



LINDA LAPPIN

Daphne Award Winner

SIGNATURES
IN STONE

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Contact Lauren Grosskopf

Lauren@pleasureboatstudio.com

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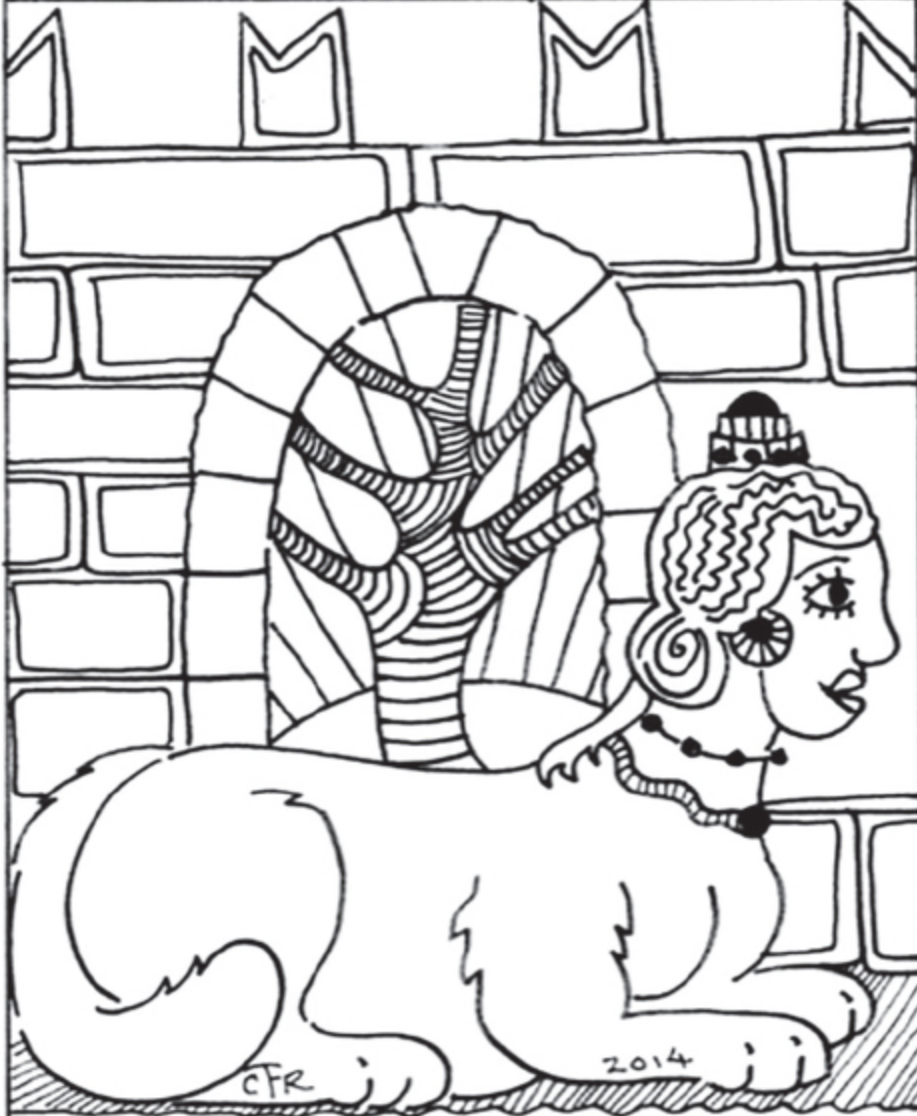
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The Quest Begins

