

LATAYNE C. SCOTT

The Mona Lisa Mirror Mystery

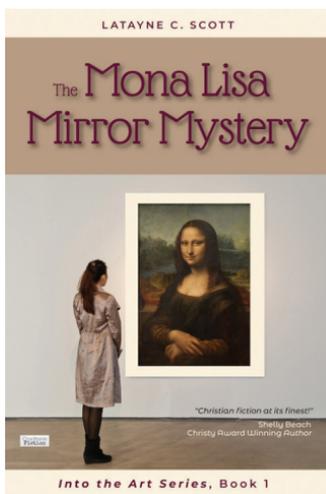


"Christian fiction at its finest!"

Shelly Beach
Christy Award Winning Author

Cruciform
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Into the Art Series, Book 1



THE MONA LISA MIRROR MYSTERY

Into the Art Series, Book 1
by Latayne C. Scott | 108 pages

Night at the Museum *meets*
A Wrinkle in Time!

Addy's three friends don't know what to think when Addy tells them she "whooshed" right back into time and met a quirky Leonardo daVinci. Is it a dream? And what do the girls do when they have just as much drama in the present?

"Christian fiction at its finest!" –Shelly Beach, Christy Award-winning author

"Crosses space and time...The Mona Lisa Mirror Mystery is for the lover of mysteries and art." –Patti Hill, author, *The San Clemente Bait Shop; Telephony*

"A book your teen won't want to miss. . .I will recommend it over and over." –Celeste Green, Academic Dean, Oak Grove Classical Academy

"So imaginative, so engaging. Well done." –Sharon K. Souza, author, *What We Don't Know*

"The characters are well developed and the plot has a way of drawing you directly into the action. I can't wait to read the next one." –Joy Capps, reviewer, HomeSchoolLiterature.com

The
Mona Lisa
Mirror Mystery

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Dedicated to young readers, who are my hope for the future.

The Mona Lisa Mirror Mystery

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“*Mona Lisa* is a L’Engle-ish blend of family, fantasy and adventure, friendship, and deep wisdom.”

Kathleen Popa, author, *To Dance in the Desert*;
The Feast of St. Bertie

“May we all. . .*whoosh* away into lives full of truth, art, and life-enriching thoughtful abandon.”

Stephen Collins, Associate Headmaster,
Riverbend Academy

Chapter One

So my dad always told me, from the time I was little, that a woman reached the full bloom of her beauty at age sixteen. Of course that led to another discussion about being perfect in heaven. And if someone died before that time, would they be sixteen forever in heaven?

Or on the other hand, did all old women regress to age sixteen at the pearly gates? (But Dad usually chickened out on that one—I think the idea of all teenagers in heaven made him nervous.)

Long story short, I kept that in my mind all my life, about becoming sixteen and the full bloom (whatever that meant exactly), and I asked him about it every once in a while. He's pretended not to remember saying that, but Mom gives him the look.

And so last week, early in the morning on September 11, I couldn't wait to get up and see what kind of transformation had taken place.

I took one look in the mirror at my hairline's crown of zits and my bleary eyes and bed hair and elbows (even the best parts of me kinda look like elbows) and knew, if this was the best it was going to get, I was in serious trouble.

So I cornered Dad at breakfast. It was hard to get him to look away from the screen on his phone to talk to me. He didn't want to look at me. Man, I didn't want to look at me.

"Tell me again about the full bloom of beauty, and all that," I said.

"What?" He was screen-eyes, me-nose.

"Maybe it was supposed to be . . . seventeen," he said. "Happy birthday anyway, Addy." He hugged me and kissed me on the top of the head.

I went back into the bathroom. I squinted and the fuzzy me in the mirror looked better. There's my grin—nice white teeth. I have these braids and they're thick as ropes. Maybe there was hope. Maybe I could find a boyfriend too proud to wear glasses. A hot boyfriend, that is. Of course, a hot, spiritual boyfriend. Humble and nearsighted.

Fast forward to now. My phone is buzzing, and nobody is wishing me happy birthday since that was last week.

