



No Moustaches, Meraki

Of all the things that could've gone wrong today, it *had* to be the Mona Lisa. It could've been burning my breakfast waffles. It could've been dropping my phone into the sink with my washing up dishes. It could've been the hot water running out during my shower.

But no. It had to be the Mona Lisa.

Pax didn't answer my first call, and I smashed my thumb down on the hang-up icon before his recorded voice could finish telling me that Percival Antonio Xanthopoulos was probably busy or had dropped his phone in the toilet, and could I please leave a message. Where's a homeless genius when I need him?

I tugged my cap off and glared at the blank wall. No Mona Lisa. The plaque still glinted below the empty patch, as if it were laughing at me.

I can't believe I lost the Mona Lisa.

One day off, and the billion dollar painting was nowhere to be found, and on inspection day no less. This was just the worst thing ever. I smacked the brim of my security guard cap against my face several times, just in case that would help.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I snatched it out. "Pax?" I didn't wait for his normal greeting.

"You got him." Pax's ever-cheerful voice had my stomach churning.

"I got a problem."

"Same here actually, but you can go first. Spill."



I gripped the phone harder and glanced at the blank spot on the wall. “The Mona Lisa is missing.”

A tiny pause, then Pax cleared his throat. “Well, I was going to say that I burned my waffles, but I guess you wouldn’t appreciate it.”

Yeah, no. Waffles vs Mona Lisa? Mona Lisa was more important right now. Maybe I should befriend an actual genius for once. “I need you to come in and help me find it, okay?”

“Sure thing. I can even bring this replica I’ve got if you’d like.”

Oh, thank goodness. A replica, even a slightly bad one, would fool everyone for long enough for us to find the real deal. This was going to work out. Deep breaths. Pax’s got it sorted.

“That’d be awesome. Be here in five?” I glanced at my watch. Five minutes would be early enough to get the replica up on the wall before many more employees started arriving. At least the museum didn’t open until ten. We had another hour yet.

Pax made the clicking sound he always makes with his fingergun motion. “See you in a jiff.”

Ten minutes later, I called him again. He answered, first ring. “Hey, what’s the holdup?” I peered around the corner, keeping my voice low. “People will start noticing if you don’t hurry up a bit.”

“Yeah, I just had a problem on the way.” Something crunched on Pax’s end of the phone. What on earth?

“Please tell me you didn’t waste time buying yourself food.”

A pause, then, “It was only five bucks.” Another pause. “I’ll be there in three.”

The phone beeped, and I barely resisted throwing it at the ground. I would strangle that man when he finally got here. Hamburgers do *not* take precedence over the Mona Lisa.



“Hey, everything going okay over here?”

I spun around, shoving my phone into my pocket. “Whaat? Um, yes, of course, it’s going fine. I’m not having any problems and yes... um, thank you very much for asking.”

Oh. My. Goodness. I was the world’s most terrible liar.

“How are you?” I added, attempting a smile.

The cleaner stared at me for a handful of heartbeats, then nodded slowly. “I’m...fine...” She turned and hurried in the other direction.

I turned just as fast and dragged my hand over my forehead. How much more suspicious sounding could I get?

My phone vibrated in my pocket and I checked the text.

>> Is it illegal to break into a museum?

I cleared my throat, glanced around one last time, then jogged off toward the front door. Didn’t count as breaking in if I let him in. I worked here after all.

Unless they find out I twinkling lost the Mona Lisa.

Pax waved through the glass entrance door at me as I flicked the catch over. Wind tousled his shaggy hair so it stuck up in every direction, and he carried a hamburger in one hand. But it was the paper-wrapped parcel under his arm I was really interested in.

“Get in here.” I pulled open the door just far enough for him to slip through.



“Man, this hamburger was totally worth the waffles burning.” He folded down some of the paper wrapping and glanced around. “Sweet place. These guys hiring, atm?”

I pushed Pax along. “I’ll put in a good word for you if you help me keep my job, okay?”

He nodded, then patted the parcel under his arm, scattering crumbs across the floor in the meantime. “Yep yep, totally got this under control.”

And thank goodness for that. I nudged him into the gallery with the Mona Lisa’s empty display. “You’re a homeless dude anyway. How do you even have a copy of the Mona Lisa?”

He flapped a hand at me and shoved the rest of his hamburger in his mouth. “I wouldn’t say ‘homeless’ exactly,” he mumbled around the lettuce.

“You move around the country in a tiny van. And you shower about twice a year. I call that homeless.” I pointed at the bundle tucked under his arm as we walked. “Where do you even have room to keep stuff like this?”

He shrugged. “Taped it to the ceiling, of course. There’s only a few small marks on it now. No one will ever know.” He stopped by the display and carefully pulled the paper free. “What do you think?”

I stared at the canvas for what could’ve been eternity.

What the...flippity flap...

I closed my eyes and forced a slow breath out. “You brought me a kid’s paint-by-number version.”

Pax cocked his head at the disaster of a painting. “Come on, I thought it was pretty good for a four-year-old’s thing.”

I snatched the canvas from his hands. “Are you *kidding* me?” I spun it around and shoved the painting in his face. “The Mona Lisa does *not* have a moustache.”



Pax just chuckled. “Yeah, my little sister has a bit of my humour.” He smiled at the painting, and tapped the background. “She added me in there too, then gave it to me on my birthday.”

I shoved it back into his hands, then turned away, dragging my hand across my face. This was hopeless. “Look,” I turned back, but my words shrivelled away as another security guard glanced around the corner.

A frown creased his brows. “What’s going on here?” He squinted at Pax, then up at me, then at my uniform cap on the floor.

