc.

"Okay, you've kept me intrigued," Dunningham said as he tried to keep up with the French men.

"Let's get up there, and I'll tell you about it," Moreau said as they walked along the narrow pathway.

Dunningham looked forward and saw that the path began to make a ninety-degree arc to the left in the corner of the cemetery. He noticed that uniformed police officers were already there. He'd heard about this cemetery, but he thought it mostly just about "the place" to be buried in Paris.

"Anything?" LeBlanc asked the officers who were standing at the destination.

"Nothing except for the usual display of flowers and cards, Chief," one of the officers replied.

"*Merci*," LeBlanc responded in an unusually civil tone.

As he and Dunningham approached the area where LeBlanc and the officers were standing, Moreau stopped and pointed to the brick wall and the embedded plaque. "Just as your country has some unpleasant history of citizens killing other citizens in the name of war, we have also experienced this in Paris. It started in 1870 when Prussia invaded France and basically took over the country. Except for Paris, that is. Our government, if that's what you want to call them, high-tailed it to Versailles, trying to figure out a way to get the Germans to help us.

“Meanwhile, the people in Paris were left to fend for themselves, and so they formed an oppositional revolutionary government called the Paris Commune. The following year, in 1871, those at Versailles decided to take Paris back from its own socialist citizens by sending in soldiers. Tens of thousands were slaughtered as the soldiers moved systematically from the western edge to the east.

“Well, here we are at the edge of the city in the cemetery, and that’s where that last of the revolutionary holdouts came for refuge. The soldiers couldn’t care less about the sanctity of a cemetery; and so on May 28, 1871, the French soldiers lined up the last of the 147 Communards against the wall here, and shot them. They were buried right here in a mass grave, where they essentially fell into their own grave. That was the end of the revolution, and the city entered into a long period of martial law.” Moreau stopped to let the story sink in, and also to reflect on the barbarism that he’d just described.

“I had heard something about that,” Dunningham said. “But I didn’t know the whole story. And to think that our Civil War entailed most of the nation as it existed then, but this horror was just in the city of Paris.”

“Right,” Moreau said. “When I saw the numbers you wrote on the board, it was clear to me. The one four seven were for the one hundred forty-seven Communards who were massacred right here. And then it was the date, written the European way, date, month, year. We have two eight for the twenty-eighth day; then zero five for the fifth month, and then one eight seven one for the year eighteen seventy-one. Let’s see what LeBlanc knows about any of the Com-

munard descendants. I'm not from here, and so only someone who was born in Paris will know much of their history." Moreau headed toward the Chief Inspector who was chatting idly with one of the officers.

"I don't see anything here, Agent Moreau, that says the Communards had anything to do with the thefts." LeBlanc's civil demeanor disappeared as Moreau approached him.

"I am quite confident that there is something significant here, Chief Inspector," Moreau said. "I'm not a Parisian, as you know, so I'm not as familiar with any of the Communard descendants or any off-shoot activists." Moreau appealed to LeBlanc's ego by asking for his valuable assistance.

Curious, Dunningham started looking at the flowers and the cards that were placed haphazardly around the area. As he picked up a foiled-wrapped potted plant, he noticed someone riding a bicycle down the pathway toward them. As the bicycle got closer he could see that it was Marie Laurent pedaling down the dirt and gravel path. It was a sight that none of them had ever expected to see — she was riding the bicycle while wearing an attractive short skirt, blouse, and neck scarf. They all stared at the sight of her approaching them.

She pulled the bicycle to the right and pointed it away from the corner so she could alight from the bike as gracefully as possible while wearing a skirt. She set the bike down in the grass and walked over to the grouping. "Sorry I was away when the word went out about the Communards' Wall," she said still somewhat out of breath from pedaling the bicycle. "How'd you come up with it?" she said to LeBlanc.

"Uh," LeBlanc began before Moreau cut in.

“Professor Dunningham here recognized that the set of the first letters on the returned items were the first eleven letters in the Greek alphabet, from which he deduced that the ordering of the meaning of the second letters was critical. Using some of his math and ancient history he determined that the second letters were numbers, and from that he ended up with the sequence one four seven two eight zero five one eight seven one. That, of course, becomes the one hundred forty-seven Communards who were murdered right here on the twenty-eighth of May in the year Eighteen Seventy-one.”

“Nice work, Professor,” Marie said as a slight smile adorned her face. “But those Communards died over a hundred and forty years ago, Agent Moreau, so I don’t see how those numbers are a real clue to the mystery,” Marie said in a confident voice to regain control of the investigation.

“I agree, Detective,” Moreau began, “and we were just asking the Chief Inspector what he knew, as a lifelong Parisian, about the descendants of the Communards. You arrived just as he was beginning to tell us.”

Professor Dunningham put the index finger of his left hand to his head. “Just a minute,” he said. “I was looking at these flowers; most of them are standard potted plants or cut flowers, but this one wrapped in blue foil is different. Do you see it?” he asks as he holds up the plant for others to see.

