

FINDING PICASSO**By Michael Haskins**

When the curator from the art museum outside of Los Angeles called and said that Howard Bolter, the curator of a museum in Boston, had recommended he contact me, I asked what paintings had been stolen.

The hesitation in the curator's voice told me he a problem, and mentioning Boston added up to art theft. A little less than two years prior to the evening's call, I had been the intermediary in retrieving stolen art for a Boston museum. The theft wasn't publicized and I don't do that sort of thing for a living, but the thieves knew I was in Boston, and I have a reputation for discretion.

Richard Walsh, the curator from Los Angeles, stuttered and finally mumbled, "How do you know a painting has been stolen?"

"I've only had one dealing with the museum in Boston," I said, and left it at that.

There was some heavy breathing on the other end of the phone, maybe he was hyperventilating, and then he said, "A Picasso was stolen this morning." The words came out coarse and sounded like each one caused pain.

“I like Picasso,” I whistled, and Walsh remained silent. “I don’t know how I can help you.”

My name is Liam Michael Murphy, I live in Key West, and I’m a journalist. While attending Harvard I picked up the nickname Mad Mick Murphy, mostly due to student stunts and somewhat because I’m Irish. The name has stuck.

It was an early winter evening in Key West; tourists filled Mallory Pier hoping to see the green flash as the sun set into the Gulf of Mexico, and Duval Street bars were crowded with sunburned tourists starting the nightly pub-crawl. In Los Angeles, it was late afternoon.

“The painting was on loan from the Boston museum,” he said, as if it explained his call. “We’re aware of how you helped them two years ago and would like you to help us.”

“That whole thing in Boston was a fluke.”

“We’ve been in meetings since the theft and the insurance company is hoping the same thing that happened in Boston will happen here.” He spoke quickly and then took a deep breath, “The insurance company is the same one you dealt with in Boston. I was told to tell you there will be a ten-percent reward if you help retrieve the painting.”

“I’m in Key West.”

“We realize that,” he continued to mumble, “a plane will pick you up, we will pay for your hotel and \$300 per diem.”

“What’s the painting insured for?”

“Ten million dollars.” He whispered each word.

If a private collector had arranged the theft, the thieves would not contact the insurance company. If a collector was not involved, the probabilities were good the thieves would call and try to arrange a ransom deal. The insurance company would be responsible for the \$10 million if the painting was not recovered, so paying a ransom and keeping the theft out of the news benefited them. It was also difficult to sell a stolen Picasso on e-Bay.

Small private jets can land at Key West International Airport; they are also comfortable, and I was in Los Angeles after midnight.

I read the brief report I received, during the flight. The art theft had happened during operating hours, the report explained. Schoolchildren, on a tour of the museum with their teachers, were horsing around on the second floor, and after touching some frames, an alarm went off. The alarm sent the museum's entire second-floor security staff to that room. The head of security estimated that in the ten minutes his crew was in the room with the children someone stole the Picasso by cutting it out of its frame. As soon as the first alarm went off all exits of the museum locked automatically, so security assumed the painting was still within the museum. However, a thorough all-day search had not found it.

* * *

I had a few hours sleep before arriving at the museum's security room in the morning. The room was hidden in the museum's first basement, and there were two more levels below it for storage. It was a small and dark room with outdated security camera monitors stacked around two large desks. It seemed to be an odd arrangement for an art museum. Six men monitored the monitors.

Richard Walsh, a tall, slim nervous man introduced me to the head of security, Seán Smith, and then went to his office to wait for the thieves to call. Smith was in his early fifties, had a military haircut and physique.

“Do you think they’ll call?” Smith asked.

“I don’t know.” I handed him the theft report. “Did you write this?”

He glanced briefly at the papers and nodded. “Do you want to see the security tapes we have?”

I followed him into his cramped office where there were more monitors. He pushed a tape into one and pointed to a chair. I sat down.

“Let me tell you what you’re going to see, so you’ll understand it,” he said. “A man in an old trench coat and hat will cross in front of the camera. You’ll see him turn the Picasso painting, cut it from its frame, and then walk out of view, rolling it up. He’s not recognizable and we can’t tell his age. We know he’s white. We don’t have the equipment to enhance the images, and our surveillance equipment is antiquated.”

“I noticed,” I said, and watched the monitor as the thief walked into the empty room and stole the painting. He never looked at the camera. “Did he show up on any other surveillance tapes?”

