

THE MISSING SIXTH

A Novel

by

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The thieves were four in number. They were experienced and patient men. But for the piercing of clay-hardened soil by shovel and pickax, an asthmatic cough, and an urgent whisper, they worked in near silence.

In contrast, other night sounds played havoc with the imagination. The passage of a semi-trailer. The hoot of a great horned owl. The wind strumming the branches of ancient oaks. Each sound played upon the one before.

Ironically, the silence more than the sounds reminded Ari Paros of the last time he had violated an employer's "directive." A violation he had paid for with a bullet in the back.

Yet he was an hour away from a similar indiscretion. Why? They had been hired to steal a single painting and were being paid an exorbitant amount to do so. Still, walking away with but a single painting from a gallery filled with virtual masterpieces had never made sense to Paros. Then they had devised a plan; or, more accurately, one had been devised for them.

Paros disliked the idea of tunneling. Unfortunately, the entire estate, eight thousand acres, was surrounded by a stone wall ten feet and nearly six inches high. A million granite slabs, nine years, sixteen hundred men: Paros had read the history. But the problem was not the height. The problem was an intricate web of magnetic detectors and vibration contacts that coursed over and around the entire wall. Paros had never encountered anything like it.

The dry creek bed in which he now crouched exited the estate beneath a two-lane highway. Their tunnel ran beneath the concrete and steel wall that sealed the wash at the property line. It had taken two nights and nearly eleven hours of digging, but now Castille had broken through at last; Paros could see him at the mouth of the tunnel. A man of titanic stature, his beard a flaming red, his eyes as bright as a cat's, Castille was more than a friend; he was the one man in the world Ari Paros could truly say he trusted with his life.

Not so the others. Renucci, on the one hand, was a local recruit from back home. He was a loner and a cheat, and was thus controllable. Hulster, on the other hand, Paros didn't know from Adam, and that scared him. Hulster was a last-minute replacement. Their original fourth, another local, had taken ill two days before departure. Hulster was the *principal's* choice. Paros hadn't objected. His reasoning then was that you don't make waves with the guy who's handed you a once-in-a-lifetime job like this one. Now he regretted it.

Paros shimmied through the tunnel, crawled into the wash on the other side of the wall, and scrambled up the bank. The others followed.

They used binoculars in search of mounted horsemen and spotted two Land Rovers instead. They saw ostriches, as slender and elegant as dancers, shuffling among dozing cattle. A half mile to the east, the outline of a guard tower lurked on the horizon. To the west, a beam of white light played over the ground, projected from a helicopter as yet too far away to be worrisome. Overhead, a moon the shape and hue of an ivory tusk emerged from behind a wall of menacing storm clouds.

They hoisted backpacks. Castile shouldered two coils of nylon rope. As they followed the creek bed into the heart of the estate, they felt the first drops of the rain Paros had been dreading.

They paused every hundred yards, burrowed into the overgrowth of willows and cattails, and listened. Twice they heard the rumbling of a Land Rover. Once the random sweep of its floodlight filled the wash at their feet.

After a half mile Paros spotted on the north bank what remained of a yellowwood tree struck down by lightning three years before. The blackened stump was their first marker.

Alone, he scrambled on hands and knees up the side of the bank and glimpsed the Land Rover's fading red taillights as they disappeared into a grove of trees. The helicopter was by now far to the west; its white light scored the horizon. Paros could see horsemen, two of them, following the course of a man-made aqueduct a half mile away.

Once they were out of sight, Paros focused on the mansion and the grounds surrounding it. An open pasture ran from the wash fifty yards over to a split rail fence. Beyond the fence, a stand of oaks shadowed the estate's famous protea garden. A pond separated the garden from the horse stables to the west. A mile to the east a macadam road led from the estate entrance to a circular drive at the front of the house. The house, Paros knew, was built around a central courtyard. The gallery was on the second floor facing the courtyard.

He turned to the others and nodded.

In single file they shimmied up the bank and a moment later were on their feet and running flat out through the pasture, to the fence, and over. They fell in among the trees and froze.

Beyond the trees, on the far side of the garden, stood the timbered gazebo that was their second marker. Again they ran, in pairs this time.