There were the shrugs of shoulders, shakes of heads, but no one indicated acknowledgement of what the mathematics Professor was intimating. “All the other flowers are either cut flowers or they’re annuals, meaning that none of these

others are going to live very long." Dunningham paused as he saw a few raised eyebrows.

"This one, however, is an evergreen, a peculiar one to be sure. But once planted and properly cared for, it will live forever. That's one clue; the person or persons who brought this intended it to represent long-lasting life, and I take that to mean that the spirit of those Communards who gave their lives is still alive and will continue to live.

"The next clue is the set of markings on the card. How many people write personal messages on cards for the flowers that are left at a cemetery? Not many that I know of," Dunningham continued with his discourse.

He passed the card around. "I think you might be aware of the Greek letter sigma, which in mathematics usually means a summation. Here, however, it is combined with what we could call a capital letter T. Notice three occurrences of the sequence: sigma T, sigma T, sigma T." Dunningham paused as each person looked at the card.

"This has significant meaning," Dunningham said as the card was handed back to him.



“And what’s that meaning?” Detective Marie Laurent asked in a doubting voice.

“Thank you for asking, Detective,” the esteemed Mathematics Professor replied. Everything was falling into place in his explanation, just like the perfect scenario for a court case. “As I showed Agent Moreau earlier today when we uncovered the numbers and their sequence, there are references to Ionian numbers and their relationships with Greek and Byzantine letters. This particular symbol, the sigma T, is one that doesn’t have a direct translation to the Greek alphabet as we know it today.

“What it does have, however, is a numeric value that we had to skip over in our work earlier today in the conference room. Do you remember what that number was?” he asked Moreau.

Moreau nodded his head. “We had to skip the number six and went right from five to seven in our alphabetical relationships.”

“You have an excellent memory, my friend,” Dunningham said as he continued. “So if sigma T stands for the number six, what do you think three consecutive occurrences of

that very symbol means? Sigma T, sigma T, sigma T; that sequence becomes the numbers six six six. Now that sequence has several meanings, but a popular one is that it refers to the devil or to anything below earth.

“Note the fresh digging,” Dunningham said as he pointed to a small dirt mound. I think this plant, the card, and the inscription on the card says there’s something down below for us. Any believers?” Dunningham stepped back.



65



“Who has a metal detector and a shovel?” LeBlanc asked as he saw that no one else was doing anything.

“I think we do, Chief Inspector,” said one of the officers who was first at the scene. “We’re about as far away as possible,” he added. “We’re on the opposite side at the *Porte des Amandiers* entrance.”

“One of you take that bike and go get your car and drive it around here,” LeBlanc responded.

“Yes, sir,” the officer replied as he went and clumsily boarded the bike and headed on the circular path around the edge of the cemetery.

“I’d like to hear more from the Chief Inspector about the Communards and their descendants since we have some time before he’ll back,” Dunningham said.

“If you don’t mind,” Detective Marie Laurent interjected, “I’d like to hear more about the sequencing and the numbers you ended up with that led us to here.”

“I think we’ll have enough time later to go over that,” Interpol Agent Antoine Moreau said. “I think hearing about

the Communards is more germane to the current situation. Would you agree with that, Professor?"

"Most definitely," Dunningham agreed.

"Chief Inspector?" Moreau opened the way for him to talk about the revolutionists and those who still believed in their goals.

"Somewhat similar to the way that there are people in the southern parts of the United States who have not accepted that the Civil War from the 1860s is over, there are some here in Paris who feel that the resistance fueled by the Communards is still a worthy cause. Their efforts are more underground today than they were back in the 1870s; but they're still around. The group is called the Association of the Friends of the Paris Commune." LeBlanc stopped as he heard a sharp sound from just beyond the wall.

Professor Dunningham saw the irony in LeBlanc's statement. "Underground, you say. And that's interesting because it appears that this Association or someone else might have placed something underground for us to find. I like that connection.

The buzzing sound of the mobile phone got everyone's attention. Marie reached inside her clutch purse and retrieved her phone as all eyes were upon her. She looked at the message; looked at it again; dismissed it, and put the phone back into her purse. She looked up and noticed everyone was looking at her. "My hairdresser; just confirming our appointment for this weekend," she said.

The siren sound was getting closer as the officer had retrieved his car from the opposite side of the cemetery, and was coming along the western and southern roads around

the cemetery to the gate closest to the Communards' Wall. He pulled behind the two police cars that were already there, LeBlanc's and the one that brought Moreau and Dunningham. He exited the car after flipping the lever to pop open the car's trunk, where he retrieved a metal detector and shovel.

Upon hearing the sound of the approaching siren, the officer's partner started jogging slowly toward the entrance gate. He encountered his partner; took the shovel from him, and then the two of them walked briskly back to the group.