(Not exactly happy anymore, and not exactly my birthday. F: When my parents adopted me on a Tuesday, nobody could quite remember whether I'd been born the Friday before, or the Saturday. Some-

time around September 12 my blonde birth mama and my dark little Mexican Indian dad had stopped in at the adoption agency in Clearwater, Florida, and presented tiny me to the agency, sort of like dropping off a donation at the Goodwill. Then my birth mom stayed just long enough to pick Mom and Dad's pictures out of a photo album, just as you'd scroll through Amazon to find the right color of backpack to order.)

"Hi," I say into the phone. I glance at my Mom as she pushes a warm chocolate chip scone toward me and wonder if she feels like she won any kind of lottery with me. What a shock it must have been to a couple of former hippies to find they couldn't naturally have a baby. So they did the next best thing by recycling somebody else's kid.

"Hi," I say again, then I look at my phone. I feel stupid because the phone didn't ring for a voice call—it's a text message from Lace.

Getme outta here

She's my smart friend. The one with great grammar. This must be bad. I pour myself a glass of milk and lay a banana—the last one—by it.

Need rescue?

Yes—just found out I'm getting kicked out of my bedroom

Out of town company again?

Yes. Can I come hang out?

Come on!

For sure I need to talk to her, or somebody, because I've got something on my mind.

She's the only one of my friends who has her own car, and even with early morning traffic, if she avoids

the Plaza area, she'll be here in fifteen minutes. Santa Fe is just not that big a town.

I look across the kitchen table and through the window see the courtyard starting to crank into activity. The cottonwood trees are their own brand of blaring green and gold, and the morning light through the edges of the leaves looks like moldy dust rippling all over the old picnic tables and the fire pit where we hang out sometimes.

Two doors down, the Hernandez kids, all five of them, burst through the bottom portion of a screen door without even opening it. They all have their superhero lunch boxes and are heading toward the bus stop. I kind of imagine their mom is leaning back on the couch, saying "*Ay, Ay, Ay*, somebody will have to fix that screen again."

The rest of the community's kids—the Brown twins, little Elizabeth Pham, and the Baca kids—meander down the sidewalk.

Old Mrs. Grayson is sweeping the sidewalk, not just in front of her door, but everyone's, like she has done every morning since she arrived here at La Paz four years ago. She waves to Mr. Tsosie and tries saying good morning to him in Navajo (she's been practicing), and his eyebrows raise so I figure she's close.

Living in an "intentional community" with an assortment of really different Christian people has its pluses and minuses. On the one hand, we are all together at La Paz for a purpose and we take care of each other. On the other hand, we are all together. *All* the time.

Across the way, Mr. Tsosie is opening the door to

the pottery workshop, where he supervises making the ollas, the clay pots that rich people buy like crazy to help water their patio tomatoes. Past the shop, on the other side of the woodpile for the kiln, I can hear the chickens protesting the fact that nobody has fed them this morning, and I'm pretty sure it might be my turn.

It's Thursday. It is *my* turn. I throw on my clothes and trot over to the place where we keep the animals. The chickens know the sound of the feed being put into the bucket and they start griping. By the time I've filled their water troughs and scattered the feed to some totally ungrateful birds, I see Lace's old Camry pulling into our parking lot.

Don't let her looks fool you. She's all angelic with blonde hair and you could lose your thumbs in her dimples when she smiles, but she doesn't have a great life, and she's definitely not smiling now.

"This time nobody even asked what I wanted," she says.

Chapter Two

“Let’s go eat something,” I say, and she nods that this is a good idea. But when we get inside my house, a woman is sitting at the table, and she’s got a mug of coffee and is eating my banana, and a little kid in her lap is drinking my glass of milk and eating a scone. He has some kind of rash. My mom is talking to her, cooing at the kid—maybe it’s a girl?—telling the lady that the clinic won’t open for a while, and just make herself comfortable.

“You know them?” Lace whispers.

“No, but I was on a first-name basis with that banana,” I whisper back. Lace and I exchange looks that say, “See, there you go.” I smile half-heartedly at the guests, get two scones and two bottled waters.

