



THOMAS SWAN

THE
CÉZANNE
CHASE

An Inspector
Jack Oxby Novel

"A surprisingly
sexy and dirty
world where nothing
is sacred—least
of all, art."

—*New York Times*

*The
Cézanne
Chase*

Thomas Swan



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Praise for the acclaimed art crime mysteries by Tom Swan featuring Inspector Jack Oxby

The Cézanne Chase

“A surprisingly sexy and dirty world where nothing is sacred—least of all, art....The beauty of *The Cézanne Chase* is in the technical details about fine art—great tips on conserving it, packing and shipping it, buying and selling it, and destroying it forever.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“A virtual primer of the art world...*The Cézanne Chase* is also a marvelous travelogue that transports readers to dazzling museums and art capitals of the world. The dialogue and descriptive portraits of cities are first rate...It offers plenty of action and a plot that is terrifyingly plausible. And we won't give away any more than that.”

—*The Bergen (NJ) Record*

“Read the first few pages of *The Cézanne Chase* and you know you've discovered a very good thing indeed. A thrilling novel of the unexpected, an intriguing, behind-the-scenes look at the high-risk world of international art.”

—*Book-of-the-Month-Club News*

“Readers will be drawn to the intrigue...steady action, looming suspense, and an appealing subject.”

—*Library Journal*

“Swan has created a page-turner...The stakes are high and so is the suspense...With quick, sure strokes our author leads us to a violent climax, [keeping] the action moving like the bursts from a AK-47.”

—Bill Sweeney, *KSRO Radio (CA)*

The Final Fabergé

“Oxby is charming and disarmingly intelligent.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

The Da Vinci Deception

“A grand old caper yarn of classic design, filled with tantalizing details of forging techniques and facts about da Vinci's work....*The Da Vinci Deception* isn't just good, it's terrific.”

—*Book-of-the-Month Club News*

Books by Thomas Swan

The Da Vinci Deception

The Cézanne Chase

The Final Fabergé

Dedication

*For Barbara.
And the grandchildren:
Sara, Michael, Josh, Cameron, Casey, and Dylan.
And as always, Steve.*

Chapter 1

St. Petersburg, for all its frayed edges, has remained the jewel among Russian cities. The city and its people survived revolution, a nine-hundred-day siege in World War II in which nearly a million died, then a kind of benign neglect brought on by decades of Communist rule. It is a city of islands and bridges, built on the banks of the twisting Neva river. In spite of all, St. Petersburg's important institutions have survived, as has the spirit of the natives, who affectionately call their city "Pete" as they did during the years when it was known as Petrograd or Leningrad. In spite of decades of adversity, the university, the libraries, and the museums have held together with remarkable tenacity.

One museum in particular was enjoying a renaissance: the Hermitage. Catherine the Great decreed that the magnificent salons of the Winter Palace be made into its galleries. From Peter the Great until the Revolution, agents of the czars and empresses scoured the world for great art, until the royal collection bulged to eight thousand paintings and five times that many drawings. Four buildings compose the Hermitage, a giant sprawl in which there are a thousand rooms and 117 staircases.

It was early morning. Pigeons scavenged on the broad sidewalks then separated as a young woman walked with a purposeful stride to a door leading to the administration offices. Ilena Petrov came early to the museum every morning. It was this show of dedication and her recent completion of studies in European art history that had helped bring recognition and a recent promotion. She had been appointed assistant curator for European art and sculpture of the period 1850 to 1917, a position of immense responsibility. The collection of paintings in the Hermitage from those years was among the world's largest and, without question, of incalculable value.

Ilena carried a heavy cloth sack, in which were books and notepads and a thermos filled with strong tea as well as a thick slice of plushka, a sugary cinnamon blackbread baked by her grandmother. From a window in the reception office she could see the rising sun that reflected brilliantly off the spire above Peter and Paul Cathedral in the historic fortress across the river.

Each day, before the rest of the staff arrived, Ilena would go out into the long corridors and galleries, where she was alone in the silence. She went first to the Malachite Room to touch the carved figure of a cupid that had become her personal talisman then climbed the great Ambassador Staircase up to the galleries that held her favorite artists. In room 318 were, among others, the works of Pissarro and Cézanne. Ilena had united their art by placing their paintings on the same wall, aware that the two men had been close friends and aware, too, that Paul Cézanne had not forged many long-lasting relationships.

Two windows in the small gallery room looked out to Palace Square and the Alexander Column, the pink granite of the ninety-foot high monument catching the early sun. Ilena entered slowly, her eyes taking in first a landscape by Corot then two village scenes by Pissarro. Beyond the doorway were two Cézannes. First was a landscape; next to it was a portrait of the artist titled *Self-Portrait in a Beret*.