"Where would you like to start?" the officer with the metal detector asked.

"Right there," Moreau said as he pointed to the pile of freshly dug dirt.

The officer clicked the Power switch on the device and waved the detector over the area. The dial on the meter sprang to the right, and the officer smiled.

"Right there," Moreau then said to the officer who was holding the shovel.

The officer took the shovel and began to dig. It was easy work as the dirt had been dug up recently. He had dug about two feet into the ground, making a hole that was about three feet long and two feet wide when he hit something hard.

"Easy, now" the Chief Inspector said.

The shoveling continued, but at a slower and easier pace. "There's something heavy in there," the officer said as he struggled to lift the shovel.

"Let me take it," Moreau said as he stepped to the officer, who gladly handed him the shovel.

Moreau worked the dirt around the object, and as he went to put the shovel into the area near the object, there was a clink as he hit another hard object. "I think we've found pay dirt," Moreau said as he deftly scooped the shovel under the first object and started to pull up on the handle. As he did, he shook the shovel to knock off some of the dirt. "Degas?" Moreau exclaimed in a question as he lifted one of the stolen bronzes from the dirt.

"Wow," Dunningham remarked as Moreau swung the shovel over to the grassy area and gently emptied the bronze statue on to the grass. He then quickly put the shovel back into the hole and retrieved the second object. It, too, was a Degas bronze; this one had a note attached to it.

Moreau set that one on the grass next to the first one, tossed the shovel aside, and then knelt down to look at the statues. He brushed the dirt from them, and then he saw the nicks he had made in them with the shovel. "Oops," he said as he saw the small shiny mark. "This one is *Standing Horse*, that now has a new branding mark," he said in reference to the shovel nick. He brushed the dirt from the second one, *Spanish Dancer*, as he admired her graceful lines. "I thought these had already been returned," a stunned Moreau said.

"Those were imitations; decent fakes, but they were fakes nonetheless," Marie said. "We just said they'd been returned to play along with the thieves."

"Interesting," Moreau said, still sitting on the ground. "Detective, would you like to open this envelope?" Moreau asked as he pulled the rubber band loose from the statue base and held the envelope in his hand.

"Go ahead, Agent; you seem to be on a roll," Marie said as she stepped back slightly.

Moreau pulled the envelope flap out, opening it wide. He then extracted a single quarter-sheet of paper, which he read first to himself. "Okay," he sighed as he looked up at the others. "Short and sweet. It says, 'We will return!'" He handed the note and the envelope to Marie who casually looked at them and then put them into her purse.

"I wouldn't bother checking for fingerprints on any of this," Marie said as she attempted to regain control of the situation. "Nice job, Professor. I see now why Monsieur Moreau said you were the one who could help us."

"My pleasure, Detective," the professor said. "What now?"

"My car is parked at the main gate, so why don't you two take them back to headquarters, but wrap them up so no one else sees them.

"I'll meet you in the conference room," Marie added as she started back up the path, garnering glances along the way.



“I’ll get bags out of the car,” one of the police officers said as he headed toward the gate and the other one picked up the shovel and began to refill the hole.

“What could this be about?” Professor Dunningham asked.

Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc shook his head. “There has been some rumbling for years about some sort of rebellious uprising from an anti-government group. But nothing had come of it until this.” LeBlanc wasn’t the sharpest person on the force, somewhat surprising given his top leadership position. But as a student of history, he was able to piece fragments together to complete a story line.

And this was turning out to be quite the story line!

“I’ll check with our HQ in Lyon,” Interpol Agent Antoine Moreau said as the first police officer returned with two small bags. “*Merci*,” he said as the officer handed him the bags. He knelt back down, placed each bronze in a separate bag, and handed one to Dunningham who was standing close by.

A small crowd had gathered as the Communards’ Wall was a popular spot, being included on many walking tours

of the cemetery. "What's going on?" one of the onlookers asked.

"Just some routine police business," the Chief Inspector replied.

"What were you digging for?" the onlooker continued.

"As I said, just some routine police business," LeBlanc repeated. "Now why don't you continue along your way; we'll be gone, and then you can come back here." His voice got a little more forceful.

"This is a free land, and this is public property, so I think we'll just stay here a bit longer," the feisty man added.

One of the uniformed police officers approached the man. "Unless you'd like us to take you downtown for questioning, I would suggest you move on as you were just advised."

"On what grounds?"

"For one thing, interfering with police business. For another, obstructing a police investigation," the officer retorted. "Now, after a day or two of holding and some interrogation, it might turn out that we might not be able to press actual charges. And that's if we're able to get to you that soon. Depending on backlog, it make take up to a week, and gosh, we'd hate to see that happen to a nice fellow like you. So, why don't you just move on along." It was more of a statement than a question. The officer grinned and cocked his head to the right as he stared at the man.