“There are short glimpses of him in the same room with the kids, but he did his best to stay out of the camera’s angle,” Smith said, sucking on an unlit cigarette. “The kids told us he teased them into touching and lifting one of the large frames, and that’s what set off the alarm.”

“Why didn’t the Picasso set off an alarm?”

The paintings in that room are not wired,” he grinned. “Before you ask, it’s because of costs.”

“Tell me, Murphy, was it prearranged for the kids to be there, or was it a crime of opportunity?” The voice came from the doorway.

I turned and recognized Joe O’Brien, an insurance investigator from Boston. He filled the doorway.

“Someone from the school would have to be involved, maybe even the teacher,” I answered him. “Was the visit publicized?”

“No,” Smith said. “You two know each other?”

“Yes,” O’Brien said, and walked into the room. “What do you think, Mick?”

“The trench coat and hat was a disguise, so it wasn’t a crime of opportunity,” I said, running the grainy image through my mind. “If the teacher wasn’t involved, then the thief might have known they were coming and he knew the frame wasn’t wired because he’s on the museum’s staff.”

“Not bad for a Harvard grad,” O’Brien laughed. “Huh, Seán?”

“If you say so,” Smith said without enthusiasm.

“Seán doesn’t think we should bring you in, Mick,” O’Brien explained Smith’s coolness toward me.

“Nothing personal,” Smith mumbled. “I just don’t see how a journalist from Key West is going to do us any good. I don’t think the painting ever left the museum, and I know we’ll find it.”

“But you won’t get a million dollar reward, will you?” O’Brien asked him. “And you don’t hangout with thieves and liars, Mick does. The idea of the reward gives Mick incentive.”

“There’s that,” I said, trying to sound sincere.

We took an elevator up to the curator’s office on the first floor. Walsh hadn’t received any ransom calls, so he grudgingly walked with the three of us to the second floor room where the Picasso had been displayed.

“Police?” I asked as we walked the stairs.

Both Smith and O’Brien shook their heads no.

“If this isn’t a ransom heist ...”

“We probably won’t get it back,” O’Brien said. “The police will be notified tomorrow, if we don’t hear something from the thief today.”

The museum was scheduled to open in four of hours, but for now it was quiet, though there were a lot of security people milling around. The room where the Picasso had been had high ceilings and the off-white walls held a variety of art in different sizes. I am not someone who frequents museums, so I wasn’t sure about the art hanging there. Where I hangout art frames are screwed to the walls.

The floor was carpeted and uncomfortable chrome and leather bench-like seats were placed in the center so patrons could sit and stare at a painting.

I walked around the room as if I knew what I was looking for. I stopped in front of the empty frame.

“Is it worth finger printing?” I asked.

O'Brien laughed. "I had some people come to do that a little while ago. We don't expect to find any."

"Why don't you suggest they screw the frames down?" I whispered to O'Brien.

"Because they don't serve booze here, Murphy," he laughed. "Do your job."

"Why the dead spots for the cameras?" I asked, as I looked toward the camera over the door. The system had to be more than five years old, and that's old for a security system.

"Because it would cost too much to do it right and upgrade," Smith snorted.

"We have a board of directors to report to," Walsh said, his tone firmer than before. "Mr. Smith would have the museum wrapped in barb wire if we let him. Updating the equipment is too costly."

"It's going to cost someone now," I said and looked at O'Brien.

"We were not aware of the dead space," O'Brien said guardedly. "The painting is owned by a private party and was on loan to the museum in Boston. The owner agreed to the secondary loan to this museum, but there was a contract involved and this museum's insurance company has that responsibility. I guess we assumed the security was adequate."

"You didn't check?"

"We were assured there were surveillance cameras," O'Brien mumbled.

"And there are," Walsh answered tensely. "No one questioned our equipment."

"We should have been more thorough," O'Brien said. "But this museum has a good reputation."

"So why are you here?"

“I’m looking out for the welfare of the Boston museum.”

“Expecting lawyers to come knocking?” I asked.

O’Brien gave me a dirty look, but didn’t say anything.

We followed Walsh to the room where the schoolchildren had set off the alarm. It was two doorways from where the Picasso hung. I looked around. The size was the same as the other room, the layout the same, even the carpeting and furniture. What was different was the size of the paintings. They were huge.

“All these frames wired?”

“Most,” Smith said. “The thief would have had to know.”

“Yeah, he would” I said. “Dead surveillance space in all the hallways?”

