

Prologue

The man pulled a box of matches from his back pocket and struck one against the sole of his boot. The match head flared orange and red; the flame danced in the breeze that rolled off the River Seine. He cupped a hand and lit the unfiltered cigarette that dangled from his bottom lip. The tip glowed against the biting cold of the afternoon. Alphonse filled his lungs with the foul smoke and savoured the heat in his chest. It was good to be back in Paris.

He would have preferred the south of France (for the more pleasant weather) but winter in the city of lights was where the job had brought him. And when Sir Mason Green phones through an order, it takes a braver man than Alphonse Poulet to say no.

Alphonse took another drag. He rubbed one hand across his round belly and the other over his stubbled chin, then pulled a piece of paper from his coat pocket to study it for the umpteenth time. Mason Green's order was quite specific. Alphonse never queried the motives of his clients. In the world of international art theft it was wise not to ask too many questions. But even by the eccentric standards of his usual clients, this request was way out there.

Alphonse stroked his belly again, as if for luck. He took a final puff, tossed the cigarette butt to the gutter and crushed it under his boot. Then he joined the stream of people flowing into the courtyard of the Palais du Louvre and down an escalator to the main entrance of the most famous museum in the world.

Alphonse breezed through the metal detectors, brushed past clusters of tour groups and made his way to the second floor of the Denon wing. He entered a crowded, high-ceilinged gallery. Hanging on three of the walls were portraits and scenes from the Italian Renaissance—the works of masters, rich in colour and life.

No one was paying them the least attention.

More than three hundred people were crammed into the space and all of them were crowding around a single painting. It was the only piece that graced the gallery's fourth wall and it was no bigger than a large scrapbook.

The Mona Lisa: the most valuable painting in the world.

Alphonse elbowed his way to the front of the crowd where tourists pressed against a wooden barrier, trying to catch a glimpse of the portrait that hung behind a panel of bulletproof glass.

La Gioconda—the lady with the enigmatic smirk. Smiling. Beguiling.

Alphonse Poulet was entranced. There were times when his life as the Falcon—the greatest art thief of all time—was very good indeed. He checked through the corners of his eyes. A security guard the size of a small truck was parked by the door to the left of the Mona Lisa. Another guard, only slightly smaller and poured into his uniform like concrete into a mould, stood by the exit to the right.

Alphonse swivelled his gaze upwards. Security cameras were mounted along the length of the ceiling. More guards hovered at the rear of the room, watching every movement. If he was going to pull off this heist, everything was going to have to go exactly to plan.

Alphonse melted back into the crowd. He unbuttoned his coat, slid a hand inside the false belly strapped to his front and pulled out five ceramic cylinders, each one about the size of a torch battery. He looked left, then right, and dropped one of the cylinders into a woman's unzipped shoulder bag.

Alphonse ducked, then reappeared in the middle of the crush of people. He placed another cylinder into the drooping hoodie of a teenage girl. Seconds later he was

at the rear of the room. He bent to tie his bootlace and placed two cylinders against the wall.

Alphonse squeezed his way through to the adjoining gallery and slipped the final cylinder into the truck-sized security guard's gaping trouser pocket.

Then he turned through an arched doorway and into a long room. Dull winter light seeped through glass panels in the ceiling high above. The blood-red walls were adorned with enormous paintings depicting scenes from French history. Alphonse strolled the wooden floor and stopped halfway along the room in front of an arresting image: a beautiful woman striding across the barricades of revolutionary Paris, her dress torn from her shoulders, a French tricolour flag clutched in one hand, a musket in the other. A messenger boy with a satchel over his shoulder stood to her left and a band of fallen fighters at her feet.

Alphonse scanned the massive canvas—three metres across and almost the same in height. Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*.

So beautiful. So much energy in its form. Such vitality in the golden light.

'Pity I have to destroy it,' Alphonse muttered. His right hand slipped inside his pocket. His fingers wrapped around a small remote control, and he pressed the button.

Sixty metres away, in the Mona Lisa gallery, five compact smoke flares detonated, breaking the museum silence like muffled fireworks.

Pop. Pop. Pop-pop-pop.

Then the alarms started. Great whooping sirens pierced the air. And all madness broke loose.

Alphonse took his eyes from the face of Liberty and glanced back towards the other gallery. Grey smoke billowed from the door. People stumbled through the haze, hands over their mouths, coughing and wheezing. The few tourists around Alphonse took one look at the mayhem and bolted for the far exit. Then what seemed like every security guard in the Louvre descended on the Mona Lisa gallery. They sprinted straight past Alphonse, boots clattering over the smooth parquetry.