CHAPTER ONE

Bomarzo, March 1928

We arrived in the evening after an exhausting drive along the sea through a land of silvery olive trees where innumerable dirty sheep dotted the meadows, and a rosy haze of blooms shimmered above low-lying peach groves. The Italian countryside looked sleepy and wet. Tenuous clouds, pinkish and plum-colored, streaked and feathered a lavender sky. And the light! Impossible to describe the tints of amber, ochre, bloodied tangerine. I was enchanted, but our artist friend Clive was too woozy to rhapsodize. He sat green-faced in the front passenger seat, clutching his Stetson on trembling knees, groaning at every curve. Determined to reach Bomarzo before nightfall, Nigel steered our gleaming Packard, fearless and expert, along dirt tracks, scattering chickens from the roadside, while I sat in the back, wrapped in a shawl, looking out at solitary oaks and ruined towers. Though I may have reached that phase of life dubiously called “a certain age” when women often cease to enjoy traveling, nothing engages my fantasy more than a long road trip with rapid changes of scenery, as in this undiscovered country called Tuscia.

About a hundred miles north of Rome, we turned inland to cross a marshland, then a succession of arid hills where broken bits of ancient Roman aqueducts stood stark against the twilight. Farther on, deep ravines gashed the terrain like unhealed fissures from which rose twisted masses of gray stone where ancient houses, domes, and grottoes were chiseled along the edges. Only a great turbulence from deep within the earth could have gouged out such chasms which appeared before us with hardly any warning as we rolled along. Flat meadows fell away into gorges where the road plunged, then laboriously wound up again. Thorny bushes scraped the sides of the car in narrow spots; jutting rocks thumped against the belly of the vehicle, causing Nigel great concern for his axel. God knows what would have happened if the car had broken down out there in the middle of

nowhere. We might have been devoured by wolves, or by the ferocious white sheepdogs that pounced out of the brush to run alongside the car until their legs gave out, barking their heads off till we rounded the next curve.

Sometimes on a promontory we saw a cluster of houses, now all dark, or an isolated farmhouse with a yellow glimmer at the window or a curl of smoke above the chimney; sometimes a dilapidated church or hermitage nestled in a crevice along a cliff. The landscape was full of signatures, signs, and hidden meanings, I felt. An entire manuscript was displayed before my eyes, inviting me to decipher its alphabets, offering inspiration for the new novel I had come to Italy to write at Nigel's forceful insistence.

At last we were delivered to the forlorn town of Bomarzo built along the rim of a deep gorge where Nigel had leased half the *piano nobile* of an aristocratic old villa until July. The main attraction we had come from Paris to see was a sixteenth-century sculpture garden in a park appended to the villa, which until a few months ago, was so overgrown with briars and weeds that it had been entirely forgotten by generations of art historians. Clive had heard about it through an acquaintance who knew the tenant currently residing at the villa, an eccentric, American art-history scholar and retired college professor, working in great secrecy on a monograph about the place. Clive wanted to be the first modern painter to immortalize the park and its sculptures, and had convinced Nigel, his new patron and my publisher and old family friend, that he should contact Professor Finestone, the current tenant, and arrange to sublet part of the villa for a few months so that they could spend a holiday in Italy together and he could paint there. The idea was that Nigel would later publish Clive's sketches and watercolors of the sculptures in a book, perhaps as an accompaniment to the professor's monograph about them, which was rumored, according to Clive, to be of worldwide import—at least to the art world. These statues portrayed a series of monstrous, imaginary creatures—denizens of a pagan hell, or, perhaps, allegories of the seven cardinal sins. The place was known to local legend as “the Monster Park.” That's all I knew about our destination, which had been explained during our journey down from Paris. As an author of mystery stories, I confess I found it all quite appealing.

Midway down a steep descent, we came to a gate behind which a somber villa illuminated by flickering torchlight waited at the end of a gravel drive. Lining the drive all the way to the villa were tall cypress trees, like hooded figures in the dusk. Beneath each cypress, a small oil lamp

guttered. At the sound of Nigel's claxon, a man hobbled from the deepening shadows.

A short, stout, bovine fellow of about sixty peered into the window on the driver's side and mumbled a word to Nigel. I noted at once his canny black eyes beneath heavy brows, his beak-like nose and thick stubble of beard on cheeks shining with sweat. A coarse face, I thought, but not without character and rustic virility. Thrusting up a rigid arm to greet us with the Fascist salute, he turned to open the gates. Nigel nudged the Packard through and we drove on up to the villa. Trotting behind the car, the gatekeeper extinguished the lamps behind us one by one, snuffing them out with a heavy iron tool as we proceeded. When we reached the villa, the long drive behind us was almost completely steeped in darkness and you could no longer see as far the gate.

