

FACT OR FICTION

DUPED is based on the theft at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Names have been changed and events and characters have been fictionalized, modified, or composited for dramatic purposes.

The other art thefts described in the book also occurred, including the attempts to enter the Gardner and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts before the 3/18/1990 robbery.

THE BASIC FACTS

On 3/18/1990, two men disguised as Boston Police officers took six paintings, five sketches, and two artifacts during eighty-one minutes from 1:24 AM to 2:45 AM. None of the items have been recovered. They were not insured.

Although there are multiple suspects, no one has been charged with the theft as of this novel's publishing date. The statute of limitations for the theft expired long ago.

As of the publishing date, the museum is offering a \$10,000,000 reward for information leading to the recovery of the objects. The museum can be contacted at reward@gardnermuseum.org.

CHAPTER 1 – PUSHED TOO FAR

North End, Boston

The 1970s

“Tell us what happened, kid,” Detective Granby asked. He was a new detective assigned to the cut-and-dried cases. This one looked as cut-and-dried as they came.

One drop-leaf of the kitchen table had been lowered to push it flush to the wall to save space in the tiny kitchen in the tiny apartment. Granby sat at one end. Granby’s partner, an older cop assigned as a mentor, sat at the opposite end, taking notes. A two-foot-long piece of white wood with a jagged end laid on the kitchen table.

Louis sat in the middle and didn’t respond.

“That your dad’s seat?” Granby asked.

“Not anymore,” Louis said.

His mom’s crying in the living room intensified. Louis wrung his hands on his lap under the table. The other cop pulled them out to take a look at them.

Louis’s knuckles were huge, and his fingers pointed in odd directions.

“What happened to your hands?” the older detective asked.

“My dad didn’t want me to take art classes,” Louis said. “He used a pipe.”

The cops looked at each other. “How old were you?” Granby asked.

“Ten.”

“You never got them looked at?”

Louis shrugged. “Dad said they scared kids when I took their lunch money.”

“Were you any good?” Granby asked.

“At what? Stealing lunch money?”

“No. Drawing.”

“I was okay.”

Louis’s mom barged in from the living room. A female cop trailed her. “Ma’am, you’ve got to stay out of there,” she said.

His mom opened a cupboard above the oven. “He was great,” she said and extracted sheets of art paper. There were watercolors and charcoal sketches executed by a skilled artist. She slapped them onto the kitchen table, one after the other. “See. See. See.”

“Yes, ma’am. They are great. But that doesn’t help us understand what went on here tonight.”

The female cop grabbed Louis’s mom by the arm to pull her out of the kitchen. His mom barely moved. “I’m telling you, Louis didn’t do anything wrong.” Only his mom called him Louis. To the outside world, he was Louie.

“Yes, ma’am, but we need his version about what happened.”

“He saved my life is what he did.” Louis’s mom turned and raised her shirt. Her back was covered with red, angry welts. The cops flinched. “Don’t look away, you cowards,” she said.

“Get the EMTs to take a look at her,” the older detective said, and the female cop hurried down the hall.

Granby lifted the piece of wood up. “Where’d this come from?”

Louis grabbed the other end and pulled. Granby tried to keep his grip, but Louis was too strong and won the tug-of-war. "It's a leg from my easel."

"How'd it break?"

Louis sat silent, twirling the wood in his hands.

"Pull up your shirt," Louis's mom said.

He hesitated.

"Louis."

Louis stood and raised his shirt. Two-inch wide welts covered his shoulders and back. There were pieces of hanging skin.

"That's from the bastard's belt buckle," Louis's mom said.

Louis lowered his shirt and sat down.

Granby repeated his question.

"He threw the easel at me, and it broke," Louis said.

Granby carefully touched the jagged end. "What about the rest of the leg?"

"I picked it up and pointed it at him. He grabbed it and jabbed it against his stomach. He screamed that I was a pussy, that I didn't have the guts to protect my mom, that he would kill me first, then beat my mom all night long. I pushed."

The EMTs arrived and started toward Louis. "Help my mom first," he said, and they went into the living room.

"It was more than a push," the older detective said.

"I pushed hard."

"He was impaled into the wall," Granby said.

Louis shrugged. "I can fix the wall."

The detectives went into the living room where his mom was being attended to. He heard mumbling and couldn't make out the details, but when they were done his mom was crying harder. The detectives came back into the kitchen.

“Louis, we have to take you in. You're going to juvy for now,” Granby said. He gently touched his shoulder. “You did the right thing, kid.”

Louis was released two years later on his 18th birthday. His mom met him at the gate, and they spent the day at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. It was a good day.

