

***From Priceless: How I Went Undercover to Rescue the World's Stolen Treasures* by Robert K. Wittman and John Shiffman**

**OPERATION MASTERPIECE**

**Chapter 18**

**MRS. GARDNER**

**Paris, 1892.**

ON THE AFTERNOON OF DECEMBER 4, 1892, THE Auction at the famed Hotel Drouot reached item No. 31.

The Dutch painting was offered without fanfare. No one could know that it was destined to become the centerpiece of the twentieth century's largest and most mysterious art heist.

As the bidding began, Isabella Stewart Gardner of Boston held a lace handkerchief to her face. This was the signal to her broker to keep bidding. No. 31 was an oil on canvas, a work by Johannes Vermeer, the seventeenth-century Dutchman whose genius was not yet universally recognized. He called the painting *The Concert*. The work portrayed a young lady in an ivory skirt with black and gold bodice playing the harpsichord. A second woman in an olive, fur-trimmed housecoat stood by the edge of the instrument, studying a note card as she sang. At the center of the painting, in more muted hues of brown and green, a gentleman with long black hair, his back to the painter, sat sideways in a bright terra-cotta-backed chair.

Although works by Vermeer were not nearly as popular or as valuable then as they are today, Gardner faced tough competition as she vied for No. 31. The other bidders making a play for *The Concert* were agents representing the Louvre and the National Gallery in London.

From her seat in the auction room, Gardner could not see her straw bidder. She simply trusted that he could see her.

The bids climbed steadily past twenty-five thousand francs and Gardner kept her handkerchief in place. The bidding slowed, rising in smaller and smaller increments, until Gardner's man won it with a final bid of twenty-nine thousand. Afterward, she learned that the Louvre and the National Gallery had dropped out because each wrongly presumed that Gardner's bidding agent also worked for a large museum—in that day, it was considered bad manners for one museum to drive up the price against another. The museums were dismayed to hear that the winner, this cheeky woman with the healthy checkbook, was an American, and that she planned to take *The Concert* home to Boston.

I DON'T KNOW if Isabella Stewart Gardner ever met Albert C. Barnes—she died in 1924, the year before he opened his museum outside Philadelphia.

But Dr. Barnes and Mrs. Gardner strike me as kindred souls: Each assembled an astounding private art collection. Each built a museum to showcase these works to the public, displaying them in an eclectic, educational style. Each lived on the grounds of the museum, and each left a strict will that stipulated that the galleries remain precisely as arranged, not one frame moved, not ever.

Gardner was not a self-made millionaire like Barnes; few women of the nineteenth century were. She inherited the fortune her father had made in the Irish linen and mining industries. Yet Gardner spent the final thirty years of her life in the same manner as Barnes. She traveled extensively to Europe, snatching up important Renaissance and Impressionist works, pieces by Titian, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Michelangelo, Raphael, Botticelli, Manet, and Degas. Her ample resources and skilled negotiators enabled her to compete against the world's great museums.

Gardner and her husband, Jack, traipsed the globe on grand adventures, and she documented them in a diary with broad cursive strokes. An entry from November 17, 1883, is typical. She wrote of a trip by oxcart to Angkor Wat: "A small Cambodian, naked to the waist, fans me as I write. Within the walls of Angkor Thom have already been discovered one hundred and twenty ruins..." Gardner returned repeatedly to her favorite city, Venice, island of art, music, and architecture. When she decided to build a public museum for her collection in Boston, she found a plot of marshland along the Fenway and designed a building in the style of a fifteenth-century Venetian palazzo, filling it with as many authentic European pieces as possible. She imported columns, arches, ironwork, fireplaces, staircases, frescoes, glass, chairs, cassoni, wood carvings, balconies, fountains. Like Barnes, Gardner disliked the cold, clinical museums of the day, in which paintings hung side by side with affixed labels explaining the significance of each work. She arranged her museum the way Barnes would twenty-five years later

in Pennsylvania, decorating it with more subtle forms of art—furniture, tapestries, and antiques. She designed a great, glass-roofed, flower-filled Mediterranean courtyard in the center of the four-story museum, allowing the warm light of the sun to fall into the most important galleries. Gardner built an organic museum, one to be appreciated as a living thing. As the museum's official history notes, "Love of art, not knowledge about the history of art, was her aim."

The Dutch Room, home to the Vermeer and four Rembrandts—and later the scene of a great crime—was arranged in typical Gardner style.

She flanked the entryway with a pair of husband-and-wife portraits by Hans Holbein the Younger and hung a large bronze knocker of Neptune on the door. On the left, between a Van Dyck painting and the door, Gardner placed her first important purchase for the museum, a dark Rembrandt self-portrait from 1629, a painting similar to the one I rescued in Copenhagen. Underneath Self-Portrait, she placed a carved oak cabinet framed by two Italian chairs. To the side of the cabinet, she nailed a postage-stamp-sized framed Rembrandt etching, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

Virtually everything Gardner displayed in the Dutch Room was an imported work of art, most of it from the seventeenth century. The red marble fireplace was Venetian; the refectory table, Tuscan; the tapestries, Belgian. The Italian ceiling was decorated with scenes from mythology—Mars and Venus, the Judgment of Paris, Leda, Hercules. The floor was covered with rust-colored tiles specially commissioned from Mercer's Moravian Pottery & Tile Works in Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

On the south wall, against patterned olive wallpaper above sets of salmon, aqua, and rouge chairs, Gardner hung seven paintings. There were works by the Flemish artists Rubens and Mabuse, but the wall was dominated by two of Rembrandt's better paintings, A Lady and Gentleman in Black and The Storm on the Sea of Galilee, his only seascape. Around these paintings, Gardner arranged Barnes-style accoutrements, including a twelfth-century Chinese bronze beaker.

The most unusual arrangement in the room stood along the wall by the exterior windows. There stood an easel with two paintings positioned back to back. In front of each painting, Gardner set a glass case filled with antiques and a chair. The first faced the rear wall: Landscape with an Obelisk, an oil painting on oak panel that was long thought to be a Rembrandt but later discovered to be the work of Govaert Flinck. The second painting faced the entrance to the Dutch Room, and the position of the chair beneath it seemed to mimic the bold square splotch of terra cotta on the chair at the center of the painting.

The Concert was the most valuable piece in the room.

## Chapter 19

### COLD CASE

Boston, 1990.

THE LARGEST PROPERTY CRIME IN U.S. HISTORY began very early on a Sunday morning in March 1990.

St. Patrick's Day fell on a Saturday that year and revelers across Boston were still stumbling from bars into a light drizzle and growing fog. Inside the Gardner museum, two young security guards worked the graveyard shift. One made rounds through the third-floor galleries. The other sat behind a console of cameras on the first floor.

At 1:24 a.m., two men dressed in Boston police uniforms approached the museum's service entrance along Palace Road, the narrow one-way street forty yards from the main doors on The Fenway. One of the men pressed the intercom button.

The guard at the desk, a college kid with dopey curly black hair that fell below his shoulders, answered. "Yeah?"

"Police. We have a report of a disturbance in the courtyard."

The guard was under strict instructions: Never open the door for anyone, ever, no exception. He studied the images of the men on the security camera. They wore badges on their sharp-edged police hats. He saw large radios on their hips. He buzzed them in.

The men in police uniforms pulled open the heavy wooden exterior door, moved through a second unlocked door, and turned left to face the guard at his station. The two men were white, each roughly thirty years old—one tall, perhaps six foot one, the other a few inches shorter and wider. The shorter man wore square, gold-framed glasses that fit snugly on his round face. The taller guy was broad-shouldered but lanky from the waist down. Each wore a false mustache.

The tall one did the talking. He said, "Anyone else working?"

"Yeah," said the guard behind the desk. "He's upstairs."

"Get him down here."

The guard picked up his radio and did as he was told. When the tall policeman motioned for him to step out from behind his console—away from the button for the silent alarm—the guard did that, too. Before the second guard arrived, the tall policeman said to the first guard, “You look familiar. I think we’ve got a default warrant on you. Show me some ID.”

The guard dutifully dug out his driver’s license and Berklee College of Music identification. The policeman took a quick glance and without a word spun the young guard around against the wall and handcuffed him. When the confused guard realized the cops hadn’t frisked him, it hit him: These guys aren’t cops. But it was too late. When the second guard, also a part-timer and aspiring musician, arrived, the policeman slapped cuffs on him before he could speak.

“You’re not under arrest,” the thief told them. “This is a robbery. Don’t give us any problems and you won’t get hurt.”

“Don’t worry,” the second guard sputtered. “They don’t pay me enough.”

The thieves led their captives down the stairs into the basement, a damp warren of aging, low-hanging pipes and ducts. They took one guard to the end of a passageway and cuffed him to a pipe by a janitor’s sink. They wrapped duct tape around the young man’s eyes and ears, and from the base of his chin to the top of his forehead. They led the other guard to the other end of the basement, to a darker, harder-to-find corner. They wrapped his head in tape in the same manner and latched him to a pipe.

Most museum robberies are over in a matter of minutes, simple smash-and-grab jobs. But the Gardner thieves were able to take their time. Confident that they had prevented the guards from tripping the silent alarm, and likely carrying radio scanners that picked up police frequencies, the Gardner thieves spent an astounding eighty-one minutes inside the museum. They did not even begin to try to remove paintings until 1:48 a.m., twenty-four minutes after they entered the museum. They would then spend a full forty-five minutes in the galleries, ripping masterpieces from the walls, and another twelve minutes shuttling works of art out the service door. We know these minute-by-minute details because motion detectors installed throughout the Gardner tracked the thieves’ movements. Although the robbers grabbed a printout of this record from the security chief’s office before they fled, a computer hard drive preserved a backup copy.

At 1:48 a.m., the thieves headed up the main staircase. They turned right at the second-floor landing, moving along a hallway overlooking the courtyard, and directly into the Dutch Room, through the door marked with the Neptune knocker. The paintings were secured by little more than simple hooks, and the thieves quickly removed the four Rembrandts and rudely set them on the tile floor, scattering shattered and splintered glass from one of the frames. At the easel, they grabbed the Flinck, perhaps believing it

to be a Rembrandt, and, shoving the glass case aside, got to work on the Vermeer. Very neatly, probably using box cutters, one of the thieves began slicing the works from their frames.

The other thief headed back past the stairway through the Early Italian Room, turned right, moved through the Raphael Room, past a priceless Botticelli and a pair of Raphaels, arriving in the Short Gallery at 1:51 a.m. This thief easily broke into a cabinet filled with framed sketches, a collection secured only by a century-old lock. In one of the center panels, the man removed five Degas sketches, works in pencil, watercolor, and charcoal. The sketches were relatively minor pieces compared with the far more valuable artwork within arm's reach of the Degas—a Matisse, a Whistler, and a Michelangelo. Perhaps the thief was a Degas fan; perhaps he was following orders; perhaps he was confused in the darkness and his hurry.

At 2:28 a.m., both thieves were back in the Dutch Room. They abandoned the Rembrandt self-portrait on wood, presumably because it was too heavy or could not be properly cut from its frame, and carried the five Dutch paintings and five Degas sketches downstairs. They removed the videotape from the recorder, ripped out the printout of the recordings by the motion detector, and made for the door. They opened the service entrance door twice, at 2:41 a.m. and 2:45 a.m.

The thieves stole three other works of art from the Gardner that misty morning, creating clues that have long intrigued investigators. They took two relatively valueless items—a Chinese vase from the Dutch Room and a gilded Corsican eagle finial from the top of a Napoleonic banner in the Short Gallery. Why take such minor pieces? Were these souvenirs? Or red herrings designed to trick investigators?

The third clue is most befuddling. The thieves took a three-foot-tall Manet, *Chez Tortoni*, from the Blue Room. This was the only work stolen from the first floor, and most curiously, the motion detectors did not pick up any movement in this gallery during the robbery. Absent a malfunction, this meant the Manet was moved before the thieves confronted the guards, raising the specter that the Gardner heist was an inside job. Additionally: Whoever took the Manet left its empty frame on the chair by the desk of the security chief, a gesture many interpreted as a final insult.

The mystery of the Manet is like most Gardner clues—intriguing but ultimately useful only to the countless armchair detectives in the bars and salons of Boston and the art community.

THE THEFT SHOCKED Boston and the art world, but it shouldn't have.

As the value of artwork, from Impressionists to Old Masters, rose steadily at auction houses from the early sixties to the late eighties, so too did the pace of art crime, especially in New England. The thieves began slowly, targeting the region's many colleges. Schools made prime targets because, as the thieves soon discovered, they held valuable but poorly guarded art and artifacts donated decades ago by long-dead alumni—Hudson Valley School paintings, ancient coins, rifles from the Revolutionary War. If a painting vanished from the walls of the English Department reception room, embarrassed college officials assumed it to be a prank or the work of the town delinquents, not the work of a growing cadre of Boston burglars who found it easier to steal art from a college or a mansion than to rob a bank. Emboldened by success, these thieves expanded their horizons and targeted museums. The most successful New England art thief was Myles Connor, who would become one of a number of Gardner suspects. Beginning in 1966, Connor burglarized the Forbes House Museum, the Woolworth Estate, the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College, the rotunda of the Massachusetts State House, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. By the late 1980s, museums had begun to recognize the threat, but moved slowly to address it. When a new director was named to lead the Gardner in 1989, she ordered a review of her museum's security measures. It was not completed before the 1990 crime.