The man wisely chose not to say anything more as he turned, muttered something inaudible, and started walking away. The rest of the group followed him while glancing to the left and shaking their heads.

"You handled that quite well," LeBlanc said as the officer watched the group walk down the path.

"Thank you," the officer said as his eyes continued to follow them.

"Are there any security cameras around there that might have surveillance footage?" Moreau asked.

"Nothing," LeBlanc said as he shook his head.

"What about having some installed?" Moreau added.

Still shaking his head, LeBlanc breathed heavily through his nostrils. "We might see something going on that we really don't want to see. No; these people have been two steps ahead of us all along. I don't think they'll be back here."

"You're right, Chief Inspector," Dunningham began. "There doesn't seem to be any repetition in their actions. What they've done and what they're doing has been carefully planned out, and it is highly unlikely that they will do something foolish. Brash, yes; foolish, no."

LeBlanc pulled a mobile phone out of his coat pocket and entered three numbers and pressed CALL.

The ringing phone interrupted her busy mind as she was driving back to police headquarters. She pressed the hands-free button on the dashboard. "Detective Laurent here," she said as she heard the connection.

"*LeBlanc here,*" she heard from the car's radio speaker. "*When you get back I'd like you to start the paperwork to get warrants out for the leaders of the Association of the Friends of the Paris Commune.*"

"Already underway, Chief," Marie responded in a calm voice. "Although from what I understand their leadership is somewhat fragmented and not really set in stone. And they

don't really publicize a who's who of the organization. So I'll need to make a few phone calls and pull in a few favors, so we might not be able to fully process the paperwork until tomorrow."

"*Okay*," LeBlanc answered.

"Drive safely; it's crazy on the roads for some reason," Marie said as she hit the OFF button.

"The roads are always crazy here," LeBlanc said without realizing the conversation had already ended. "It's Paris," he added.

The five men — LeBlanc, Moreau, Dunningham, and two uniformed officers — started walking along the path toward Porte la Réunion where their cars were parked outside the gate. Dunningham and Moreau each carried a small bag with a Degas bronze inside; one officer carried the shovel; the other carried the metal detector. LeBlanc just walked along.



A hastily called meeting of the Association of the Friends of the Paris Commune was underway in one of their safe houses not far from the headquarters of the French National Police. Many of the members were not able to attend on such short, almost non-existent notice, but several of the key members were there. On her way from the cemetery back to the office, Detective Marie Laurent had used her private non-traceable mobile phone to call Claudette and tell her that warrants would be forthcoming for the leaders of the group.

Even though the calls made from that phone couldn't be traced directly to her, what Marie didn't know was that a hidden tracking app that was installed on all French National Police phones tracked all mobile phone signals emanating within twenty-five feet of the department-issued phone. So the signal of her call to Claudette was logged into a secret database that automatically matched the calls with their starting and ending points.

"Our plan has been successful," Claudette told the small gathering. "It culminated much faster than I anticipated, but then I didn't expect them to bring in a mathematics pro-

fessor who solves these types of mysteries for police departments all over the world. I wish we'd had more time, but our situation is what it is. My contact has told me that the police will be issuing warrants for my arrest and for a few of you; I'll talk with you privately about that. But she did say that she will do whatever she can to stall the process, although that puts her in a tricky situation."

The leader continued with more positive statements about the outcome of their operations. They would have to keep the remaining works of art hidden away in random safe houses until she told them what to do with them. Claudette cautioned them against trying to sell any of them or sending any ransom notices.

"We can't have another incident of one person going rogue and taking a painting to some foreign land like what happened with that one van Gogh." She paused and took a sip of water. "For the sake of the Communards, both those from a long time ago to the proud ones today, I am going to leave the area."

"No, don't go," shouted one of the members.

"I have to," Claudette replied. "It's not safe for all of you if I'm still here. No one has anything to link any of you to the thefts. But if my contact has to give me up to save herself, I just won't be able to be found."

"What about the gallery," one of the members asked.

"I had to leave while we had a special exhibit going on, but I sent a text to Pierre and he said he'd be in and cover for me for the evening. Unfortunately, I'll be destroying my mobile phone before I leave here. I need to leave right away, and

so I'll do a quick stop at my apartment, grab a few things, and then leave. But I need to leave now."

Claudette was surrounded by her comrades, many of them with tears running down their cheeks as they hugged her and kissed her for what they figured would be the last time. Louis waited and then he approached her. "You were great my friend," she said. "Don't ever lose that fighting spirit."

"You, too," Louis said as the two hugged in a tight embrace. He wasn't the only one surprised when Claudette then kissed him passionately on the lips as tears flowed mightily from her eyes.

"Au Revoir, mon ami," she said as she stepped back, grabbed her purse, and headed toward the door. She checked the security cameras before she opened the door; everything looked normal in the alleyway and on the street, and so she headed out straightaway to the Metro station. She had rehearsed this plan many times; she just didn't think she'd have to initiate it so soon.