She approached the portrait then was suddenly jolted by an awareness that something was terribly wrong. Drawing closer, she saw that Cézanne's face seemed to have been painted over. Now she could touch it and saw that the paint where the head had been was a jellied mass, sagging away from the canvas. It was the canvas she had seen, bleached to a ghostly white.

Ilena screamed, a long, pitiful cry. She brought her hands to her face and stared in shock and disbelief. For minutes she stood, trembling, as if rooted to the spot in front of the canvas. Anger

overwhelmed her. Who could be so cruel, she asked aloud. She backed away then turned and ran. Not until she had reached the head of the magnificent stairway did she stop. She sat on the top step, her body bent forward, her head lowered and resting on arms crossed over her legs.

She began to weep.

Chapter 2

Christie's salesrooms were on the second floor of the building on New York's Park Avenue and 59th Street, space the two-hundred-year-old London-based auction house had occupied since coming to America in 1977. Christie's, like its fierce competitor, Sotheby's, was one of those places where an obscure painting could be given the imprimatur of greatness by dint of someone paying many times more than it was worth, and where art-world insiders set prices by helping to establish the reserve, the confidential minimum price agreed upon by the seller and the auction house below which the painting will not be sold. The presale price is higher than the reserve and is generally publicized in advance of the auction so that the auction house can encourage the bidders to accept the presale price as an arbitrary minimum.

The auction at hand had been widely advertised in the media and through special mailings to known buyers and had attracted an overflow of the serious and curious. They were jammed into the square high-ceilinged main gallery. An adjacent, smaller gallery was also filled to standing room an hour before the auction began. Serious bidders were in view of the auctioneer, but others, who wanted anonymity, were represented by a surrogate or a member of Christie's staff, several of whom were positioned at a bank of telephones at the side of the auctioneer's platform. Some of the more than two dozen reporters were more interested in the well-heeled socialites and occasional show-business celebrities who attended auctions for the excitement, as well as to occasionally add to the collections.

Interest was focused on the Jacopo da Pontormo portrait titled *Halberdier*, a painting of a young man holding a staff and wearing a sword. The portrait until six months before the auction had been prominently displayed in New York's Frick Collection where it had been for twenty years. It was always believed that Chauncey Devereau Stillman had placed it there on a permanent loan. The surprise decision to enter the painting at auction was a sad development for the Frick and a happy one for the Stillman Foundation.

Jacopo da Pontormo was a reclusive painter who, so evidence indicated, had studied under Leonardo Da Vinci in the early years of the sixteenth century. Pontormo's reputation, in need of a boost, had received one when the young man in the portrait was identified as Cosimo de' Medici of Florence, a speculation that roused heated controversy among art historians and let loose a flood of contradictory stories in the press. The controversy proved helpful to Christie's, which had mounted an energetic promotion to lift the presale price to \$20 million.

Standing room was five deep, and the air in the gallery had grown stale and hot. In what had become his accustomed position, Edwin Redpath Llewellyn sat at the end of a row at the front of the gallery, squeezed against the wall and fanning himself with a bidder's paddle ...paddle number eighteen.

Llewellyn attended auctions with the enthusiasm of a low-handicap golfer at St. Andrews. He knew how to bid, rarely making the mistake of entering the competition when he was unfamiliar with the artist, the painting, or those he was bidding against. He was dressed in his go-to-auction uniform: gray trousers, blue-and-white striped shirt, club tie, and a pocket handkerchief tucked into the breast pocket of his elegantly frayed blue blazer. In one hand was a catalogue that detailed every item in the evening's sale, and cupped in the other was a pair of opera glasses. Llewellyn was an authentic connoisseur who understood fine art and could articulate his preferences and his prejudices. He was

also rich, divorced, and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. After making several preliminary notes, he settled to watch the room fill, paying attention to the overflowing crowd as they took positions along the sides and across the back of the room. Llewellyn recognized some of the faces: Dupres, the wily one from Paris; Elton, the London barracuda; Takahawo of Tokyo.

His small but powerful binoculars slowly panned across the rows of standees and stopped at a tall woman wearing a strand of pearls and a brightly colored handkerchief placed carefully in the breast pocket of her tailored, pale gray suit. He caught her leafing through her catalogue, and then, suddenly she raised her eyes and looked directly toward him. The binoculars had brought her so close it seemed Llewellyn could touch her. Blonde hair was combed back under a wide-brimmed hat that framed her face, and the bright lights made her pale skin seem nearly white and created soft shadows beneath her prominent cheekbones. The tip of her tongue moistened her lips, which parted into a smile, and at that moment he felt as if he had been caught peeking. He reacted with an embarrassed grin, then he extended two fingers upward and made a sort of friendly wave.

