

Prologue

September 1943, Sant'Angelo in Vado, Italy

Instead of being warm in his own bed, Ricardo Minucci was standing under the portico on the edge of the piazza, sheltering from the piercing wind. His hands shook as he attempted to light a cigarette. He could no longer be sure if it was from the cold or fear. A couple walked past on the other side of the road, their dog meandering in and out of the darkened shop doorways, sniffing. He could hear their laughter as they turned down a narrow street. The man called the dog, and they disappeared from Ricardo's sight.

Five more minutes. This was a fool's errand. He'd give them five more minutes, and then he was heading home. He glanced up and down the cobbled street. Nothing in sight. Ricardo strained to look at his watch in the weak light of the streetlamp.

A low purr. A car was moving slowly down the road toward the piazza. No headlights. Ricardo held himself back beneath the portico, waiting.

The car stopped outside the theater, and the engine was turned off. Ricardo looked around one more time and then decided to move. He

walked across the piazza and knocked on the driver's window. It opened a couple of inches.

Ricardo gave the agreed-upon signal. "Are you looking for the cathedral?"

"I'm a friend of the prelate," replied the driver. Ricardo nodded. Right answer. The man opened the car door and got out, stretching his limbs. He shook Ricardo's hand. "Glad you're still here. I was forced to take a short detour."

Ricardo noted that the man was wearing an expensive-looking gabardine raincoat and brown leather shoes. *Not a farmer then.* The two men walked to the rear of the car, and the stranger opened the trunk. He pulled a gray blanket to one side, uncovering a large, thick parcel wrapped in some kind of waterproof paper.

"Not ideal, I know, but we didn't have a lot of time."

Ricardo wasn't sure what to make of this information, so he simply nodded again. He cleared his throat, trying to dislodge the phlegm that seemed to be permanently lodged there.

"My car's parked around the corner. I got word to the superintendent that I'd make the delivery to the Rocca at dawn. I wasn't sure when you would turn up, so I didn't want to promise any sooner."

"Like I said, had a spot of trouble. Over to you now. This is the last leg, hopefully."

Ricardo grunted his assent. "Do you know what's in there?" he asked, pointing at the parcel.

"A couple of small Giorgiones, I understand. Two of his lesser works, but still priceless." The man pulled a silver cigarette case from his pocket and opened it, offering a cigarette to Ricardo. The stranger lit both cigarettes and leaned against the car, inhaling deeply. He didn't seem to be in a hurry to leave.

"Why'd you get involved in this, then?" the man asked, pointing at the trunk. He looked at Ricardo with interest, taking in his patched jacket and worn pants. Ricardo knew he looked like somebody who worked in the fields rather than for an art museum.

"I did my fighting last time around. Still wanted to do my part though." Ricardo wasn't sure why he felt compelled to explain himself. The men stood in companionable silence, smoking. Ricardo was less

Saving Madonna

nervous now that there were two of them. They could be two friends enjoying their last smoke together at the end of the night.

“I was wounded at Isonzo in 1915, in one of the first battles,” said Ricardo, feeling the need to clarify. “Our leaders had joined the Allies by then.” He grunted again, this time with disdain. “Can’t trust those in power. Don’t trust them this time around either. Definitely wasn’t going to put myself on the front lines again.”

“So why do this then?” persisted the man.

“My cousin asked me to help. He works at the museum. Makes sense to me. No telling what damage will be done otherwise.”

Ricardo lapsed into silence once more. The two men leaned against the wall of the theater, smoking their cigarettes.

After a few minutes, Ricardo said, “I saw too much of that. Damage, I mean. Wanton destruction. Thieving. Soldiers don’t care what happens when they’re being shot at. Valuable things get stolen or worse when there’s chaos.”

The man nodded his agreement. Ricardo crushed his cigarette on the cobblestones. Too much small talk for his liking.

“I’m off. Let me take them then.” He lifted the parcel carefully from the trunk. “Safe journey back, Signore. I’ve got it from here.”

