

CHAPTER THREE

March 19, 1990

The Day After

It had been almost nine months since Antonio had died. On many nights after Alexa was asleep, Portia tiptoed into the library and replayed his saved phone messages. “Hi, Portia . . . it’s me calling to check in with you.” Hearing his voice lent credence to her fantasy that Antonio was still alive. When she awoke the next morning, the bleak reality made her weep until Stansky comforted her in his arms. She was grateful to him and also to Alexa, who made her laugh with imitations of Mr. Snow, her hapless math teacher. Encouraging her artists’ creativity filled her workdays, yet that pleasure was offset by graphic nightmares of her house burning down.

On this chilly March afternoon, Portia closeted herself in her gallery. Her office space offered warmth and comfort. She was doing what she did best: moving photographs of artists’ work around her desk as she designed the new show. The gallery was officially closed, with the phones switched off—a good time to organize Stockwell’s April

opening. He had promised to finish his large, evocative landscapes, even if it meant staying up late for the next few nights.

While the misty tinge of his abstractions might remind collectors of Mark Rothko, they acknowledged Stockwell's gestural brushstrokes could only be his. Portia's exhibition space served as a home for ten emerging artists' paintings, lithographs, drawings, and sculpture. She employed three twentysomething art history graduates, who impressed potential buyers with their knowledge. And she felt proud when her artists' shows were well reviewed in the *Boston Globe* and *ARTnews*. After two years of struggle, the gallery had finally hit an upward swing, though so far none of her artists had become famous.

Toward the end of the day, Portia reached for a pile of bills that lay on her desk. Underneath the top envelope was Monday's *Boston Globe*. The lead headline jumped out:

\$200M Gardner Museum Art Theft

2 Men Posing as Police Tie Up Night Guards

With shaky hands, Portia continued reading the story, running one finger down the list of stolen art. A mention of Vermeer's masterpiece, *The Concert*, stopped her. Placing her elbows on the desk, she covered her forehead with her hands.

"No, no, no!" she shouted at the empty room.

After a few moments she lifted her head. Her forehead felt heavy, throbbing with tension. The framed poster of the Gardner Museum's flowering courtyard on her office wall caught her eye. *Their* special place. The Gardner. She couldn't stop crying until she looked at her watch and realized her family would be waiting for her. She somehow managed to gather a few papers from her desk and jammed them, along with the newspaper, into her leather bag. She hoped that dinner with Stansky and Alexa would help restore her spirits. Instead of walking home, she took a taxi the short distance from her Newbury Street gallery to their South End townhouse with its yellow door. Monticello Chrome Yellow had the effect she'd intended when she chose it, much to Stansky's chagrin. He feared the glow would attract too much attention. She convinced him yellow symbolized warmth and honesty.

Portia fumbled in her purse for the keys and shivered as she turned the lock. She strode down the narrow hall, overheard Stansky and Alexa in the kitchen, and threw open the half-closed door. The bright lights reflected against the three floor-to-ceiling windows, the mustard-yellow drapes reached the black-and-white tile floor, the Welsh dresser was festooned with blue-and-white English crockery, the clunky divan with its flowered cushions sat in a corner, and Normanno Soscia's aquatints of mythological heroines hung along the wall.

"What's wrong?" Stansky asked. "You look awful."

"Thirteen pieces were stolen from the Gardner."

"Oh no." Alexa, in her striped overalls, rushed over to give her mother a hug.

Stansky, who had been at the stove sautéing pasta sauce, dropped his mixing spoon. "I didn't hear about it," he said. "I was in the dark-room all day."

Portia felt the kitchen's sanctity—redolent with pasta Bolognese, oil-drenched chicken, and carrots braised with mushrooms—was violated by the robbery.

Alexa sat next to her. Stansky poured her a glass of Pinot Grigio. She was grateful to be home.

"I've lost the last link to my brother."

"They took *The Concert*?" Stansky's bushy eyebrows rose as he gulped his wine.

She nodded. "Next Monday I'm supposed to lead the Gardner tour. How can I face those empty frames? If the police don't catch whoever did this, I'll never see that painting again." Alarmed at hearing the tone in her voice—its register must have dropped an octave—she felt an accumulated sorrow in its depth. All three deaths in her family had occurred too soon, one after the other. Serafina, her darling mother, had a fatal heart attack two months after Antonio killed himself. The only real family she had left sat there at the table with her.