One last burst took them from the gazebo, along a footpath of slate and flagstone, across a manicured esplanade to the house. They crowded together in a small, narrow postern that had once served as an entryway for a previous owner's help, but hadn't been used in two decades.

Marker number three was a turret twenty yards to the south.

Paros slung the first block and tackle over his shoulder. He slid along the wall to the turret and the sprawling vine that grew upon its face. The vine was supported by a heavy trellis. The trellis provided a ladder past three floors of darkened rooms to a wide, half-timbered gable where Paros attached the first pulley. From there, he hoisted himself onto a stone-tiled roof. Castille and Renucci followed. Hulster huddled at the rear of the postern and waited. He took the paper off a stick of chewing gum and tossed it purposefully on the ground.

Alone, Paros scrambled along a narrow roof ramp up the valley to the peak. He secured a length of rope to the base of an octagonal chimney, curled the other end around his waist, and eased himself down the far side of the roof. A fountain lit by blue and red spotlights dominated the courtyard below. Paros anchored the second block and tackle to a beam member the size of a railroad tie. He slid down the rope to a third-story balcony

and flattened himself against the wall. Castille, with Renucci stationed now on the roof, was less than a minute behind.

The gallery was a story below.

As planned, the French doors off this balcony were unlocked. Beyond was a bedroom, stuffy and stale from disuse.

Castille tossed aside a Persian rug and together they moved an empty dresser. Paros knelt down on a floor made of hardwood strips and, with the aid of a small flashlight, made his calculations. The gallery's alarm system was based on the uninterrupted flow of microwaves. The system's transmitter and receiver, according to the diagram they had been supplied with, were attached to the wall directly below. From his backpack, Castille drew a small nail pull, a tube of lubricant, and a razor-sharp carving knife.

He used the knife to expose the heads of nails holding down three of the floorboards. Paros used the nail pull and lubricant to coax out each nail, eighteen in all.

Beneath the floorboards was a thin layer of insulation. Beneath the insulation was a sheet of foil necessary to deflect the microwaves back into the gallery. The insulation Castille tossed aside. The foil he carefully stapled to the ceiling below. To the foil's surface he secured two rubberized suction cups. Around the cups Paros cut a circle fifteen inches in diameter.

Their diagram indicated that the bullhorn-shaped transmitter was attached to the wall twenty-six inches below the ceiling. An intrusion of any kind, they knew, would upset the standing waves of the system and thus trigger the alarm.

There were, however, two possible exits built into such a system: a dead spot directly above the transmitting antenna—doubtful in this instance—or a time-delay relay that allowed the intrusion signal to persist for three to four seconds before activating the alarm.

Paros readied the wire cutters. At his signal, Castille raised the suction cups, the foil, and the circular section of ceiling. Below, the coaxial cable connecting the transmitter to the receiver was clearly in view. The cutters broke through the plane of the ceiling. Three seconds in which to have the cable severed; Paros counted them off in his head.

It took less than two.

Outside once more, they scrambled down the rope to the second-floor balcony and another set of French doors. These too swung open at the touch of a hand.

The gallery beyond was cut into fourths by crossing photoelectric light beams, knee high and extremely sensitive. Yet only direct contact with either beam would initiate the alarm. Therefore, the likelihood of floor detectors presented a more immediate concern. For this, Castille took a mat knife from his pack and exposed the blade. Working from the doors inward, he began slicing through the carpet. A pattern became clear: the detectors were spaced diagonally along the floor at half-yard intervals. Disconnecting them all would not only be time-consuming but risky; instead, Castille simply relaid the carpet, section by section, and marked the location of each detector with a blue felt pen.

Paros followed. From the sitting area at the near end of the gallery he collected a leather-covered footstool and an inlaid cherrywood end table. These he placed on either side of the first light beam, forming a bridge of sorts, which Castille used to cross into the

second quadrant. Castille continued: dissect, detect, mark. While Paros waited, he took in the gallery piece by piece. A Chagall, a Picasso, a Matisse. He knew the names, but matching them to the works was beyond him. In Paros's eyes, art was a well-tuned Ferrari, a perfectly balanced Webley-Scott, a shapely woman.