Without saying another word, Ricardo carried the parcel across the piazza toward the small street where he had left his car. As he turned the corner, he heard an engine starting up again and the stranger’s car beginning to move away.

Ricardo gently placed the parcel in the trunk of his own car. Time to go home and get some sleep. In a few hours, the paintings would be safely hidden in the Rocca, far from the front lines, and any inquisitive German. *Best place for them*, thought Ricardo.

Chapter One

Early October 1943

Marco was afraid of the biggest pig. Papa always laughed when Marco complained that the pig was intent on knocking him over. Papa said the pig was an animal and had no emotions, and Marco would never be an effective farmer if he was scared of the animals. But Marco sensed the pig looking at him with his mean, small, beady eyes each time he struggled in with the heavy pail. Feeding the pigs was his least favorite job, and a small jolt of fear went through him every time his mother reminded him of it.

“You’re just a *bambino*, Marco,” scoffed his cousin Gianni. “Watch me—I’m not afraid of him!” Gianni poked the big pig’s flank with the small stick he was carrying and got a grunt in return. The pig attempted to shuffle away, but it was hard for the huge creature to move easily in such a confined space. Gianni turned back to his cousin.

“Come on! Hurry up so we can go and help Luca herd the sheep.”

Marco spread the feed into the trough, spilling some of it on the ground, and then, with Gianni’s help, scattered fresh hay on the floor. All the pigs in the small room, who had been ignoring them up to this point, stood up and approached the trough.

“Let’s go!” shouted Gianni.

The two young boys ran out of the pigsty, hollering at each other. Marco, ever cautious, made sure the small wooden gate was locked behind him. He was all too aware of the punishment his father would mete out if any of the pigs managed to escape. Marco tossed the pail away before the two of them began racing up the hill to the field where Luca and the dogs were attempting to corral the sheep into some kind of order.

It was a beautiful October day in the valley, with clear blue skies and a hint of colder weather in the air. The leaves on the trees were turning russet red, and some had already carpeted the hard ground. The black crows, which Marco had to admit he was also afraid of if he was being honest with himself, huddled together on the barest branches of the oak trees lining the field, cawing loudly like sentinels as the boys ran past.

As they approached the top of the hill, Marco slowed down, his breath ragged. He conceded the race to his cousin and stood for a moment, surveying his valley kingdom. The two-story stone house he shared with his family and his cousin’s family looked small from this vantage point. Even the giant oak tree that dominated the front yard did not appear as imposing as it did when Marco and Gianni tried to climb it, which they did frequently. He could see his mother and his aunt unpegging white sheets from the clothesline and his father repairing loose tiles on the slate roof. Wisps of smoke rose from the kitchen chimney. Marco smiled at the sight because he suddenly remembered that a relative of his worst enemy was getting slowly roasted on the fire in the kitchen. He licked his lips in anticipation of the dinner. Few meals had been worth anticipating recently.

Marco looked beyond his home to a small wood that stretched out from the rear of the property down to the narrow white road snaking through the valley toward the distant hilltop town of Peglio. His home was called Ca’Boschetto (House of the Copse) because of these trees, and Marco knew it would soon be time for his father and uncle to gather their friends and bloodhounds for the annual truffle hunt. Their small wood was known far and wide as a fruitful location for the illusive and highly sought-after fungi, and the truffle hunt was one of the highlights of the season.

Saving Madonna

Beyond the wood, a patchwork of fields that had been parched brown after the harvest in the heat of August was beginning to turn into shades of green from recent rain. Marco spotted a couple of deer making the most of the fresh grass. Something else caught his eye as it glinted in the distance. Marco lifted his hands to his brow to deflect the glare of the autumnal sun. Whatever was flashing in the sunlight was moving toward their farm. The ox-drawn carts that often made this journey on the back road couldn't move that quickly. He squinted. Something was not right.