Stansky strode over to pat her shoulder. "I'm sure they'll be caught."

"Many stolen paintings are never found." Portia looked at Stansky. "I appreciate you comforting me . . . but I have to be realistic." She choked on her words. She grabbed the newspaper from her briefcase and took a deep breath before quoting the journalist: "The police only found shreds of canvas, some paint chips from a large Rembrandt that

had been taken, and glass fragments from the frames that once held the now-missing Degas drawings.”

“Sloppy work,” Stansky said, before he returned to the stove. He shook basil leaves into the pasta sauce and continued stirring.

“No fingerprints. How can detectives not find incriminating clues?” she asked.

“I understand why you’re upset. At least no one was hurt.”

“It’s a huge loss.” Portia put a hand over her heart.

“Of course.” Stansky moved to embrace her. He nuzzled her ear.

She stayed in his arms for a few moments, relishing the warmth.

“How did it happen?” Stansky murmured into her hair.

“Two men impersonating policemen got into the museum by telling the two night guards they were investigating a neighborhood disturbance.”

Stansky returned to the pasta sauce. “Only an idiot would believe that.”

“The guards should have known better—being part-time college students is no excuse.” Portia reached for the *Globe* again. She read aloud the journalist’s description of how the thieves handcuffed the guards, wound masking tape around their mouths and eyes, and tied them to chairs in the basement. “They also disabled the security cameras,” she said. “In total they spent eighty-one minutes inside before taking off with the art.”

Stansky turned away from the stove, his eyebrows raised. “That long?”

“The robbers must have known they had time to remove everything they wanted. They took pieces from three rooms on two different floors.” She put the newspaper down on the table and retied the bow on her white blouse as a way of pulling herself together. Then she turned to face Stansky. “The robbery took place after midnight.”

“Those bastards! They chose Saint Patrick’s eve, when the real police were busy breaking up drunken brawls.”

“Do you think they knew the night guards were Berklee music students?” she asked.

“They were probably smoking dope.”

“That’s not the point.” Tears ran down Portia’s cheeks. “*The Concert* wasn’t protected.”

“It’s okay to cry,” Alexa said, and in her sweetest ten-year-old manner, reached over to caress her mother’s hand. “Uncle Antonio loved that painting.”

“It’s precious, darling—just like you.” Portia raised her daughter’s bangs and kissed her on the forehead, breathing in her Ivory soap scent. “Do you remember it?” she asked her.

Alexa shook her head no.

Portia pointed to the grainy picture in the newspaper.

“I can’t really see it well,” Alexa said.

“I’ll be right back.” Portia ran upstairs. She grabbed a book on the Dutch masters from their library shelves as she calmed herself for Alexa. When she returned to the kitchen table, she motioned for her daughter to move her chair closer.

She opened the book to a crisp image of *The Concert*. “See the space below. It’s shadowy. Vermeer’s interiors shimmer and threaten.”

“Wow,” Alexa said.

“Can you imagine the harpsichord’s sound?” Portia asked.

“Sort of.” Alexa pointed to the figure on the right. “Why isn’t she singing?”

“She’s keeping time for the other two musicians.”

Stansky sat down to join them. In his black turtleneck sweater, he looked every inch the bohemian art photographer. He stroked his beard. “If you could read a crime scene the way you read paintings, you could be a sleuth instead of an art dealer.”

Pleased by the compliment, Portia ran her fingers through her hair. “You know I love mysteries, especially Donna Leon’s.”

“Me too,” Alexa chimed in. “I want to be Nancy Drew.”

“Nancy Drew has great instincts. They’re almost as good as yours.”

“You mean I could become a detective when I’m older?”

“You can be whatever you want.” Stansky beamed at his protégé. Although Alexa was not his biological daughter, Portia knew he loved her with a parental passion. He made sure to be there for her when she came home from school. He helped her with homework. He’d bought her a bicycle for her tenth birthday and taught her how to ride it.

Portia leaned over to kiss Alexa on the cheek, and her gaze fell on the large black-and-white floor tiles. “Do you remember, *The Concert’s* floor was my inspiration for our kitchen?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“It’s dinnertime. Let’s stop discussing the robbery,” her husband urged.

And though Portia agreed with Stansky, the loss of *The Concert* festered inside her.