But the villa was ablaze with torches set along the monumental staircase and with lamps shining in the twenty or thirty windows on the upper floors. As we pulled over and parked near the foot of the staircase, I noted a stone archway with an imposing iron gate far to the right of the building. This, as we were to discover, was the entrance to the famous park which lay along the edge of an untidy lawn where the land sloped sharply down to be engulfed by an outgrowth of riotous vegetation.

I climbed out of the Packard, following the men, relieved to stretch my legs and smooth my stockings after so many hours on the road. I looked up at the villa from beneath the brim of my cloche hat. We had received a royal welcome with the dramatic touch of the lamp-lit driveway, but the villa itself, of yellow stucco with bluish-gray shutters, looked a bit run down. I noticed a couple of broken window panes on the third floor and a place or two where the cornice had crumbled away. My first thought was that I ardently desired a hot cup of tea, and I feared this place might not be able to produce one. My next thought was I needed a smoke, and I don't mean tobacco.

"This way! This way," spluttered a voice from behind me as the gatekeeper caught up with us. "Welcome. Welcome. I am Manu. I am keeper," he chortled, in between ludicrous bows. Unloading our bags from the car and piling them at the foot of the staircase, he ushered us up the gray stone stairs into a drafty, unlit hall hung with tapestries, where more stairs led to upper floors. Professor Finestone was not there to meet us, but he had apparently left instructions on what to do with his new housemates, for we

were led directly into a dark kitchen opening off the hall, permeated by the smell of rancid grease and soot, where I was cheered to see a fire burning. In the middle of the room, four mismatched chairs were drawn up to a bare plank table. Huddled by the hearth sat a bony, blond slip of a girl wrapped in an apron.

Manu threw his chubby arm around the wraith's shoulder, "This is my Amelia!" he announced jovially, pulling the reluctant girl forward into the light shed by candles and oil lamps placed about the room. I saw then that her apron was dirty and her cuffs quite soiled and that she was not as young as she had first appeared. She was perhaps thirty years old. "She will cook, clean, wash clothes for you. Now she make tea! English people love their tea." Amelia glared at us, quite tongue-tied and unsure of what she was to do, until with a bearish growl "Vai!" *Go!* Manu pushed her to the stove where a kettle had begun to sing.

"Very good! We were hoping to meet Professor Finestone. Is he away?" began Nigel, with a slight clearing of his throat. I detected a bit of nervousness in his voice as he addressed the gatekeeper. We had wired the money for our rent to Finestone and expected to find him there. Suppose he had gone off without making proper arrangements with the owner of the villa? But Manu reassured us.

"No worry, no worry! Professor is in Rome. Back in few days. Till then, my girl and I look after you. We want that you feel... at home! Anything you need, ask Amelia. She will do. Is that not so, Amelia?"

Intent on buttering some slabs of bread for us, the girl did not answer. Unlike her father, whose command of English was surprisingly deft, Amelia didn't seem to understand a word of what was being said. I hoped my knowledge of Italian from my schooldays would suffice for me to communicate how I wanted my egg boiled, my chemises ironed, and at what time to serve my breakfast.

"Sit! Sit!" urged Manu, inviting us to the table with a clap of his hands while Amelia continued her preparations. "Tea almost ready." Now he turned to me. "Lady, come, sit near fire!" and as he seized a chair to offer me a seat, a little white cat that had been curled up there leapt to the floor with a yowl and crawled under a sideboard. Manu thumped the straw seat twice, as if to dispel fleas. "Lady! Sit! Gentlemen, Sit!" Clive and Nigel complied and I too sat down, after briefly inspecting the chair to make sure there were no insects. The three of us were too tired to talk and we waited

in silence for our tea. I glanced at my companions to gauge their reaction to this rather rustic setting, which, I supposed, was not quite what any of us had been expecting.