Hundreds of FBI agents and police officers investigated the Gardner theft, and as the years passed, the mystique and mystery of the heist only grew. Investigators navigated a growing thicket of speculation, one fueled by a cast of characters featuring con men, private detectives, investigative journalists, and wise guys—all chasing a reward that would climb to \$5 million.

No lead went unchecked. Detectives and agents searched a trawler in the harbor, a city warehouse, a Maine farmhouse. When a pair of tourists visiting a Japanese artist's home spotted what they believed to be *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, an FBI agent and a Gardner curator dashed to Tokyo. They found a fine copy, but no Rembrandt.

Every now and then a con man approached the media and the media bit. One got face time on *60 Minutes*, the other on *Primetime Live*. The con artist who appeared on ABC claimed to be working with Connor, and he repeatedly teased the U.S. attorney's office in Boston, claiming he could return one of the paintings within an hour, if paid \$10,000 and granted immunity.

One newspaper reporter didn't just investigate the story. In 1997, he became part of it. Under the blazing headline "We've Seen It!," the Boston Herald reported that one of its star journalists, Tom Mashberg, was led blindfolded to a Boston warehouse in the dark of night, and shown a curled, badly damaged canvas that resembled *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. Mashberg's source later sent him photographs of the Rembrandt and paint chips supposedly of seventeenth-century vintage. Although an initial analysis

suggested the chips were authentic, further tests by the government showed they were not.

Shady mob links to the Gardner heist surfaced repeatedly, and most drew breathless press coverage across Boston. Four times in the space of a decade, the papers reported, a wiseguy with alleged ties to the Gardner case died under suspicious circumstances. When two more reputed mob associates were arrested for conspiring to rob an armored car, they alleged that FBI agents had set them up as part of a scheme to win the paintings' return. As all of this mob-Gardner speculation swirled, alleged Boston mob boss Whitey Bulger—a man the media identified as a prime suspect in the Gardner case—fled the United States on the eve of his arrest for unrelated murders.

Almost every new twist and detail from the Gardner investigation made the papers and the eleven o'clock news—from the dead, indicted, and fugitive mobsters to the false sightings in Japan. The Herald reporter recounted his story for a national audience in Vanity Fair and inked an option for a movie deal. Harold Smith, a respected private art detective, was featured in a well-received documentary film about the heist.

Even the normally tight-lipped FBI joined the fray, feeding the hype. For a story marking the anniversary of the crime in the mid-1990s, the lead FBI agent in Boston gave an on-the-record interview—highly unusual for a street agent working an active case. He told the New York Times, “I can’t imagine a whodunit as nightmarish as this, considering the pool of potential suspects. It’s mind-boggling.”

Mind-boggling, perhaps. Frustrating, for sure.

And then, in 2006, sixteen years after the crime, after all the false leads and con games, the FBI received a credible lead.

That tip landed on my desk.

## Chapter 20

### A FRENCH CONNECTION

Paris, June 1, 2006.

A LITTLE OVER A CENTURY AFTER GARDNER WON THE Concert at auction in Paris, I traveled there to give a lecture. And to follow up on the hot tip.

Each year, the men and women who supervise the world's undercover law-enforcement operatives convene in a major capital. The conference goes by a secret name as bland as Universal Exports.

The agenda includes lectures on crime trends, updates on important international legal developments and treaties, and presentations on successful operations—war stories told by undercover agents on famous cases. In the spring of 2006, the group invited me to give a lecture on the Rembrandt sting in Copenhagen. I flew to Paris with an old Philadelphia colleague, Daniel DeSimone, the FBI's unit chief for Undercover and Sensitive Operations. We looked forward to meeting and socializing with our counterparts, making the kind of personal connections that can be invaluable during international investigations. The undercover group planned a Seine dinner cruise and a behind-the-scenes tour of the Paris Opera, the venue immortalized by Renoir.

During one of the luncheons, I introduced myself to DeSimone's counterpart in Paris, the chief of the French undercover unit called SIAT. The SIAT chief was busy hosting the conference, shaking lots of hands, making small talk, but when we met, he arched an eyebrow.

He put down his glass of red wine. "You've of course heard what we heard about these paintings?"

We spoke in vague, veiled terms. There were a lot of people around. But I knew he was referring to the tip that the French had just passed to the FBI: Two Frenchmen living in Miami appeared to be trying to broker the sale of two stolen masterpieces. One was a Rembrandt, the other a Vermeer. The world was missing only one Vermeer—the one from Boston.

"You should meet the officer who received the tip."

"I'd like that."

“Good. He works for another department, but I will find you his mobile number.”

I MET THE SIAT contact at the tourist entrance to the Louvre, outside the large glass pyramid.

We spied each other easily in the thick crowd of tourists in T-shirts and shorts—we were the only ones wearing suits. He was a grizzled Police Nationale officer who worked the busy undercover art crime beat in Paris. He was heavysset with a leathered face and narrow blue eyes and introduced himself as Andre. We shook hands and laughed at ourselves: two hotshot undercover art sleuths meeting in coat and tie at France’s best-known museum! Andre and I strolled away from the mob in the warm sun, tossing back and forth the names of cops and museum chiefs we both knew.

Three minutes later, we were turning right on the cobblestones, following the sidewalk through one of the great arches and out of the palace complex. We crossed Rue de Rivoli and its cheap souvenir shops, moving north up Rue de Richelieu. I was eager to dive in, start peppering him with questions about the Gardner tip. But this was his town, his tip. I let him lead.

After two blocks, the crowds thinned. We kept walking, and Andre said, “You know in France, we have two different national police departments, the Police Nationale and the Gendarmerie Nationale?”

I did, but treaded carefully, having heard about the rivalries. “Kind of a complicated arrangement, huh?”

“Oui. There are important differences and it is important for you to understand.” Andre laid it out for me: The Gendarmerie, created during medieval times, is an arm of the Defense Ministry.[1] Their officers carry themselves with military bearing and discipline, and are deployed mostly in rural regions and the ports, but by tradition the gendarmes also keep a strong presence in Paris. The Police Nationale, created in the 1940s, is an arm of the French Interior Ministry. The force focuses mostly on urban crime. Andre worked for the Police Nationale.

“Sometimes the Police Nationale and Gendarmerie investigate the same case, compete, and this gives us headaches,” he said.

There was one other important nuance I needed to know, Andre said. “You must understand SIAT.”

SIAT was a division of the Police Nationale created in 2004, the same year the French repealed a decades-long ban on the use of evidence obtained by undercover officers.

During the ban, France had used undercover officers sparingly, but in an informal, no-paperwork-involved manner, often with a wink and nod from the local magistrate. Back then, each unit in the Gendarmerie and Police Nationale had used their own people to go undercover. When the law changed and the SIAT was created, many undercover officers had transferred to the new unit. But some veterans, like Andre, had stayed where they were. They found the rule-heavy SIAT culture and configuration too bureaucratic and turf-conscious to be effective. Andre was warning me that SIAT would insist on running the show if this case involved any undercover operations inside France.

“Who runs the art crime team?” I asked.

“Complicated also: It is under the jurisdiction of the Police Nationale, but for political reasons the chief is always a Gendarme.”

“How’s the chief?”

“This one we have now is very good, very smart,” Andre said. “He would rather return an important statue to a church or a painting to a museum than put a man in jail. The problem was that Sarkozy, before he became President of France, was the Minister of the Interior and he didn’t agree. He was very much about law and order. For the Police Nationale, Sarkozy cared only about results—arrests, arrests, arrests. Sarkozy cared only about the statistics. He wanted to show he is fighting the criminals.”

“Sounds like the FBI. We’re not wired to recover stolen property, art. We’re wired to count convictions in court because that’s how you’re measured. We’ve got guys so cynical they call cases and convictions a ‘stat.’ We have arguments over which FBI office gets credit for the ‘stat.’” I smiled at Andre. “You have your Police Nationale-Gendarmerie-SIAT issues, we have our own problems.”

“Yes, I have heard this, though I thought all this changed after 9/11.”

“That’s what everyone thinks, but it’s probably only true in terrorism cases,” I said. “When it comes to everything else, not much has changed.” The FBI remains a largely decentralized law enforcement agency, divided into fifty-six field offices spread across the country. Each of these fifty-six field offices operates as its own fiefdom. Once a field office begins an investigation, it rarely cedes its turf. The FBI’s investigatory protocol is sacrosanct: Absent extraordinary circumstances, investigations are run and supervised by the agents in the field office in the city where the crime was committed—not by anyone at headquarters. “The case we’re talking about now is being run out of Boston because the paintings were stolen from Boston.”

“The FBI agents in Boston are experts in art crime?”

“No. Bank robbery. SWAT, that kind of thing.”

Andre cocked his head, confused.

“That’s the FBI, my friend,” I said. I didn’t want to go into too much detail because Andre still seemed to be sizing me up, deciding how much to tell me about the Florida tip. So I did not explain that despite my expertise, Eric Ives’s enthusiasm from headquarters, and the Art Crime Team’s worldwide successes, the Gardner case would almost certainly remain under the control of the Boston office. I would work for them. In theory, Headquarters could overrule a field supervisor or wrest a case away from a field office. But in reality, that rarely happened. It would be viewed as an insult to the field office supervisor and create a blot on his record, a slight he and his friends would never forget. The FBI is a giant bureaucracy—middle-management supervisors are rotated to new jobs every three to five years, between the field offices and Washington. This dynamic makes supervisors at Headquarters reluctant to make waves. The supervisor you cross today may become your boss tomorrow.

“But don’t worry about it,” I said. “I’ve been doing this a long time and never had a problem with that sort of thing. I just do my cases.”

We kept walking, crossing another busy boulevard.

The Frenchman said, “You know, Bob, you must be subtle in art crime. It is important to use discreet methods, sometimes methods that are not illegal but not by the book. Our chief understands that in some situations you have to be subtle.”

I nodded.

The French cop stopped on the sidewalk and looked me in the eye.” These are dangerous people, the guys who have your paintings. Corsicans. I’m going to put you in touch with someone in Florida.” Andre said his French contact in Florida did not know he was a cop, and that he had discreetly used the man’s information in the past. “All very quietly, you understand?”

“Of course.”

“I will give him your number in the U.S. What name will you use when he calls?”

“Bob Clay, art broker from Philadelphia.”

“Good.”

I said, “Let me ask you—just so I’m clear, the paintings for sale are...?”

“Oui, a Vermeer and a Rembrandt.”

“A Vermeer, huh?”

“Oui,” he said, and walked off.

ANDRE RANG MY cell phone a short while later.

“Now,” he said. “I’ve told this guy you deal in fine art, big, multimillion-dollar deals. You’re based in Philadelphia and we’ve done business, made a lot of money.”

It was the vouch.

“Excellent,” I said, “I appreciate it. So, he’ll call me?”

“Oui,” he said.” This guy, his name is Laurenz Cogniat.”

“You know him well?”

“Laurenz? He is a fugitive. An accountant for many years in Paris. Worked with organized crime. Money laundering. Very smart, very rich. Moved to Florida. Big house, big car, Rolls-Royce. Knows many people still, here in France, Spain, Corsica.”

“Can I trust him?”

The Frenchman laughed.” He is a criminal.”

“If he says he can get the Vermeer—”

“Let me tell you something about Laurenz,” the cop said. “I do not think he will lie to you about this. Laurenz is not a con man. He is an opportunist. He views himself as a businessman, a man who makes deals in the space between the black and the white. You understand?”

“Sure.”

“But this man Laurenz can be trouble if you try to control him too much,” Andre said. “Be patient. He will take you in many directions, but I think he will lead you to what you want.”

## Chapter 21

### LAURENZ AND SUNNY

Miami. June 19, 2006.

LAURENZ DID NOT DISAPPOINT.

Two weeks after we began speaking by phone, I flew to Miami to meet him. He took me for a ride in his Rolls, an FBI surveillance team in slow pursuit.

Laurenz wore a salmon Burberry dress shirt with a cursive LC monogram on his breast, blue jeans, brown sandals; and a gold Rolex Cosmograph Daytona. He was forty-one years old, trim, with short-cropped curly brown hair.

“Nice car. New?” I asked because I knew the answer—I’d checked his motor vehicle records—and was curious if he’d tell the truth.

Laurenz answered honestly. “A year old. I get a new one every eighteen months. I don’t like to drive a car with more than twenty thousand miles on it. Not good for the image.”

I admired the cherrywood console, running a finger across the frosted silver lettering, PHANTOM. I said what he wanted to hear. “Very nice.”

Laurenz nodded. “If it’s good enough for the Queen...”

I laughed and realized I couldn’t tell if he was joking.

“Her Majesty drives one just like this,” Laurenz added. He spoke English fluently, but with such a thick accent that it sometimes took an extra moment for what he said to register. “If you’ve never driven this car, you will never understand how smooth it is. You hear nothing outside. You speed up to seventy and you feel nothing. You go to one-ten and you feel like you are driving seventy. Everything is top of the line. The sunroof, the steering, the brakes. There are two DVD players in backseat. For many years, this was an old car for old people. But the new ones are magnificent. I have a guy who comes every month to do the leather. And a boy who washes the car every two weeks.”

