

# **The Last Mona Lisa**

a novel

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**Based on a True Story**

*"Imitation...is a double murder, for it deprives both copy and original of their primitive existence."*  
Madame de Staël

*"Nothing is original."*  
Jim Jarmusch

## ***Prologue***

**August 21, 1911**

**Paris, France**

**H**e has spent the night huddled in the dark, mind burning with Bosch-like scenes from hell, hideous monsters, people writhing in flames. He stares into the gloom, knowing that he will spend the rest of his days in darkness.

*We lose the things we do not cherish enough*, his one thought, his only thought as he slips into his workman's tunic, buttons it over his street clothes and opens the closet door.

The museum is unlit, but he has no trouble making his way down the long hall. He knows the layout perfectly, his intention fueled by guilt. The *Winged Victory* casts a predatory shadow that causes him to shiver though it is stifling, airless.

Her face appears like a specter, beautiful lips cracked, flesh tinged gray. Somewhere a baby cries. The crying swells to a sickening shriek. He covers his ears and lets out a sob, twisting one way then the other, searching in the dark for his lost love and his child, whispering their names, walls closing in, room tilting, that empty feeling in his gut expanding until that's all he is: a hollow man. Now he understands that the emptiness he has felt for so long has been a foreshadowing, a preview of the rest of his life, that he has been practicing to be a dead man.

*Footsteps?*

But it's too early, and a Monday, the museum closed to visitors.

He peers into the dim hallway and sees nothing. He must have imagined it, no longer sure what is real and what is not. Gloved hand cupped around his ear he listens, but it's quiet, only the sound of his own heavy breathing and the scudding of his heart.

A few more steps, through the arch and into the Cour Visconti Gallery, the high-ceiling room large enough to hold mural-sized paintings. In the dark, the canvases appear as black rectangles though he can picture them: a landscape by Corot, a famous Delacroix battle scene, Jacques-Louis David's *Consecration of Napoleon*, the dictator clad in outrageous finery, animal skin cape, crown of ivy, a smug look of victory on his face.

It is then, as he pictures Napoleon, that his fevered brain comes up with the explanation he will give later, the one the newspapers will print: *I stole the painting to restore it to its rightful home.*

He will be a patriot, a hero, no longer the immigrant, the man without a home.

Steadier now, he heads down the hallway, mind focused and filled with purpose. He will show them he is someone.

In the smaller Salon Carré Gallery he can just make out the shapes of the paintings, Titian and Correggio and the prize shimmering between them—the lady of the rocks, the vampire who never sleeps, the most famous woman in the world: *Mona Lisa*.

Heart pounding, nerve endings tingling, a dozen thoughts in his brain as he unscrews the small wooden panel from its iron bolts. A man possessed, blind to the shadow of his face reflected, distorted in the glass he himself installed only last week.

It takes all of five minutes.

Then he is moving, the painting clutched to his chest, a shadowy figure darting out one doorway, through another, down a hallway and into a stairwell where he stops to remove the painting's heavy frame and plate glass and leave them behind. Moving again, through a narrow corridor lined with marble sculptures, faster now, panting, sweating, he cuts through an archway until he comes to the side door, the Porte des Arts, all of it exactly as planned, a perfect dream. Until the doorknob does not turn.

He tugs and twists, pulls and jerks but the knob will not budge, his spinning mind the only thing that is moving.

A deep breath, then another until it comes to him: *the screwdriver, of course!* The same tool he has just used on the bolts he now uses to unscrew the hardware until the doorknob drops into his hand and he stashes it in the pocket of his workman's tunic, which he strips off, rolls up and tucks firmly into the back of his belt.

He slides the panel under his shirt, aged canvas abrading his skin as he buttons his jacket over it, his heart beating against the mysterious four-hundred-year-old beauty who has witnessed her own abduction more than once, observed countless assassinations from the wall of Napoleon's bedroom and endured the gapes and stares of millions and now, tired and world-weary she yearns to rest—but her story is far from over.

**December 2019**

**Florence, Italy**

Carlo Bianchi dabbed the handkerchief to his dripping nose. His shop, on the Via Stracciatella, not far from the Ponte Vecchio, was small and cramped, books in shelves, on his desk, scattered around the floor in stacks like miniature Mayan villages, everything covered in dust, the place reeking of mold and damp.

Bianchi was looking for a book on rococo garden design, which he knew was here, somewhere. He finally found it at the very bottom of a tall stack. Lying on his side, beard picking up lint, he was just inching the book out when he saw the man's thick-soled sneakers.

Bianchi twisted his neck for an angled view. "*Posso aiutarLa?*"

The man peered down at him. "Do you speak English?"

"Yes," said Bianchi getting to his feet, slapping dust from his pants and jacket. "One learns many languages in a lifetime of dealing with books."

"I am looking for a diary, a journal that you recently purchased from a French book dealer named Pelletier."

"Pelletier? Let me think. I should have a list of recent purchases," Bianchi said, making a show of sorting through a mass of receipts on his desk. He knew every book he sold or purchased, including those to and from the French dealer, Pelletier, though he never gave out a customer's personal information.

