

CHAPTER ONE

“Light reveals but it also conceals, it illumines but it also blinds: the devastating light of God’s presence, the midday sun bleaching the world of color. Light alters our perceptions as much as it defines them. Intangible, invisible and yet making all visible, light is the ultimate paradox in art: essential to it and yet eternally peripheral, eternally untranslatable. With Caravaggio, light becomes the painting’s darkness, light exposes the shadows of a world of illusion.”
(Edward Donant from his guide to Italian galleries and museums)

Valeriano Cerasi squeezed his black Maserati between a battered BMW and a Ford van. He looked into the mirror and removed a speck from his eye with the nail of one perfectly manicured hand. It was very hot in Sicily even though it was only March and, in spite of the car’s air conditioning, he was already sweating in his dark blue, pin stripe suit. Nonetheless, he straightened his tie and buttoned his collar. Gianni had told him the padre was impressed by wealth and power, an impression that Valeriano easily projected. There was no one in the square that fronted the Church of Messina. It was too hot and everyone had taken refuge in the cooler and more appealing shade of a café or tree-covered courtyard. The church itself had a typical Gothic façade, squatter than it’s Northern neighbors but attractive in a quiet, provincial sort of way.

The interior was dim. Father Bassi was standing by the altar, his back to the entrance. The padre turned and saw Valeriano.

“Si? Posso aiutare, Signore?” Father Bassi walked slowly down the aisle towards Valeriano.

“Si. Sono Valeriano Cerasi...”

“Ah, si, si. Benvenuto, Signore. Welcome to our humble church. Is it not very hot? Already in March but it is so much cooler here in the sanctuary.” Father Bassi smiled genially at Valeriano who smiled perfunctorily back.

“The painting?”

“Ah, yes. It is down below the church, in the crypt. Quite a mess,” Father Bassi said as he led the way. Valeriano followed the father at some distance, discreetly covering his mouth with his handkerchief. Emanating from the padre was a potent body odor made more nauseating by the reek of garlic, which must have been the starring ingredient in Father Bassi’s lunch. When they arrived in the crypt, the padre pressed a switch on the wall and the dim light from two bare bulbs revealed the disorganized state of the room. Somber, dusty paintings representing the gruesome martyrdom of one of the innumerable Catholic saints leaned against the walls, a pile of broken glass had been swept into a corner, boxes of books and a partially open wardrobe full of sacramental objects and religious vestments filled the remaining space. Father Bassi had set the painting Valeriano had driven so far to see on a slightly off tilt table so that the crucified Christ looked as though he were going to slide off the canvas. Murmuring his apologies, the padre lifted the lop-sided end, straightened the work and looked expectantly at Valeriano.

Valeriano had grown up studying the masters of the Italian Renaissance and he had confidence in his ability to recognize a masterpiece when he saw one. This painting—he stepped closer to it, frowning for the benefit of Father Bassi—struck him as having that quality, that immeasurable quality of beauty and sincerity that was only evoked by the greatest of artists.

“And how did you say you found it?” He asked the question carefully, suspiciously. It would never do to give Father Bassi the idea that he might have one of the world’s great masterpieces hidden away in the dingy basement of his provincial church.

“It wasn’t me,” Father Bassi smiled apologetically as though confessing a secret to Valeriano. “A man, an artist he described himself, came to me and said that he would like to look through the basement in search of something he thought he might be able to use as a prop for a painting.”

Valeriano didn’t take his eyes from the painting. He knew all about Gianni, of course. A forger and a smuggler, it was Gianni who had told Valeriano he had to see

the work. He had little doubt that this priest had alerted Gianni before to works that he could smuggle out of Italy to the benefit of them both. Turning his head slightly away from the odiferous priest, Valeriano took the canvas from Father Bassi's hands and walked over to hold it beneath one of the bulbs. "Not the best light in which to view a work of art," he commented. "It certainly appears to be old and it's in terrible condition. So you believe that this work could have been lying here for, what, several centuries? Doesn't it seem rather odd that no one has discovered it before?"