CHAPTER 2—CLICK

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

Sunday, March 18, 1990, 1:10 AM

Boston's March weather can be fickle. Warm days that fool tree buds to open can be followed by a blizzard that tears down tree limbs as the snow clings to the new growth. Gloves and ski hats worn one day are replaced by shorts and t-shirts the next. Window scrapers are pulled from beneath front seats and put into action.

The two men in the front seat of the red hatchback idling between the street lights on Palace Road hadn't bothered to listen to the weather reports. No one had told them they had to do it, so they didn't.

A man rubbed his thin fingers together, then cupped them and blew on them. "Doesn't this piece-of-shit have heat?" Mutt asked.

The man behind the steering wheel flicked the knob with his stubby fingers from defrost to heat and raised the temperature. "How's that?" Jeff asked.

Mutt put his fingers directly in front of the vents. "Feels the same."

"I'm gonna buy a new one after this."

"Great idea. How about a boat, too? Or ask a cop for directions wearing an "I did the Gardner" t-shirt?"

“Yeah, I . . .”

A flash of light shot from the building they’d been watching for an hour. A door had been opened, stayed that way for three seconds, and then been closed.

“What the hell?” Mutt asked.

The building was the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, a four-story, light brown brick replica of a Venetian mansion commissioned by its namesake in the early 1900s. It was opposite The Fens, a swamp-turned-park in the middle of Boston. The Red Sox’s Fenway Park, The Museum of Fine Arts, Simmons College, and Northeastern University were all within blocks of the men’s parking spot.

“Was it our guy?” Jeff asked.

“I don’t know. All I saw was a shirt sleeve. What time is it?” Mutt asked.

Jeff looked at his watch. “1:10. What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. Let’s wait,” Mutt said.

The side door stayed closed. Their cell phones didn’t ring. No cars or pedestrians passed them. Mutt blew on his fingers, then stuffed them under his armpits. Jeff drummed on the steering wheel.

“What time is it now?” Mutt asked.

“1:15. We’ve got ten minutes,” Jeff said. “We got here too early. I feel like a sitting duck.”

“Yeah, but you’re a sitting duck wearing a cop uniform, so take it easy,” Mutt said.

“And we’ve got these,” Jeff said. He removed a snub-nosed pistol from the storage space between them and twirled it on his forefinger.

“Put that away before you kill us,” Mutt said.

“The safety’s on. I’m not an idiot,” Jeff said. He replaced the gun in the storage bin between the front seats and slammed the lid shut.

“What was that?” Mutt asked.

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“Shhhh. Listen.”

They held their breath and froze. They strained to hear the slightest sound like forest predators reacting to the nearby rustle of leaves and grass.

The noise got louder, and the men twisted to look out the car’s back window. A scrum of college-aged, beer-infused, Irish-for-Saint Patrick’s Day revelers was meandering toward them bellowing “When Irish Eyes are Smiling.”

“Shit,” Mutt said.

Jeff removed his pistol from the bin and rested his arm over the back of his seat.

Click.

“They come near us and I’m gonna blow them away,” Jeff said.

Mutt pulled his companion’s pistol down onto the front seat. “Cool it, man.”

The scrum abruptly stopped twenty feet from the car, crashed into each other, and fell into a laughing and giggling heap in the middle of the street. “Quiet. Those are cops, man,” a boy slurred.

“No way,” a girl said. “It’s a piece-of-shit car.”

“No, they’re cops. I saw their pointy hats,” the boy said.

The men looked at each other. Their breathing was rapid and shallow. Despite the temperature, sweat formed on their foreheads. Mutt removed his pistol from the storage space.

Click. Click.

“They get any closer, and we jump out and scare them, okay?” Mutt whispered.

Jeff nodded.

The group helped each other up.

“You think they’re on a stakeout? We can look for bad guys,” the girl said, pantomiming and searching the area. “Hello, any crooks out there?” She held a hand to her ear. “Guess not,” she said. “Let’s chicken fight,” she said, climbing onto the nearest boys’ shoulders.

Another couple did the same, and they started to battle. They were too drunk to make contact, swaying like palm trees in a hurricane, and their enthusiasm petered out.

“Let’s go to my dorm. I’ve got some weed,” one of the boys said.

The girls dismounted, yelling, “Weed. Weed. Weed.” The scrum reassembled and arm-in-arm sang “Danny Boy,” as they stumbled up the street toward Simmons College.

Click. Click. They lowered their pistols.

“Fucking kids,” Jeff said.

“Holy shit,” Mutt said. “What time is it?”

Jeff showed his watch. It was 1:18.