“Luca! Luca! I can see a car coming. Look at the road!”

His older brother turned away from the flock and walked over to where Marco was standing. Luca stared at the distant vehicle for a minute and his face darkened. “Marco, Gianni, run down to the house and tell Papa that there might be Germans coming. Move!”

The two boys, frightened by the edge in Luca's voice, ran back down the hill. Luca urged the dogs to herd the sheep toward the trees lining the field, where they would all be shielded from both the sun and any prying eyes. He felt his heart racing, but he knew it made sense to stay hidden. Better safe than sorry. Young men of fighting age were prime targets for the recent unwelcome arrivals in their neighborhood. It was rare to see a car on these rough country roads, and Luca had a bad feeling about this one. He remembered that his twin cousins, Tommaso and Matteo, were even further away from the house, repairing fences in another field. *Best they stay there.* Luca watched the car painstakingly make its way along the rutted road toward his home. His father would know what to do.

Papa started climbing down from the roof once he heard the shouting as the two boys approached the house. He listened to their garbled sentences as they talked over each other. Marco's father grabbed his bag of tools and stashed them in the back of a wooden cart standing in the yard. He then turned his attention to the boys, who were looking at him with scared faces.

“Boys, run into the house and grab the bottles of wine from the kitchen table.”

The two families were preparing for a party to celebrate *Nonna*'s eightieth birthday. Marco's mother and aunt had been cooking for days. Meals, such as they were these days, had been noticeably leaner for months as the two cooks had to make sure they could eke out enough food for the guests. Signor Francesco Marchetti from the neighboring farm, Papa's closest friend, had ridden over earlier in the day with four bottles of his prized red wine as a contribution to the upcoming feast.

“Hide the bottles under the straw in the pigsty. Go now!” Papa pushed Marco and Gianni in the direction of the house while his wife and sister-in-law looked at him in bewilderment.

“Whether it's the militia or Germans, they'll want something. We might have to give them some food. We can't hide the roasting pig, but I'm damned if I'll let them take the wine.”

Marco could hear the car getting closer. Fear constricted his chest as he and Gianni raced up the stone steps to the family living quarters on the higher floor. Pushing open the thick oak door, they stumbled into the large room. Marco could see the roasting pig turning on the spit in the kitchen fireplace. The mouthwatering smell from the charred flesh almost derailed him for a moment. His cousin grabbed two of the wine bottles from the table and directed Marco to pick up the other two. Their grandmother woke up from her nap in the comfortable chair by the fire.

“What are you two boys up to?” she muttered, confused by the sudden noise.

The boys ignored her, rushing back through the doorway and clattering down the steps again with the bottles. They ran through the door on the ground floor, where the animal pens were situated. The horses, tethered to their hitching rings, snickered at the interruption. Marco stopped short, just as fearful of facing the big pig again as he was of the approaching car.

“Come on, Marco,” Gianni said urgently. “Hurry!”

They hustled into the small room that served as a pigsty through the arched entrance from the stable. The big pig raised its head from the trough. It did not seem at all happy to be disturbed while eating. The

boys hesitated for a moment. They looked at each other and, with a mutual nod, rushed to the pile of straw and excrement, fell on their knees, and pushed the bottles into the muck.

“Cover them. Cover them,” whispered Gianni in a panic.

Marco wasn't sure if Gianni was keeping his voice down to avoid upsetting the pigs or because he was afraid of what was about to happen. Their job completed, they stood up and attempted to wipe the incriminating mess from their knees. Rather than disturbing the horses again, they ran straight out of the back gate. Marco, following his cousin, saw him run right into the arms of a tall, blond soldier.

“Steady, *ragazzo*,” said the stranger in halting Italian. He laughed as he grabbed Gianni's arms and held him back. “What's the emergency?”

Marco stared up at the man's gray peaked cap with an eagle insignia on the front and then down at a pair of highly polished black boots. The three soldiers he could see standing by the car in the middle of the farmyard were not dressed as smartly.