She hurried from the Metro stop at Gare du Nord carrying her small knapsack and bought a ticket on the high-speed TGV train headed to Lille at the northern edge of France. From there she would take another train into Belgium, then transfer to Munich, and finally get to Vienna. She felt naked without a mobile phone, but she knew she had to leave all traceable connections behind. Someone would eventually find the smashed phone in her apartment, but she'd be long gone and have a new identity by then. And all signals from that phone would have disappeared with the broken chip that she dropped in a waste bin along the street

as she walked to the Metro station. She was sorry she had to leave Pierre without any notice, but there were priorities in her life, and she knew that he would be fine without her to manage the gallery.

The gentle swaying of the high-speed train, combined with the drain of the energy rush she'd had earlier in the day, rocked her to sleep as she clutched her bag, the only personal possession that she had left on this earth.

The light of the television camera was switched on, causing Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc to blink his eyes in the bright morning sun. He was attired in his formal Dress Blue uniform, complete with medals and sashes. Standing next to him was Detective Marie Laurent, looking every bit as astonishing in her tight police uniform. They were surrounded by many other police officers. Interpol Agent Antoine Moreau declined to participate in the interview ("It's better if I remain anonymous"), as did Mathematics Professor Alfred Dunningham, PhD. ("The focus needs to be on the hard-working officers who've been working this case since the beginning.")

Standing near the hand-held camera, the on-site producer raised his hand, extending all five fingers. He slowly reduced the number of fingers from five to four, to three, to two, to one, and then he was showing a clenched fist. "*Bonjour, madames et monsieurs,*" the reporter began. "We are live at the headquarters of the French National Police, here with Chief Inspector Henri LeBlanc who has an important announcement about the art thefts that ripped Paris apart not all that long ago."

The reporter stepped up to LeBlanc opposite from Marie. He held the microphone up to LeBlanc's mouth. "We are pleased to announce that the theft of art works from many of Paris's fine establishments has been brought to a close. Under the direction of Detective Laurent, we've completed our work, and she'll tell you all about it."

The reporter stepped in front of LeBlanc and held the microphone for Marie. "Thank you, Chief Inspector. This morning we are pleased to announce several significant actions in connection with the art thefts that brought an unfortunate light to the many fine things here in our lovely city of Paris. The first thing we want to announce is that we have recovered all of the items that had been so brazenly stolen." Marie looked as attractive in her police uniform as she did when she was clothed in the designer outfits that were perfectly formed to fit her shape.

"We have also identified and issued arrest warrants for the people who were responsible for the thefts. Those arrest warrants are being served right now, and we expect to have everyone in custody today. We will follow up with more information later this afternoon." The cameraman kept a tight focus on Marie's beautiful face even though she was finished talking. She took one step backward to indicate she was done.

"Was this an organized crime activity?" the reporter asked Marie.

"I would say it was definitely organized, and it certainly was a crime," she replied. "But, no it wasn't part of any organized criminal activity that is basically non-existent here in Paris anyway."

“What about those letters or symbols that some people had painted on the back of the items?” Marie and LeBlanc wanted to leave, but the reporter kept asking questions.

LeBlanc gently grabbed the reporter’s hand that held the microphone and pulled the microphone to his mouth. “As the Detective said, we will have more information to share with you and with the public later this afternoon, but for right now, that is all. Thank you, and we want to thank the citizens of Paris for their courtesy and patience during this trying time.” Le Blanc released his grip on the reporter’s hand who got the not-so-subtle message that the press conference was over. He turned to the cameraman who’d already hit the OFF switch.

There were signs of relief across the faces of many Parisians who had watched the announced newscast. Some of the people watching, however, showed signs of surprise at the announcements made by Detective Laurent.

“Too bad we can’t tell Claudette about the audacious news they just announced,” one of the Association’s members said. “What an outrageous lie. But that’s okay. If they want the ignorant public to believe that everything has been returned, then that’s fine with us. That’s why we must stick to our mission just like the one hundred forty-seven did in Eighteen Seventy-one.”

Alfred scanned through the morning paper as he and Sylvia ate a leisurely breakfast in the hotel's dining room. "Quite the article on yesterday's press conferences, wasn't it dear?" Sylvia enjoyed the beautiful cup of coffee as her husband lowered the paper so he could see his wife.

"Yes it was," he replied. "And most of what they said was true," he added.

"The reporter or the police?" she asked.

"Both," he answered. He leaned forward slightly and said in a soft voice, "They don't have all of them back; that was just a smokescreen to get the attention away from the police and the investigation."

"Oh, my," Sylvia replied.

Alfred turned his left wrist and looked at his watch. "We still have plenty of time to go to the Orsay before we have to come back here, do the last bit of packing, and then head to the airport. You want to go?"

"Will we have time for one of those chocolate pastries?" she asked.