Father Bassi raised his eyebrows and spread his hands in an expansive gesture. "It is not only possible, Signore, it is quite likely. There is much down here that is old and forgotten. We do not spend our time on the past but think only of the future and what we may do in the name of the Lord."

"Where did this artist say he found the painting?"

Father Bassi beckoned to Valeriano who left the canvas and followed him through the maze of jumbled debris. "He found it leaning against the wall here." They were at the back of the crypt where the ceiling became so low they had to stoop. "Behind these paintings." He indicated several ancient canvases, their somber hues so darkened with age that Valeriano could barely make out the figures painted on them. "You are welcome to look at these if you are interested."

But Valeriano had already turned back to the painting on the table. Picking it up, he examined the canvas. "Well," he spoke almost reluctantly. "It has some value to those few like myself who are interested in obscure paintings from this particular period. I will offer you two million lire."

The priest looked scornful and they began the inevitable process of bargaining, which resulted in Valeriano removing the painting for the equivalent of twenty-five hundred dollars. He carried it carefully out of the sacristy and into the late afternoon sun. Once he got outside the church, he scrutinized the work, holding it so that the sun fell directly across the grimy surface. He could be wrong but he thought that there was only one man who painted like this and he had been commissioned to paint four works for this very church. It was assumed that none of them had ever been executed. After all, Caravaggio had been a man on the run. But somewhere there was a record that one of

them had been completed. He would have to make sure, of course. There were certain preliminary tests that would have to be made.

Valeriano carefully wrapped the ancient, darkened canvas. Christ's eyes gleamed at him as he disappeared beneath the bubble wrap. He couldn't be absolutely positive that the painting was an original. It looked like it might be, he felt like it was but whatever the case, of one thing he was certain: this painting was going to be the answer to his prayers.

CHAPTER TWO

“A great painting, like a beautiful woman, is constantly revealing itself yet remains shrouded in mystery. Look at this still life by Claesz. The glint of light (where does it come from?), that glass half full of wine (the forbidden fruit), that tantalizing peel descending from the lemon. I can imagine squeezing it onto those luscious oysters, hmmm? And yet, sumptuous pleasures though we observe, we know that there has been a drama here, perhaps a MELOdrama that is about to unfold with greater violence. The broken glass, the beautiful jeweled cup tipped so beatifically on its side. Something’s rotten in Europe, in the world of art and artifice. What a feast of small surprises, hmmm?”
(Edward Donant)

Anne Langlais smashed the soft, beige beret more firmly on her head as she struggled to drag her bags through the crush of people packed into the small compartment that connected the train cars. They had left the Gare de Lyon in Paris at eight o’clock that evening and already she was regretting the fact that she had not gone first class.

“Oh, mais c’est des fruits et des legumes. C’est bon pour toi.”

“Pour moi, il n’y a que le chocolat et les bonbons .”

The young couple giggled and Anne regarded them with some amusement. She had been lucky really. She had to share her couchette with only this girl and boy who were completely engrossed with each other. The girl had acne and was overweight, he was tall, thin and snorted when he laughed but they were happy and she envied them their unselfconscious pleasure in being with one another.

Anne was a tall, fair-skinned woman with gray-green eyes that flashed and sparkled as sunlight entering the water trembles opaquely beneath the waves. She walked with a slight limp, the result of a fall from a hotel roof in Rome nineteen years before when her pelvis had been pierced by the flagpole on the hotel facade. Her hair was long

and black and pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck. Tufts and tendrils of it were continually working their way out beneath her hat, teasing her by floating elusively across her eyes. For the first hour she had pushed them away, but now, growing impatient, she reached up and jerked off her beret, shaking her head so that the short bangs fell into place. Folding up the soft hat she stuffed it into a great straw bag.

Had she made the right decision to return to Rome? She could, of course, do what she had always done—retreat into solitude and the world of academics but she didn't want to do that any more. Anne had avoided looking at the possibility that her plan could fail but here, on this train speeding to Rome, she was faced with the fact that she was committed whatever unforeseen circumstances might arise. She sat up, her spine straight against the uncomfortable seat back, her book lying face down in her lap. It was strange how John had suddenly reappeared in her life, like some nemesis come to call after all those years.