He rapped the window with his knuckles. “Bulletproof glass. Custom armor-plated exterior. Four hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

“Impressive.”

He sniffed. “That’s the point.”

Laurenz steered the Rolls onto the Dolphin Expressway, headed west toward the airport. An irritating pop song played on the radio—all synthesizer and falsetto. Laurenz cranked it up. “Good sound, huh?”

I studied Laurenz and wished I’d been carrying a recorder. What my handling agents and supervisors would make of such banter! Two weeks into the Gardner case and the FBI agents involved were already falling into two camps—those who believed Laurenz might be able to deliver the stolen Boston paintings and those who were skeptical. I fell squarely in the middle, not yet ready to pass judgment, still working him. With undercover cases, especially art crime, you never know until you vet it out. Was Laurenz a fool? A con artist? The real deal? We wouldn’t know until I sized him up.

Clearly, Laurenz liked to talk about himself and I didn’t mind listening. It was an easy way to ingratiate myself with him, and so far, I hadn’t caught him in a lie. His claim that he was worth \$140 million was impossible to verify because his holdings were scattered across Florida, Colorado, and Europe in a variety of names and corporations, and Laurenz seemed to spell his first and last names a variety of ways, probably on purpose. But our most basic checks of public records showed that he was worth millions, if not tens of millions, of dollars, at least on paper. What really mattered was that the French police confirmed Laurenz’s connections to the Western European underworld, particularly gangs that dealt in stolen art.

Laurenz and I didn’t directly discuss my background on the phone. With the vouch from his friend in Paris—the undercover cop—it wasn’t necessary to talk about such things on an open line. After a few calls, Laurenz had asked me to fly down to meet him. He said he had a friend arriving from France, someone I should meet.

At Miami International Airport, Laurenz pulled the Rolls into the short-term parking and we walked toward the international arrivals terminal. We had forty-five minutes to kill and Laurenz bought two bottles of Fiji water.

I took a sip. “Looks like you’ve done all right for yourself. How long have you been in Florida?”

“Ten years. But I’ve lived all over the world. I speak seven languages.”

“Seven? How did you learn seven?”

“When I was younger, I was working for Club Med around the world. French Polynesia, Brazil, Sandpiper, Japan, Sicily.”

“What’d you do for Club Med?”

“Didn’t matter. I was twenty. Whatever they asked. Pool, beach, bartender, waiter. I was only thinking about eating, drinking and, you know, girls. When you are this age, you get three, four girls a week minimum, every week for three years.”

I laughed.

“Then I returned to France and I studied accounting, finance, and I started working for this guy. A wiseguy in Paris. I was twenty-five. I did things for him, and then I found out that he used my name as the president of his corporation. The business had many debts and I got into trouble because I was the president. This situation I could not handle—the only way out was to go into the life. Since I am accountant, this is what I do for them. I was very good, washing money, setting up foreign corporations in Luxembourg. You have one million euros and ten minutes later it is in another name, another country, another currency. You understand?”

“Yeah, sure.” He was a mob accountant.

“I was very good. I had a nice office near the Champs-Élysées. It’s good for a while. French and Italian wiseguys, some in Spain. We dealt in gold, cash, diamonds, paintings, whatever you like. Then I saw some bad shit. The Russians and Syrians, sloppy. So, things happened and I know too much. I must leave France. If not, I am dead or in jail.”

I knew Laurenz had been arrested once in Germany and once in France on suspected currency violations, but freed after a few months. I also knew he was a wanted man in France for financial shenanigans. I didn’t bring any of this up. The way he was talking, I expected him to get around to it soon enough. I said, “So you came here?”

“Right, Florida, 1996. I come here with just \$350,000 and I get lucky with real estate. First month here, I meet an asshole, a Swiss guy who is losing his condo in foreclosure. I go to the courthouse for the sale. Don’t get his condo but I get another. I pay \$70,000 for a \$400,000 penthouse in Aventura! You see, Bob, I understand the financial system, and it’s easy if you do. I also know the right banker, the one who will take a few dollars in his pocket when he gets the loan.”

I laughed at that. “The right banker.”

We checked the board and saw the flight had landed. A team of undercover agents was waiting inside the customs area to see if Laurenz’s friend had arrived with anyone else.

I said, “So what’s the plan when we meet your guy?”

“We take Sunny to lunch. We talk business. Sunny is a wiseguy. Not a big guy, but he knows people in the south of France, and I think these people will have the paintings you want. He is trying to move here. Sunny wants to be a player. He will try to impress you and say he can sell anything.”

“I’m only interested in paintings,” I said. “No drugs, guns, nothing like that.”

“Yes, yes, I agree,” Laurenz said. He leaned in and gently grabbed my forearm. “Listen my friend,” he said, “we are the sharks, you and me, and we have a small fish here who can lead us to the big fish. But these big fish, the guys with the paintings in France, are very bad guys. We must be serious. You must have the money. I will get the price down and then you and I will take our cut. We are partners?”

“You get me what I want,” I said, “and you will be happy.”

Sunny came through the doors a few minutes later, a short, plump man of fifty, his brown mullet matted from the long flight. He was rolling two large blue suitcases. We shook hands and headed outside, toward the Rolls.

As soon as we hit the fresh Florida air, Sunny lit a Marlboro.

WE BEAT RUSH hour and reached La Goulue, an upscale bistro north of Miami Beach, in about forty minutes.

The three of us sat around a white-linen tablecloth. Sunny ordered the seared calamari with basil pesto. Laurenz got the jumbo scallops. I tried the steamed yellowtail snapper. If nothing else, Laurenz knew where to get a good meal.

As we dined, Laurenz continued to dominate, talking, talking, talking. He dropped some names, presumed wiseguys in Paris. He talked about his new Jet Ski, and a sucker’s deal he was working on a condo near Fort Lauderdale. He also vouched for me with Sunny, making up a story, saying we’d met years earlier at an art gallery on South Beach. Sunny listened quietly, shoveling calamari.

Finally, Laurenz turned to me. “Sunny can get you many things.”

Sunny pursed his lips.

Laurenz said, “Bob is looking for paintings.”

“Yes,” Sunny said. “I’ve heard this.” He looked at his plate and continued eating. For now, I let it drop. Laurenz picked up the check, conspicuously laying his black American Express card on the table.

On the way back to the hotel, we stopped off at a cellular phone store and Laurenz bought Sunny a mobile phone. I memorized the number. We'd need it if we decided to tap it.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, the three of us met for bagels. As always, an FBI surveillance team hovered nearby.

When we sat down, Sunny asked to see our cell phones. "Please take out your batteries," he said.

Laurenz laughed. "Why?"

Sunny said, "The police, the FBI, they can track you through your cell phone, even when it is off."

"Oh, bullshit," Laurenz said.

"No, it is true," Sunny said. "I saw it on 24."

"The TV show?"

"Just take them out."

We did.

"All right," Sunny said, "I can get three or four paintings. A Rembrandt, a Vermeer, and a Monet."

"Monet or Manet?" I asked.

Sunny looked confused.

"Monet or Manet?" I said again.

"Yes," he said, and I realized he didn't know there was a difference. In a way, his ignorance led credence to his offer. He was just passing on names he'd been given. If he'd been playing me, he would have done enough homework to know the difference.

"These paintings are good," Sunny said. His English was poor, but I could understand most of what he said. It was certainly better than my French. "The paintings were stolen many years ago."

"From where?"

“I don’t know,” he said. “A museum in the U.S., I think. We have them and so for ten million they are yours. You can do that? Ten million?”

“Yeah, of course—if your paintings are real, if you’ve got a Vermeer and a Rembrandt. Look, Sunny, my buyer’s gonna want proof. Do you have pictures you can send me? Proof of life?”

“I will see what I can do.”

THE CASE INCHED through the summer.

At FBI offices in Washington, Miami, Boston, Philadelphia, and Paris, agents and supervisors expressed cautious optimism, exchanging e-mails and hosting conference calls. The French police fed us more information on Sunny and Laurenz, confirming their links to underworld art brokers. Authorities on both sides of the Atlantic arranged for wiretaps. I kept in touch with Laurenz by phone. He said Sunny was moving forward on the deal, slowly. I urged Laurenz to push him.

By early fall, we were moving toward an undercover buy in France. Eric Ives, the Major Theft Unit chief at Headquarters, began to arrange for a group of FBI agents to travel to Paris in mid-October for our first formal meeting with the French.

One morning after Labor Day, Eric called to chat.

“What do you think?” he said.

“What do I think about what, Eric?”

“Sunny, Laurenz, Boston.”

“I think it’s on,” I said. “That’s what I think.”

IN THE FIRST week in October 2006, on the eve of our first big FBI-French police meeting in Paris, I flew down to Miami to see Laurenz and Sunny.

We met in the late afternoon at Laurenz’s favorite haunt, a Thai-Japanese joint just off the 79th Street Causeway. Laurenz and Sunny were already there, phones on the table, batteries out.

I sat down and removed my phone battery. “Ca va? Good to see you, Sunny.”

“Ca va, Bob.”

I slapped Laurenz on the back and gave him a big wink. “Nice work, buddy. We’re going to celebrate tonight, right?”

Laurenz beamed. “Absolutely. Already doing it.” He pointed to the bowl of green tea ice cream, topped with whipped cream, Laurenz’s idea of a celebration. He held up a glass of water in toast. “To the next deal!”

I said, “Amen, mon ami.”

Sunny cocked his head, confused—reacting just as we had hoped. The “deal” we were celebrating was a complete fabrication, one that Laurenz and I concocted the night before. It was part of our play, designed to impress Sunny.

Laurenz leaned close to Sunny and whispered rapidly in French. He explained that he and I had just completed an \$8 million deal for a stolen Raphael. We’d each cleared \$500,000, he said. Laurenz was a pretty good liar. Sunny nodded, duly impressed.

The fake deal was all part of an expanding wilderness of mirrors: I was playing Laurenz, and Laurenz thought that he and I were playing Sunny. I’m sure Laurenz had his own angles thought out. And Sunny? Who knew what really went through his mind?

Laurenz and I continued to banter about the fake Raphael deal until Sunny finally broke in, taking the bait. “All right,” Sunny said. “The paintings in Europe—we are ready. It can only be the three of us. We must work together to not get caught.”

“Of course,” I said.

“Yes, yes,” Laurenz said impatiently.

“Just the three of us,” Sunny repeated. “We’ll go to the south of France and…” He launched into a convoluted scenario for the exchange, one that included a series of rotating hotel rooms—the money in one room, the paintings in another, a human life as collateral in a third. With Sunny’s accent, I couldn’t understand every word, but it didn’t matter. We could clarify everything later. I just wanted to get things moving.

Sunny was quite clear on one point. “When you see the paintings, you will know that they are real. But once you see them, you must buy them. So let me say again that you must be serious about having the money. You see the paintings, you must buy them.”

“I want to buy them,” I said. “Vermeer and Rembrandt?”

“Yes, yes, we have,” Sunny said. “The important point is not the money or the painting, but that we are all happy, all safe. Nobody wants trouble. Very important, from here on out, nobody gets involved in this except us.”

Sunny grabbed a napkin and took out a pen.

“Now,” he said, and he drew a triangle and scribbled a letter in each corner—S, L, and B. “This is Sunny, this is Laurenz, this is Bob. We are in this together. We cannot let anyone else in the triangle. This is all it can be, ever. This way, if anything goes wrong, we’ll know it’s one of us who betrayed.”

## Chapter 22

### ALLIES AND ENEMIES

Paris. October 2006.

THE TROUBLE BEGAN A WEEK LATER, JUST MINUTES into our first formal Gardner case meeting with the French police.

An FBI supervisor from Boston—I will call him Fred—began with an impolitic demand. “Since we’ll be going along on the surveillances, we’re going to need to be armed.”

Fred spoke louder than necessary, clumsily enunciating every syllable. Just to be sure the French understood, he cocked his thumb and index finger in the shape of a gun. “So we need to take care of that, right off the bat.”

Fred liked to be in charge and because of the FBI’s sacrosanct protocols he was considered the lead supervisor on the Gardner case—back in 1990, the heist had been assigned to the Boston FBI’s bank robbery/violent crime squad, and Fred now led that unit. He’d been an FBI agent for seventeen years, but his expertise was SWAT and chasing bank robbers, not investigating art crime or running international undercover investigations. This was his first trip to a foreign country. It didn’t seem to occur to him that we were guests on someone else’s turf.

“We’re here to get our paintings back,” Fred said severely, as if puffing up his resolve would help get the job done. “The people who have our paintings will be armed. So will we.”

It was such an outrageous thing to say that everyone else in the room—the six French police officials, six other FBI agents, and an American prosecutor—simply ignored it. Fred had been watching too many movies. As I knew from my experiences in Brazil, Denmark, Spain, and other nations, most countries don’t allow foreign police officers to carry weapons.

One of the FBI agents stationed at the embassy politely cut Fred off, directing the conversation back to the matter at hand, our joint American-French sting operation.

This first major meeting raised the stakes on both sides. The French police had gotten into the spirit and hosted the meeting at the new Musee du Quai Branly, which showcased artifacts crafted by the indigenous peoples of Asia, Australia, the Americas, Africa, and the Polynesian region. It was one of the most interesting and confounding museums I’d ever visited—designed with a jungle theme, a thicket of trees and grass on

the outside, dark passageways and dimly lit displays on the inside. It was easy to lose one's bearings.