He took the colored photograph from his shirt pocket and studied it. Four red circles and a black star marked their targets. When the paintings were firmly fixed in his mind, Paros struck a match to the photo, watched it erode into a crust of ash, and used his heel to crush the remains into the carpet. Then he followed Castille's grid over the bridge into the second quadrant.

He stopped in front of the first work, a pastel rendition of a ballerina. Patiently he explored the painting, the frame, and the mounting, front to back, top to bottom. The tilt switch was located beneath the frame's lower right corner. Paros used a magnetic file to deactivate the connection.

He lifted the painting off the wall. Castille was waiting beside him with a black nylon bag. An adhesive strip sealed the painting and its frame neatly inside.

Paros moved on. From the depths of a dark and haunting oil, the forlorn face of a young peasant woman sought his gaze. Paros ignored her. He concentrated instead on the tilt, this time finding it in the upper right-hand corner. When this painting too was free and sealed inside its own bag, Castille took both parcels back out to the balcony. There he slipped the eyelet at the top of each bag onto the S hook dangling from the end of the rope and gave a slight tug. Renucci was on the roof waiting. He hauled the paintings up, used the walk rope to work his way to the other side, and carefully lowered the parcels into Hulster's eager hands. When he returned, two more bags were awaiting him.

The fifth painting Paros carried out himself. Castille followed him up to the roof. They climbed the roof ramp to the crest and back down the other side, then carefully eased down the trellis to the ground and slipped along the wall back to the postern.

Ten seconds later, they heard the horseman. The staccato clap of hooves on stone, a snort—then dead silence. A shaft of high-intensity light spilled from the end of a flash; it panned the flowerbeds and walkways of the garden, reflected on the lattice frame of the gazebo, and followed the footpath across the esplanade. Just then, the storm broke. Overhead, lightning cut a jagged gash across the face of the clouds. The horse shied at the bellow of thunder that followed, and deep within the postern Paros saw the rider extinguish his light. At last, he loosened the reins and the horse moved on.

Two minutes later the four thieves parted. Castille and Hulster took possession of the fifth painting that destined for their employer, and set out for the creek bed. Paros and Renucci gathered up the other four, a parcel in each hand, and followed a cobblestone path west beyond the esplanade, around the silvery pond and a fenced training ring to the stables. They were soaked to the bone by the time they reached the tack room.

Beyond the tack room lay the grooming area, which adjoined the stalls themselves. Wood floors creaked, and a pure white Arabian stirred.

The last six stalls were vacant, separated by head-high panels of thick plywood mounted on either side of four-by-four posts. Exactly as they had been described to Paros. The effect of the construction was to create narrow air spaces between the panels. They used two of these spaces to hide their parcels.

Empty-handed, they retraced their steps and rejoined Castille and Hulster in the trees beyond the garden. The rain was slowing; it had quit altogether by the time they

were through the tunnel. They made their way quickly up the bank to the road and then across into the sparse woods adjacent to the estate. Their van was parked a quarter of a mile from the road under a tall pine.

Hulster climbed behind the wheel and started the engine. Paros opened the rear doors of the van and carefully laid the painting inside. Renucci and Castille lit cigarettes and breathed a joint sigh of relief. It was premature.

Over the hum of the engine, they never heard the footsteps. Nor the raising of the pistol, nor the cocking of its hammer.

It took two bullets to take down Castille. A single head shot felled Renucci. Paros bounded from the van with a sawed-off shotgun in his hands and was dead before his feet hit the ground. Hulster stepped slowly down from the front seat.

“It’s me, Hulster,” he said with an air of confidence. “Everything’s fine.”

“The painting,” was all the killer said in reply, still clutching the pistol.

“In the van,” Hulster said, staring now at the barrel of the gun and trying to usher it away with a toss of his head. “In the back. We took care of the other four just like you said. Everything’s fine.”

“Excellent. You’ve done well. I wish it made more sense, but it doesn’t, does it?”

“What doesn’t?” Hulster took a step to his right. The barrel of the gun stalked him. He backpedaled. Hysteria crept into his words. “What doesn’t make sense?”

“The sacrifices.” The killer’s voice had an indifferent ring to it. “The sacrifices we make.”