She looked out of the window as the train jerked into a tunnel—the landscape disappeared, replaced by a dark pane reflecting her face, wan and puffy around the eyes. She wasn't going to be one of those women who aged beautifully, she thought. Anne took a deep breath. Her analyst had told her she had to confront her fear and her anger, that she had to enter her nightmares and vanquish her foes and that was exactly what she intended to do. She pulled out the letter Maya had sent her and read it again.

Dearest Anne,

You can love so many people in so many ways or, an alternative way of putting it, you can present your own rationalization of needs in an attempt to make what you secretly cannot control sound virtuous. I try desperately to make myself a gracious, hard-line, rational, unemotional woman but I'm essentially romantic, passionate and sensitive to any slight of myself as an attractive female. Jealousy is the inevitable result of this combination of the need to be adored and resistance to this need. All of this is just a preface to my confession that Edward and I are getting married and to the hope that you've not been carrying any repressed resentment towards us because we became lovers. I know he still loves you, so I am jealous but not of you, never of you. I'm jealous, I think, of the fact that I can't achieve that coolness which I ache to acquire and which you so naturally possess. It's a grace for you and not a coldness or a pretense to be other than what you are. It's part of your irresistible charm and one that I continually try and fail to emulate. But there, I love you so much and I feel you're such an important part of my life that, much as I love Edward, I feel if only you can forgive, no that's not the word, if only you can

understand and accept what I'm trying to tell you, then I can truly look forward to my life with Edward.

Well, I'm off. I'm going to my favorite haunt, "Les Deux Magots," to drink a glass of champagne and see if I can still attract the young men. I'm really not all that prepared for marriage and its accompanying responsibilities, am I? But then, I do so love Edward—perhaps he'll be the one to make me a virtuous woman.

Yours forever, Maya

Anne looked across at the boy and girl. It was so like Maya to believe that her actions bore no consequences. Her letter was guileless, revealing more about Maya's selfishness than it did any love she had ever felt towards Anne or Edward. "That coolness you possess." Anne closed her eyes and leaned back in the seat. If Maya only knew how hard it was for her, how hard it had been watching Edward trying to hide his increasing infatuation for Maya. Anne knew that Edward still loved her, just as she loved him but they really had been impossible together.

"Art is ultimately a male product," Edward had said. "Even the women who produce art are masculine in their sensibilities, in their desires, in their ambition. Women's role is and has always been to inspire the male. It may be a cliché but, like so many clichés, it's true. Women are, by nature, muses and critics, the graces and the harpies." Naturally, this had not gone down well with Anne—"Don't be such an asshole" she had snapped—nor had Edward, in the end, much cared for her role as harpy. Anne shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She should be grateful to Maya for releasing her from such a relationship but she wasn't. Anne felt the familiar tears well up and she shook her head, determined to shut them out. She missed him. She missed their arguments, she missed watching him paint in the cool, brightly lit studio he had set up in the glass conservatory behind their house, she missed the comfortable way that they lived together, knowing what the other was thinking even without speaking. That's not true, Anne reminded herself, wiping an errant tear with a quick motion of her hand. They had not had sex for months before Edward asked for the divorce. He had been cold and distant when she had tried to talk to him, and, what was truly unforgivable, he had abandoned her, like all the men she had ever known. Except John, Anne thought. She laughed suddenly. How absurd it all was. John had really meant to kill her. Anne realized that

the boy and girl had stopped talking and were watching her. She smiled at them. They whispered to each other.

“No excuses,” Anne told herself firmly and looked out of the window again. This time she was relieved to see, not her face, but the fields parallel to the train passing rapidly in varied shades of green that were turning velvety in the dimming light. The boy and girl had taken out sandwiches and cokes and were happily chewing and drinking. She had brought some cheese, a baguette, and a half bottle of Haut Brion but felt uncomfortable taking them out in front of this couple. In spite of the fact that they didn’t offer her anything or include her in anyway, she would feel obligated to share her dinner and she wasn’t inclined to do that, not tonight, not with them.