The Gendarmerie lieutenant colonel chairing the meeting was Pierre Tabel, the chief of the national art crime squad. Andre, the undercover French police officer who'd provided me the initial tip, had spoken highly of Pierre, describing him as a rising star in the Gendarmerie, savvy with keen political instincts, a future general. The art crime job Pierre held was a sensitive one because the unit often became involved in international cases and investigations in which the victim was a celebrity, wealthy, or politically connected. Pierre understood that these cases sometimes called for discretion, or off-the-book methods in which the supervising magistrates agreed to look the other way.

Pierre and I had been talking shop over the phone since September, and I liked him. We'd built a tight working relationship, one I felt would be crucial to our success. I could immediately tell he was a good supervisor—someone who encouraged his people to get things done, without micromanaging or throwing up bureaucratic barriers. He understood that art crime cases could not be handled like other undercover cases, and we agreed that the goal here was to rescue the Boston paintings, not necessarily to arrest anyone in France. Besides, he explained to me, the maximum penalty in France for property theft of any kind was a mere three years in prison.

When I had arrived at Charles de Gaulle Airport from Philadelphia the previous day, Pierre had picked me up, a gesture both courteous and shrewd. He intercepted me before I could speak with anyone else, including my FBI colleagues at the U.S embassy, and on the ride into the city we talked over the case. Based on my undercover work in the United States and Pierre's phone tap and surveillance successes in France, we had agreed that Sunny and Laurenz would probably arrange for the sale of the Gardner paintings somewhere in France.

Pierre had cautioned that he would not be able to control every facet of operations in France. In a case with the potential for such huge headlines, he said, many supervisors from many agencies will want to play a role, claim credit, stand at the podium at the press conference, get their picture taken. "Everyone will want a piece of the cake," Pierre liked to say. Pierre warned me that the SIAT undercover chief would probably now demand a major role. Because the undercover laws in France were so new, the SIAT chief often acted cautiously, and this sometimes placed him at odds with Pierre's more adventurous art crime team. I warned Pierre about the FBI's pecking order and protocols, and we agreed that turf wars and intra-agency rivalries on both sides of the Atlantic were going to complicate things.

Sure enough, at the French-American meeting that afternoon, the SIAT chief followed Fred's speech with one of his own: He unilaterally announced that he planned to insert

a French undercover officer into the deal. I explained that Sunny would probably resist adding a fourth person to the deal. I even sketched out the triangle on a piece of paper and spelled out what Sunny had said: "It can only be the three of us." The French SIAT chief replied that this was impossible. "There is a warrant for Laurenz in France," he said, "and so he cannot come to France." The SIAT chief added that he doubted I would be allowed to work undercover in France. The new French undercover law, he explained, was tricky.

"Sure, I understand," I said, careful not to become engaged in an argument in front of such a large group. If what the SIAT chief said was true, it would mean that two thirds of our triangle—Laurenz and me—were barred from doing a deal in France. That sounded ominous.

The most encouraging news from the briefing came from the two supervisors running Pierre's wiretap and surveillance groups. One said she was "ninety-nine percent sure" that the gang Sunny was speaking with held the Gardner paintings.

Pierre added, "On the phone calls, they talk in code to a person in Spain. But it's easy to understand. They speak of getting apartments for someone named Bob. One they say is located on Vermeer Street. The other they say is on Rembrandt Street."

"Do you know who Sunny is talking to?" someone asked.

"Yes," the French surveillance supervisor said. "They are Corsicans, a group known to us." [2] The French territory in the Mediterranean was infested with organized crime, and the national police officers were as unwelcome on Corsica as FBI agents are in Puerto Rico.

After the meeting broke up, Fred sauntered up to Pierre. I overheard the Boston supervisor again mention something about a gun and Pierre say, "I'm sorry, but..." I walked over to Pierre, pulling him aside to apologize.

"No problem," Pierre said, and he lowered his voice. "I have my problems also. What my SIAT chief said about you not being able to work in France? Not true. But he is a boss and I cannot make him look bad in front of the Americans."

I shook my head. Too many chefs. Too many FBI offices. Too many French law enforcement agencies. Too many competing interests. It didn't bode well for such a complex undercover operation, one that would require speed, flexibility, creativity, and risk.

Pierre seemed to sense what I was thinking and said, "Like I say, in this case, we're going to have a lot of managers; everyone wants a piece of the cake."

WHEN WE RETURNED to the United States, the case agent in Boston, Geoff Kelly, put together the necessary paperwork for a major undercover investigation, a seven-page form called an FD-997. He set the value of the Gardner art at \$500 million, summarized the FBI's extensive efforts to recover it since 1990, and laid out the undercover plan for a sting in France.

Geoff also gave the case a name, Operation Masterpiece.

A FEW WEEKS after the Paris meeting, Laurenz called to tell me we'd be buying the paintings in Spain instead of France.

For me, the change of venue was fortuitous. I'd made plenty of friends in the Spanish police during the Madrid case—their cooperation would be virtually assured. The medal the Spanish government gave me hung in my den. The richest woman in Spain owed me a favor.

"Fine, no problem," I told Laurenz. "I love Spain."

"Sunny wants to know if you want the 'big one' or the 'little one' first." I didn't know if he meant the diminutive Vermeer, which was worth much more, or the gigantic Rembrandt, which was worth less.

"I want them both, so it doesn't matter," I said. "What are we talking about? Madrid? Barcelona? Couple of weeks?"

Laurenz said, "I let you know."

I called Eric Ives in Washington and gave him the good news. We put together a plan to travel to Madrid in ten days' time. On the eve of the trip, Eric arranged a conference call between all the FBI offices involved—Washington, Paris, Boston, Miami, Madrid, and Philadelphia. The call did not go well.

Fred began by announcing that the trip to Madrid was canceled, catching everyone except the FBI agents in Paris by surprise. This particularly embarrassed our agent in Madrid, because he'd already spent a lot of time with the Spanish police securing SWAT, surveillance, intelligence, and undercover support. The Boston supervisor cited unnamed "security issues" in Spain, suggesting that the police there were not trustworthy.

What's more, Fred made it clear he was furious that I'd been making arrangements without clearing every detail with him. "There are communication issues here," he said.

“We’ve got to be careful not to leave people out of the loop.” Fred chastised me for directly contacting the FBI agent in Madrid. I reminded Fred that Eric had already obtained Headquarters’ approval for me to make the appropriate contacts in Spain—and that I knew our man in Madrid from the Koplowitz case. Fred didn’t care. “Not your job, Wittman. I’m in charge.”

I backed off for now. I didn’t care if these guys barked at me. Whatever it took to move forward.

But I knew we’d never recover the Gardner paintings if we operated by committee.

After the conference call, I needed some air. I began wandering around the office, and landed at the desk of my friend Special Agent Jerri Williams, a twenty-four-year veteran and the FBI’s spokesperson in Philadelphia. She’d replaced Linda Vizi, who’d retired.

“You don’t look too good,” Jerri said.

I told Jerri about the conference call.

She frowned. “It sounds like the kind of turf-war crap we get whenever we deal with other agencies, not inside the Bureau.” She was right. The major federal law-enforcement agencies—especially the FBI, DEA, IRS, ATF, and Immigration Customs Enforcement—almost always wrestled for control of joint investigations; the public would be surprised to learn how often different law enforcement agencies hid things from one other, or tried to squeeze each other out. Jerri said, “Not getting much help from headquarters?”

“I’m trying, but...”

“Yeah, well, you know Boston isn’t going to give up a case like this.”

My concern only grew in the weeks that followed, as I found myself spending a great deal of time juggling calls between Eric in Washington, Fred and Geoff Kelly in Boston, and the agents stationed at U.S. embassies in Europe. Since I needed to verify what Sunny and Laurenz were telling me, I kept in close contact with Pierre, whose art crime investigators were wiretapping their phones. We agreed to check in every Thursday morning. On one of those calls, he warned me that his French bosses weren’t happy that the case might be shifting to Spain. They would fiercely resist the move.

I didn’t bother to ask Pierre why the French would object. It was obvious. If the bust went down in Spain, the big press conference would be held in Madrid and all the accolades would go to the Spanish police, not the French.

PIERRE'S BOSSES NEEDN'T have worried.

Shortly after Sunny returned to Miami in late November 2006, Laurenz called to let me know that the plan had changed once again: Sunny was now offering all eleven Gardner paintings in France, not Spain.

"How much would you be willing to pay?" Laurenz asked.

"Thirty million," I said. It was the standard black-market price, five to ten percent of open market value.

"Cash?"

"If I buy them inside the U.S., yes," I said. "Otherwise, wire transfer."

Laurenz asked if I could put together some financial statements to prove we were serious, that we had access to thirty million.

"Shouldn't be a problem," I replied.

"Magnifique," Laurenz said. "If you can get the money and can get me into France, I think we can have the paintings in six days."

This was, of course, extraordinary news. The money wouldn't be a problem. Thirty million was just a number—a big number, yes, but ultimately just a number—money temporarily moved from one account to another. We weren't talking about flash money, cash on the street. The \$30 million would never leave the bank.

I let Pierre know. "I think we're coming to France." I ran through the latest details.

"Good, good," Pierre said. "Do you think we'll be able to use our undercover man?"

"Don't know yet," I said, dodging the question. "Any luck on waiving Laurenz's warrant? Looks like we're gonna need him in France."

"Working on it, my friend, working on it."

WHEN I FLEW into Charles de Gaulle for our second big American-French meeting in late November 2006, Pierre picked me up again. We were late and Pierre used his blue lights and siren to part the morning traffic.

On the ride downtown, Pierre let me know that counter forces were at work. "You missed the nice dinner we had last night—Geoff and Fred, and your boys from the embassy."

What the hell? I was groggy from the overnight flight and figured I'd misunderstood. "Dinner?"

Pierre grinned. "Just games, my friend," he said. "Office politics. They came a day early to see us without you. I think they are scared of you."

Pierre caught my frown. "Don't worry, we took them to a cheap place," he joked. "Tonight, we will eat much better."

Pierre dropped me at my hotel, but the room wasn't ready. I showered in the fitness center, and when I came out I saw a welcome sight, Pierre chatting with Eric Ives from Washington. Eric, the art crime unit chief, was fuming because he had just learned that he, too, had been excluded from Fred's secret American-French dinner.

The briefing convened in a stark conference room inside a modern Defense Ministry building. Pierre began with an overview and quickly turned to his surveillance chief. She reported that Sunny had been spotted meeting with known Corsican mobsters on a street corner in Marseilles and that in wiretapped conversations he spoke of "frames for Bob."

We wrestled next with the thorny issue of how to get Laurenz inside France. The top French police official in the room insisted that the decade-old warrant against Laurenz for his financial crimes could not be lifted. The French warrant, he added, was valid in virtually every country in the European Union, so Laurenz couldn't travel to Spain, either. But, the senior French official wondered aloud, what if we allowed Laurenz to enter France under a fake name with a fake U.S. passport? The Americans looked at each other. It was a possibility.

Afterward, I pulled Pierre aside. "Why did your bosses all of a sudden come up with a way to let Laurenz inside France?"

He replied with a small smile, "Because they worried that you were going to take the case to Spain. They want the arrests to be in Paris."

Things finally seemed to be coming together. When I got back to my hotel, I called Laurenz and told him to be ready to fly to Paris on a few days' notice. I wanted to move quickly, I said. My buyer was eager to get going. He had cashed investments to rustle up the \$30 million and it was now sitting in the bank, not earning much interest, and while we dickered, he was losing money. Laurenz said sure, he was ready and eager to do the deal—so long as it didn't interfere with his big ski vacation in Colorado.

"So maybe we do this in January, after the holidays?"

Stunned, I didn't know how to react. So I simply said, "Where you headed, Vail?"

“Crested Butte. Just sold a complex there—kept a condo for myself.”

As I sat on the bed and digested the Laurenz conversation, rubbing my temples in bewilderment, an FBI agent from the embassy called. He said the bureaucrats were balking at the plan to furnish Laurenz with a fake U.S. passport. But the agent had come up with a new idea: What if we did the deal in Monaco? We could fly Laurenz from New York nonstop to Geneva, then charter a helicopter to fly him over French airspace to tiny Monaco, the independent principality on the Riviera. Since neither Switzerland nor Monaco belonged to the European Union, the French warrant wouldn't apply.

Hmm, I thought. Not a bad idea, not bad at all.

WHILE WE WAITED for everyone in Paris, Boston, Washington, Marseilles, and Miami to resolve the administrative and political issues in the Gardner case, Eric and I planned a quick side trip—an undercover mission to rescue treasures stolen from Africa.

Our plane to Warsaw left early the next morning.

## Chapter 23

### A COWARD HAS NO SCAR

Warsaw, December 2006.

IN ZIMBABWE, THEY HAVE A PROVERB, “A COWARD HAS no scar.”

When I received a tip that five national treasures stolen from a major Zimbabwe museum might be in Poland, Eric didn't hesitate when I proposed an undercover mission to rescue them. He didn't care that there was no American connection, or that we were in the midst of the Gardner case. Eric understood that it was the right thing to do, and that it would earn the FBI goodwill in two countries. Besides, the flight from Paris to Warsaw is just two hours and twenty minutes.