The auction began. Eighteen unimportant paintings were put up in the first twenty minutes, each one selling quickly as the auctioneer repeated the bids in a singsong chant accompanied by “do I hear more,” then finally announcing the paddle number of the winning bidder. Then came the Pontormo. Llewellyn served on the museum’s acquisition committee and joined the majority who opposed an effort to acquire the large portrait. His reason was arbitrary. Old Masters bored him, and the young man in the portrait looked inbred and arrogant; and besides, it didn’t matter how he or his committee felt about the Pontormo. Gerald Bontannomo, Director of the Metropolitan, listened to but rarely accepted advice on major acquisitions.

The bidding opened at \$20 million. Even to Llewellyn, who showed a practiced nonchalance toward money, it was a vastly unreasonable sum. Within two minutes it was more unreasonable. By twenty-eight million there were three bidders, at thirty, there were two. The Getty Museum’s representative was in the room competing against an anonymous telephone bidder.

Quickly the bidding rose to thirty-five million. At \$35.2 million it was over, and the Getty Museum was the new owner; *Halberdier* would remain in the United States. A dozen more unimportant works were hammered down, including an inferior painting by Pieter Brueghel that mildly interested Llewellyn as a purely speculative play. It was a game. If he could sneak by with a low bid, he would take it, wait a year and then sell it. He stopped raising his paddle when the bidding reached and stopped at a half million dollars, and he heard the auctioneer quietly call pass. It was a no-sale, the painting had been “bought-in.” Obvious to Llewellyn and a few others, the reserve had not been met, and Christie’s had entered and accepted its own bid. How much didn’t matter, as no money would change trade hands. The gallery thinned to a hard core of dealers and agents looking for a bargain.

Llewellyn remained seated while he made notes in the catalogue. This had become a ritual, and he had accumulated several dozen catalogues filled with prices paid for important works, along with his observations on the bidding strategies of the top dealers. When he got to his feet there were but a half dozen lingerers, including the blonde in the gray suit.

As he walked near her she said with a slightly accented voice, “I’m sorry you did not get the Brueghel.”

Llewellyn stopped. He stood an even six feet, yet she was about as tall as he. “I was looking for a bargain. It sold two years ago for nearly as much.”

“Are you Mr. Llewellyn?” she asked.

“I am. But I don’t believe I know your name.” He said it in a way that suggested it was possible

they had met before.

“I am Astrid Haraldsen, and I apologize if I seem to be—” she made a gesture as if searching for the right word—“if I am being forward.”

Llewellyn smiled—a warm smile emphasized by brown eyes that were happy, too. He looked distinguished in his blue blazer and shock of gray hair. He was deeply tanned, the result of a week with old friends on Jupiter Island in Florida.

“Do you come to these things regularly?”

“I am beginning to. But mostly I go to the smaller auctions.”

“Do you collect?” Llewellyn was enjoying the fact he had been picked from the crowd.

“It’s too expensive.” She looked down to the catalogue she had been rolling and unrolling. “I am a designer. Of interiors,” she added quickly. “I look for special items for my clients.”

“There wasn’t much here today. Awful stuff, I thought.” Then he said, “The Doyle Galleries would have better choices for you.”

Her eyes came up to his for the first time. “I wanted to meet you.”

“How nice.” He smiled a little shyly. “How very nice.”

For the instant when she looked directly into his eyes he felt as if she possessed an inner power, nearly hypnotic influence. Certainly he felt sexually aroused. But her eyes strayed off and those feelings subsided.

Llewellyn guessed correctly. She was Scandinavian. Probably resolute, too. “Do you have a card?”

In fact she had several cards in her hand, ready to pass them on if asked. “I have a presentation of my work. I would like to show it to you.”

He looked at her card on which she had written the Westbury Hotel. “I like your address, we’re practically neighbors.”

She smiled, “I’m looking for a sublease. The hotel is very expensive.”

By this time Llewellyn had made a more complete evaluation of Astrid Haraldsen. Her suit was silk, probably a Giorgio Armani; the salmon-colored blouse had expensive detailing; and her shoes were in the three-hundred-dollar range. She used makeup effectively, highlighting her cheeks and making her lips appear fuller. She hadn’t fussed with eye liner and mascara, preferring only to accentuate the full brows that arched over the pale blue eyes he had noted when he first trained his binoculars on her. She had a good nose, which meant it wasn’t a bad one, and probably in Llewellyn’s mind not her best feature. Her perfume, Shalimar he thought, was one he liked.

After an awkward pause, he said, “Now that we’ve met, what can I do for you?”

“Help me to get an assignment. Perhaps a friend, or your own apartment.” She hesitated briefly then said quietly, “Because I am new and need references, I will not charge a fee.”