"This journal was written over a hundred years ago," the man said. Pelletier had sworn he'd sold the journal to Bianchi, and people rarely told lies when they had just lost a finger and there was the threat of losing another. "Surely you would remember buying such a book." He laid his hand over Bianchi's then pressed it against the wooden desktop.

"*Si, si*, I remember," Bianchi said, "it was hand-written and in Italian!"

The man eased up, and Bianchi slid his hand out, backing away, practically bowing. "I am sorry—but—the journal—I have already sold it."

"To who?"

"To an old man who collects such things—no one important."

"His name?"

"I don't re—"

The man grabbed Bianchi by the front of his jacket and lifted him off the ground "The name. *Now.*"

Arms flapping, legs dangling a few inches above the floor, Bianchi gasped the name: "G-Gugliermo!"

The man let go and Bianchi landed unsteadily, knocking over a tower of books.

"And where might I find this Gugliermo?"

"He, he is a—" Bianchi tried to catch his breath. "—a *professore*, at the university—in Firenze—but, but I think he is retired." He stole a glance at the window to see if there was

anyone outside, a passerby he might call for help, but the man shifted his body to obscure his view.

“His address.”

“I, I am certain if you inquired at the university—”

The man gave him a dead-eyed stare and Bianchi quickly thumbed through his Rolodex, fingers trembling. He found the card and began to read from it, but the man snatched it from his hand. “You did not read the journal, did you?”

“Me? No, no.” Bianchi shook his head back and forth.

“And yet you knew it was hand-written, and in Italian.”

“Pelletier must have—told me—or—perhaps I glanced at a page, but that was all.”

“I see,” the man said, lips pulling back to reveal tobacco-stained teeth. He slipped the card into his pocket. “And you will not speak of my visit, not to this Gugliermo, not to anyone.”

“No, *signore*. No! Not even to Pelletier. I would never say a word.”

“Of course not,” the man said.

Bianchi was still trying to recover his breath and balance when the man thrust a fist into his chest. Bianchi stumbled back, arms flailing, knocking over another stack of books before he fell.

The man lifted him up, hands around his neck, tightening and squeezing.

Bianchi tried to speak, to plead but managed only a few strangled squawks, the room going in and out of focus.

“No. Not a word,” the man said as he felt the bookseller’s larynx snap.

## Two Months Later

The email had arrived less than two weeks ago and here I was, unable to think of anything else, bolting from my life on a possibility, a whim.

I tried to tamp down my anxiety, stopped to stretch the kinks out of my body, then wheeled my suitcase through one long corridor after another, a mix of exhaustion and adrenaline after a seven-hour flight from New York where I'd been too keyed-up to sleep.

Leonardo di Vinci airport was like most, impersonal, crowded, harsh lighting. The fact that it was named for Leonardo struck me as prophetic, though clearly, they hadn't named it for me. I checked the time, 6:00 a.m. Then searched for the airport train and was proud of myself when I found it, slumped into a seat and closed my eyes, a dozen thoughts buzzing in my brain like gnats.

Thirty-two minutes later I was in Roma Termini, the train station huge, crowded, a throbbing nest of travelers, but with an element of romance, all of those trains hovering just beyond the ticket stalls, belching white smoke into the winter air.

I cut through crowds of people—"scusami, scusami"—thankful to my parents for speaking to me in their native tongue from the time I could crawl, moving from one train to another, clutching my ticket, eyes on the big board searching for *Firenze* as minutes ticked away. I almost missed my train, listed only by its final destination, Venice, a place I would love to have seen, but not now, when I was on a mission.

The train to Florence was clean and new looking, the seats comfortable. I got my suitcase onto the rack above, took off my backpack, and twice nodded off to pictures of pages wafting through the air, and me trying and failing to catch them.

I drank a Coke to stay awake and stared out the window, the landscape going from flat to hilly to distant medieval towns dotting the tops of even larger hills, all of it slightly unreal, as if I were in a movie and not on my way to discovering what I hoped would finally answer a hundred-year-old mystery and twenty years of research in pursuit of my family's most infamous criminal.

An hour and a half later, I was outside of Florence's bustling train station, Santa Maria Novella, in the center of the city, lugging my suitcase over cobblestone streets, hazy sun dipping in and out of low clouds, the air crisp and cold, replaying the events of the past two weeks: receiving the email, buying an open-ended ticket, going to the Italian consulate where I sweet-talked a young woman into giving me a cultural *permesso* and a letter stating I was a university art professor which granted me access to Italian cultural institutions, the call to my cousin in Tucson—a sculptor always eager to make the New York City art scene—who was more than happy to sublet my Bowery loft. A week later I'd left my college classes in the hands of my graduate TA and had had taken off a week before intersession, a rash move for an Assistant Professor hoping to get tenure.



I crossed the wide street in front of the train station into a warren of smaller ones, trying to follow my cellphone's GPS that was constantly rerouting. I had to change directions twice but about ten minutes later came into a large rectangular plaza dominated by a sienna-colored chapel with a red brick dome, the Piazza di Madonna, and there, spotted the hotel, *Palazzo Splendour*, its name spelled out in old electric lettering.