"There is always time for chocolate pastries, my dear," the gentleman professor said as he folded the paper, put it under

his right arm and pushed back his chair. Sylvia arose from her chair at the same time and they strolled hand-in-hand out of the dining room to the elevator.

Standing in line to buy tickets at Musée d'Orsay, Alfred heard several murmurs about the art thefts. Most of what he heard people say was incorrect second-hand or third-hand information; he could have corrected them, but he'd told Sylvia that he was going to be just a private citizen today. So he let the people prattle on as the line moved forward slowly toward the ticket window.

"Two, please," Alfred said as he approached the window and placed Fifty Euros in the money slot.

"Aren't you?" the ticket agent started before Alfred interrupted.

"Shhh, please" he said quietly as he held his right index finger up to his pursed lips. "Thank you, my dear," he said as she slid two tickets with his Fifty Euro note sandwiched between them toward him. He slipped the note from between the tickets and stuffed it into his front pocket.

"What was that about, dear?" Sylvia asked as Alfred turned around, grabbed her hand and headed toward the entrance.

"Nothing really," he said as he looked down at his watch. "How about if we head up to fifth floor and check out my theory on that door lock that's up there by the big clock? And then we can sit and have one of those pastries you like?"

"Sounds good to me," his wife said as Alfred handed the tickets to the ticket taker just inside the large glass doors.

As they walked to the back of the museum toward the escalators, they could see large crowds milling around the Im-

pressionist area on the second floor. "It looks as if the van Gogh salon is still closed," Alfred remarked as he saw the large wooden panels still in place near Salon Seventy-One.

"That's too bad," Sylvia said. "I hope they're able to re-open it soon."

"I agree, dear," Alfred replied. He looked at his watch again as they stepped off the escalator that took them to the fifth floor. He had a clear view of the large clock that faced outward toward the Seine; it was just past eleven o'clock. "We have a couple minutes, dear," he said as he clutched Sylvia's hand and headed toward the clock. As they got near the clock, Alfred led them next to the door that led outside.

The other visitors were taking photos of the back of the large clock, some even taking photos "through the clock" toward Sacré-Cœur in Montmartre, the highest point in the city. Alfred stared intently at his atomic clock. He knew the calculations by heart; the time at which the minute hand would be as far from the twelve o'clock position as was the hour hand on the other side of twelve. That time would be four minutes and fifty-five point zero eight seconds past eleven o'clock. If his theory about that cipher lock was right, at that exact moment he would hear a slight click and the door would be unlocked for a very short time.

If they had missed this time at almost 11:05, they would have to wait until almost one o'clock when the current hour and minute hands would be in the opposite positions at 12:55:55.08. The countdown was on as it was now 11:04:30; just twenty five seconds to go.

Sylvia stood there patiently as she always did when he was "doing one of his mathematics things."

11:04:40

11:04:45

11:04:50

51

52

53

54

11:04:55

"Click" went the cipher lock; Alfred heard it and he immediately reached for the door handle and turned it clockwise. The door opened and the fresh breeze that came in surprised everyone. Alfred smiled and pulled the door closed as people around them looked at him. As Alfred and Sylvia walked toward the cafeteria, a few people walked over to the door and tried to turn the door handle; it wouldn't budge.

"That's how they got out of here," Alfred said when he returned to their table with a large pastry that oozed chocolate icing from the top and the sides. Two steaming cups of coffee were also on the tray.

"But the police said they were already arresting everyone involved," Sylvia said as she eyed the delicious pastry that was already cut in half.

"You're right, dear," Alfred said as he sat down and smiled.

Two hours later, Alfred and Sylvia Dunningham were entering Charles de Gaulle Airport when two reporters recognized him and approached them. "Excuse me, Professor," one reporter began. "The police said that all the stolen artwork had been returned. You had a part in this investigation;

do you know if those were the real pieces that were returned?"

Professor Dunningham patiently stopped and smiled. "Yes, I do know," he said, and then continued on inside the terminal as the reporters were kept outside by the airport police. As they got in the Business Class line for United Airlines flight 986 to San Francisco, he turned to Sylvia and smiled. "Too bad those reporters don't know how to ask the right question."

"Yes, dear," she said as they stepped up to the counter.