“Stand back,” I remind Lace when we get to the

end of the hall. I pull a rope that's hanging from the ceiling and a space above opens up with a ladder that slides down. We climb up the ladder to my secret attic, I call it.

"Sheesh." Lace is looking around my room. "Guess you reached your goal of covering up all the walls." And it's true, the ugly drywall that never looked right even when I painted it is now invisible. Or at least covered up. I've constructed shelves out of scrap lumber and brackets and they are loaded with pottery I've made and books. Since the wall doesn't matter anyhow, I've glued pictures all over it. Some are my own art. I also disassembled several art history books I found at garage sales, and my room is now a gallery of picture-planets all around a sun, and that sun is my favorite, the Mona Lisa. This painting has sent me into an Internet search for everything about her and Leonardo daVinci, the man who painted her.

Lace sidles up to the painting and imitates the smirk or smile or whatever is going on with that lady.

Should I tell Lace now about what happened?

Not yet.

"So who's invaded your room this time?" I ask Lace as she devours her scone.

"An uncle who's Mr. Perfect, but not so perfect that his wife wanted to stay married to him. Divorced him flat after only two years. All my life I've heard about Uncle Steve this and Uncle Steve that, but since he lived in Cincinnati, it wasn't exactly on our way anywhere and he never came here before."

I feel for Lace. At least in my house I'm used to people coming and going, but she lives in a house that's

pretty enough to be on Pinterest, and when people from out of town come to visit, her mom goes frantic because they don't have a guest room. She knows the Bible says to be hospitable, but they have a three-bedroom house and Lace's little brother Roo still wets the bed sometimes, so they keep him and his plastic sheets right where they have always been.

"That's what I get for passing potty training," she says wryly. "My room gets rented out."

"Your parents are charging rent?"

"No. Well, at least not that I know of. But he's taken over half my closet, and I'm sleeping in the living room. He doesn't look like he wants to move on anytime soon. Uncle Steve." She says the name like it has too much salt on it.

I have the mental image of her lime-green-and-electric-blue bedroom and her closet of all her sweaters and jeans and school uniforms crammed together next to some guy's suits and gym stuff.

Then I realize that my friendship with Lace is like that closet—I'm the gym clothes next to her fashion-istaism when people look at us. I mean, she's rich and I'm anything but. She's like gorgeous and I . . . well. Braids. Teeth. Everything else is pretty plain.

But honestly, she looks perfectly happy to be lounging in my old camo beanbag chair and licking chocolate chips off her fingers. I just know that it's not the right time to talk to her about what's on my mind.

For the first time, I notice her backpack full of books. She came to stay awhile. I point to my shelf of schoolbooks. She sighs at the signal and pulls out a binder.

Lace attends a classical Christian school where she studies Latin and some ginormous lit book—seriously, it weighs ten pounds—along with the regular stuff like algebra and science. The classes are all day on MWF, so she does homework all day on TTH.

I'm home schooled, and Mom is my teacher. Well, by now, after ten years of it she's more like a supervisor. And where else can you go to school in pajama pants and do all your lessons on a porch swing. And get science credit for going to the doctor and researching the virus you have?

Since I have a whole book to read by tomorrow—on Renaissance art, my choice of course—Lace and I stay sprawled over the beanbag and the bed (except when we go downstairs for a PBJ). Mom comes up to check on us, gives me some feedback on the notes I'm taking, but generally leaves us alone because we're quiet.

We spend until 3:00 studying and keeping an eye on the clock. At that magic hour at which homeschool kids—in waves across the globe—rejoice, Lace shuts the big book with a *whomp*, stuffs in her backpack a report she's outlining about *The Iliad* and how it compares to something else I never heard of, and begins some serious texting. She looks up from her phone as it buzzes with replies.

"I sent a group text to Michaela and ZZ to see if they want to hang out after their soccer practice," she says. The four of us—Lace, Michaela and ZZ and I—met and became friends over a year ago when we all worked together on one of La Paz's community outreach projects.