The hotel's lobby was the size of a cramped Manhattan kitchen, the walls in need of a paint job, floors of white variegated marble badly cracked, the only decoration a faded black and white photo of Michelangelo's *David*.

"Luke Perrone," I said to the guy behind the desk—youngish, rosy arms laced with badly inked tattoos, handsome in a drug-addicted sort of way, puffing on a cigarette, cellphone crooked between his ear and shoulder. "*Passaporto*," he said, without looking up. When I asked in my best Italian if I could leave my suitcase and come back later, he held up a finger as if I were disturbing his call, obviously personal unless he called all of the hotel guests "*il mio amore*." I didn't wait for his answer, left my suitcase and headed out.

Google Maps said San Lorenzo was eight-minutes away and seemed easy enough, though I walked the wrong way before realizing I was reading the map upside down. I backtracked, rounded the domed chapel in Piazza di Madonna one more time, and followed the route which led me alongside a series of stacked, ochre structures, then past a long expanse of ragged stone wall with stairs leading to blind arches, which ended at the corner. Piazza San Lorenzo was open and mostly empty, a few tourists, a couple of monks in long brown smocks.

I tried to take it in, realizing what I had passed and where I now stood was all part of one vast complex.

Directly ahead, the sand-colored basilica was rough and unfinished-looking, three arched entrances with heavy wooden doors, all of them shut. To the left of the church was a smaller arch and a dark alleyway, which led me into the famous cloister of San Lorenzo, a place I had only seen in pictures.

A few steps in and it was as if I were entering a dream, the square garden with its hexagonal-shaped hedges and two-story loggia, classic and harmonious, all of it designed by my favorite Renaissance architect, Brunelleschi. For a moment I tried to imagine I was an artist of the High Renaissance, and not some struggling New York painter, who taught art history to pay the bills.

I sighed, my breath a fog in the late morning chill, everything in the courtyard covered in a silvery frost. Three monks in long woolen smocks were wrapping plants with burlap while I shivered in my thin leather jacket. I hadn't thought it would be so cold in Florence. To be honest, I hadn't thought about much after receiving the email.

Dear Mr. Perrone,

One of Professor Antonio Gugliermo's last requests was that I get in touch with you regarding what may have been your great-grandfather's journal. The professor had planned some sort of publication about the journal, which he claimed would be a "revelation." Sadly, his sudden death prevented him from ever writing it.

The journal, along with the professor's books and papers, has been donated to the Laurentian Library, in Florence, Italy. I was the one to catalog his works and placed the journal in a box labeled "High Renaissance Masters."

To see Professor Gugliermo's documents you will need to obtain a cultural *permesso*, which should not be difficult.

If you request the papers, I suggest you do not mention anything about the journal, and would prefer that you kept my name out of the request.

Sincerely,

Luigi Quattrochi [Quattrochi@italia.univerity.org](mailto:Quattrochi@italia.univerity.org)

I had contacted Quattrochi right away and he'd emailed back sounding serious and sane, assuring me of the journal's existence though he couldn't guarantee its authenticity.

For years I'd been receiving letters and emails, ones that invariably demanded money for information regarding my great-grandfather. None had ever panned out. This time the information had come free of charge and with no ulterior motive—at least none I could see.

"*Scusi, signore*—" one of the monks, young, with a russet-colored beard and startling blue eyes. "You wait for library to open?"

"Yes!" I practically bit his head off then apologized. "You speak English."

"A little," the monk said.

I told him I spoke Italian.

"Il bibliotecarlo e' spresso in ritardo," he said, "the librarian is often late."

I checked my watch. It was exactly ten, the library was supposed to be open.

The monk asked where I was from and I said, "New York, but my people are from Ragusa," though I had never been to the Sicilian town and hadn't meant to say where my family had been from; I hadn't meant to say anything.

The monk extended his hand. "Brother Francesco."

"Luke Perrone," I said and glanced back at the door that led up to the library.

"It will open soon," he said. "*Pazienza*."

Patience, right. Never my strong suit, and clearly not now, when I'd bolted from my

life on nothing more than a hunch.

I watched Brother Francesco rejoin the others in the garden, noted him whispering then all three monks looking my way, their eyes narrowed in the cold winter light. I moved into the shadow of the arches to avoid their stares, leaned back against a pillar, pictured my Bowery loft and the haphazard collection I'd begun as a boy in my Bayonne, New Jersey bedroom. It now filled an entire corner of my studio: copies of hundred-year-old newspaper stories, a floor plan of the museum with my great-grandfather's escape route mapped out in red marker, a metal file cabinet crammed with articles detailing the theft and various theories, one drawer devoted to the letters and emails I had begun writing as a teenager to anyone who might know anything about the crime or about my great-grandfather—and the answers, which were few and rarely, if ever, illuminating.

A cold wind whipped through the cloister and I shivered. A tap on the arm, and I flinched.

The young monk again, "*Mi scusi, ma la biblioteca e' aperta.*"

I gave him a quick nod then headed down the arched path to the wooden door, which now stood open.