The landscape shifted from day to night, the fields and towns and trees losing color until they metamorphosed into sharp, black edges. In Anne’s lap lay Gaudy Night, a mystery by Dorothy Sayers with which she had been trying to stave off her increasing sense of unease. But what, really, could go wrong? She left the book lying face down and stared at her reflection in the darkened windowpane.

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The train jerked on the track, the lights from the stars disappeared and there came the familiar reverberating clack of iron on iron as the train sped through another tunnel and emerged once again in the soft summer night. Anne started awake, stifling a small gasp. She rested her head against the pillow, breathing slowly to quiet her nerves. She was reclining on the seat, her head squashed between the seatback and the windowsill, buffered by the small pillow. The boy and girl were sleeping soundly on the top bunks so she had been able to leave the middle bunk raised, giving her more space. The stale breath of sleep combined with the dim light above the door to create an oppressive atmosphere in the closed compartment. She felt as though she would suffocate if she fell asleep again. She lit a cigarette and leaned her head back against the headrest.

She had dreamed of Edward. He had been lecturing in a huge auditorium. There had been adoring men and women, dancers and musicians and lights and she had been sitting at his feet gazing at him worshipfully. But then some silly woman had spoken of him scornfully. How small and egoistic and fraudulent he was. And there he was exactly

as the woman had described him—a fraud all neatly brushed up and displaying himself coquettishly and Anne had had that same dull, dirty feeling as when he had sat at her table and drunk her wine and brought in his dog, unmasked, to lie on her floor and spread fleas in her furniture and in her hair. How she had resented his smug confidence sitting there. Arriving unannounced after he had left her. Gone off on another erotic fling.

Anne turned on her reading light and began to read. After a few pages she closed the book irritably. At one time she had dearly loved Dorothy Sayers and had rather disloyally rejected Agatha Christie as superficial and facile. Now she found Sayers closed-minded and pettily academic as opposed to Christie's gently humorous representation of human foibles. How tiresome it was to constantly re-orient your opinions; about the people you loved, the books you savored, the places you visited.

Anne looked at her watch—six in the morning. She would be arriving in Rome around eleven where Maya had offered to meet her. Did Maya really believe that her engagement to Edward hadn't affected their friendship? Anne thought that she probably did. She sighed as she walked down the aisle of the train towards the dining car. She might as well get a cup of tea. She might as well go on with her life the way she always did. What difference did it make what she wanted anyway?

Three businessmen and two elderly women were sitting at separate tables in the dining car. As Anne ordered tea in her careful Italian, she was acutely aware of the difference between this trip and the last time she had taken the train to Italy. Then she had been twenty-two: very plump, very eager, very young and naive. In the bar, burly Italian men and hawkish French had shared smoky obscenities, twirling between two fingers the phallic ego of a man's world. They had drunk and smoked with avidity, sharing a camaraderie born of centuries of exclusivity: exclusive of feminine wiles, feminine deceit, the hated Pandora.

She had listened to them with a half smile, already tipsy, a bottle of Chianti swinging lazily from the straw loop hooked around her finger. These had been the older men: men of the Mediterranean, of Gaul, of Cesarean troops and glorified homosexuality. She had felt no particular fondness, no admiration for them, but as she had entered the bar, listening to their incomprehensible chatter, brushing past them, her feelings had been

fiercely contemptuous, fiercely sexual—they had burned and pricked her thighs. Now, in retrospect, as she observed the sedate behavior of the five persons sitting with her in the narrow car, she wondered at her interpretations of the men she had seen. Had it been she who had been fascinated with male camaraderie, male love of a masculine ethos? Had it been her fantasy or theirs that had filled the car with erotic undertones?

When the train was two hours away from Rome, Anne returned to the dining car for lunch. She ordered cold chicken and fruit, bread and Asiago cheese and a small bottle of white table wine. She had spent the morning reading and staring at the passing countryside, impatient to arrive yet feeling increasingly edgy.