She wasn’t wasting any time, he thought. “I have friends at McMillan. You might find an opening there.”

“I have worked with the finest designers in Norway and Denmark. And a very good one in London.”

“Call me in a week,” he said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“I won’t disappoint you.” She turned her eyes to meet his. “Thank you.”

It happened again. In that brief exchange, Llewellyn felt that she had exuded some sort of extraordinary energy. She turned and walked toward the door leading out from the auction room. He watched her, his smile still in place. He added great legs to the inventory he had made.

At the door Llewellyn was met by a short man blessed with a marvelous voice and bright eyes that lit up a small, round face. “Who’s your friend?”

Llewellyn showed one of Astrid’s cards. “New York’s newest interior decorator drumming up

business. Interested?"

"She's too tall. We'd never see eye to eye." The short man laughed. He was Harvey Duncan, director of Christie's Impressionist and Modern Paintings Department. "What did you think of the Pontoromo?"

"Not a great deal," Llewellyn replied. "Not worth what the Getty paid."

"Agreed," Harvey said. The brightness in his eyes suddenly faded. "I've been waiting to give you a piece of bad news we received from our Moscow agent this morning. The media's not in on it yet." He moved closer to Llewellyn. "The Cézanne self-portrait in the Hermitage was destroyed."

"Destroyed!" Llewellyn said incredulously. "How in God's name did that happen?"

"Not sure." Harvey shrugged. "We haven't received a complete report, but we think it was sprayed with some kind of acid. Whatever it was, the painting's a complete ruin."

Llewellyn stared past Harvey Duncan to the small stage, where minutes earlier a painting, to his mind of no great consequence, had sold for \$35 million. "Any idea who did it?"

Harvey shook his small, round head. "No. But I suggest you tighten up security around the collection of yours. You act as if all you had were a few old copies of the *National Geographic*."

In fact, Llewellyn had inherited a collection of paintings. The star among them was a self-portrait by Cézanne. His grandfather had bought it from Cézanne's agent Ambroise Vollard in 1903. The others were the work of run-of-the-mill artists and together were worth a fraction of the value of the Cézanne. He had acquired other paintings, each one valuable, all by Americans except one by Marc Fortin, a Canadian.

"No one gets past Fraser, and I've got triple locks everywhere," Llewellyn said triumphantly. "And then there's Clyde." Fraser was a combination handy man, cook, and family retainer, and Clyde was a Norwich terrier with a marked proclivity for barking at the slightest provocation.

Harvey replied wryly, "Yes, of course, there's Clyde." He looked up at Llewellyn, his eyes not showing deep concern. "We're friends, Lew, and I don't want anything to happen to you or your painting, but THOMAS SWAN Rembrandt's *Night Watch* a few weeks ago. Fast work and a layer of lacquer saved it."

Harvey gave Llewellyn a firm, yet friendly pat on the shoulder. "They're mad, some of them. And people get hurt."

Chapter 3

On Tuesday the 13, shortly before noon in the National Gallery off London's Trafalgar Square, the miniature pagers carried by security personnel emitted an irregular beeping sound that meant an emergency condition existed and commanded all guards to report immediately to their duty stations.

In the corridor off Gallery A an attaché case had burned furiously, throwing off thick, black smoke. It had caused hysteria among the visitors, particularly the crowds in rooms where the smoke had reached. The beeping of the pagers had been joined by fire alarms sounding throughout the great structure. Foam was needed, and a crew arrived to smother the stubborn blaze and put out a row of fans to blow away the dirty, foul-smelling air. Though nearly all of it had been reduced to black ash, the attaché case was surprisingly recognizable, its metal lock and hinges intact. Someone had scooped the remains into a plastic bag.

The entire floor had been evacuated as a team from the security department began the investigation, and the curatorial staff made a room-by-room assessment of the damage. The smoke had been cleared within an hour, and the only apparent damage had been a burned scar on the wood flooring and a fine layer of soot that settled over several nearby pictures. The incident was put down as one of those bizarre and troubling affairs and most likely an accident caused by someone too embarrassed to explain what happened.

By two o'clock the gallery had been reopened, and soon after, at 2:15 according to the records, a young Australian couple had informed the guard in Gallery A that something was wrong with one of the paintings, a small Cézanne self-portrait, one that the artist had painted of himself without a hat, looking dead-even at the viewer. The paint had begun to dissolve, and splotches of foam the size of large coins were spotted over the canvas. Tiny wisps of what seemed to be smoke escaped from the foam, and a sharp, sour odor surrounded the picture. The painting had been rushed to the conservator's laboratory where it had been bathed in mineral oil and the action of the acid halted. But all efforts to save it were too late.