The Polish case was a model international investigation—completed in just three weeks, from initial tip to hotel sting, involving governments on three continents but minimal manpower and precious little paperwork. The longest meeting in the case was the hour-long briefing we held with the Polish SWAT team in Warsaw. They were the nicest group of bald-headed, bull-necked knuckle-draggers I've ever met. They even laughed at my jokes.

“The name of this case,” I said, “is Operation KBAS.”

“What's KBAS?” someone asked.

“Keep Bob's Ass Safe.”

One of the first things we all agreed on was a media blackout. Because of the Gardner case, I wanted to keep a low profile in Europe, and the Polish police hoped to prosecute the case without using an undercover FBI agent as a witness at trial. As I understood it, the Polish police planned to keep every trace of FBI involvement quiet. Publicly, at least, Eric and I were never there, and neither was my FBI colleague from Philadelphia, John Kitzinger.

Our target was a Polish man named Marian Dabuski. On the Internet, he'd advertised for sale three Zimbabwean headrests, ormutasagos, and two Makonde helmet masks. When an honest dealer in Denver saw the offer, he tipped me. The headrests were sculpted concave pedestals, about a foot long and six inches high, and used as a sort of hard pillow during religious ceremonies: A worshiper would lie on his back, his neck supported by a headrest, close his eyes, and enter a Zen-like state in which he'd try to communicate with the dead. The headrests dated to the twelfth century, were crafted by the nomads of Zimbabwe, Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, and looked a lot like

the priceless artifacts I'd viewed at the Musee du Quai Branly in Paris. One of the headrests Dabuski advertised online matched one stolen the previous year at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe in Harare. In that theft, a middle-aged white man who looked remarkably like Dabuski had walked into the museum during the day, ripped four headrests and two helmet masks from a museum wall, and run out the front door. A guard chased him into the street and cornered him, but as the two began to tussle, people in the Harare crowd mistook the black guard for the criminal and began to beat him. The white thief slipped away with his loot.

I contacted Dabuski by e-mail—I said I was an American IBM executive based in Budapest, looking to expand my collection of African artifacts. He agreed to meet me in the lobby bar of the Marriott Hotel, across the street from Warsaw's Palace of Culture and Science. He and his wife showed up an hour late, but bearing three skull-sized boxes.

We went up to my room, which was wired for pictures and sound. The Polish SWAT team was in the room on the left, and the commanders, including Eric and John, watched via video from the room on the right. As the Dabuskis unwrapped the masks, I pretended to closely study the craftsmanship, but I was really looking for the museum's serial numbers, etched just beneath the underside of each mask's chin. One had no telltale marks, but on another I noticed an odd smudge. It looked like brown shoe polish and it seemed to be concealing something. When I made out part of a number, perhaps a "3," bleeding through the polish, I knew these were the stolen masks. I agreed to their offer, \$35,000 for the two masks and three headrests, and I gave the go-code.

Given my near disaster with the failing hotel key cards in Denmark, I tried a different approach in Warsaw. A member of the SWAT team simply knocked on the door, and I acted annoyed. "Who the hell could that be?" I grumbled. When I opened the door, the Poles yanked me out, rushed in and arrested the Dabuskis, throwing them on the floor and slapping black hoods over their heads. The police, following through on their plan to erase my role in the case, then put on a big show that in all the confusion I had somehow escaped.

Two surprises followed.

At checkout, the Marriott bill for the three rooms I'd booked on my Robert Clay credit card came in \$800 higher than expected. It seemed that my friends from the Polish SWAT team had helped themselves to the minibars in the rooms, cleaning out all the liquor after I made my escape. Half amused, half annoyed, I paid the bill, knowing I'd face days of extra paperwork coming up with a way to justify the expense.

The second surprise came a few weeks later, after I returned to Philadelphia and the Gardner case.

I got a call from the FBI agent stationed at the U.S. embassy in Warsaw. He said that a Polish prosecutor, a man clearly in the dark about what really went down, had called with a request.

That conversation had gone something like this:

FBI agent in Warsaw: "How can I help you?"

Warsaw prosecutor: "Well, we've arrested a Polish man named Dabuski at the Marriott in Warsaw for trying to sell African artifacts to an American."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, but the American got away and we'd like your help tracking him down."

"Sure, I can try. What's his name?"

"Robert Clay."

The FBI agent didn't miss a beat. "OK," he told the prosecutor, "I'll get right on it."

## **Chapter 24**

### **SUSPICIOUS MINDS**

Philadelphia, January 2007.

FRED, THE BOSTON SUPERVISOR, REACHED ME ON MY cell phone late on a Sunday afternoon. I was home watching the NFL playoffs with my boys.

It was two months after our Paris meeting. While things remained promising, we were still waiting for the bureaucrats to clear Laurenz's fake passport, approve the Monaco scenario, or come up with some other plan.

I knew that Fred had been complaining about me to Eric Ives in Washington. He was angry that I'd been speaking directly with Pierre in Paris and that I'd warned every FBI official involved that if we didn't move swiftly, we'd lose our opportunity to buy the paintings. Fred believed I was usurping his role.

On the call, I grew uneasy as I detected a trace of satisfaction in Fred's voice. Then he said, "We're hearing that Sunny thinks you're a cop. So this changes everything, Wittman. We're gonna have to ease you out of this—insert one of my guys or the French UC."

Fred was quick to presume his tip was accurate. “How do you know Sunny thinks I’m a cop?” I asked.

“From the French,” he said. Presumably from their wiretaps.

“Whoa, hold on a sec, Fred,” I said. “This doesn’t make sense. I spoke with Laurenz last night and he and Sunny are still in. I’m not surprised to hear Sunny worrying that I might be a cop. Hell, he might be talking about it on the phone to see if we react—just to test me and see if his phone was tapped. He’s paranoid about everything. Remember the triangle he drew?” Criminals are always probing each other to figure out if this guy or that guy might be a snitch or an undercover agent. It’s normal. I’d heard such talk during most of my long-term undercover cases. I’d heard it in Santa Fe, Madrid, and Copenhagen. Yet in the end, each time the criminal had succumbed to greed and followed through with the deal.

Fred made it clear he hadn’t called to debate. He’d called to give me marching orders: I was on my way out.

“From now on,” he said, “the French are going to deal directly with Laurenz. They’ll use their guy in Paris”—Andre, the undercover cop—“to deal directly with Laurenz.”

“Wait, I can’t talk to Laurenz?”

“Right now, no.”

“Fred, how’s that supposed to work? He’s gonna call me. What do I tell him?”

“We’re working that out, gonna have some meetings.”

I called Eric Ives in Washington. I told him about Fred’s call and my new marching orders.

“That’s ridiculous, Bob,” he said. “Let me see what I can do.”

I knew it wouldn’t be easy for Eric. To overturn anything Fred had done, he’d need support from his bosses in Washington, who’d have to be willing to confront Fred’s bosses in Boston. Unfortunately, supervisors in Washington are typically reluctant to confront supervisors in the field. They don’t like to make waves, especially when it pits a veteran supervisor like Fred against a younger man like Eric. The FBI is very much an old-boys network.

Street agents have a saying that explains this mentality: Mind over matter. The bosses don’t mind and the agents don’t matter.

OF COURSE, LAURENZ called me the next morning.

I told him I might have to fade out from the deal for a while. A family medical emergency, I said. I kept it vague. I told him I might introduce him to a colleague.

Laurenz exploded. “Bob, what the fuck are you talking about? The deal, it is with the three of us. You, me, Sunny. You can’t drop out. You have \$30 million parked in the bank. I’m yelling at Sunny, telling him it is costing you \$150,000 a month in interest and we have got to get moving, that you want to buy the Boston paintings. So what the fuck am I supposed to do now?”

“It’s family, Laurenz,” I said. “I’ve got a family problem. I don’t know what to say.”

Laurenz cursed again, screamed something at me in French, and hung up.

THE NEXT EVENING, shortly before midnight, Laurenz called me back. He was ebullient, and acted as if our previous conversation had never taken place.

He boasted that he’d just closed a \$20 million real estate deal in Colorado, and now planned to buy the Gardner paintings in France on his own, and then sell them to me afterward. He spoke more rapidly and forcefully than usual. I wasn’t even supposed to be taking his calls, but it sounded like we were on the verge of a breakthrough. I just listened. Laurenz said he planned to travel to Paris and that the French undercover cop Andre, the man who’d introduced us, would be arranging the sale.

The day after Laurenz’s caffeinated call, Fred phoned. Before I could tell him about Laurenz’s call, Fred began chatting about the latest plan. He said the French undercover cop Andre had told Laurenz that he would use his underworld contacts to sneak him into France, and that Laurenz and Sunny would buy the Gardner paintings in France on their own, then sell them to me.

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “Laurenz told me about it last night.”

Big mistake. Fred went nuts. He started shouting. “You spoke with Laurenz! You’re not supposed to talk to him!”

“Fred,” I said. “He called me.”

When Fred calmed down, he started talking about a series of more meetings, maybe in Miami or Paris or Boston or Washington. But by now, I wasn’t really listening. I was seething. We were weeks away from solving the biggest property crime in American history, going up against Corsican mobsters to recover a set of long-lost masterpieces. Fred seemed more worried about protocols, meetings, and protecting his turf.

Soon, Fred was busy deploying that timeworn bureaucratic weapon, the memo. Inside the FBI, such memos are called “Electronic Communications,” or ECs, because they are sent e-mail-style through the Bureau computers to each addressee. About a week after our heated call, Fred penned an outrageously slanted EC, one that not only presented a lopsided version of the way Operation Masterpiece had unfolded but raised questions about my integrity. The most damning section included a claim by a French participant that I planned to delay the Gardner sting until after my retirement in 2008, so that I could claim the \$5 million museum reward for myself. It was a preposterous allegation. FBI agents aren’t eligible for rewards for cases they’ve worked, even after they retire. Everyone knows that.

Steaming, I printed out a copy and walked it over to my direct supervisor in Philadelphia, Mike Carbonell. Mike and I were the same age, though he’d been with the FBI a decade longer. Mike held the same job in Philadelphia as Fred did in Boston—supervisor of the bank robbery/violent crime squad.

When I walked into Mike’s office gripping Fred’s slanderous EC, it marked the first time in a decade I’d come to a supervisor for help. I was used to fixing my own problems.

“You need to read this,” I announced.

He closed the folder on his desk and took the document. To say that Mike uses foul language is like saying Rembrandt painted a few self-portraits. By the time he got to page two, the expletives were flying—“Holy shit... He put all this bullshit in a goddamn EC?... What the fuck?”

I asked him what he thought I should do.

But Mike wasn’t done venting. “In twenty-eight years, never seen anything like this....”

I told Mike that I’d made a call to France and had learned that the remarks Fred cited had been made in jest.

“Well, then it’s obvious what’s happening,” he said. “You’re on the cusp of solving a huge case and these guys want to cut you out.”

“What should I do?” I repeated.

“You’re the one whose ass is on the line. You know going undercover is always voluntary. It’s up to you. You still comfortable going undercover with Fred or the guys in France who are running the operation? You trust them with your life?”

“No.” The quickness of my answer surprised me.

I asked Mike about getting the case transferred from Boston to a supervisor in Philadelphia, Miami, or Washington.

“Doubt it,” he said. “You know the drill. Nobody in Washington wants to risk pissing anyone off.”

Mike, who was nearing retirement, didn’t care if he made enemies. He forwarded his anger up the chain of command. And, in a rare move, Headquarters ordered Fred’s EC deleted from the FBI system.

Ultimately, senior officials in Washington convened a come-to-Jesus meeting at Headquarters to hash out the differences and try to salvage Operation Masterpiece. The result: I was now permitted to resume conversations with Laurenz. But I was ordered not to speak to Fred, and presumably he was ordered not to speak with me. Left open was the question of whether I could work undercover in France or Spain—and, even if we could get permission, whether I would work with Fred.

After the Washington meeting, we returned to the job at hand, trying to come up with ways to shore up my backstory, ways to convince the sellers that I was a high-end art broker, a player, not a cop. We came up with several ideas to solidify Sunny’s and Laurenz’s confidence in me. Under one scenario, the three of us would travel to Los Angeles, party, and bump into a Hollywood starlet who often helps the FBI. The celebrity would recognize me, stop to chat for thirty seconds, and leave the impression that she and I once did a deal together.

We didn’t end up doing the L.A. gig. Instead, we came up with a better way to ingratiate myself with them: I’d involve Sunny and Laurenz in two painting “deals,” one in Miami, one in France—and in each case, I’d bring Laurenz and Sunny along as my “partners.” As I had with Josh Baer in Santa Fe, I’d lead them to believe that we were partners in crime. Both deals, of course, would be fake, American and French undercover operations. In the U.S. deal, I’d sell forged paintings to undercover FBI agents posing as Colombian drug dealers aboard an undercover FBI yacht in Miami. The French deal would be similar, except that I’d sell fake paintings to French undercover agents in Marseilles.

I laid out the plan in a long e-mail to everyone involved. At the end, I wrote, “I caution everyone involved that in order to make this work we need complete cooperation and advocacy. Ladies and gentlemen, we all have to be on the same page on this.”