“Every hallway,” he answered and looked toward Walsh. “It’s less expensive.”

I walked back to the room where the Picasso had been.

“You find the coat and hat in the bathroom?” I asked. The information wasn’t in the report emailed to me.

“Yes,” Smith answered. “How’d you know?”

I didn’t answer. I checked the second hand on my watch, moved slowly into the hallway, and entered the men’s bathroom. I tried to open a broom closet but it was locked. I pretended to open it and then stuffed the imaginary Picasso into an imaginary tube. I walked back to the hallway, ignoring everyone’s questions, and walked away from the elevators. Halfway down the hall there was a large door. I turned the handle, and to my surprise, it opened.

A wide stairway led down to the first floor where a large, poorly lit room was empty, but dim light seeped in from under the door that entered the museum. As my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I noticed a couple of doors hidden in the shadows.

“Is this door always open?” I asked without looking at anyone.

“Fire laws require it,” Smith said.

“Why so poorly lit?”

“It’s not for public access,” Walsh answered. “Staff uses this way when the museum is open and we hold large deliveries here.”

“Lights cost money,” Smith added sarcastically.

“Where do the doors lead?”

“To the museum, to the basement, and there’s a storage closet too,” Walsh said.

“It’s been checked,” Smith said quickly.

“Can the lights be turned up?”

“No,” Walsh said. “Why?”

“Has this room been checked?”

“Yes,” Smith said. “There’s nothing here. No fake ceilings or walls. We know what we’re doing!”

“Where in the basement does that door take you?” I asked, ignoring his reply.

“To my office,” Smith said flatly. He didn’t like having to answer my questions.

“The other door opens where in the museum?”

“By the elevators and lobby,” Walsh said.

I looked toward O’Brien and saw him smirk.

“Okay, the thief dumps his disguise in the men’s room, puts the Picasso into a tube and comes down here,” I explained, more to myself than the others. “He could do it all in less than five minutes. In all the excitement, no one notices him because he isn’t out of place. Where does he go from here?”

“To the museum or the basement,” O’Brien answered.

Smith shook his head and grunted. “We’ve gone through all this earlier.”

“Humor me,” I said.

We walked down the stairway and I saw that the area underneath the steps was open. No hiding places there.

“What was going on out here when the alarm went off?” I asked, as I opened the door to the museum.

“Security officers covered the main exits, even though they lock automatically,” Smith said.

“Where were you when the alarm went off?” I turned to Walsh.

“I was talking to the volunteer at the book counter,” he stammered.

“Then what?”

“I hear the alarm, listen to make sure it’s not a mistake and then go upstairs.”

“Walk, run, elevator?”

“I run, of course.”

“And?”

“I see guards heading toward the center room and follow,” he explained nervously and looked at O’Brien for an explanation for my questions.

“Who was the first to notice the missing Picasso?”

“After we quieted the children, the guards returned to their posts,” Walsh said, “Séan went downstairs to get the doors unlocked. People were being curious, they knew something was going on.”

“Where were you when the alarm went off?” I turned to Smith.

“In the basement headed to the lobby. When I heard the alarm I ran up these stairs,” Smith said pointing at the stairs behind us. “My men had the situation in hand and one explained about the kids jarring the frame. I was leaving to give the okay to unlock the doors. I was halfway down the stairs when I got called back and that’s when I was told about the Picasso.”

“The guards called you too?”

“Yes,” Walsh said. “I was still in the hallway talking with the school teacher. She was very apologetic.”

“I bet,” I said.

I walked back into the dim room and opened the door that led down to the basement.

“This is always open?”

“Fire laws,” Smith smirked. “The only doors locked around here are the fire doors that lead outside from each floor, and they can be opened by pushing the panic bar.”

“When you were running upstairs you didn’t see anyone in this room?”

“No one.”

I walked back up the stairs slowly; I turned a couple of times and looked down, and then continued up to the landing. They all followed me.

“What are you thinking, Murphy?” O’Brien asked when he reached the landing.

“I think the thief came down this stairway, and that leaves only two ways for him to go,” I said. “Has the basement been checked?”

“My men are still checking the second and third basement levels,” Smith said. “There are a lot of rooms below.”

“Has your security office been searched?”

“No!” he said quickly. “It was manned all through this. No one could come in carrying the painting without being noticed.”