There were no clues, nor had there been a warning or letter or even an irrational phone call. Bottom line: No one claimed responsibility, yet it was obvious that the smoking briefcase had been a diversion and had quite admirably served the purpose of emptying the gallery of visitors and security personnel.

The incident had been reported in the morning tabloids, and one speculative writer with the *Sunday Sport* had gratuitously given the destroyed painting a value of \$29 million. Another suggested an investigation into the Gallery's security system was long overdue. The *Guardian's* headline escalated the affair to the level of a national disgrace, and an editorial in the *Times* concluded, "... there is much to explain concerning the woefully inadequate, if not complete absence of, proper surveillance and security. We have lost a national treasure."

On the following morning, the director of the National Gallery, Sir Anthony Canfield, K.B.E., convened a meeting at ten o'clock. In attendance were three chief supervising security managers; the guard assigned to Gallery A; plus guards from the adjacent galleries, corridors, and all entrances to the building. A Miss Cook took verbatim notes. Also present was Elliott Heston, Commander of Operations Command Group—OCG—under which was the Arts and Antiques Squad, Metropolitan Police. The director of security, a curiously private man named Evan Tippett, was attending a conference in California. He had been reached by phone and given preliminary details of the

painting's destruction. He had asked several questions, then directed that a full report be on his desk when he returned.

Elliott Heston focused on what he considered to be the most intriguing question: "Why a Cézanne self-portrait? Any thoughts on that?"

"I haven't a clue," Canfield replied, "but whoever's up to this horrible mischief has a way to go. Lionello Venturi's catalogue of Cézanne's paintings shows that he completed twenty-five self-portraits. Not the life's work of a man lacking ego, would you say?"

Heston ignored the question. "Any other portraits in England?"

"There is one. Owned privately by some upstart collector south of London ... uh, man named Pinkster." He handed a sheet of paper to Heston. "This inventory of the self-portraits is the best we've got, but it's incomplete and woefully out of date because at least two of the portraits have been sold and we don't have a record of the new owners. And two more are on loan, and we're not certain where either one is at this point. There's a separate report that describes a self-portrait owned by an American named Llewellyn. It's a bit of a mystery because the public has never really seen it. We've got a black-and-white photograph and not a very good one. But its provenance is flawless. Add that to the others and there are—correction—were—twenty-six in all."

Heston stood, shook hands around the table, then eased himself out of the meeting room. He went on to his car, walking with long, deliberate strides. He was tall and angular, with the build of a distance runner, which he had been during his school years. His hair was unruly and would likely fall across his forehead. His face, like his body, was long and narrow, and it had the inquiring look of a policeman, and he wore gold-rimmed glasses selected by his wife, who insisted they gave him a scholarly air. His driver saw him taking the steps two at a time and pulled the car forward.

"The Abbey," Heston said, getting in beside the driver.

The car maneuvered around Trafalgar Square onto Whitehall, past the government buildings on Victoria Street. Heston entered Westminster Abbey by the west door where he was confronted by a half-dozen tour groups. He walked along the north aisle to the transept and stopped between the choir and the high altar. An organ played, accompanied by a brass trio. Unusual, he thought; perhaps a rehearsal for a special event. Then he turned toward the choir, where, as he suspected, seated in the first row was a man keenly involved with whatever he was writing in a notebook perched on his lap. Heston circled around a group of tourists, came up behind the man, and leaned down and said in a heavy accent, "You got a special pass to sit in there?"

Without looking up, the man replied, "That's an obscenely terrible accent, Elliott."

Heston smiled and sat next to the man, whose attention remained fixed on his notes. Heston had come to the Abbey numerous other times to find his man in the choir or, if the crowds were unusual, in the thick, in the small and quiet Chapel of St. Faith. Heston had attended the memorial service for a popular assistant commissioner of New Scotland Yard and another time had witnessed an East End service at the urging of his wife. Otherwise he rarely visited the great abbey and knew it mainly as a tourist attraction or as a spiritual hideaway for the Arts and Antiques Squad's Detective Chief Inspector Jack LaConte Oxby.

"They know me, but they might ask you to step down from the choir," Oxby said matter-of-factly.

"Then use your considerable influence, as I rather like the view from here. What's the music about?"

Oxby said, "It's for old King Ed the Confessor. It's his nine hundredth birthday."

"Has it been that long? It hardly seems it." Heston hoped to raise a smile from his obstinate independent companion.

Oxby turned. No denying he was a small man, though it seemed there was a largeness to him because even as he sat, his eyes were nearly level with Heston, who stood several inches taller. When he shifted his weight or moved his arms, it was apparent that he had a coordinated and well-conditioned body. His nose was long but somehow it did not dominate his face. No, the real fascinations about Oxby were his eyes and his voice. The eyes were perfect; a blue-gray that penetrated with curiosity or warmth, humor or intense determination as the circumstance required, and his rich baritone had been trained for both singing and acting. He spoke French with the ease of a Parisian and Italian with the singsong fluency of a very proper Florentine. Oxby had also mastered the infinite ranges of accents and idiosyncratic slang of the language spoken throughout the British Isles. He could identify and mimic a solicitor from Glasgow as well as a Liverpoolian stevedore.