The windows had fogged up. Jeff switched the defroster to full blast, and the condensation disappeared.

“We’ll go in two minutes like we planned,” Mutt said. “You got everything?”

Jeff reached into the back seat and grabbed a black backpack. He showed Mutt two rolls of gray duct tape, two box cutters, a floor-by-floor map of the Gardner, and a catalog book of the museum’s art. Mutt took the catalog, ripped out two pages, handed a page to Jeff, then stuffed the other page into his jacket. Jeff checked that the guns’ safeties were on and placed them in the backpack.

At 1:20, Jeff put the car in gear and slowly drove until they were opposite an extension that jutted out from the side of the building. The extension had a blue-green door framed by two ornate columns and an archway. A sign above a buzzer showed it was the employees' entrance. Two gnome figurines stood guard.

They exited the car and looked up and down Palace Road. No one was in sight. The metal buttons on their jackets, the badges on the front of their eight-point duty caps, and the yellow pants stripes on their Boston Police uniforms reflected the streetlights. Mutt pulled his waist-length jacket down to remove the wrinkles and straightened his hat. Jeff copied the actions.

“My mom’s got them gnomes on her front lawn,” Jeff said. He was short and stocky. “Fix your mustache.

“Good for your mom,” Mutt said. He was tall and thin. He applied pressure to his upper lip. “How’s that?”

“Almost as good as my real one,” Mutt said. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Jeff said and hoisted the backpack onto his right shoulder.

Mutt pushed the buzzer at 1:23.

CHAPTER 3—EIGHTY-ONE MINUTES

The Gardner

Sunday, March 18, 1990, 1:24 AM

Mutt turned to the closed-circuit camera that pointed down at him from its mounting above the door. “Police. We’re here about the disturbance.”

The buzzer sounded, and they entered a plexiglass-walled area between the outer and inner doors. Mutt pulled open his jacket, making his “BPD” pin more prominent. Another buzzer sounded, and they entered a small rectangular room split in half by a chest-high counter. A monitor for the security camera feed was attached to the wall. Their parked car was in view for a few seconds, then the feed cut to the security desk where a man was seated, his hand still hovering over the button he’d pushed to let them in. He looked like a refugee from the 1960s Woodstock Festival with a full beard and stringy, curly hair that hung a foot past his shoulders.

“You alone?” Mutt asked.

“The other guy is on rounds.”

“Get him here. Now,” Mutt said, and the guard barked orders into his walkie-talkie.

“You look familiar. Get over here,” Jeff said, and the guard came from behind the security desk. He was wearing red pants with a belt buckle the size of a license plate. He was

skinny and wore a blue dress shirt over a flannel shirt. He was over six feet, about equal to Mutt. Jeff patted him down. He had no gun.

Jeff smashed him face-first against a wall, handcuffed him, and removed his wallet.

“You’re Luke Shelton?”

“Yeah. Don’t hurt me, man,” Luke said as he glanced over his shoulder.

Jeff smacked him with the back of his hand. “Don’t look.” Jeff heard rapid breathing like Luke was fighting back tears. “Just shut up, and you’ll be fine.”

The other security guard came around the corner into the security room. He said, “What’s up...” then stopped. He turned to run away but Mutt grabbed his right arm, jacked it up so his hand reached his shoulder blades, and handcuffed him. He took the guard's wallet from his jeans back pocket. “You’re Dylan Pearce?”

“Yes.”

Click.

“You hear that?” Jeff asked.

“Yes,” the guards said.

“Either of you says anything to the cops, and we know where you live. Got it?”

The guards nodded.

Mutt pulled a roll of gray duct tape from the backpack and ripped off a foot-long piece.

“Cover their mouths,” he said as he wrapped his piece around Dylan’s head. Jeff did the same to Luke.

Each cop grabbed a guard by the arms and unhesitantly walked them through the labyrinth of hallways and stairs to the basement. “Tape him to that sink,” Mutt said. “And you

get a bench,” he said to Dylan and walked him down a long corridor where he plopped him down on a wooden bench. Mutt rejoined Jeff after Dylan was securely wrapped.

“Jesus, did you use enough tape? He looks like an Egyptian mummy,” Mutt said.

“Only being careful,” Jeff said and looked at his watch. It was 1:45. “We gotta get moving.”

They climbed the stairs from the basement to the first floor.

“What’s with all the plastic?” Mutt asked. Plastic sheets hung from the ceiling to the floor. White streaks from dried substances carried by flowing water were visible in the folds of the sheets. The outlines of dried puddles dotted the floor.

“I don’t know, but the place is a freakin’ sieve,” Jeff said. He kicked a yellow sign warning of slippery floors.