Marco scanned his father's face, trying to decipher his reaction to these unexpected visitors. Papa's face betrayed nothing. The officer was keeping a tight grip on Gianni. For once, Marco was happy that he had been slower than his cousin.

“Signor Rossi, Major Heinrich at your service.” The man holding Gianni bowed his head in the direction of Marco's father. “We heard a rumor in town that congratulations might be in order. Where is your mother?”

“She is napping.” Papa's voice sounded curt. He was not being as friendly as he usually was when people came to the house. The Germans smirked at each other and waited for their commanding officer to say something else.

“Well, that is a shame. We heard in the market in Sassocorvaro that your wife was trying to procure extra provisions, so you can understand why I wanted to pay you a visit.” The tall slim man smiled and looked at each of the family members in turn.

“Since being posted here I have learned that you and your neighbors do not seem to understand the meaning of the word ‘rations’. You farmers have it much better than your compatriots in the cities. But my orders are to impose some discipline around here. We wouldn't want

any essential foodstuffs diverted to those *partigiani* hiding in the hills would we?"

Marco could not help shivering. This was not a social visit, and he did not know what the Germans would do if they found the wine. The officer might be smiling, but it seemed to Marco that it wasn't a real smile. He forced himself to stay still, wanting to cry.

Marco's mother stepped forward.

"Signore, we do the best with what the Lord provides. And sometimes he overdelivers. I was able to make ravioli this morning, because I found some wild mushrooms in the woods yesterday. So many! I said to my sister-in-law, here's something to celebrate . . ." She stopped and drew a breath. "I'm sure you aren't interested in all that, Major. What I meant to say is, we have enough pasta for the birthday—we would be happy to give you some if you like." Mamma spoke in her usual cheerful voice without a hint of antagonism. Marco held his breath.

"Sounds delightful, Signora Rossi. Shall we?"

The major let go of Gianni and signaled Mamma to walk in front of him to the steps of the house. Papa and Zia Maria started to follow, but the officer put up his hand. "No need to make a fuss. Why don't you stay here with the young ones?"

Without waiting for a reply, the major turned to his men. "Private, Staff Sergeant, search the lower floor—see what else you can find. Captain Müller, wait here with our new friends."

Two of the soldiers hurried into the animal quarters on the ground floor while Major Heinrich followed Mamma upstairs to their home. Captain Müller stood tall with his hands behind his back, not saying a word. Marco swallowed hard, trying not to throw up, and squeezed his eyes shut as tears formed. The soldiers would find the wine and then Marco and his family would all be shot. He started shaking again.

The next five minutes dragged on. Marco tried to focus his attention on the hill where he knew Luca was standing under the trees with the sheep and his dogs. His older brother was hidden from view but knowing that he was close made Marco feel better. He did not dare look at his father.

Loud noises came from the house. As the officer came down the steps carrying an earthenware pot, his two men emerged from the lower

Saving Madonna

floor, one of them holding a small, squirming pig. The men were laughing at the squeals coming from the terrified creature.

“Supper, sir! There was a bigger one, but it was too large to move.”

Major Heinrich nodded at his men and then turned to Papa. “You forgot to mention the roasting pig in the kitchen, Signor Rossi, but your wife has cut some generous slices for me and my men. And she has given us some ravioli. I don’t know why you farmers are always complaining about food shortages. I was able to say ‘*Auguri*’ to your mother after all—shame we cannot stay for the feast.”

Captain Müller opened the trunk of the car and, taking the pot from the major, placed it inside before getting into the back seat. The two younger soldiers sat in the front, the one holding the wriggling piglet in the passenger seat. The major looked around the farmyard one more time, as if committing it to memory. He gave a short bow to Marco’s mother and aunt and then turned to Marco’s father, the smile gone.

“I control this area now. The rules will be enforced. *Ci vediamo*, Signore. I am sure we will see you—and your family—very soon.”