The room with its red brick floor and charred ceiling beams looked positively medieval. Huge brass cauldrons dangled from butcher's hooks above a giant tiled stove. Lined up along rough wooden shelves were antique platters big as cartwheels, heavy enough to crush your toe if one should accidentally fall on your foot. Cutting tools of iron and steel more suitable for display in a dungeon decorated the walls. Above the mantelpiece hung an oval mirror, its dim silvery surface finely gummed with grease and flyspecks. In every corner of the malodorous room, I noted thick skeins of spider webs, inhabited by large black things as big as a baby's hand.

Clive seemed to be observing all this through the wide eyes of an American ingénue to whom everything old and European, no matter how decrepit, is invested with quaint charm. But from the studied neutrality of Nigel's face and the stiff movements of his head as he gazed about the kitchen, I could see he was far from pleased and quite possibly furious. He was a creature of comfort who loved luxury even more than I, and we had already paid our full rent in advance. If the place should prove unsuitable, I rather doubted that we would get our money back. This whole trip had been arranged to satisfy Clive's whim—and now that he and Nigel had fallen out, on my account, well, I thought it likely Nigel already regretted our coming here. But I was in no hurry to head back to Paris, especially after accidentally setting my flat on fire, and running off leaving two months' rent due and no forwarding address.

Tea was served. As Amelia handed me a chipped but precious china cup that might have come from a museum, I noticed the edges of a nasty bruise on her neck, half hidden by the tired ruffle of her dingy white blouse. Her blue eyes slid sidewise to meet mine as her quick fingers rearranged the ruffle to hide her blemish. "*Sembrare stanca, Signora,*" *You seem tired, Signora,* she said addressing me directly. I don't know why but from the very first, I didn't like the sound of her voice.

The tea was passable and the food—ham, cheese, bread, olives—simple but filling. We drank and ate without further conversation. My mind was running ahead to when Clive and I would be alone again, hopefully after

having a short rest. The drive had worn me out. A clock from somewhere, upstairs perhaps, chimed the hours. It was nine o'clock.

Manu had stepped out to bring the rest of our luggage in. Returning to the kitchen, he distributed candles, for there was no electricity anywhere in the house, and proposed to give us a tour of the ground floor before showing us to our rooms. Taking a lighted candelabra from the sideboard, he led the way—with Nigel right behind him, Clive following, while I brought up the rear. The draperies across the high windows had not been drawn, and pale moonlight shone in to help guide our steps through the villa, but the floor was uneven in spots; one had to be careful not to trip. The slim flames of our candles barely allowed me to gain a general impression of the place, but I could see, nonetheless, that it must have been in shambles for a hundred years at least.

The rooms were all dank and gloomy and smelled of must. Mildew and mold mapped the walls and mottled the tapestries blackened by centuries of dust. It didn't look as though there were a comfortable chair or sofa anywhere and it was also very cold—I could feel the chill of the marble floor through the soles of my shoes—but, admittedly, the ambience was intriguing. Lewd gorgons leered down, wagging their tongues, over doorways. Statue fragments and coats-of-arms were embedded in pock-marked walls where the flaking plaster was tinted in pastels: sky blue, pea green, ochre, lavender. Whenever we passed a mutilated piece of sculpture or a peeling scrap of frescoed wall where a detached head or arm were all that remained of an antique image, Manu would hold his candelabra higher to shed a patch of light upon it and say, "Very old painting," "Very valuable," or "Famous artist," with a touch of pride in his voice. A bleak warning immediately followed: "No touch, please."

Despite the dilapidated condition of the villa inside and out, one could see that the artistic treasures it housed were priceless. We groped along a gallery of Florentine-style portraits, their rich colors emerging jewel-like in our candlelight. All these paintings were clearly worth a fortune but the dampness of the place was hardly congenial to their conservation. I could see that several of the paintings had buckled from moisture absorbed from the stone walls on which they hung.