Michaela and ZZ (short for Zrita Zdunek: In her words, “I’d-like-to-buy-a-vowel-please”) kind of got rooked into the project because they were caught texting during a don’t-text-while-driving assembly at Santa Fe High and their punishment was community service. Lace came with her parents, and we four girls kind of clumped together that day at our open-air neighborhood health fair, handing out canned food and my Mom’s granola bars and coupons for free clinic visits.

At first the other girls were kind of freaked out by the fact that most of the mothers of little kids looked like they were our age, and couldn’t speak much English and didn’t seem to have any men around. But as the day went on, everyone seemed to figure out what I see every day at La Paz: People are people, even if they’re poor or you can’t understand a word they’re saying. At the fair, everyone was able to understand the word *gratis*—free—for the health care and food.

So Michaela and Lace and ZZ and I all exchanged phone numbers at the end of it. It took a lot of guts for me to invite them to another work day, but I figured I could kind of bribe them, with some of La Paz’s famous honey, to work on a flower bed near the beehives; and they came that time, too. Later we all did a Saturday at our food co-op.

From that time on, I knew they’d gotten used to La Paz. They weren’t uncomfortable about it at all, even though Michaela’s not exactly a church person and ZZ stopped going to catechism and just calls herself a “searcher.”

Our friendship kind of welded together when

Lace's parents included us in a rafting trip up in northern New Mexico. There's something about knowing that you could actually die together in the Thunderdome Rapids wearing a Farmer John wetsuit, splash jacket, and helmet. Just imagine Hamlet's dead Ophelia floating in the water wearing this gear, ZZ had said, and we could hardly paddle for laughing.

We just totally like hanging out together, and feeling good about helping other people sometimes, though that's not the point so much these days.

And I have something to tell them that I hope doesn't ruin it all. Today's the first time we're all going to be together since The Very Strange Thing happened, and I need to talk to them about it.

I'm afraid they might think I'm crazy.

Chapter Three

Michaela is trying to fold up what she calls her horse legs (read: long, brown, skinny, and fast) and put them under her so she can sit on one of the old log stumps around the fire pit. She's still wearing her school soccer uniform, and so is ZZ. I'm handing out coat hangers and veggies and wieners and trying to get the wood to stay lit.

"You got any handitizer?" Michaela asks. Nobody wants to take the time to go inside to wash hands. Lace, of course, has plenty.

Michaela looks at the wieners suspiciously.

"These aren't vegan, are they?" She holds a piece up and sniffs it. Ever since I told her Mom and Dad went vegan for three years when they first got married,

she tested everything at our house. Never mind that it always tastes good.

“Nope, I bought the pig flesh and nitrates myself,” I say.

She relaxes and pops a piece into her mouth. Her eyes close as she chews. Her African-American skin is the color of espresso with two creams and when she closes her eyes and then opens them, you notice how almost scary her green eyes are. But they are laughing at me.

“Nitrates,” she says. “Hey, food names can be useful. Here’s a randomcivity for you: If you haven’t memorized the lyrics for a song in chorus class, if you just sing ‘riboflavin, riboflavin, riboflavin,’ nobody will notice.”

I look at my three friends in the courtyard of La Paz and we’re like a little United Nations in the middle of a compound of Other Nations.

There’s a cold wind stirring up, and everyone else in the compound was smart enough to go inside for the evening. But this is the only place I’m pretty sure I can talk without being overheard. These are the only people I can trust.

(Love my mom and dad. Great people. Great servants of the Lord.)

(Totally good at least part of the time with me with some of my weirdnesses.)

(Totally would lose it, if I told them. They’d be talking about the collapse of western civilization over this one.)

“So, I wanted to run something past you,” I start.

“It’s a guy, isn’t it! Oh boy!” ZZ is starting to jab

her coat hanger toward me, and I have to jerk to protect my knees.

“No. . .”

The silence that follows tells me nobody really thought it was a guy anyhow.

“When you grin like that, I’m not sure what you’re thinking,” Lace says. I concentrate on not smirking.

“I had a kind of an experience a few days ago. . .” I say.