They made it to the second floor and walked down a corridor overlooking a courtyard.

“Nobody said they had a garden in here,” Jeff said.

To call the courtyard a garden was like calling the Hope Diamond a shiny rock. The four-story open area gave the feeling of being in a church with ornate balconies and stained-glass windows filling the walls. The floor was an intricate, multi-colored tile design that resembled a Persian rug. Luscious tall ferns created a canopy over the ground-hugging plants and white marble statues beneath them. Four grand staircases befitting a mansion entered from the first-floor corners. Trees rose to the second and third floors, stretching toward the glass roof for sunlight.

Mutt grabbed Jeff’s sleeve. “Hey, if you love it that much, come back and buy a ticket. We got work to do,” he said, and they continued down the corridor to the Dutch Room.

“Bingo,” Mutt said.

“Come to papa,” Jeff said.

The Dutch Room stretched two-thirds of the width of the museum at the end away from The Fens. Tall windows opened to the courtyard. Irregularly-shaped dark red tiles covered the floor. The ceiling, taken from a 16th-century artists' guildhall in Italy, had scenes from the Bible, ancient mythology, and Italian coats-of-arms. Except for two large dining tables in the middle of the room, the size and layout looked ready to host a cotillion ball with chairs for anxious partners lining the walls. The walls were covered with a green fabric that matched the tablecloth on the large table.

The reason for the room's name was obvious: works by Dutch painters Rembrandt van Rijn, Johannes Vermeer, and Govert Flinck predominated. But they weren't the only items as oil paintings and precious wood and silver works packed each wall.

The North Wall had five paintings, including Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait*, furniture, and silver plates.

The East Wall had six paintings, an English tapestry, furniture, a Nativity, and an Italian commode with its chamber pot. Mary Tudor, daughter of Henry VIII, eventually Mary I, Queen of England, sternly stared at you from this wall.

The West Wall faced Palace Road with four large windows covered with shades. A simple setup with facing chairs and desks belied the Flinck and Vermeer paintings that were mounted back-to-back.

The South Wall had seven paintings including Rembrandt's *A Lady and Gentleman in Black* and *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* and Peter Paul Ruben's *Portrait of the Earl of Arundel*.

“Screw the lists. We should take them all,” Jeff said.

“Sure. You go rent a U-Haul, and I’ll take a nap. When you get back, the guys in the basement could pitch in,” Mutt said.

“Hey, I wasn’t serious. But they all must be worth a ton. We’ll just take a couple of extras.”

Mutt pulled the catalog sheet from his jacket and shook it at Jeff. “No. We do the lists and get the hell out. No muss, no fuss. That’s it. Right?”

“Fine.”

“I’ll do this room. You get the Short Gallery.”

Jeff looked at his map. “Which one? There’s two.”

“Which one has the Degas stuff?”

Jeff stared at the map. The South Short Gallery had cabinets, priest vestments, wood panels, and paintings.

“The South One has drawing cabinets.”

“Then go there.”

Jeff walked to the other side of the museum and entered the Short Gallery at 1:51. It wasn’t much bigger than a closet and it was dark. The wall to the right had four, floor-to-ceiling dark wood cabinet doors with small round, plain brass nobs. He opened the doors by the nobs, revealing inside panels covered with small etchings.

An alarm went off in the Dutch Room at 1:54, and Jeff retraced his steps.

“You get the stuff?” Mutt asked.

“No, but there’s this cool-looking eagle thing, a Faneuil...” Jeff said.

“That’s Faneuil Hall in Quincy Market, you numbskull. You mean the finial.”

“Yeah, that thing, the funeral. There’s a flag wrapped around it, and it’ll be a bitch getting to it,” Jeff said.

“Quit messing around. Cut this one out,” Mutt said and tossed over Rembrandt’s *Lady and Gentleman in Black*.

Jeff flicked open the blade end of a boxcutter, sliced along the inside edge of the frame, and peeled the painting out. He tossed the frame to the ground. “I shoulda been a brain surgeon.”

“Only if you operated on stuffed animals,” Mutt said. “Now get the sketches.”

At 2:08, Jeff returned to the Short Gallery. He again passed through the Early Italian and Raphael rooms without taking anything.

For the next 20 minutes, they worked on their lists.

At 2:28, Jeff returned to the Dutch Room.

“Where the hell you been, drawing replacements?” Mutt asked.

Click.

Mutt turned around.

“You’re getting on my nerves,” Jeff said.