Clive, just two steps ahead of me, studied all this with great attention, pausing to poke his nose closer whenever Manu pointed out a painting or an *objet d'art*. Everything interested him intensely. As Manu and Nigel

trundled along up ahead of us, he lagged behind, once to peek inside the drawer of a secretary along the corridor; once to terrify me by lunging out of a corner unexpectedly, grinning like a gorgon; and once to pinch my bottom and pull me behind some moldy brocade drapes, which only made me sneeze. I pushed him away. “Naughty boy! Not here, darling! Later!” Nigel knew all about us, of course, but I didn’t want to make a show in front of a servant, partly because I was obviously much older than Clive.

At last we returned to the great entrance hall, now pitch black, where the fitful gleams of Manu’s candelabra illumined an imposing staircase.

“We go up. Watch feet.”

At the top, we came to a set of massive double doors decorated with gold stucco. From this hub, two wings stretched left and right into the dark. The interior of the place seemed even larger than it had appeared from the outside, and I imagined the villa must have incorporated structures from several centuries as various rooms and floors had been added on.

Manu indicated the ornate doors before us: “This is library. Many, many books. Tomorrow you look.” He thrust his candelabra to the left. “Rooms of Professor,” then gestured with the candelabra toward the right as dripping wax splattered the floor. “Your rooms that way. The Signora is next to library. The gentlemen just here and down here. Come along.”

Across from the library, I noted a large painting set in a niche partly hidden by dark red velvet curtains. Curious, I stopped to have a better look while the others went ahead. Clive, noticing I had paused, retraced his steps to see what had caught my interest. Shoving his candle toward the niche, he intoned in an uncanny imitation of our keeper’s voice: “Very old painting. Very Valuable! Famous Artist. No touch, please!”

I would have laughed, but when Clive pulled the curtains all the way open to reveal the painting in the niche, I was momentarily stunned. A lean, brown, handsome face emerged from its concealment to confront my own. Hazel eyes, keen and alive, bored into mine with a power of attention that took my breath away. The face belonged to a life-sized angel with rainbow wings in earthen tones—brown, beige, mauve, ochre, rust—like an exotic moth, standing guard in a boulder-strewn landscape. In one hand he held a scale; in the other, a sword pointed downwards, where it transfixed an ugly serpent with brownish-purple scales, by no means dead, the tip of whose tail coiled around the angel’s left ankle. The snake’s lidless yellow eyes were directed toward the viewer, glinting with the same vivid intelligence

that graced the angel's brow. I think I gave a little gasp, and Clive grabbed my hand, he, too, fascinated by the angel and the snake. The two figures were not antithetical by any means; they seemed to make a whole, like a yin and yang.

Our contemplation of the painting was rudely cut short by Manu's intervention. "Lady! Sir! This way to rooms! I give keys." He had come to fetch us, and at the sound of his voice, I dropped Clive's hand. Manu reached out to tug the curtains closed, saying, "Ugly painting. Not valuable. Unknown artist. You look tomorrow."

"Daphne!" Nigel now piped up from the dark. It was the first word he had spoken to me since our arrival. "I should very much like to retire now. You and Clive may stay up exploring, if you wish, and gaze at all the paintings you like. But I must get some rest."

"Of course, darling." As I turned away from the niche, the snake's amber eyes still burned into my retina, like the impress left by a bright spot of sun glimpsed on a cloudy day.

Manu handed out our keys, informing us that he would bring our luggage up at once and promising a kettle of hot water in the morning. Clive was conveniently installed in a room across from mine, Nigel in two large rooms at the end of the corridor. As we said goodnight, Clive wished me pleasant dreams. It was our code word to say I could expect a visit from him later in the night.