About the Author



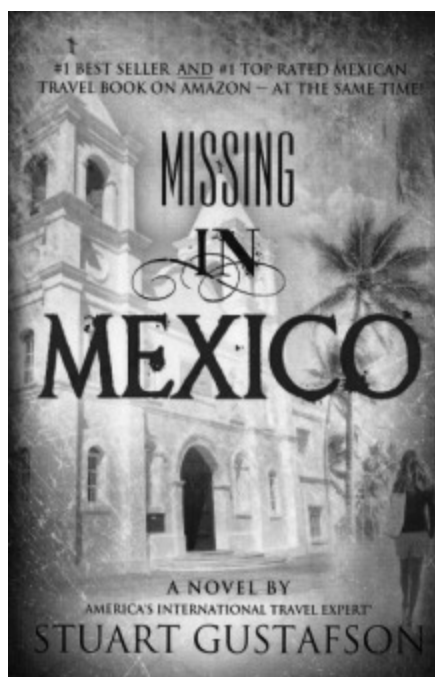
Stuart Gustafson learned the love of travel at a very young age when the family moved often as his father was in the US Navy. The frequent relocations also ensured that he was able to establish new friendships, as well as integrate into established ones. He was born in Southern California, and while he moved many times as a youngster, Stuart ended back up in San Diego where he met and married Darlene Smith in 1974. They have one daughter, one son, and one rescue dog.

His formal education includes a B.A. in Mathematics from San Diego State University and an MBA from the University of San Diego. He spent twenty-nine years in high-technology endeavors, including a move from San Diego to Boise, Idaho, in 1993. He took early retirement in 2007 to devote time to writing, traveling, and spending more time with his mother who lived to the wonderful age of 94. His mom also loved to travel, and the collages on her walls showcased some of her more enjoyable trips.

One way that Stuart enjoys traveling is through speaking engagements on cruise ships. These opportunities have allowed him to visit one hundred fifty cruise ports, thus en-

asuring the authenticity of many of his books' descriptions and locations. In addition to novels, he writes travel articles and posts pictures of the amazing places he's visited. With his Million-Mile Flier status, Stuart has visited over fifty-five countries, and thus it's easy to see why he is *America's International Travel Expert*^{*}. For more travel information, and to read about Stuart's other books and speaking opportunities with him, visit **www.stuartgustafson.com**¹.

1. <https://www.stuartgustafson.com>



Primary Setting: Los Cabos, Baja California Sur, MEXICO

ISBN 13: 978-0-9771727-4-0

Edition: Third USA Printing (December 2017)

Length: 308 pages

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Chapter One

One/Uno

Flight # 1476 from Los Cabos to Seattle

Saturday, January 5th

The voice over the intercom system announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, we trust you had a good time in Los Cabos, but it’s now time for us to take you back to the States. The cabin doors have been closed, and Alaska Airlines flight 1476 with nonstop service to Seattle-Tacoma is ready for departure.”

“Hey, wait. Sarah’s not here; we can’t leave without her,” the girl in seat 14A yelled in a frightened voice. Mary reached up and pushed the flight attendant call button even as the flight attendant was already headed toward her seat. “We can’t leave yet; Sarah’s still down there,” Mary continued, now reaching the point of hysteria.

“Please calm down, miss. Everyone’s already onboard. You can look for yourself,” the flight attendant said in a calm voice as she pointed to the window.

“What do you mean everyone’s onboard? Sarah’s not here; she should be sitting right here!” Mary pulled her tearing eyes away from the empty seat and looked out and saw that the boarding ramps had been pulled away from the airplane, but what she didn’t see scared her. How come Sarah’s

not out there, running in a panic toward the plane? “Where’s Sarah? She was just there with me. Where is she? Don’t leave; Sarah’s missing!” Mary cried out as tears began flowing down her cheeks.

The annoyed passengers felt a jolt as the plane was being pushed back. They were ready for their flight home from Los Cabos. But Sarah wasn’t on board; she’s missing — *Missing in Mexico*.

Book Clubs and Book Groups: Stuart would like you to consider adding *Missing in MEXICO* to your reading program.

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Book #1 in the Mathematics Professor Alfred
Dunningham, PhD series

(PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED as *Sydney Murders-
SOLVED!*)

Primary Setting: Sydney, New South Wales, AUS-
TRALIA

ISBN 13: 978-0-9887270-0-7

Edition: First USA Printing (September 2018)

Length: 291 pages

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Chapter One

Early morning

Monday, 30 November

Throughout New South Wales, Australia

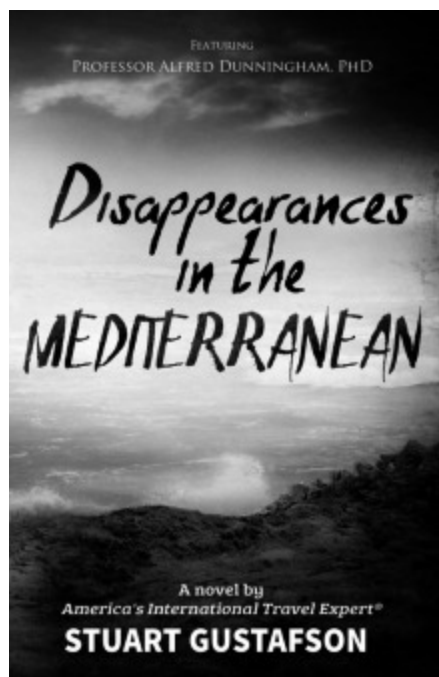
“Killer arrested!” exclaimed the street corner newspaper vendor. “Read the full details of the arrest for the killings in the Prince Albert, the Tooey Rocks, and on the Bridge. It’s exclusive only in the *Tribune*!” The hawker continued his routine of showing the headlines, taking the dollar coin, and then targeting some new customers. If a driver showed interest, the newsman would venture out into the traffic to make a sale, but he tended to stay mostly on the sidewalk near his dwindling stack of newspapers. It was a good day to be selling newspapers. Headlines always sold more papers, and sensational headlines sold them even faster.