“Unless they were involved.” I said. “Maybe the whole security department was involved. Why didn’t anyone monitoring the security cameras see the guy stealing the Picasso?”

“That’s bullshit,” Smith yelled back. “Everyone in the office was focused on the screens in the room where the alarm went off. These men are mostly retired cops, and they’re here twenty-four hours a day, and if they wanted to steal they could get a hell of a lot more than one Picasso.”

“I’m just thinking out loud,” I explained. “Nothing’s impossible.”

I walked back down the stairs and opened the door to the lobby again. I could see the bookstore and the “office” sign that hung over a Walsh’s door by the store.

“You were at the bookstore when the alarm went off, right?” I asked Walsh pointing toward the store.

“Yes and my office and the store have been searched.”

“What are you doing?” Smith asked, staying back in the darkness. “Is he taking over the investigation?” he demanded from O’Brien.

“No,” O’Brien answered calmly. “I’ve found over the years of knowing Mick that his mind works differently than most people’s. His imagination sometimes sees things the rest of us miss.”

“And his imagination is doing what for us?”

O’Brien shrugged and looked at me. “You have anything for us, Mick?”

“Nothing Seán hasn’t said,” I grinned. “I agree with him. The painting is still in the museum. He hasn’t said it, but I think he knows it’s still here because someone working here stole it.”

“So far it’s not brain surgery,” Smith said smugly. “I’ll find the painting and, if it’s an inside job, I will find the thief. But, you feel free to wait with Richard and O’Brien, just incase a ransom call comes. Let me take care of the museum search.”

“Which brings up another questions,” I said. “How are the thieves going to know I am here?”

“There’ll be an ad in the *L.A. Times* tomorrow mentioning you’re here to discuss your experiences with art theft and recovery,” O’Brien explained. “If the thieves are looking at a ransom, the point will be clear to them.”

“Or they may already have another plan worked out,” Smith said, “that doesn’t include us.”

“Fact is, art theft is on the rise around the world,” O’Brien said. “Most of it’s for private collectors, but statistically it’s a group crime. Look at what happened in Norway. Broad daylight and thieves walked out with Munch’s ‘The Scream’ and ‘Madonna,’ ninety million dollars’ worth of art stolen in a few minutes. In May, another Picasso was

stolen from a restoration studio in Paris. The thieves are usually paid a fee, and often have no idea of the value of what they're stealing."

"Not in this case!" Smith said quickly.

"I agree with you," O'Brien said. "This is not your ordinary art theft. It could be a disgruntled employee, someone in a lot of debt, maybe to gamblers. Or it could be someone looking to make a killing with one quick heist ... like in the movies," he couldn't stifle a laugh.

"So why this guy?" Smith questioned my involvement again. "The museum's insurance people are all over this, we're on top of it. So why some guy from Florida?"

"He's here at my request, the museum's carrier has okayed it, as has Richard," O'Brien answered. "We're not trying to step on your toes, and we're out of here in a little while."

"Yeah," Smith replied, "I'm going to check on the search," he said to Walsh, and walked through the door that led to the lower levels.

"We've been considering replacing Seán," Walsh said after a few moments of awkward silence. "He wants to bring the museum up to modern security levels and this is his chance. I don't always disagree with his ideas, but I also have to deal with the board and budgets."

"So, if he finds the painting ..."

"It would give him a little more sway with the board," Walsh said. "Maybe. But his ideas are expensive and, until yesterday, no one thought we really needed that kind of technology."

I walked away, leaving O'Brien and Walsh, and worked my way up the dark stairway to the second floor, where it was quiet. A few people still walked around, but the search for the painting had moved to the lower levels.

Two security officers eyed me, but kept their distance. I retraced my earlier walk from where the painting had been stolen, to the bathroom, back to the hallway and the dim stairwell. I stood on the top platform landing until my eyes adjusted. I heard the elevator move. I held on to the old wooden balustrade as I walked down slowly, slapping at the newel posts, while looking over the side. From the second landing, half way down, I looked into the grayness and knew Smith was right, there were no hiding places in the walls.

I looked at the doors that led from the dim hall, turned and looked back at the door to the second floor hallway, and whistled as I walked downstairs to find O'Brien and Walsh. I wanted them with me when I produced the painting.

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I found them in the bookstore and had them call Smith to meet us.

"Let me make sure I have this right," I said after I told them I knew where the painting was. "I produce the stolen Picasso and receive a ten-percent fee."