Once I got the green light, I started making preparations. I called Washington and arranged to borrow a sack full of diamonds and a half dozen Krugerrands from an FBI forfeiture evidence vault. I called Miami to lease the yacht and dug up a bunch of fake paintings for the first sale—six forgeries seized by the government long ago, imitations

of works by Degas, Dal?, Klimt, O’Keeffe, Soutine, and Chagall. The Miami division agreed to supply a cadre of undercover FBI agents to help.

When everything was squared away, I called Sunny and Laurenz.

The call to Sunny was easy. I told him I needed his help as muscle. He was so eager to make some cash, he said yes, no questions asked.

I approached Laurenz differently. He didn’t need money and he didn’t fancy himself a man of muscle, so I played to his weakness—he was so rich and so bored that he’d developed an odd passion for danger. He was an adrenaline freak. Laurenz loved to Jet Ski, sky-dive, snow ski, and make outrageously risky real estate deals. So when he balked at joining me on the yacht deal, I teased him about his manhood.

“I’ve known you for a year now, Laurenz,” I said. “You certainly talk a good game, drive a Rolls and all, but the truth is I’ve never seen you in action. And we’re talking about doing a \$30 million deal together. Let’s just say I’d like to see how you handle something like this before I commit to something like that.”

“OK, OK, I do it with you, Bob,” he said. “But I can’t do it next week.”

“Why not?”

“Going on vacation.”

I bit my tongue. “Skiing again?”

“Hawaii.”

LAURENZ WASN’T THE only one headed to Hawaii.

Just as we geared up for the Miami yacht operation, my best ally in Washington, Eric Ives, was transferred to Honolulu. The move was unrelated to the Gardner case, simply part of the routine FBI rotation of young supervisors around the country every three years. But it was a huge loss. During the Gardner investigation, Eric repeatedly stood up to turf-conscious supervisors. On his final day, he even sent an e-mail imploring them to give me the space I needed to do my job.

The FBI did not replace Eric. It left his position as chief of the Major Theft Unit open, creating a vacuum. Many months later, things turned worse. The FBI reorganized its operations and eliminated the Major Theft Unit, scattering its programs to other sections. The Art Crime Team was reassigned to the Violent Crime Section, where it

instantly became a low priority, eclipsed by the FBI's bread-and-butter duties, like catching kidnapers, gangsters, drug dealers, bank robbers, and fugitives.

Inside the bureaucracy, the Art Crime Team lost its juice.

WITH LAURENZ ON vacation, the Miami/Marseilles boat stings remained on hold. But my supposed colleagues in France stayed busy.

On a Thursday call with Pierre, I learned that the French SIAT undercover chief and a Paris-based FBI agent now planned to try to squeeze me out and run the operation entirely in France. The same SIAT chief who'd once told me it was impossible for Laurenz to enter France now planned to sneak him in and do the deal without me. I was dumbfounded. It was one thing for the Boston supervisor to try to tell a street agent like me what to do, but it was quite another for an American colleague in Paris to conspire against me with a foreign police officer.

I told Pierre about Fred, his crazy EC, his rants, and the Washington meeting. I told him about losing Eric as unit chief and how it would hurt the FBI Art Crime Team. Pierre and I talked about the Miami boat deal, and when I mentioned that it would be delayed for three weeks because Laurenz was going on vacation in Hawaii, Pierre burst out laughing.

"What's so damn funny?" I asked.

"My guys in Paris, your guys in Paris, Fred in Boston, Laurenz off sunning himself at the beach when you want to do a deal, losing your friend Eric from Washington," he said. "Everyone is giving you the banana to slip on."

THE NIGHT BEFORE the Miami yacht deal, I brought the six fake paintings to Laurenz's house. Sunny helped me carry them inside.

The three of us sat under palm trees by the pool and smoked cigars, steps from the dock and Laurenz's beloved Jet Skis.

I laid out the plan—the six paintings for \$1.2 million. Laurenz tried to act cool, but I could tell he was excited. I doubted Laurenz ever got his hands dirty; he paid others to do it. Sunny sat quietly and smoked, sipping a bottle of Evian. When I finished, I asked Sunny if he had any questions.

"Non, I am OK," he said. "I have my insurance. Got my gun."

“No, no weapons,” I said. “If they pat us down on the boat, it’ll insult our hosts. I’ve never done a deal with a gun. Never needed it.”

Sunny laughed. “And I’ve never done a deal without one!” Sunny turned to Laurenz. “Tell Bob what Patrick said.” Patrick was one of their contacts on the French Riviera.

“He wants to sell us about ten paintings,” Laurenz said. “There is a Monet and I think others. He will send pictures. He says they are worth forty million euros and he wants six million.”

“What’s that in dollars?” I said. “Ten million?”

“Mmm, maybe more like nine,” Laurenz said. “You interested? With these guys, you don’t screw around. Once you agree to buy the paintings, you must follow through.”

“Or?” I said, acting dumb to try to provoke a reaction.

Sunny scoffed and stood, agitated, pacing, and speaking rapidly in French. Laurenz translated: “We must be entirely serious. We do not want to go to war with these people. They are stone-cold killers. They killed my best friend. He was driving in his car and the assassin pulled up at a light on a motorcycle and shot him. We are dealing with loosely organized gangs. Maybe two hundred guys in all, in France, Spain, Serbia, Corsica. Different gangs have different caches of paintings. Some of these guys have been in prison for years, and have been hiding the paintings, waiting out their sentences. Some paintings are badly damaged because they’ve been taken from their original frames. One of the big Rembrandts you seek is badly damaged. Our friend Patrick is going to try to get it repaired.”

Alarmed, I interrupted Sunny’s spiel. “No, no. Tell him not to do that. It might make it worse, decrease the value. Let me get the professionals to do that. I know some guys.”

I told Sunny I’d think about buying the Monet, but I really wanted the Old Masters, especially the Vermeer and the Rembrandts.

Sunny was adamant. “First, you must take what they offer.”

WE DID THE Miami yacht deal the following afternoon.

We drove the six paintings to the harbor in Laurenz’s new platinum Rolls. Sunny and I carried them onto the undercover yacht, The Pelican. We cruised Miami Harbor into the late afternoon, watched the undercover bikini babes dance and eat strawberries, and I “sold” the fake paintings to the fake Colombian drug dealers for \$1.2 million.

The Colombians paid me with a phony wire transfer and with the diamonds and Krugerrands from the FBI vault. When we left the boat, I tossed the small sack of ten diamonds to Sunny and gave Laurenz a few of the gold coins. “For your help today,” I said.

Sunny held the sack aloft and said, “Dinner’s on me.”

We drove to La Goulue to celebrate. On the ride up Miami Beach, Sunny seemed more interested in talking about the drug dealers and the bikini girls than the painting deal. While on the boat, he said, he’d talked to one of the Colombians about a possible cocaine deal.

“I don’t know about those guys,” Sunny said. “I don’t know them. Maybe they are cops.”

“Yeah, be careful—I don’t know them well either,” I said, trying to play it cool without discouraging him from considering the drug deal. “You don’t want to be messing around with drugs anyway, Sunny. You make more money with art. But hey, man, if you like drugs, that’s up to you. Maybe you know drugs better. And those guys, I know their money is good. But that’s all you. I don’t want any part of it.”

“Mmm,” Sunny said. “I don’t know.”

I dropped it, unsure if he would take the bait. The cocaine angle, created by the Miami agents, was designed to develop several opportunities in the Gardner case. At a minimum, we hoped it would allow us to introduce Sunny to more undercover FBI agents, men he might grow to trust. We could wait to see how the Gardner case was playing out and, if appropriate, bust Sunny on a serious drug charge and try to flip him—threaten him with a very long prison sentence unless he agreed to help us recover the Boston paintings. Also, we believed that a drug scenario might create a safety valve for use in an emergency. If we needed to make a sudden arrest of one of the Gardner conspirators, here or in France, we could always deflect blame to one of Sunny’s new drug buddies, plant the idea that one of them was a snitch.

By the time we arrived at the French restaurant, the three of us were talking about art again, not cocaine. We discussed the plan to helicopter into Monaco, and whether Patrick, Sunny’s French connection, could meet us there. I suggested that this would be a lot easier if Patrick and his partners simply flew to Florida to meet with us. Then we could hash everything out. Laurenz liked this idea and Sunny said he would call Patrick.

Then, out of the blue, Sunny asked me if I liked Picasso. When I said sure, he asked me if I’d heard about the recent heist in Paris, the theft of two paintings valued at \$66

million from the apartment of Picasso's granddaughter. I told him I had. Laurenz and Sunny smiled slyly.

Our meals arrived and Sunny said, "We eat. We talk business later." We spoke of family, Jet Skis, Laurenz's Hawaiian vacation, and the deal he got on his new platinum Rolls-Royce. We never returned to the Picassos.

Everything seemed copacetic. The bill came while Laurenz was on a phone call and Sunny used the opportunity to politely excuse himself and slip away, sticking Laurenz with the check.\* \* \*

IN MAY, BOSTON and Paris launched a new paperwork salvo.

It was a clever setup to push me out and began with an EC from Boston to Paris. On the surface, the questions seemed innocuous enough: Given the "Bob is a cop" suspicion, did the French police believe that my undercover identity had been compromised? Could I safely travel undercover to France to meet with the people offering to sell the Gardner paintings?

The answer from Paris: While there was no direct evidence that my cover was blown, the Paris office noted that "a significant degree of danger will exist" if I worked undercover in France.

I studied the two documents and shook my head. Of course an international undercover operation would pose "a significant degree" of danger! You didn't need to be an FBI agent to know that. But in the risk-averse culture of the FBI, I knew that a memo like that would set off alarm bells and flashing yellow lights. Everyone was now on notice that I might be hurt or killed in France, and no supervisor wanted that on his record, especially when we'd all been warned in writing.

No one was directly saying I couldn't remain on the case and work undercover in Paris, but the vibe was chilling. My supervisors in Philadelphia got on the line with Fred and his bosses, then with the FBI supervisors in Paris and Miami. Afterward, my Philadelphia bosses told me that the atmosphere had grown so toxic that Boston didn't even want me to play a consulting role. The internal strife was so intense that it now jeopardized the case and the safety of the agents involved, including me. My Philadelphia bosses advised me to withdraw from the Gardner investigation. Reluctantly, I agreed.

But how to tell Laurenz and Sunny without ruining the case?

I kept it short, sweet, and as close to the truth as possible. It was nice working with you guys, I explained, but my boss has lost confidence in me and wants someone else to step in. I told them I could no longer take their calls.

Hysterical, Laurenz left me voice mails and sent several unsettling e-mails, rants that revealed desperation and vulnerabilities he had never displayed in person.

“Good evening!” Laurenz wrote in one e-mail in broken English and peppered with capital letters and exclamation points. “I am very sad. I am really in a difficult situation tonight. Why doing all the risks, my life, my future, my time? For nothing! Why? I was thinking we could really get these paintings and now I know it is just an illusion? Why? Why? I REALLY NEED SOME EXPLANATIONS. Good night! Sweet dreams!”

I felt compelled to reply, but did so with an incredibly bureaucratic, cover-your-ass e-mail, one that conveyed the warmth of a corporate customer service representative. “I understand your concerns and questions and have relayed them...” I felt awful, but I didn’t have a choice.

Laurenz responded in minutes. “It’s ridiculous! I am spending/investing a lot of money and now you throw me a DOG BONE? Be nice? Talk to someone else? No! The only person I will talk to is BOB! ONLY BOB! I don’t trust anyone else.”

I let the FBI offices in Boston and Paris know about the e-mails and calls and they were not pleased. In short order, they sent a request to my boss in Philadelphia, demanding all recordings and investigative notes of my contacts with Laurenz. The memo read like a subpoena.

It marked the lowest moment in my FBI career since December 20, 1989, the night of the accident. I began growing irritable, sleepless. I tried to hide it from the kids, but Donna bore the brunt of my frustration. She understood I was one year from retirement, and encouraged me to fight for my reputation.

Few inside or outside the FBI knew of my despair. On the surface, everything seemed fine and my success as the FBI’s top art-crime sleuth only grew. That summer, I recovered the original, hand-edited manuscript of Pearl Buck’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Good Earth*. The press conference was well attended, but as I took my usual place, out of sight behind the television cameras, I couldn’t help feeling hollow.

FOR A FEW weeks, I followed orders and didn’t call anyone involved in the Gardner case. But I couldn’t stop Laurenz or Pierre from contacting me.

One afternoon in mid-July, Laurenz sent me several e-mails I couldn’t ignore.

Attached to each e-mail was a photograph of a Picasso painting beside a week-old copy of a Paris newspaper. I instantly recognized these “proof of life” pictures as the paintings stolen from Picasso’s granddaughter’s apartment—the ones Sunny and

Laurenz had mentioned offhandedly at the restaurant a few months earlier. Laurenz wanted me to buy them.

I didn't respond, but I let my supervisors know. Soon, Pierre was calling from Paris.

"You know of the Picassos stolen in Paris?" he said. "I have now seen the e-mails."

"Right," I said, cautiously.