I snatched the cap up and tugged it on. “We’re just making sure everything’s all okay right here.” I grabbed Pax’s arm and dragged him toward the wall. “Putting good ol’ Mona back on the wall.”

Pax fumbled to hang his little sister’s canvas onto the wall, and I forced the biggest smile I could muster as I positioned myself in between my hobo friend and coworker.

He shook his head, then pointed at my cap. “Inspection is on in less than an hour. You’d better be wearing your cap when the Head comes.”

I saluted. “Of course.”

He left, and I spun back to Pax. “This is *not* going to work.” I pointed at the painting now hanging above the ‘Mona Lisa’ plaque, complete with moustache and tiny stick-figure Pax in the background. “No one will believe that’s the real thing.”

Pax made a calming gesture. “Hey, I get it, man. Not working out. That’s okay, we’ll just…” He fumbled in his pocket but only came out with a gum wrapper, a paperclip, and a few loose coins. He wrinkled his nose and shoved them back in his pocket. “Second thoughts, maybe not.”

I gripped my head in my hands, not daring to take off my cap in case the other guard came back.



The Mona Lisa was missing. Where would it go? Why was no one else saying anything about it? Should I report the missing painting to the police? And how was Pax such a genius and a moron at the same time?

I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the wall. May as well give up already. They'd sack me and probably a dozen other guards if the Heads found out. Then when the Heads at Louvre found out that we'd lost their masterpiece, we'd probably have to pay them a killing, and the National Gallery did not need that on its record. Why did this have to happen on my shift?

We only had—I checked my watch again and groaned—twenty minutes before the museum opened and just under an hour before the inspection. There's no way I could locate and return the Mona Lisa in time.

“How long until this thing opens?”

I twisted around at Pax's words and blew out a breath. “Twenty minutes. We open at ten, then the inspection is on at ten-thirty.”

“Perfect.” He made the ending 't' pop, and the sound echoed in the gallery.

“Trust me, Pax, nothing about this is anywhere *near* perfect.” I ripped my hat off again and threw it in his direction, but he caught it and tugged it on over his insane mop.

“Hey, don't sweat it man, I have a plan.” He flipped his phone around so I could see the screen.

Ebay. Really? “Pax, this is no time for—”

“Hear me out, dude.” He waved the phone in my face. “There's a replica on ebay for twenty bucks. Pick up only.” Pax jabbed his finger at the address. “I can go pick this up and be back in no time.”



I stared at him, weighing the pros and cons in my mind for approximately two seconds, then grabbed out my wallet and shoved some money into his hand. “Do it. Go now and *don’t stop for hamburgers on the way.*”

He saluted, fist still full of money and the dumbest grin on his face. “Sure, gunva.”

Pax returned fifty-five minutes later, carrying a larger rectangle package and a paper bag, wafting the smell of doughnuts with him.

I didn’t even bother mentioning the doughnuts, but grabbed the package from his arms and tore the paper away.

Mona Lisa in all her plain-faced, dull-coloured glory stared back at me. No moustache. No stick-figure Pax. Just plain, ordinary Mona Lisa.

I’d never noticed she was so gorgeous until that moment.

“You might notice the brush marks.” Pax pulled a large, powdery doughnut from his bag. “You can thank me for those. I knew you’d flip if you saw it wasn’t an actual painting, so I borrowed some egg whites from a chicken coop and went over the whole thing to make it look authentic.”

I glanced over the painting and couldn’t help the sort-of smile that tugged my lips. “Not perfect, but it’ll fool the average art critic.”

So maybe Pax is a genius after all. At least, when he’s not getting sidetracked by his stomach, but we’ve all got our faults.

“Consider yourself redeemed.” I hefted the replica toward the wall, fiddling at the hook to get it hanging at least temporarily. “Stop eating doughnuts and help me hang this straight.”

“Caleb Wilkins!”



My own name sent me flinching back, and I spun around. My cap almost flew off, but I caught it just in time and jammed it properly onto my head.

That was the Head. Here already.

I twisted back to look at the Mona Lisa. Pax shot me a thumbs up as he crammed the bag of doughnuts underneath his flannel shirt. I twisted back and saluted the senior officer.

“Everything is in order, sir.” I saluted again just to be doubly sure.

But he wasn’t looking at me. He was frowning over my shoulder. I turned around again, but the Mona Lisa was safely in place, not even crooked. Surely he didn’t know the original well enough to tell that this one was different? Pax snuck a bite of doughnut as he pretended to admire the other Da Vinci works.

“What’s the problem?” I followed the man’s gaze, but he was definitely looking at the Mona Lisa.

“That’s not the Mona Lisa.” His forehead creased into confused lines.

Oh, crud. “Yes, it is. Of course, it is. I mean, what else would it be?” I flapped my hands in a vague gesture at the painting. “It’s certainly not anything else.” I laughed, but it sounded more like a frog dying.

Pax appeared at the man’s elbow and indicated the Mona Lisa with a dramatic motion that scattered cinnamon off his doughnut all over the floor. “That, *monsieur*, is the Mona Lisa if I’ve ever seen it. I can confirm. That one’s definitely worth a million.”

The man shook his head, somehow not noticing the doughnut. “No, no. We sent the Mona Lisa back to the Louvre yesterday, this is some cheap copy.”

I stared at him, my brain completely blank.



“Some wisecracker must’ve hung this rubbish up when the guard wasn’t looking.” The man shook his head.

I gaped after the Head, but he just continued past, giving the rest of the paintings a cursory glance, then disappearing from view.

What?

“Did he just say...?” Pax took a thoughtful bite from his doughnut, still looking at the spot where the senior officer disappeared around the corner.

I dragged a hand over my face, looked up at the ceiling, and whispered, “Why..just why?”