

Framed

by

Andrew Armstrong

“Where to?” asked Sergeant James Mincher as he slid into the driver’s seat of the squad car.

“The Hitchcock Art Museum,” replied Detective Antoinette ‘Toni’ Rogers. “You look like the kind of man who appreciates a little culture.” Mincher frowned, and Rogers elaborated, “They’re missing a painting. A very valuable painting.”

They were at the museum in less than five minutes. The officers stepped gingerly over the puddles left by that morning’s thunderstorm and approached the front door, which was swung open by a man who identified himself as Martin Horan, the museum’s director.

“Thank heavens you’re here,” said Horan. “This way.” He led them into a large gallery where four individuals waited beneath a skylight. Horan introduced the officers to his assistant, Barbara Payne; the museum’s controller, Edward Campbell; and two guards, Fred Shepherd, an older man with a perpetual frown, and the much younger Martin Kerr, who was nervously shifting from one foot to the other.

“You said you’d been robbed,” Rogers said.

Horan groaned. “Robbed of our most valuable possession,” he said, “a masterpiece by the great abstract artist Dudley Waring.” He pointed to the far wall; the officers turned and saw an empty frame measuring about four by six feet. Rogers and Mincher went closer and read a brief description of the work, which was titled Kaleidoscope.

Horan stepped forward, a museum catalog in his hand. “This is what it looks like,” he said, showing them what a picture of what appeared to be overlapping wheels of various colors.

“Very nice,” said Rogers. Mincher didn’t trust himself to say anything.

Rogers examined the frame of the missing painting. “The thief or thieves cut out the canvas using a razor or similar sharp object,” she said. “I believe the same technique has been used in other art thefts.”

“Nothing else was taken,” said Horan. He added, “We have two galleries on the first floor. Our Egyptian collection is housed on the second floor, but that’s closed for renovation. All of the administrative offices are on the third floor.”

“Who discovered the painting was missing?” Mincher inquired.

“I did,” said Edward Campbell, stepping forward. “I came in a little after eight o’clock, wet from the rain, and went to my office to take off my coat and hat. When I came downstairs I found the night alarm in the off position, which of course is against our rules.”

“Which of you left last yesterday?” asked Rogers, turning to the guards.

“I did,” Kerr admitted. “It was my turn to close up.”

Horan explained, “The last guard to leave makes a final walk-through, and then turns on the night alarm behind the front counter. He has 30 seconds to lock the front door behind him before the alarm sounds. The first person here in the morning has 30 seconds to turn it off.”

“Maybe you forgot to activate the alarm, or to check to see if anything was missing,” snarled Fred Shepherd to Martin Kerr. “Maybe you were playing with that darn cellphone of yours, like I seen you do.”

“That’s not true,” Kerr answered. “Well, I do sometimes check my phone, but only when there are no visitors. I did walk around to see that everything was all right, and I did turn on the alarm,” he added, a little uncertainly.

“How long have each of you worked here?” Mincher asked the guards.

“Eight years for me, less than four months for him,” replied Shepherd, referring to Kerr.

“Less than four months, and he’s already asked twice for a raise,” Campbell put in.

Barbara Payne whispered something to Horan, who told the officers, “Someone contacted our website to say they want \$150,000 in Bitcoin deposited in a Swiss bank account, or we’ll never see Kaleidoscope again.”

“I don’t think you’ll need to pay the ransom,” said Rogers. What did she say that?

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(Solution: Rogers recalled that Campbell said he had gone to his third floor office to take off his wet hat and coat before going downstairs to turn off the alarm, actions that would have taken far more than 30 seconds to complete. Campbell, a lottery addict, later confessed to having entered the building several hours earlier, turned off the alarm and stolen the painting, hoping to throw suspicion on the newest employee, Martin Kerr.)