Heston's smile faded. "Something's come up, and you've got a new case."

Oxby widened his eyes in acknowledgment and to signify he wanted to hear more.

Heston placed a copy of *The Sun* on top of Oxby's notebook and paused while Oxby stared at the screaming headline and a photograph of the portrait taken before its destruction. "I know you're just back from the country, but don't you ever read a newspaper?"

"Certainly not that one," Oxby said disdainfully, his eyes focused on the front page of the newspaper. "I'd rather you told me what happened."

Heston took the paper back and swacked it across his thigh. "There's not much to tell. Whoever did it created a diversion, then sprayed the painting with some kind of exotic acid or solvent, then disappeared." He filled in with the sparse details that he had picked up earlier.

Oxby turned to a clean sheet in his notebook. "What's a Cézanne self-portrait worth these days?"

Heston laughed. "A ridiculous amount, I'm sure. I don't buy them, you know. Depending on size and which one, I suppose ten million ...fifteen? More?"

"Much more," Oxby said firmly. "And perhaps a little more now that one has been permanently removed."

"I thought of that. An interesting speculation."

"Do we know how many self-portraits there are?"

"Canfield told me that Cézanne painted twenty-six in all. We still have one in England, owned by a Mr. Alan Pinkster who I believe you know."

"I've met him, twice perhaps. Lot of money, bit of a pain."

"One of the twenty-six is owned by a New Yorker. Also wealthy. It came into his family a few generations ago, and it's still there. We don't know much about it."

A man dressed in plain cleric's clothes came up to Oxby and touched his arm. "I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Oxby. The choir's coming along for their rehearsal any minute now." The man spoke with a rich cockney accent.

"It's all right, Teddy. We're moving on." Oxby motioned for Heston to step down from the choir. "Now there's authentic cockney," he said with admiration. "Teddy's fifth-generation East End." Heston led Heston through the accumulating crowd.

Heston's driver had pulled beside a row of taxis. Oxby said, "I'll walk. Officially, I'm still on holiday."

"It's important that we talk, Jack. There'll be hell to pay if we don't nip this thing right off. There's a call in from the director and—"

"We'll talk," Oxby said, moving away. "You know, Elliott, I'd be mad as hell if this were happening to a Manet or a Degas." He shook his head slowly. "Cézanne isn't one of my favorites." Then he brightened. "Cheerio... see you in your office." Instantly he was absorbed by the crowd.

converging on the great cathedral.

He crossed Victoria Street and continued to Broadway, covering the half mile in six minutes and arriving at New Scotland Yard ahead of Heston. He was surprised to find two of his assistants waiting, both wearing worried expressions. Detective Sergeants Ann Browley and Jimmy Murratore were young, bright, and ambitious. Ann was a bit of an anomaly, as her family was old money with strong links to London society, while Jimmy's Italian-born parents worked long and diligently to make their living from their bakery shop in Brixton.

"Something's gone wrong," Oxby guessed.

"Very wrong," Jimmy said. "We just got word that the self-portrait in Alan Pinkster's collection was destroyed."

Oxby's eyes narrowed. "Acid, or whatever they're using?"

"I'm afraid yes," Ann replied. "Pinkster himself called, mad as a hornet and as much as saying it was our fault."

"And him with a security system good enough for the queen's jewels," Jimmy said.

Heston arrived, frustration clearly showing. "Bloody damned press will have us responsible... see, I'm not right." He went into his office, the others following. "When did it happen?"

"Probably during the night," Oxby said. "Pinkster's collection isn't open to the public except by special arrangement."

"A group from the Danish embassy was on a tour, eighteen in all," Ann said. "They were gone from the gallery before five, and apparently everything was in good order when they went off."

Heston said, "Jack, you're on this now. Tell me what you need, but get something sorted out as quickly as you can."

Oxby instructed Ann to assemble a file on Pinkster and his collection. To Heston he said, "I want you to call Nigel Jones." Then he went to his office and collected a notebook and palm-sized tape recorder. At that precise moment he picked up his phone to order a car, it rang. A voice said, "Detective Tobias is in the lobby. Shall I send him up?"

Oxby sighed heavily and said softly to himself, "Alex old friend, you promised that you'd give me a fair warning." He called Ann into his office and thrust the phone at her. "Alex Tobias is at the reception desk. Get him on the phone and tell him I've got to run off but say that I'll stop to see him on my way to the garage. And Ann, see if you can have a decent car waiting for me."