She was looking forward to the private showing in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. The discovery of a Caravaggio was rare, exciting if it proved to be the real thing. It would also be interesting to test her knowledge of Caravaggio against Edward's. Edward had written about and studied Caravaggio intensely enough to be considered one of the world's authorities on the great artist. Not that Edward would ever admit that Caravaggio, or anyone else for that matter, was a greater artist than himself. Anne wondered again why the market for Edward's works had dropped so suddenly and, though she experienced a certain satisfaction at the thought of his sudden fall from favor, she was also a bit perplexed. He was talented—there was no doubt about that—so what could have happened to cause this sudden lack of interest in his work?

A distinguished-looking, older man was sitting at a table across from hers reading the "Herald Tribune." Anne placed a slice of cheese on her bread and leaned forward to read the article on the page facing her.

"VALUABLE PIRANESI DRAWING 'DISAPPEARS.'" A Piranesi drawing, which was lent to the Cerasi gallery in Rome, has been reported as having been stolen. The private collector who lent the drawing was notified by Valeriano Cerasi, the well-respected collector and art dealer, some time ago. After making discreet inquiries the gallery has made the disappearance public knowledge in the hopes that the thief may have tried to sell it..."

Anne's heart beat faster. She glanced up to see the man watching her from behind his paper. He smiled at her and graciously extended the paper to her. Anne smiled back

and shook her head. “Non, non, grazie. Mi scusi.” She turned to look out of the window. So the theft had been made public. There was no turning back now.

CHAPTER THREE

“How do you paint Helen of Troy? How do you paint the most beautiful woman in the world? You must look for various manifestations of beauty in nature and put them all together and then you have something more beautiful than nature can produce. Sort of an extracted abstract.”
(Edward Donant)

Maya Kelly put on her black, spaghetti-strap Donna Karan dress with the floppy skirt. She brushed her cropped blond hair back from her brow, applied lip-gloss, slipped on her sling-back shoes and a leather jacket and strode out onto the Rue Rambuteau.

It was late June in Paris and the weather was very changeable; cold and gray, the air redolent with the omnipresent odor of pollution. She recalled the heady smell of exhaust fumes with which she associated her Roman adventures—adventures that had been so often recollected as she stood by a bus stop or crossed a busy road. A dangerous allure—one that was, like MSG, both irresistible and lethal; nicely symbolic of the games of passion played daily on the streets.

Maya shivered and wished that she had worn a hat. She glanced occasionally at her reflection in shop windows, wondering what men thought of her as she ignored their stares, their murmured compliments as they brushed past her. Did they really find her beautiful? Did they see her as a distant object of desire, as some fantastical image of feminine beauty, as a whore? Did the women see her as vain, as ridiculous, as enviably lovely? It was different in Amsterdam, in Paris, in Rome. The farther south you went the more fashionably provocative the clothes, the more open the sexual assumptions, the more reverential the propositions. It was an erotic game that was simultaneously sincere and superficially flattering, genuinely erotic and ultimately meaningless.

It was early and the tables at “Le Jardin de The” were nearly empty. Maya took one where she could sit close to the Stravinsky fountain and watch people wandering around the Pompidou Museum. Suddenly, unexpectedly, the sun came out and the gray fog disappeared. Nikki de St. Phalle’s sculpture of a big-bottomed bather turned her tiny, faceless head and stubby limbs in Maya’s direction, her huge breasts and buttocks a colorful cousin to the Venus of Willendorf. Two doves, wings silver against the blue opaque sky, soared from de St. Phalle’s rotating striped serpent to the buttress of the church of Parousse de St. Merri. In one graceful swoop they flew from 1980 to 1331, from twentieth century sculptures derived from the capricious humor of modern cynicism to a thirteenth century architectural edifice dedicated to a solemn God and faith in an everlasting life.

Maya removed her jacket and ordered a cappuccino. The light had shifted from metallic gray to metallic blue. Her period was two weeks away and already she was feeling heavy. She drank her cappuccino quickly, adding up the days as she did so. Edward was already in Rome. He had not suggested that she accompany him when he had left the week before and she had been disappointed but she had reconciled herself to the fact that that was how it was with Edward. “You must take me as I am,” he had told her when they first moved to Europe, caressing her, half teasing. “And that’s no mean feat.” She had laughed and thought nothing of it at the time.