"There is more," Pierre said. I knew Pierre was tapping many phones, including Sunny's, and his team was doing its best to monitor any calls Laurenz made to France. "On the wiretaps, Sunny and Laurenz are talking to these bad guys who have the Picassos about selling the paintings to our undercover man, Andre. And on the phone, they say that Andre can be trusted because he works with a man named Bob in Miami. And I do not think there is another Bob in Miami who they are talking about."

"Probably not, no."

I shook my head as I untangled the logic of the situation. At the beginning of the Gardner investigation, Andre had vouched for me to Laurenz, leading him to believe that Andre and I had worked together as shady art dealers. But now that Laurenz and Sunny believed the three of us had actually committed a major crime together—the "sale" on The Pelican—the vouch had doubled back on itself. Sunny and Laurenz were now telling the thieves that Andre could be trusted because Bob could be trusted. Yes, Laurenz was annoyed with me because I'd pulled out of the Gardner deal, but he still believed I was trustworthy. After all, we'd done business together and no one had been arrested. What could be better evidence of my criminal credentials than that?

"So, this has created a problem because of the Boston case," Pierre said. "Your friends Fred and the others at FBI, they ask us to wait. To not take the paintings right now. You understand why?"

"Yeah, I do." The moment Andre and his fellow officers completed their sting in the Picasso case, making arrests, the thieves would know that someone involved was actually an informant or an undercover cop. Suspicion would likely turn to Andre and perhaps to his American partner, Bob, the man whose bona fides Sunny and Laurenz had used to convince the thieves to work with Andre in the first place. If that happened, it might ruin any chance of using Laurenz and Sunny to recover the Gardner paintings.

I also understood Pierre's dilemma. He couldn't let \$66 million worth of Picassos slip away. If word got out that he had failed to recover the artwork as a favor to the FBI, it would create a scandal and probably scuttle his career.

So I offered Pierre a suggestion: When you make the bust, pretend to arrest your undercover police officer. That way the thieves won't know who betrayed them. At a minimum, it will buy us time.

Pierre liked the idea. "You are a good chess player," he said, and promised to make it happen.

Incredibly, Pierre's orders were not carried out during the Paris sting—the French SWAT team failed to arrest their undercover officer with the thieves. Worse, during an interrogation, another French policeman confirmed to one of the thieves that the buyer was in fact an undercover agent. It didn't take long for the thieves in Paris to make the link from Andre to Laurenz and to me.

Pierre called and apologized profusely for the screwup. It wasn't intentional, he said, and I believed him.

Unfortunately, the consequences were immediate and severe.

LAURENZ CALLED IN a panic a few days after the Picasso sting.

"They want to kill me! They want you! You and me! They want to assassinate us both!"

I told him to calm down and start from the beginning. Associates of the Picasso thieves were in Miami with Sunny, he said, demanding answers from Laurenz and money for the thieves' legal bills.

"I was at the Blockbuster," Laurenz sputtered. "You know I go every Tuesday for the new releases? They follow me there and they want to put me in the car and take me away. I told you these guys don't fuck around."

"How'd you get away?"

"I saw them from inside the Blockbuster and have my wife call 911 and when the police come I go out to talk to them."

"Smart. Where are you now?"

"A hotel. The Loews. They take my dogs here." Laurenz loved his two mutts, took them everywhere. He began bragging about the size and cost of his suite, and I let him prattle on. I needed time to think.

I wanted to know more about the goons threatening Laurenz. For one thing, they might lead me to the missing Gardner paintings. For another, they were threatening my

life. But I had to find a way of stepping in that would be plausible to Laurenz and remain in character for Bob Clay. Here I held an advantage: Laurenz didn't know that I knew he had floated my name as Andre's partner to the Picasso thieves. As far as I ought to know, the French thieves had never heard of me.

So I said, "Laurenz, back up a second—you said they want to kill me, too. Why would they want to kill me? All I did was look at e-mails you sent me. I was never in this deal."

Laurenz fell into the trap, and blamed Sunny. "Sunny said to them that you are a partner with Andre, and that we can trust Andre because we trust you. So now they want to know where you live. They want assassinate you because you are responsible for their friend being in jail."

I exploded. "What the—? Why would Sunny say that? Never mind! Who do these guys think they are? I want to meet them! You set it up!"

Laurenz called back the next day. We'd meet the two Frenchmen at the bar at a luxury hotel in Hollywood, Florida. In three days.

THE OP PLAN for the hotel meet was a compromise, hashed out by committee. As one FBI employee later handwrote across the coversheet of his after-action report, it looked like "a total clusterfuck."

Given the circumstances, I was officially brought back on to the case, but Fred made it clear the move was only temporary. He insisted that I use the meeting to introduce his undercover agent from Boston into the mix. The agent who would replace me was named Sean, and he often played a Boston mobster. I was instructed to vouch for Sean, to explain that he was taking over for me on the Gardner deal. I doubted it would work. Sean was a nice guy, but he didn't know anything about international art deals. Besides, the Picasso case had already spooked the Frenchmen—this was the point of the meeting. It seemed like the worst possible time to get them to start dealing with a complete stranger.

"What if these guys refuse to deal with Sean?" I asked. "What if they insist on working with me? What do we say then?"

"We tell them to take their business elsewhere," Sean replied.

I laughed. "Seriously? What about leaning on them? Take control of the situation? Maybe make a veiled threat?"

"No threats, not me," Sean said. "This special agent is not going to be on tape threatening anybody."

Sean was more worried about covering his ass than protecting mine. I didn't waste effort arguing with him.

Before I left to meet Laurenz in the lobby, I stuffed a handgun in each pocket. It was the first time in my nineteen-year career I'd carried a weapon while working undercover. But this situation felt different, and I'd already been threatened. The people I planned to meet weren't looking to sell me a priceless piece of art; they wanted to know why they shouldn't kill me.

As I stashed the guns, Fred shot me a look. I said to Fred, "If these guys start to fuck with me, I'm going to kill them."

"Please," Fred said. "Don't shoot anybody."

"I don't want to shoot anybody—never have—but these guys have already told Laurenz that they want to kill me."

That got Sean's attention. "Are these guys that dangerous?"

"Yeah, they're that dangerous," I said. "Listen, Laurenz told me a story about one of these guys. He has a thing for knives. The guy cut himself the first time he met Laurenz to show how tough he was. Sliced his arm and sat there, letting it bleed, real menacing-like, blood dripping down. And he says to Laurenz, 'I don't have any problem with pain. This is what real life is all about.' So yeah, Sean. A guy like that? I take him seriously."

SEAN AND I met Laurenz in the lobby.

Before we entered the bar, Laurenz described the two would-be assassins waiting with Sunny for us. He called them Vanilla and Chocolate. Vanilla was the white one—long, stringy dark hair and a crooked nose. Chocolate was black, bald, and wore silver braces across his teeth. He was the one with the knife fetish and was built like a linebacker.

We met them at the bar and the six of us took seats around a corner table—Laurenz, Sean, and me on one side, Sunny, Vanilla, and Chocolate on the other.

Vanilla and Chocolate were large, but they were not stupid. They treaded carefully, treating me with feigned respect. If I was who I claimed to be—a shady art broker with access to millionaire clients—the Frenchmen knew I could make them a great deal of money. It would be foolish to insult me before they got to know me. If, on the other hand, they concluded that I was a snitch or a cop, they could deal with me later.

Sensing their hesitation, I put them on the defensive. “Look,” I said aggressively, my hands under the table, inches from the hidden guns, “it’s obvious someone in France gave your guy up and now we’re all in trouble because of this. Your problem is in France.”

Chocolate said, “The FBI is involved in this. That’s not in France.”

I shot back, “Don’t you think I know the FBI is involved? They came to my house, woke me up, scared my wife to hell, asking us questions about Picasso and this guy and that guy in Paris. This is not good for business, having FBI agents showing up at my home. I’ve got a reputation.”

Chocolate wanted to know why my name had surfaced in Paris. How did the undercover French policeman know to use it to lure the Paris thieves?

I smiled and sat back in my chair. “A damn good question,” I said. “I’ve been wondering the same thing. I wish I knew.” I pointed to Sunny. “Maybe they’re tapping his phone. You know Sunny and I are working on all kinds of things.”

Chocolate asked about his arrested friends’ legal expenses for the Picasso charges. Would Laurenz help pay them?

Laurenz loved playing tough guy, but he knew there was but one correct answer if he wanted to stay alive. “Oui,” he said sharply. He looked away.

Problem solved, I moved my hands away from my pockets and changed the subject, introducing Sean. He stuck out his hand in greeting, but Chocolate and Vanilla just stared back.

Sean spoke gruffly, like a tough guy in a ’40s movie. “OK, here’s the deal. From now on,” he said, “you deal with me. You don’t talk to Bob. I’m the one you contact for business. As far as you are concerned, I am the business. You go through me.”

Sunny and his French friends looked confused, as if to say, what the hell is this? Laurenz translated for them. Chocolate spoke rapidly in French to Sunny, and then turned to Sean. “Non, we deal with Bob, Sunny, and Laurenz—only.”

Sean shook his head. “You call me from now on or we’re done.”

Chocolate sputtered a small laugh. He said to Sean, “Who are you again?”

Fred’s lame game plan was falling apart. I cut in. “Call Sean. It’s good. Tell you what: Let’s cool off for thirty days and then we get back in touch, OK?”

Chocolate didn't commit either way. He began talking with Sunny again in French. The waitress came by and Sean clumsily jumped to get the check. He shoved a credit card at her. What was his hurry?

Sunny and his friends stood and walked off, headed toward the beach. Laurenz, Sean, and I went the other way, toward the lobby and the valet stand. Laurenz remained uncharacteristically quiet until he and I were alone, back inside the Rolls. He started to open his mouth, but his cell phone rang. It was Sunny. They spoke in French and Laurenz began laughing.

Laurenz hung up, shook his head. "They say of your friend Sean, they say, 'Who is this fucking guy?' They say they wish to stuff him in the trunk of their car but they cannot because it is a rental and he is too big to fit.' Sunny says they think he's an idiot and they won't deal with him."

"What do you think?"

"He is a joke," Laurenz said. "And I think he might be a cop."

"What do you mean?"

"He is no wiseguy. This I know."

"Why do say that?"

"He is a pussycat. He say, 'Oh, you don't deal with me, I walk away.' Oh, I am so scared. A real wiseguy, he look you in the eye and say very quietly, very calmly, 'Fuck me? Fuck you. You tell me why I should not kill you today. Tell me now or you are dead before the day is over. Thank you. Good-bye.' This is what the real wiseguy say."

"Well—"

Laurenz floored the Rolls, rocketing away from the valet stand. "This guy Sean, he use green American Express card to pay the bill! A real wiseguy doesn't use a credit card. He uses cash. Always, always! And he never takes a receipt! Never! Never!"

I didn't know what to say. He was right.

Laurenz turned toward the causeway and downtown Miami.

After a few moments, he said, "I drop you at your hotel and then maybe I not see you again. Because if we had not done the deal on the boat, I would be thinking for sure you are a cop. But now"—Laurenz took his eyes off the road for a moment and squinted at me—"I don't know if you are a cop and I don't care. I am in fucking bad shape, OK? We are through."

Laurenz stepped on the accelerator and cranked the radio.

He was out.

WITH LAURENZ GONE, the Boston FBI office shut down Operation Masterpiece.

Wonderful, I thought. Bureaucracies and turf fighting on both sides of the Atlantic had destroyed the best chance in a decade to rescue the Gardner paintings. We'd also blown an opportunity to infiltrate a major art crime ring in France, a loose network of mobsters holding as many as seventy stolen masterpieces.

Our failure convinced me that the FBI was no longer the can-do force it was when I'd joined in 1988. The bureau was becoming a risk-averse bureaucracy like any other government agency, filled with mediocrity and people more concerned about their career than the mission.

The Art Crime Team, launched with such promise, seemed headed for that fate too, roiled by constant turnover. We'd not only lost Eric Ives as unit chief, but our best prosecutor as well, Bob Goldman. Petty and insecure bosses in Philadelphia had given my best friend an ultimatum: Drop art crime and return to garden-variety drug and bank robbery cases or find another job. Goldman had called their bluff and quit, abruptly ending a twenty-four-year career in law enforcement. Perhaps worse, half of the original street agents assigned to the Art Crime Team had now moved on, looking to advance their careers. It was disheartening.

As I began my final twelve months as an FBI agent in the fall of 2007, I planned to finish up a few lingering cases, train an undercover replacement, and start thinking about my retirement party. I'd travel with Donna, visit my sons in college, attend my daughter's high school recitals.

Then one afternoon that fall, my undercover cell phone buzzed.

It was Sunny.

## Chapter 25

### ENDGAME

Barcelona. January 2008.

FOUR MONTHS AFTER SUNNY'S PHONE CALL, I FOUND myself in a frayed Barcelona hotel room, negotiating with his boss, Patrick.

Six of us crammed around a flimsy table and two single beds. Patrick and I sat on opposite sides of the table by an open window. Sunny and an undercover Spanish police officer perched on the edge of one bed. My muscle, the two FBI agents from Miami, still posing as Colombian drug dealers, lounged on the other bed.

A hidden camera in the ceiling fan recorded everything. A Spanish SWAT team waited next door.

