

The Lost Madonna

PROLOGUE

The first time I saw the painting I knew little about art and even less about life. I was nineteen and off on a journey of discovery, seeking adventure and excitement, dreaming of romance. I found it all. And so much more.

I remember the day the small painting, spotted with oil and mud, chipped and flaking from stress on the bloated wooden panel, was loaded on a truck and transported from the Uffizi to the Limonaia. I can still see the sweet face of the Madonna and the Child reaching up with tiny fingers to touch her cheek. I can smell the pungent odor of the disinfectant sprayed on the surface to prevent the growth of mold and mildew, and I can feel the sense of solemnity as the painting was laid out beside other Virgins, angels, and saints, on the stiff metal bed in the winter greenhouse in the Boboli Gardens. And I remember the thrill of working at Stefano's side, and then the sense of satisfaction as we gradually brought the painting back to life.

After I returned home from Italy, I often thought of the Madonna, and I knew that someday I would return to Florence and stroll through the Galleria degli Uffizi and find it gloriously restored, hanging along with other masterpieces of the Early Renaissance. A plaque would reveal its history, attribute it to Tommaso di Cristoforo Fini, a fifteenth-century Italian artist better known as Masolino da Panicale, and note that it had been damaged in the flood of 1966 and rescued.

As the years passed, memories and images filtering through time, I wondered if it had been just as I recalled. The thought of a return evoked a mixture of apprehension and cautious excitement. Yet I knew one day I would find my way back and I would see the painting again.

But when I finally came across Masolino's Mother and Child over thirty years later, it happened in an unforeseen way, under circumstances very different from those I had imagined. And it changed the course of my life forever.

CHAPTER ONE

1999

In early November Charley Stover, Dean of a year-abroad program in Florence for an American university, called and invited me to come over and teach during the spring semester. Charley and I had met in Italy when we were both very young and wrote sporadically over the next three or four years. We reconnected when I taught at a junior college just outside of Portland, where he was teaching at a university, and then kept in touch when I moved to Boise. It still surprised me when I saw him in his clerical collar and realized he was now Father Charles Stover, S. J. He'd always be Charley to me.

I hadn't seen Charley in almost two years, since he'd taken the position in Florence, and his call was a pleasant surprise. He explained the woman they'd originally contracted for the year had been involved in an accident—she'd gone over to London for the weekend and been hit by a car as she stepped off the curb. “Looking the wrong way for oncoming traffic,” Charley told me. She'd survived and returned home to New York.

They'd been able to cover the remaining portion of first semester with existing staff, and hoped that Dr. Browning would return for second semester, but her recovery had been slower than anticipated. "The whole thing, quite a shock, surely for Dr. Browning, and it's also left me rather in a bind. I thought of you, Suzanne, and wondered if you could possibly arrange to come over and fill in for a semester. With your love for the city, having lived here in Florence, you'd be perfect for the position."

"I don't know, Charley . . ."

"Give it some thought, Professor Cunningham," he said with the same affectionate formality I might use in addressing him as Father Stover. "But not too much thought," he added with a chuckle, "I need to know soon."

I'd been thinking about a move, feeling a restlessness I hadn't known in years. I'd contemplated applying for a position at a college in Colorado and looked at an opportunity in Montana.

We were about to enter into a new millennium—the twenty-first century—full of doom and gloom and catastrophe according to the least optimistic. I'd also entered a new time in my own life, the rhythms of my body forever changed. A time when a woman who had produced children and sent them into the world might embrace new possibilities and freedoms. I saw only finality. I needed something new, a challenge, a change of course in my life.

For years I'd known that someday I would return to Florence. Maybe the time was now.

The university in Boise agreed to give me a semester's leave, even on such short notice, and I wondered if the discontent I'd been feeling lately was evident, if my gift for teaching was waning, as was my enthusiasm for the work I'd always loved.

I had no immediate family to consult. My sister lived here in Boise, Dad was still down in Twin Falls, but on the most intimate level I'd been alone since Jerry and I divorced over nine years ago. No one, it seemed, would be entirely lost without me, other than Rousseau—my best buddy, my big old thirteen-year-old puppy.

Charley said I'd be scheduled for two introduction to art history classes and one on women in Renaissance art as an upper level course. The Virgin would be important in such a study, so I went through my collection of books, pulling out those on the subject. While reading through a bibliography in one, I came across a reference to a book that sounded perfect, and decided to find a copy of *The Madonna in Italian Renaissance Art*.

The book was a collaborative effort by several art historians, many of them familiar and well regarded in the field. It had been published fifteen years ago and was now out of print, so I ended up ordering a used copy from a bookstore in Boston that I found on the Internet.

I called and spoke with the owner of the store who told me the binding was in great shape with no fading in the text, though the jacket showed some wear. I gave her my credit card number and asked her to send it as soon as possible. I'd be leaving for Florence in less than a month, right after Christmas break.

It arrived in a UPS box. I had come home from my morning class to let Rousseau out and found it waiting on the doorstep.