The headlines on the morning’s *Sydney Tribune* shouted in celebration **Killer Arrested in 3 “Famous Sites” Murders!** The continuing front-page article was intended to be sensational, contain exclusive information, and deliver a sense of relief to the inhabitants of Sydney and the outlying areas of New South Wales. Whether the article achieved its intended results would remain unknown, but most newsstands sold out of all their copies before 0830 hours, even with more copies printed than on a normal Monday morning. But, then, this wasn’t a normal Monday morning.

In this novel, Stuart reveals a previously undisclosed security flaw that exists on the famous Sydney Harbour Bridge.



VISIT www.MurdersInSydney.com for more information.



Book #2 in the Mathematics Professor Alfred Dunningham, PhD series

Primary Setting: On cruise ship *Royal Holiday* on a 15-day Mediterranean Sea cruise

ISBN 13: 978-0-9771727-9-5

Edition: First USA Printing (March 2016)

Length: 307 pages

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Chapter One

1

Sunday, July 14

5:45 PM

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention, please,” the voice over the ship’s Public Address system announced in a stern, yet professional voice. Happy Hour was still underway in most of the ship’s bars and there was considerable chatter going on. The main dining room had not yet opened, although there was a line beginning to form at its Deck Four entrance. Most passengers had gone ashore on an excursion in Civitavecchia or spent some time in the small port town so they had worked up an appetite. The railway station, a fifteen-minute walk from port, was a jumping off point for some seasoned cruisers who had destinations other than Civitavecchia in mind for the day.

All-aboard time for the passengers was at 5:30, so everyone was back on board the *Royal Holiday* when she was ready to set sail for her next port of call in Messina, on the

isle of Sicily. At least, everyone was supposed to be on board by now.

“Once again, ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please,” the PA voice said. “Will Mr. Tyler Jacobs in stateroom 7043 please contact Guest Relations on

Deck Three immediately.” The grammar was technically that of a question, but it was understood as a command. “Again, Mr. Tyler Jacobs in stateroom 7043, please contact Guest Relations on Deck Three immediately.”

A first-time cruiser in the Martini Lounge turned to her husband and asked in a slightly slurred voice, “Why are they paging him? Why don’t they just go to his cabin?”

As an experienced speaker on cruise ships, Stuart has been to the ports in the book, so these are real-life locations.



VISIT **www.DisappearancesInTheMediterranean.com**
for more information.



Book #3 in the Mathematics Professor Alfred
Dunningham, PhD series

PRIMARY SETTING: PARIS, FRANCE

ISBN 13: 978-0-9887270-1-4

Edition: First USA Printing (September 2018)

Length: 280 pages

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Chapter One

1

“Okay, this is where you’ll need your Museum Pass,” the tour guide said as her small group approached the entrance to one of Paris’s small, yet extremely popular, museums – Musée de l’Orangerie. “Make sure your name is on it and that you’ve properly entered the date. Remember, we use the European form here, meaning so we go day, month, year.” Elyse had been leading tours for years, both here in Paris where she did her graduate art studies, and in the Provence region in the southeastern portion of France. She wasn’t born in France, but she re-located from upstate New York when she wanted to advance her art studies. It came down to a choice between Italy and France, and when she compared all that France had to offer, it was an easy decision for her. She was now fluent in French, even down to the little gestures that made her seem home-grown.

Elyse showed her tour guide license and the guard waved her through. He then looked at each Museum Pass as it was held up for him, and he waved each member of the group to go inside. Closed on Tuesdays, the Orangerie was normally quite busy on Wednesdays, but she managed to get the group going early today so they could get there before the larger crowds arrived. “Let’s meet over there by the counter after everyone’s been through the scanner. Small bags are fine, but the large backpacks will have to be checked.” She watched as each of her eight went through the scanner and retrieved their metal items. She was leading a group two years earlier when one of the men forgot to retrieve his new Rolex watch, a recent present from his wife, and when they went back the next day, no one knew anything about it, or so said the low-paid security guards. Although it wasn’t her fault, Elyse felt

really bad for the man so she now made sure that nothing was left behind.

As part of his research for this novel, Stuart spent two-months in Paris where he was able to absorb the Parisian culture and lifestyle.

Visit **www.ArtTheftsInParis.com** for more information.

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