"That's the deal," O'Brien said first. "It's insured for \$10 million."

Even I could do the math on that!

"That the deal with your carrier?" I asked Walsh.

"Both carriers," he said anxiously. "You have the painting?"

"No," I said quietly, "but I know where it is."

"You saying we missed something?" Smith challenged as he joined us.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I told him. “You missed it, I found it.”

“Where is it?” he taunted.

“Follow me.” I led them to the stairwell. “I don’t know the thief’s identity, but I’m sure he’s an employee.”

We stood around quietly until our eyes adjusted to the dimness.

“It’s important we see in the darkness,” I explained. “The thief was able to get into the room and hide the painting because he had everything prepared.” I walked up the stairwell to the first landing; they followed me. “He was able to walk down the stairs, hide the painting, and continue on.”

“To where?” Smith asked.

“Don’t know, and I don’t know why you didn’t run into him as you headed up the stairs,” I answered. “I don’t know who did it, or what he did after he hid the painting. But I know where he hid it.”

“Where, for God’s sake?” O’Brien moaned.

I walked to the railing and turned to face them. I rested one hand on the railing and the other on the newel post.

“Right here,” I told them and was glad they couldn’t see my smile.

“Right where?” Walsh demanded.

“Right here.” I struggled forcing the wooden cap off the newel with my hands. I let it fall over the side for the dramatic effect of it hitting the floor. I stuck my hand into the hollow post, pulled out the mailing tube, and handed it toward O’Brien, but Walsh jumped in the way and took the tube.

He tried opening it as he walked down the stairs, but taped sealed each end. Once out in the corridor, Smith handed Walsh a small pocketknife. He cut the tape away and tossed the cap to the floor. His hand slowly went into the opening and came out quickly.

“We should go to my office,” he said.

We all followed.

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Hurricane season was long over and I was working on the *Fenian Bastard*, my 40-foot sloop, at the city marina. The winds were about ten knots and I wanted to be out sailing. The salt breeze blew from across the Florida Straits, filled the marina with a hint of tropical flora, and slapped halyards against masts. I changed oil and filters and tightened the belts on the small Westerbek diesel engine that powered my sailboat. It was sweaty, dirty work, but necessary, so I was getting it out of the way. Thin clouds danced across the sky, teasing me.

The afternoon sun beat down, some of it slipping under the cover that went from the canvas bimini to the dodger, but most of the center cockpit was in shade as I sipped my first cold beer of the afternoon. The CD changer was playing a mixture of the Blues Travelers and Dave Matthews, and I was ready for a cigar when I saw him walking down the floating dock.

“If that’s a cold beer I hope you have more,” Seán Smith called as he walked down the finger slip. “Permission to come aboard, captain,” he saluted and climb aboard.

I tossed him a cold, wet beer from the ice cooler and went below. I brought him a Cuban cigar. I clipped the end for him but lit mine first.

“You rent your regular condo?” I asked.

“No, I’m staying at the Pier House,” he said and puffed on the cigar. “I won’t be here too long, will I?”

I took a small bankbook from my pocket and handed it to him. “I think you can do what you want.”

A chartered boat rode by causing a small wake, and Séan held onto the rail, almost dropping his beer. He was not accustomed to being on the water.

“What happened in L.A.?” I asked as he sat down.

“Just what I thought,” he said, puffing on the cigar. “I was let go in less than a month, and they brought in a whole new outfit – with all the toys.”

“What you’d wanted all along.”

“Yeah,” he said, but he was not excited about being right.

“I’d leave the money in the bank,” I told him. “I wouldn’t try hiding it.”

“I was easy on you,” he laughed and looked at the bankbook again. “I’ve never been to the Cayman Islands.”

“A good starting point for visiting the Caribbean and Central America.”

“I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

“You know where I’ll be, or at least how to reach me.”

“Yeah,” he said and puffed on the cigar.

“You can fly to Havana from the Caymans.”

“I guess I can do just about anything I want, can’t I?” he smiled. “Thanks.”

“What are friends for?”

“How about for buying dinner?”

“The least you can do,” I laughed. “I’ll meet you at the Pier House around eight.”

“Thanks, doesn’t seem like enough ...”

“Get the hell out of here,” I told him. “I have to clean up and make some calls.”

“Eight,” he said as he climbed off the boat. “Thanks for the cigar,” he called out as he put the bankbook in his pocket. He had more spring in his step as he walked along the floating dock, smoking his cigar.

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