“And it’s not a guy?” ZZ says hopefully. I think she was trying for a messy bun, but her frizzy red-brown hair has escaped and makes a messy halo around her head.

“Not that kind of experience.” This isn’t going very well.

Lace is frowning at the fire and rotating the coat hanger, but all her food just stays in place, burning on the bottom.

I squirm. “Anybody want more zucchini to put on your wienabob?”

“You’re changing the subject,” Lace says.

“It’s kind of about the Mona Lisa.” We had all just come from my room where we’d stashed purses and backpacks, and everyone had seen it.

ZZ jumps up again, crosses her wrists in front of her primly, and does a little mysterious sideways smile.

“You had an *experience* with Mona Lisa,” says Michaela slowly, and everyone laughs.

Except me.

“Well, kind of.”

If you could slice the silence thin enough, you could fry it for breakfast.

“Oooooookay,” Lace says.

“It’s really weird,” I say, and they can tell by that quiver in my voice that this is something serious, and even ZZ gets still.

“When I started putting all those pictures on my walls,” I begin, “I would put some of them up and I’d get this kind of a funny feeling. Like some of them felt warm, and some felt cool, even though they were from the same book.”

Still silence.

“And with some of my favorites, when I stood back to look at them, I felt like I could just keep looking all day. Like I was remembering them—not just remembering looking at them, but remembering the people, or the landscapes.”

“Déjà vu,” Michaela says.

“Well, even more than that. Like some of them were sort of, inviting me. And it wasn’t scary at all.”

Again the silence.

“And Mona Lisa, that’s always been my favorite. When I was looking at other pictures, I’d have the feeling she was trying to catch my eye, like you do when you’re trying to say hi to someone in a crowd, but without words, y’ know?”

ZZ nods.

“So one day, just after my birthday, I just stood and looked at her. And it was as if there was water all around me, like splashing in my face, but of course there was no water.

“So I walked away and came back. Same thing. Water.

“So I looked a little more at the background of the

painting and there's kind of a river in it, but I didn't feel any wetter looking at that part."

"Keep going, this is cool," Lace says.

"But then the water part starts feeling overwhelming, like turning over on the river raft," I say. "Not drowning, but being carried along like by currents."

"And when you walked away, the feeling went away?" ZZ is the one of us who actually scores in science fair projects. She's already making a mental chart.

"Yes," I say. I take the palm of my hand and hold it in front of my face and slowly turn it back and forth. "So I kind of forget about it for a couple of days and then last week, I'm looking at the picture again and this time, I don't know how to say this, but I'm sure of it, I am with somebody in very old clothes and she is looking at me and it's like she is asking for help. And I feel like I'm losing my balance and dizzy kinda and there's all that water again. I mean, I could feel it, almost feel it, on my skin. And hear it."

"Wow."

"Cool."

"Creepy."

"Oh, no," I say. "It's not scary at all. It's like getting ice cream samples, and you know that even more will be great."

"Let's go up to your room and see if it happens again!" Michaela says.

After dinner we all go up there and I look at the painting and it's like the lady in the painting is looking beyond me or through me or daydreaming or something. And wouldn't you know it, nothing happens. I don't feel even damp.

I shrug.

“Sorry. I got nothin’.”

I am more grateful than I’ve ever been in my life that at that moment no one is making fun of me. Michaela touches several of the pictures and I can tell she’s checking if some are warmer than others. Lace steps back with her arms outstretched in front of her and does a slow-spin survey. ZZ looks hopeful anyhow.

But it’s after 9, and the girls hug me and I walk them out to the parking lot, and they pile into Lace’s car and leave.

I’m back in my bedroom, in my T-shirt and pajama pants, propped up against my pillow. I look at the painting and now the feeling is back. But it is so much stronger than ever before. The painting is pulling me toward it.

I can hear water crashing all around me. I cough because I’ve just swallowed water, and it’s gritty, muddy. I look into the eyes of the woman in the painting and her gaze is steady, trusting.

Everything around it—all my books and the other art—are underwater.

Then my room isn’t there at all.

And I can’t breathe.

I think I am drowning.