"Alex, you scoundrel," Oxby said, reaching the reception desk, "You promised to call ahead of me on time."

"Don't lecture me, young Jack, I've been taking orders from every member of my family since you left New York, and I don't need any more of it from you." His scowl turned to a smile and he extended his hand.

Alexander Tobias was on the comfortably portly side, with a thick, fluffy crop of gray hair and heavy-rimmed glasses set on a slightly bent nose. He wore a mustache, a nearly solid thatch of hair, and had a florid face that showed equal amounts of curiosity and compassion. Tobias had had a successful career and was considered a superb detective. But he had never mastered the nuances of police politics, which meant that while he had edged into the top ranks of the New York City police department at age fifty-five, he had been passed over for appointment to a deputy commissioner's spot. At fifty-eight, and at his request, he took the rank of sergeant detective and was reassigned to the major case squad, where he investigated art forgeries and thefts. He and Oxby had first paired up on

Rembrandt stolen from a London gallery and traced to New York. The case began a professional relationship that had grown into a deep friendship.

“We flew in from Dublin a day ahead because once our son was married there wasn’t any purpose staying around, and Helen was anxious to visit her sister, who couldn’t come to the wedding because of some damned bone problem.”

“So they took away all the telephones in Dublin and in the airport, and you want me to believe you couldn’t call me,” Oxby said, chiding his friend.

“Believe what you damned want to believe. Your sergeant said you’ve got to run down to Surrey, something about another Cézanne?”

“Want to come with me?” Oxby asked. “They’ve destroyed three of them now, and it’s damned serious destruction that’s going on.”

“I can’t, Jack. I’ve got to meet Helen, and we leave tomorrow. It’s why I took a chance I’d catch you this morning.”

“I’d like for you to come,” Oxby said.

Tobias shook his head. “And I’d like to go.”

Oxby was assigned a standard Ford Escort with a black exterior, gray interior, both in need of thorough scrubbing. He drove south from London over the Vauxhall Bridge, through Kensington, then on the A23 to Surrey.

Oxby and Pinkster had met at a furniture auction, but it was doubtful the wealthy art collector would remember their brief encounter. Oxby remembered. Alan Pinkster was thirty-eight years old, tenuously married to his third wife, and the father of one daughter, now ten, who lived with her mother. Wife number one, on whom Pinkster had settled a small fortune, had recently been in the news about her own remarriage. Although Pinkster had been labeled a billionaire in New York, the financial community in London wondered how much of his assets were offset by deals and heavy borrowing. Having learned the art of arbitrage from a trio of infamous Wall Streeters with whom he had worked for three years, Pinkster knew that a small percentage of a massive amount of money was a surefire route to great wealth. An expert in junk bonds, he had made megamillion-dollar leveraged buyouts by the time he was twenty-seven. There was little doubt on either side of the Atlantic that Alan Pinkster knew how to make and spend money on a grand scale.

His home was near Bletchingly, a country town in the heart of Surrey. Over several years, aided consecutively by his three wives and twice as many interior designers, he had put an old manor house through an arduous renovation. Pinkster had also built a modest-sized gallery to house his surprisingly impressive art collection.

Waiting beside an elongated Mercedes parked next to the gallery was a clearly agitated Alan Pinkster.

“Are you from the police?” he asked abruptly.

Oxby was equally abrupt. “Yes,” and offered his card.

Pinkster had an intensity about him: firm set mouth, and dark eyes that fixed on whomever he was talking with. His hair was brown and groomed, and his body was fit and covered with expensive clothes.

“I want the bloody bastard that did this to pay an awful price,” Pinkster said angrily.

“What price had you in mind?” Oxby asked.

“I’m serious. I want whoever did it to be hurt. Hurt painfully, then put away for a good long time.”

“That would indeed be a high price,” Oxby agreed.

~~Pinkster led the way into the gallery. There had been a gala celebration when Alan Pinkster officially opened his gallery two years earlier. A grand affair, by all accounts, replete with tents and sculpted ice and buffet tables lined with food and fine wines. CNN televised it, and the BBC put it on the news. It had been another attempt mounted on a monumental scale for Pinkster to crash into London society.~~

The basement of the gallery was half display, the other half given over to restoration and repair. On a large table under bright lights was the self-portrait. A glance at the painting proved to Oxby that its condition was even more grotesque than he had imagined. The face of the artist was discernible but as if drawn by an insane hand. An ear had come loose from where it belonged and was about where the nose should be. The mouth was a gaping red hole. The eyes had slid into the blackness of Cézanne's beard. Oxby's revulsion was as much over the painting's hideous distortion as the cruel fact that the great painting had been senselessly destroyed.