The lock to my room was rusty, and I needed Manu's assistance to turn the key. To my surprise, I found my accommodations much more inhabitable than the rest of the house had led me to expect. A fire had been lit in the great stone hearth, and several lamps and candelabras flickered on end tables and dressers. The room's chief glory was a giant double bed done up in red and gold damask with matching drapes shielding tall windows. I thought it would do very well as a boudoir. In an alcove was a dressing room with wardrobes, trunks, and even a zinc tub, but since, as Manu explained to me, the upper floors of the house were without running water, I imagined that bathing preparations would be quite complex.

I asked Manu to bring my things up at once, along with a nightcap of brandy and soda. As soon as I was alone, I plopped down on the bed over which hung an exquisite portrait of a lady, a minor masterpiece. I guessed it dated from the sixteenth century or so, judging by her costume: a lace-frilled crimson bodice snugly encasing a plump bosom, beneath which

flowed a skirt of spinach green brocade. Nestled in the hollow of her throat was a silver locket. Her white fingers spread upon her breast displayed a ruby ring which I studied in detail as I adore antique jewelry, probably because I had to sell nearly all of mine years ago. Her eyes, blue hauteur and marble, gazed defiantly at the viewer and were met with her own disapproval in a full-length mirror hanging on the opposite wall. The lady looked so lifelike, I almost felt the need to beg her pardon for usurping her bed, where the fine linens were embroidered with the initial A.O., which I fancied must now refer to one of her descendants.

The fire had begun to smoke, so I rose to open a window, discovering then that behind the thick drapes was a door to a terrace to which both my room and the library next door had access. Taking a small oil lamp from the desk I ventured out and walked to the edge. From here, in daylight, one would enjoy a fine view of the countryside and a partial view of the park; but there wasn't much to see now, for a layer of clouds had rolled in to veil the moon. The night air smelled sweet of damp foliage and earth, though there was also a tainted smell of rotting leaves and bad drains. Leaning over the parapet of the terrace, I gazed out over the grounds. I could hear a faint bleating of sheep and tinkling of bells coming from the wall of the gorge rising behind the villa. As the moon slit the clouds, I noted dim white shapes moving in the shadows halfway up the gorge. At the top slept the town of Bomarzo, a cluster of stone houses cobbled together around a large villa, or perhaps, a former monastery, built of yellowish stone.

In the far right corner of the terrace was a narrow shelter resembling a sentry box, which I thought might hold a water tank, or, I hoped, maybe even a privy, for I hated primitive arrangements. Going to investigate, I found it was the entrance to an ingeniously concealed staircase with steep, iron rungs spiraling downwards. Regrettably, it was much too late and too dark to explore any further, but I promised myself I would do so the next morning.

I approached the door to the library, adjacent to my room, and peeked in—but the drapes were drawn. I then noted a third door giving access to the terrace on the other side of the library from one of the rooms in the wing occupied by the professor. It was chilly now and I had no wrap. As I stepped back inside, I found Manu in my room, oiling the lock on the bedroom door. My suitcase had been set on a chair by my writing desk, and a tray with my brandy and soda waited by the bed.

“Lady will catch cold.” Manu put down his oilcan, went over to the terrace door, and banged it shut behind me.

“I did not ask you to close that,” I said, annoyed.

“Lady does not want to get ill. Besides, there are bats, things that fly at night!” He pointed to the lamps on a small desk near the window. “They come to the flame. The Signora does not want bats in her hair.”

“Nonsense,” I said. That old wives’ tale about bats getting in one’s hair! Not a bit of truth in it. Still, glancing to the terrace, I did see a tiny bat flitting joyously in the night air. Its wings nearly grazed the windowpanes.

I dismissed Manu and before shutting my door, looked left and right down the long corridor and listened a moment, but all was silent. Retreating inside, I left the door unlocked for Clive then gulped down the brandy and got ready for bed, for I was too tired to do any writing that night. The wild spirit of Bomarzo excited and intrigued me, yet that first evening upon arriving, I felt ill-at-ease about the months to come, isolated, as it were, in the company of these two men, the younger of whom, most unexpectedly, had just become my lover. As the minutes ticked away and a clock somewhere down the hall softly chimed eleven, then midnight, I mused over the strange circumstances that had brought me here to this moldy old villa. I wondered if it had been wise for me to come on this trip after all, but I had not been in a position to refuse Nigel’s proposal—especially after he had saved me from being burned to death when my Paris flat went up in flames. I had had only an hour to pack my bags and leave behind, quite literally speaking, the ashes of my former life. And now here I was, embarked upon a serendipitous liaison with an adorable younger man.