“Jesus, chill out. Grab the stuff and let’s check on the jamokes in the basement,” Mutt said. As he walked out of the Dutch Room, Mutt grabbed a trumpet-shaped cup from a table and tossed it over his head to Jeff. He dropped the sketches and the finial to catch it. “For our champagne toast later,” Mutt said.

Jeff stuffed it in the backpack.

As they walked to the basement, Jeff asked, “You know they saw us, right?”

Mutt peeled off his fake mustache. “Between this and them guys being scared shitless, we’ll be fine.”

Neither of the guards had moved. The duct tape was still intact.

The thieves went upstairs to the security room and entered the security director's office. Mutt went to the closet and took the videotapes from the recording devices. Jeff ripped the paper printouts from the motion detector equipment.

"It says here someone is in the Dutch Room, and it should be investigated immediately," Jeff said. "We should check it out."

"Funny guy. Put that Manet frame on the chair, and let's get going."

"I don't think he'll be laughing," Jeff said as he left the frame.

At 2:41, Mutt and Jeff opened the Palace Road door and carried bundles to the car.

At 2:45, ditto for a second trip.

"We got everything?" Mutt asked.

They checked the contents against their lists. "Thirteen is my lucky number," Jeff said and closed the trunk. He got behind the wheel, drove a hundred feet to The Fenway, took a right, went halfway around The Fens, then exited onto Storrow Drive toward the Southeast Expressway.

"Easy peasy," Jeff said, and they high-fived.

"Like we knew what we were doing," Mutt said. He twisted open a bottle of champagne, filled the horn-shaped cup, and took a long sip.

"My turn," Jeff said and emptied the cup.

CHAPTER 4 - A RECKONING

Beacon Hill, 1.9 miles from the Gardner

Sunday, March 18, 1990, 1:24 AM

Uncle Louie placed a clamp at the metal base on the electrical panel for the feeds to the alarm, the motion detector connection, the closed-circuit camera, and the sound sensor. The multi-million-dollar townhouse at number 25 Chestnut Street was now unable to feel, see, speak, or hear.

The basement air was stifling. His huge, gnarly hands were sweaty under the blue surgical gloves. He removed his white construction helmet and placed it on the concrete floor. The attached light illuminated his black shoes. He pulled a clean handkerchief from his black suit pants pocket and wiped his forehead. He carefully folded it, returned it to its home, and reached for the helmet.

It slipped from his grip and landed on the brim. The thin plastic acted like a spring, and the helmet bounced sideways and up. He lunged with his right hand to snare it but missed. The helmet's slow-motion somersault lasted an eternity, then landed on the concrete floor, bounced, then settled a foot away, rocking back and forth. Uncle Louie's sweat didn't dare to move. He held his breath and listened.

It wasn't that he was concerned that someone would bound down the stairs. He'd watched Ian Bradford and his family depart Friday night from Boston's Logan Airport in their private jet for a weekend ski vacation in northern Vermont. He'd called the ski resort a few hours ago to verify they hadn't left.

But Ian had hired a top-rated security company who'd call the cops in a nanosecond if they noticed anything amiss. That's what you do when you have...

The word "have" stopped him.

"Have" is a funny word. It can mean possess, which in this case was appropriate since Ian did possess what Uncle Louie was after.

But 'have' also means to own. That one didn't fit. Ian had no legal right to the items, and he knew it. Why else hide them in a fourth-floor den? They needed to be returned to their rightful owner. For a substantial fee, of course. Uncle Louie wasn't running a charity.

A police siren wailed softly, then grew louder. It sounded like it was coming from Beacon Street. He listened to discern if it went straight or turned. Straight would be good. That meant it either went on by or stopped at the front of the townhouse. If it stopped, he could easily escape out the back. Turning was bad. They'd find his car in the back alley, and then he'd have to leave by the front door, maybe running into another patrol car.

He wondered if he'd screwed up and missed a backup alarm. That'd be a new trick, having one obvious alarm backed up by a hidden one. He'd add that to his routine checklist if he didn't wind up in jail.

The sound decreased, then went away altogether. It reminded him of the alarms at his mom's nursing home, going on, going off.

He picked up his black tool bag and walked across the basement. A tiny, gray mouse scurried from under the stairs, stopped in Uncle Louie's path, and stared at him. They stayed that way, like gunslingers at a shootout.

Uncle Louie considered whether to shoot. The creature wasn't one of the giant rats that Boston's multi-billion dollar Big Dig construction project had forced from their homes. It wasn't a threat to the job, and his .357 magnum would blow it away and wake any sleeping neighbors. And Uncle Louie's reward was worth more than a rat's, or in this case a mouse's, ass. He growled and raised his arms, and the little guy retreated under the stairs.