They had spent the winter in Amsterdam. A charming city and cold in spite of the brown cafes and the bright strings of lights which illuminated the curving bridges across the canals; the Herengracht, the Prinsengracht, the Kaisersgracht. Edward had insisted they ride bicycles like the Dutch. Scarves wrapped around her throat, up to her nose, breathing in warm wool and icy air, she had gone for wine every afternoon at Cafe Luxembourg. That’s where she had met Stephen. Dark, good-looking in a melancholy, slightly ominous way, she had hoped that he would offer to buy her a drink. He had spoken to her twice as he had made his way to the bar but he had given no indication that she could expect him to risk his pride by asking if he could join her. He had surprised her, however, telling her, in a deep, slightly lispy voice, how beautiful she was.

She ordered a bottle of Perrier. The cafe was beginning to fill up. Couples warned one another as they stepped around a pile of dog droppings at the edge of the terrace. Anne should be passing through Paris about now. Maya wondered how they would feel when they saw each other again. Maya had received only a brief note in response to her letter, in which she had made her feelings vulnerably clear. Of course Maya couldn't expect Anne to be really happy about Edward and her but it wasn't like she had done anything really wrong. After all, Anne had told her she was having problems with Edward, that she wasn't happy with him. Edward said Anne wasn't jealous because she wasn't capable of loving anyone but Maya thought it was because Anne was above all the petty emotions like jealousy and envy.

“Madame. Voulez-vous quelque chose?”

Maya started then glanced again at her watch. Twelve-thirty. “Oui. L'artichaut vinaigrette et le filet de rascasse en papillote, s'il vous plait.” ‘The bloating begins,’ she thought. ‘I must try to remain thin without growing weak from lack of food.’ When had she last eaten a meal? Twenty-four hours? Thirty? Stephen was late.

An old man sat down two tables away. He turned the pages of “Le Monde” and began to cough. Thin lips opened wide, reminding her of the discs in Duchamp's “Chocolate Grinder.” Bright blue eyes turned in their sockets as he hacked. The waiter deposited Maya's artichoke and she ordered a half carafe of white wine, ever conscious of the hacking and coughing such a short distance away. His evident lack of concern over the repellent aspects of his physical distress was completely foreign to Maya whose every move was governed by an imagined male audience. She even ordered and ate according to the men around her. With older, very correct men she took small bites, interspersed with sips of water or wine. With younger, more openly interested men, she took on a thoughtful, semi-erotic manner; picking at her food, looking off into the distance, drinking wine and throwing her head back in a state of abandon. The difficulty was to eat what was necessary for the nourishment of your body and soul without allowing the internal pleasure to be registered externally in any way. After taking a sip of water or wine she had a tendency to cover her mouth as though she had just committed an indecent public act.

There were moments when Maya wondered what it would be like to live a life without an audience, without anticipating the effect she had on others. What would it be like to be “normal,” she would think as she sat at a table in a crowded café. To be one of the anonymous group of people she saw enjoying themselves in bars and on the streets, staring at other people, laughing and talking with a freedom of spirit and being that she rarely felt. But, most of the time, she enjoyed the effect she had on others. It wasn't just the vicarious pleasure she took in seeing her reflection in others' eyes, it was the only time she felt truly alive. She thought of Edward and momentarily wished that he were with her. He always made her feel beautiful and secure and he released her from her obsession with her image. It was one of the things she loved about him.

“C'est un jouissance pour moi de faire des bons investissements.” The gentleman was young, correct, boring, wearing the inevitable dark suit. He was in conversation with two other men, dressed in the same discreet style. The three of them glanced in her direction. They had ordered two bottles of red wine, which the waiter had displayed reverentially, almost humbly, a certain indication of a good vintage and a high price. Maya fantasized momentarily on the possibility that they would invite her to join them for a glass of champagne.

Stephen wasn't coming. She was destined to have another lonely lunch. The artichoke leaves were emerald green against the pale amber of the vinaigrette. She was thirty-nine for God's sake. She should know better.

De St. Phalle's blue bowler hat whirled on the far side of the twirling heart, Tinguely's metal skeletons spun and spit.