I carried the box into the house, working it open. Inside, the book was enclosed in a padded envelope, double sealed with heavy, brown plastic tape. I could picture the old woman in the bookstore—a clear image had formed in my mind when I spoke to her

over the phone—and I could imagine her taking great care, thoughtfully sealing and taping and boxing, making sure the book was properly packed to make it all the way to Idaho.

“Iowa?” she’d asked when I gave her the address.

“No, Idaho.” I wondered if she was a little hard of hearing. “I-D-A-H-O,” I spelled it out.

“Oh, potatoes,” she said, as if she were describing the population, rather than the product.

“Yes, potatoes,” I replied. She chuckled a little, maybe wondering what a potato from Idaho would be doing with a book entitled *The Madonna in Italian Renaissance Art*.

I got scissors out of the kitchen drawer and cut the envelope open and pulled the book out. The smell of old paper, old art, and maybe a little of Boston, escaped with the lift of the first page.

The jacket was slightly faded and discolored with a cup ring—had the previous owner taken the term *coffee table book* literally? But the text and reproductions were wonderful as if the book had barely been opened. I flipped through the pages, marveling at the paintings, familiar from my many years of teaching college art history. Giotto, Cimabue, Fra Angelico, Masaccio, Piero della Francesca, Raphael. These images could still bring a shiver of delight every time I came across them, and memories of the first time I’d seen many of the originals, though at the time my untrained eye saw them in a completely different light. Stefano had told me that one of the things that made art special was the fact that it was intimate and personal, that each viewer could take pleasure in his or her individual way, and even this singular perception might change and grow and expand over time.

I walked back to the dining room looking for my purse—I thought I’d set it on the buffet—still paging through the book. I’d sit down later and read, but right now I was running late for lunch with my sister Andrea.

Just as I was about to close the book, pages still flipping through my fingers, an image caught my eye—a flash of pink and blue and gold. Quickly, I leafed back and when I realized what it was, I had to sit. It was the Masolino, reproduced in color, a half-page plate. I stared down at the images of the Mother and Child.

After a moment I could see the colors weren’t quite right. These were not the vivid pinks and blues of the Madonna’s veil and garments, the white of the Child’s robe, the rich gold leaf background revealed as we had cleaned and restored the panel. A dark patina of soot and varnish tinted the painting.

Rousseau, who had been trailing along as I moved through the house, sat down on the floor against my leg, grateful that I was finally still, though only my legs were still—my hands were visibly shaking as I placed the book on the dining room table. I stared, breathless, my heart hammering, memories stirring deep inside. After over three decades, this small, tender painting brought it all back—the flood, Stefano Leonetti, and my foolish, young, unknowing heart.

The caption read *Madonna and Child, tempera on wood, 28 by 22 cm., fifteenth-century Italian, Uffizi, Florence*, and I remembered how small the painting was—no bigger than a piece of typing paper, a magazine cover. The artist was not identified, though the text itself stated that many art historians believe it was painted by Masolino, an artist best known for his frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel of the Church of Santa

Maria del Carmine in Florence.

I sat and read, and then I had to take another deep breath. The painting, according to the author, a Roberto Balducci, had been destroyed in the flood of 1966. I read this sentence over and over, staring down at the words I knew were untrue. The painting had been damaged, but it had been restored. I knew, because I had been there.

By the time I left the house, it had started to snow and a sleek white blanket covered the street. I didn't realize I was half an hour late for my lunch date until I checked my watch as I pulled into the restaurant parking lot.

Andrea sat, drinking what must have been her third or fourth cup of coffee, her fingers wrapped so tightly around the cup I could imagine it shooting out of her hand. She looked up, and then stood to greet me with a hug. "Where have you been? I thought you were in a wreck or something." There was a mixture of anger, panic, and then relief in her voice. "The streets are terrible."

"I ran home to let Rousseau out," I said. "Sorry. Just fell a little behind."

"You really outdid yourself this time," she said glancing at her watch. Andrea was always on time. The mother of five, all grown now, she had survived by following a rigid schedule, being punctual and organized.

I stomped the melting snow off my boots, unwound the wool scarf from my neck, struggled out of my coat and hooked it on the back of my chair, then sat.

Andrea stared at me for a moment. "What's the matter, Suzi?" Her voice softened. "You okay?"

I nodded and a waiter appeared at my side. "Would you like something to drink while you're looking over the menu?" He glanced at my sister, the slightest indication she'd mentioned my habit of losing track of time. "A refill on your coffee?"

"Please," she answered.

"A glass of wine," I said. "Bring a couple." I nodded toward Andrea as her eyebrows rose. "Something white, a Chardonnay would be fine."

"Drinking?" Andrea asked, looking at her watch again as the waiter left. I was sure she was going to say, "before noon?" but she didn't.

We sat silently for a moment. "You're pale as a ghost," Andrea finally said.

"I think," I replied, picking up my menu, "I may have just seen one."

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