Alphonse stood his ground. The sirens and screams wailed on. Within seconds he was alone, while all security focused on the priceless Mona Lisa. Again, Alphonse reached into the false belly beneath his coat. This time he pulled out two canisters, each about the size of a soft-drink can.

He popped the tab on one and rolled it across the floor towards the door on his left, then popped the other and sent it skittering to the exit on his right.

Both canisters sprang to life, spinning wildly and spraying a fine mist across the floor.

Alphonse observed his handiwork with a tight nod, then took hold of the bottom of the Delacroix painting. He lifted the ornate frame away from the wall and heaved. A shout came from the arched doorway. The truck-sized security guard was screaming at Alphonse in

French. Smoke poured from the man's pocket as if there was a clogged chimney in his pants. Alphonse barely glanced at him, then turned back to the painting. It was heavier than he had expected.

The security guard rushed into the gallery, still shouting. His foot hit the floorboards and the contents of the canister did its work. The man slammed onto his backside and skidded like a polar bear on a melting ice floe. He went to stand but his feet zipped out from under him. He scrambled onto his hands and knees, but that was as far as he could get.

Alphonse grinned. 'The Falcon comes prepared,' he said. The soles of his specially treated boots gripped firm on the slickened floor. He turned back to his task.

More security guards appeared in the doorway, flinging themselves into the gallery. They all ended up stranded on their backs with their legs wagging in the air like expiring cockroaches. Each time they tried to get up they fell, coating themselves in the lubricant from the canisters—slippery as soap in a sauna.

Alphonse knelt to gain better leverage and tugged again at the frame—this time the painting launched free from the wall. Like a giant kite, it caught the air and sailed out. Alphonse looked up at the inky underside of the canvas, seemingly floating in space.

Then it dropped.

The painting split over the top of Alphonse's skull with a shredding tear and came to rest on his shoulders,

his head sticking through the hole. He blinked and looked down to find Liberty's bare breasts poking out in front of him, as if they had just sprouted from his shirt.

'Eep!' he cried.

The security guards sent reinforcements through the doorway like hockey pucks. They all fell short of the target and ended up on their backs. The gallery was fast resembling a turtle farm on prank night.

Alphonse rustled about in his fake belly. A ceramic blade pierced through Liberty's front and sliced another gash in the priceless canvas. Alphonse stepped through, stomping on the face of a dead revolutionary as he went.

'Sorry,' he muttered.

Another security guard sailed by.

Alphonse dropped to his knees and stabbed the blade into the painting, cutting out the messenger boy's satchel. He quickly rolled the thirty-centimetre-square piece of canvas into a cardboard tube and stowed it inside his coat.

He stood and looked back to the guards writhing on the floor. Their swearing was almost, but not quite, drowned out by the ongoing wail of the sirens. Alphonse waved them a cheery farewell and turned to the exit on his right.

There was a commotion from the opposite doorway. Two guards had a colleague by the hands and were about to launch him into the gallery.

Un. Deux. Trois!

The man soared into the room as if fired from a slingshot. He careered across the parquet, his boots skating over the surface.

Alphonse set off, unconcerned, towards the other end of the gallery. The guard cannoned on, tucked up like a downhill skier. Then he reached for the taser on his belt.

Alphonse glanced back just as the guard fired the weapon. Twin electrodes spat from the barrel, as fast as a cobra's strike. They bit Alphonse square on his back pocket. Fifty thousand volts discharged straight into the box of 'strike anywhere' matches that Alphonse had stowed there.

The art thief's backside exploded in a ball of orange flames.

'EEP!' he cried and launched forward, yanking the Taser from the guard's grasp. His cries accompanied the clatter of the taser as it dragged behind him, still attached to the probes that were skewered into the seat of his burning trousers. His hands flailed, trying to beat out the fire that engulfed his buttocks. The taser bucked up and hit the floor hard, discharging another jolt down the wires. Alphonse soared into the air with a howl. He raced to the entrance and scrambled up the escalator, just as a platoon of ten armed gendarmes flew past him in the opposite direction.

The last of the police looked back at the shrieking man with the flaming trousers. He shouted a commanding

STOP! but Alphonse had already disappeared into the daylight. The gendarmes raced to the up escalator. But, by the time they reached the top, the Falcon had commandeered a passing motor scooter and was zipping away through the traffic.

Every few metres as he travelled along the Rue de Rivoli, Alphonse Poulet bobbed into view, smoke pouring from his pants and the taser blasting another jolt of electricity to launch him out of the saddle. His screams echoed through the winding laneways of the French capital well after the Parisian police had given up the chase.