Patrick, a lithe and cocksure Frenchman of Armenian descent, perhaps six foot three, sat a foot from my face, chain-smoking Marlboro reds. He was sixty years old, with close-cropped gray hair and a day's white stubble on his chin. He kept his brown eyes locked on mine, patient and as focused as a sniper. His words came deliberately and in short sentences.

"We are older men, you and I," Patrick said in French. "Money is nice, but liberty is very important."

I'd hoped to bring along a French-speaking undercover FBI agent to translate, but the bureau hadn't been able to find anyone qualified. So the Spanish officer did the job. He moved from French to English and English to French with speed and gusto, but also with an unsettling lisp and effeminate voice that belied the tense negotiation. I could imagine the macho FBI agents watching on video in the next room, snickering at the incongruity.

I said, "I don't want to go to jail either."

"Yes, we know what is important."

"So," I said, hoping to get a confession on tape, "tell me about the robbery."

Patrick was only happy to.

I ALWAYS TELL rookies that you've got to run down every lead. You never know which one will pan out.

Sometimes long shots pay off.

When Laurenz had dropped out of the deal, the agents at the Boston FBI office had thrown up their hands and closed the file. But the Miami division had not given up on Sunny; its agents opened a new investigation, Operation Masterpiece II, and lured Sunny back with the promise of a large cocaine deal. Soon, Sunny was calling me again to talk art.

At first, we spoke of the Vermeer and Rembrandt. But he also began to offer a second set of paintings—four works, including a Monet and a Sisley—stolen the previous summer from a museum in Nice. The two sets of paintings were held by different sets of gangsters, Sunny said.

I made it clear that I wanted the Boston paintings, not the Nice paintings. Sunny said I had to buy the Nice paintings first. It was a way to build trust, he said.

With the window to the Gardner paintings cracked open again, I had agreed and Sunny had set up the meeting in Barcelona to negotiate a price for the Nice paintings. I found it curious that Sunny chose Spain as a meeting spot—we knew from the wiretaps that the Vermeer was likely held in Spain.

I also figured we couldn't lose. If Sunny was merely stringing me along about the Gardner paintings, we'd still recover the Nice paintings and help my friend Pierre solve a big art heist. On the other hand, if a deal for the Nice paintings led to a Gardner deal, we'd hit a grand slam.

Still, I approached the Spain meeting with extreme caution. I'd recently learned that a few weeks after our Florida hotel confrontation, Sunny had pulled an FBI informant aside and offered him \$65,000 to have Laurenz killed.

IN THE BARCELONA hotel room, I let Patrick spool out the details of his big Nice museum heist. He was proud of his work.

Patrick explained that he had picked a Sunday in August, the slowest visitor day of the week during the slowest month of the year. He'd chosen the apricot-and-cream-colored Musee des Beaux-Arts because it is set off the beaten tourist track, perched on a hill in a residential neighborhood. I knew that the Musee des Beaux-Arts shared something in common with the Gardner and the Barnes—it was the inspiration and former residence of a single patron of the arts, a nineteenth-century Ukrainian princess. The museum still

held important works, though its once grand vista of the city's Bay of Angels was now obscured by a forest of bland apartment buildings.

Patrick described his four accomplices as two close friends and two nobodies, gypsies. The five of them dressed in blue city maintenance jumpsuits and shielded their faces with either bandanas or motorcycle helmets. Security was a joke. No surveillance cameras. No alarms. The half dozen guards on duty were unarmed, pimply-faced kids. Pushovers, Patrick recalled. With their ill-fitting blazers and drooping khakis, the guards were perhaps the worst-dressed males in France.

Patrick said his crew was in and out in four minutes.

Wielding handguns, the thieves pushed open the glass door at the entrance and ordered the guards and a handful of visitors to the floor. The gypsy henchmen held everyone at bay in the foyer as the others sprinted toward their targets. One thief ran through a sky-lit ground floor garden to a rear gallery, removing two paintings by the Flemish artist Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Allegory of Water* and *Allegory of Earth*. Patrick and an accomplice vaulted up sixty-six marble steps to the second floor, then scampered another thirty-four paces, past a Charest mural and a Rodin rendering of *The Kiss*, to a room lined with Impressionist paintings, each hanging by a single hook. Patrick and his buddy lifted Monet's *Cliffs Near Dieppe* and Sisley's *Lane of Poplars at Moret-sur-Loing* and raced back downstairs. The thieves escaped by motorbike and blue Peugeot van.

I'd already read the French police file and knew the story well. But as Patrick related his tale, I reacted with awe at his cleverness and derring-do.

As a favor to Pierre, I began by pushing hard for the Sisley and Monet. Pierre sought these above the others because they were property of the French national government, on loan from the Musee d'Orsay in Paris. The Brueghels were owned by the city of Nice and less valuable.

Patrick opened the negotiation by valuing the paintings at \$40 million. I told him he was crazy, that the four paintings were worth no more than \$5 million on the open market, which meant they were worth \$500,000 tops on the black market. We negotiated for more than ninety minutes in the foul hotel room, with its dingy drapes and air stale with cigarette smoke. The air conditioner didn't work and I didn't dare flip on the ceiling fan because I worried it might gum up the hidden camera and microphone.

Patrick was a fierce negotiator and I found myself in an unusual position. In other cases—with the Rembrandt in Copenhagen, the Geronimo headdress in Philadelphia, the Koplowitz paintings in Madrid—I'd been able to offer any amount, knowing I'd never

have to pay the money. But here, it was possible we might let the money for the Nice paintings walk—if we were near certain it would lead to the Gardner paintings.

As the afternoon waned, Patrick dropped his offer from \$4 million to \$3 million. Patrick was hungry to cash in. He'd planned this great heist, pulled it off, and all he had to show for it was four pretty pictures that could land him back in prison. He'd said he'd left the Nice paintings in France and had come only to talk. But what if he was lying? What if he had the paintings close by? Could he be tempted by a bag of cash? And what of the Gardner paintings?

I threw out a couple of options.

What if I gave Patrick \$50,000 cash on the spot for the four Nice paintings with the balance due after I sold them? If I didn't sell them, I told Patrick, I'd return the paintings and he could keep the \$50,000. He said no.

OK, I said, what if I gave him the \$50,000 for just the Monet and Sisley? He could keep the other two while I tried to sell them. Again, Patrick said no.

I gave it one last try and swung for the fences. On the chance that Sunny had lied, and that Patrick somehow had access to the Gardner paintings, I made a proposal. I pointed to my friends from Miami on the boat and told Patrick that they had a boat moored on the coast here, ready to smuggle the paintings back to Florida. Now, I said, Sunny knows I've got \$30 million sitting in the bank, cash ready to be wired the moment I receive the Vermeer, the Rembrandt, and the other Boston paintings. So while I'm here, I said, why don't we just do that deal too, and put all the paintings on the boat?

Sunny looked away from both of us, quiet. Patrick switched from French to English. He said, "You want Vermeer? I'll get you Vermeer."

"Can you get it?" I asked.

"No problem," he said confidently. "I get anything you want. I find you one. There are many Vermeer." He was offering to steal one for me.

"No, I don't want a new one—they're too hot," I said. "I want an old one, missing for many years."

Patrick nodded. "I sell you paintings from Nice. Then we talk more with Sunny."

"Right," I said. "OK." So Patrick had no access to the Gardner paintings. But Sunny, I still believed, was using the Nice sale to test me. If I could win his trust with this buy, we still had a chance.

Patrick and I negotiated for another hour and finally settled on a tentative price for the Nice paintings, a little less than \$3 million.

Patrick took a long drag on his cigarette. He blew smoke from the corner of his mouth, toward the translator. In English, he said, “Bob, very important, we would like business but very quiet business. You understand what I say?”

“I understand.”

“Very, very quiet.”

“Silencieux,” I said.

“Voilà?” Patrick said and stubbed out his cigarette.

AFTER BARCELONA, I never saw Sunny or Patrick again.

We spoke by phone in code but once we settled on the price I told them to work out the logistics with the undercover FBI agents in Miami. I was a financier, I explained, not a smuggler.

Four months later, when Patrick and a French friend visited Sunny in South Florida, I told them I was too busy to see them. My colleagues in Miami treated Sunny, Patrick, and their friends to one last party aboard *The Pelican*, and they set the final handover of the Nice paintings for June in Marseilles. The French were still refusing to allow me or any other FBI agents to go undercover in Marseilles, and Sunny knew better than to meet with anyone but me. Luckily, Patrick was calling the shots now, and he was dumb and desperate enough to agree to deal with my buyer in Marseilles—who was, of course, a SIAT agent, a member of the French undercover police.

The final takedown was imminent.

ON THE MORNING of June 4, 2008, a blue Peugeot van pulled out of a garage in Carry-le-Rouet, a tiny coastal Riviera town west of Marseilles. A compact beige jalopy followed close behind, Patrick at the wheel.

Undercover French officers watching nearby radioed ahead, noting that the van was heading southeast, as expected. The vehicles wove through downtown Marseilles on side streets, doubling back to avoid detection in Wednesday morning rush-hour traffic. But they did not shake Pierre’s surveillance men. How could they? The French police

knew precisely where they were headed. The thieves were on their way to meet a SIAT agent, a man they believed to be working for me.

When the van and the jalopy reached the old harbor, they headed for the Corniche John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the picturesque road that hugs the rocky Riviera coast, rising fifty feet above the lapping waves of the glimmering Mediterranean Sea. The gangsters with the paintings came armed for battle. One of the men in the van brought an automatic weapon. In the small car that followed, Patrick carried a Colt .45 under his jacket. His passenger, a hulking man with shoulder-length blond hair, gripped a Czech-made hand grenade.

The vehicles snaked their way past the four-star Pullman Marseille Palm Beach, a mod-style hotel cut into the seaside beneath the roadway. Pierre and a small army of French police officers were coordinating the sting from the Pullman, two hundred meters from the takedown site, staffing a command center with a SWAT team and, in case it was necessary, a suitcase full of euros.

Beyond the Pullman, the thieves' cars rolled into a valley flanked by curved public beaches and a dog track, and anchored by a series of boardwalk by-the-sea pubs and shops, a spot the police chose because it was easy to block all exits. It was still early—the morning sun still growing from the eastern hills, casting a warm orange glow across the wind-whipped beach—and so the thieves found plenty of free parking on the street.

Patrick and his friend with the grenade stepped out on the sidewalk and stretched, fifty meters from the sea. The guys in the van stayed put.

The French undercover officer waiting to authenticate the paintings began walking down the sidewalk, toward Patrick. The cop was alone, but plenty of colleagues wandered nearby in disguise—sweeping a storefront, walking a dog, sitting at a bus stop.

The thieves and the cop met by the beach.

Over the radio, someone gave the order.

A force of twenty policemen converged, weapons drawn and with overwhelming force, tackling Patrick, the friend with the grenade and—well done!—the undercover cop, too, preserving his identity and possibly mine.

IT WAS 2 A.M. in Philadelphia, but Pierre called anyway to fill me in. The French police found all four paintings in the blue van. They were in good condition.

He asked me about Sunny and Laurenz.

Laurenz wouldn't be charged with a crime, I said, because he wasn't involved in the Nice deal.

Sunny would be arrested at dawn at his home near Fort Lauderdale, I said. The press releases would start flowing in the afternoon.

AMERICAN GRAND JURY indictments can be written two ways.

There is a short form: A one- or two-page double-spaced vague statement of the law violated. The short form is preferred when the case is routine or when the government wants to deflect attention from an ongoing undercover aspect of the case.

Then there is the long-form indictment: A multipage, detailed document with a long narrative, a "speaking indictment" that summarizes the crime and every meeting between the accused and the undercover officers. Prosecutors almost always use the long-form indictment when they plan to convene a press conference. They do this because the rules require them to stick to the facts contained in the indictment. The more titillating facts they stuff into the indictment, the more they can repeat in front of the television cameras.

I didn't see the American paperwork in the Nice case until after the indictment was unsealed and the press release went out.

I was disappointed but not surprised. Although Sunny was charged with just one felony count, prosecutors detailed the case in a long-form indictment that included my role as an undercover agent. The prosecutors didn't mention the link to the Gardner investigation, or use my name, but the way they wrote it, they might as well have. If Sunny's associates truly held the Gardner paintings in Europe, they now knew to never trust me, or anyone else connected to Sunny. The public indictment, posted on the Internet, left no doubt that I was an undercover FBI agent.

Angry, I called Pierre to let him know of the screwup.

Pierre said, "Like I say, everybody wants a piece of the cake and wants to have their face in the picture." Everyone wanted credit.

We joked about supervisors for a few moments, and I reminded him that he was on his way to making general. We spoke about when we might see each other next, dancing around the big question.

Finally, I said, "Pierre, do you think we had a chance?"

"You mean for the Boston paintings?"

“Yeah.”

“Absolument,” he said. “We have a good idea who has them. We know to whom Sunny was speaking. But now that we arrest Sunny and say Bob is FBI, the case is gone. We will not have this chance again for many years. Perhaps you will get to try again?”

“No, I’m done,” I said. “I retire in three months.”

“Who will take your place?”

I hesitated because the query hit a raw nerve. I was eager to help train and brief my replacement, but the FBI didn’t seem to be grooming anyone.

I said, “I don’t know, Pierre. I don’t know. It’s a good question.”