Oxby broke the silence. “When did you learn about this?”

“First thing this morning.”

“Can you be more specific?”

Oxby looked inquiringly at the small group huddled near the door. Here was the gallery's curatorial staff, competent by all accounts. A young man spoke up.

“Eight o'clock. I was the first to spot it. Usually Mr. Boggs is here before eight, but he hasn't shown all day.” Boggs was Clarence Boggs, formerly the senior curator of the Wallace Collection in London and known to be conscientious and loyal.

“Eight this morning is when you discovered it,” Oxby said. “But not when someone poured acid on it.”

Pinkster was impatient, “It was perfectly fine late yesterday, and this morning—”

“I'd like to meet with Boggs,” Oxby said.

“And so would I,” Pinkster said irritably. “Where in God's name is he?” He aimed his question at the three men and two women who constituted the group by the door.

The same young man spoke again and said that Boggs seemed upset over a phone call he had received the previous afternoon.

“When was that?” Oxby asked.

“Just as the Danish group was leaving.”

“And what happened?”

“He went off. Put on that old hat he always wears, took his stick, and went off.”

“What kind of stick?”

“Just a walking stick. Mr. Boggs is a walker. Says it helps get his mind sorted out when there's a problem.” The young man added, “His daughter's had problems lately.”

Oxby approached the small group. “I would like to have a brief chat with each one of you before you leave. As it is important that you tell me what you have observed in the last twenty-four hours, I ask that you don't talk among yourselves about the painting or speculate as to what might have happened yesterday.”

They looked at each other, shrugged, and began to make a silent exit from the room. When they were gone, Oxby walked to the table and stood opposite from Pinkster, the destroyed portrait between them.

“How much insurance do you carry?” Oxby asked conversationally.

“I don't know. My collection has been assessed in astronomical numbers, but it would hardly fetter

those figures, even in a good auction.”

“I recall that you paid a little over three million pounds for the Cézanne landscape. You’ve owned for five years, and it would probably bring seven, perhaps eight million today.” Oxby’s memory was to the art world what a conductor’s mastery of a symphonic score was to music. He could match painting to purchaser, to price, to date of sale and, finally, to the auction house. “I also recall that you came across the self-portrait in a business transaction.”

“It was one of the few unencumbered assets owned by the Weissmann brothers. We bought the brokerage company shortly after the drop in stock prices in 1987. Their business had fallen to trickle, and they were getting old, both in their eighties. George Weissmann died in December of that year, and Louis had a stroke several years after that and has been in a wheelchair ever since.”

“Did you know they owned a Cézanne self-portrait?”

“It’s my business to know such things.”

“How much did you pay for their company?” Oxby didn’t expect an answer, and Pinkster didn’t disappoint him.

“It was a private transaction,” Pinkster replied stiffly. “The matter has no relevance to your investigation.”

“Perhaps not, for the present, at least.” Oxby gave notice that the issue was not dead.

“When do you plan to interrogate the staff?”

“Shortly,” Oxby replied. “But first I have one or two questions I hope you will answer.”

“Of course.” Pinkster crossed his arms over his chest, the dark eyes fixed intently on Oxby.

“Where did you spend yesterday?”

“In my London office. I had a brief lunch at the Connaught. Returned to Bletchingly at seven. We had guests for dinner.”

Oxby was amused that anyone could have a brief lunch at the Connaught.

“Have you received any phone calls or correspondence that have been out of the ordinary?”

Pinkster reflected for a moment, then shook his head. “Can’t say I have. But all that sort of thing is screened by my secretary.”

“Perhaps I’ll talk with her.”

Pinkster then abruptly ended the interview by turning away and walking off in the direction of his house. Oxby returned to the gallery. One by one he interviewed the staff, and once again the young man who had spoken up earlier was most anxious to share all he knew. He was slight, with blonde hair and soft features. His name was David Blaney. As he had with the others, Oxby exchanged small talk then informally eased into a conversation centered on the previous day.

“Had you any particular assignments to deal with yesterday?” Oxby asked.

“For some weeks now I’ve been preparing a brochure designed to show off Mr. Pinkster’s collection, as well as the building. It’s quite unique to work in a small museum that has all the challenges and problems of a large gallery. Yesterday we were photographing some of the statuary. We have a Rodin and one by Henry Moore, you know.”

Oxby was impressed and said so. “A group from the Danish embassy was here. You saw them?”

“Indeed. I had the photographer take candid shots of the group. I thought I’d work one into the brochure.” Then David shook his head. “But they were nearly all women.”

“Something wrong with women?” Oxby asked with a bemused smile.

“Nothing at all,” David replied defensively. “But I was hoping to use a picture that had both men and women in it.”

“Do you have the photographs?”

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