That fire in my flat back in Paris had been a very nasty business, and I wouldn’t have come through had it not been for Nigel. I had been smoking. My lighted pipe must have tumbled from my hand as I sank into a reverie in which the floral trellises on the yellow wallpaper began to writhe like snakes. This intriguing spectacle did not in the least alarm me until one wriggled off the wall, dropping straight around my neck like a noose and I had no voice to scream. I lost consciousness to the hissing of serpentine tongues, which I later surmised must have been the steam issuing from the kettle I had forgotten on the stove. I was roused only when Nigel came knocking at the door and barking through the transom that he had just returned from New York and had missed me at the *Boeuf sur le Toit*, and

was my first chapter ready? I moaned or laughed something in reply and suddenly the room was filled with smoke and there came an explosion. Nigel had kicked the door open and was flapping his overcoat against the flames which were demolishing one entire wall of my flat while I looked on dazed from the sofa where I lay surrounded by a pile of dirty tea cups, cast-off stockings and broken fruit plates. A tea cozy, it seems, had been left too near the stove, and catching fire, had first set a curtain and then the wallpaper ablaze.

When the fire had been put out, he looked at me, panting and red-faced, his high forehead beaded with sweat.

“Daphne,” he chided, “had I not showed up in time, you might have burned to death like a witch at the Inquisition!” Noticing the pipe that had fallen to the floor where it had singed the rug, he reached for it and shook it in my face. “You promised me you would stop this!”

I closed my eyes and smiled vaguely while the room whirled around me, a carousel of cheap, broken furniture. “Thou shalt not escape thyself,” I mumbled.

But the gallon of boiling bitter tea he poured down my throat set me on my feet again. The cold compress applied to my lids caused the blue pouches beneath my eyes to recede. When hunger returned against my will, he fed me spoonfuls of orange marmalade, the only edible substance in the cupboard, then placed a bundle of dollars on the table, which I contemplated with a blank stare. I was damnably sober again, damnably myself, damnably human and alive in this miserable world. Why had he not left me alone? He knew the money would tempt me.

“What is that?” I asked warily, pointing a shaky finger at the money, and noticing as I did, that it was high time I repainted my fingernails, though I didn’t have the cash for a professional manicure. “A gift? A loan?” I resisted the urge to reach out for the pile, but I had already calculated at a glance how much would go to pay back debts, and how much was needed for rent, for food, for wine and other even more urgent necessities.

“You know very well it is an advance on your next book!”

“Hah!” I snorted, “then you can keep it!”

“You promised me another mystery. You have signed your name to that promise.”

“And pray tell, who promised you, me or Marilyn Moseley?” Marilyn Moseley was my humble *nom de plume*.

“My dear, need I remind you that by whatever name you write your books, you are under obligation to me?”

“You are out of luck, old boy.”

I then craved something stronger than tea to drink so I flung out a hand and opened a cupboard, looking for a bottle of whatever I could find, but they were all empty. I caught sight of myself in the mirror above the sideboard, then. Good God, what a hag! I ran a hand through my matted hair to tidy it.

“Marilyn Mosley is merely a figment of my imagination. She isn’t real,” I said as I continued to study my face in the mirror. Perhaps *I* wasn’t real either. “Her promises carry no weight in this world. You had best forget her.” Opening another cupboard, I found a bottle of absinthe with a tiny emerald drop at the bottom, but Nigel plucked it from my unsteady hand before I could put it to my lips.

“Of our imagination! Remember we are in this together.”

Yes, indeed! We were in this together. He was my publisher.

And now like the Devil himself, Nigel was here claiming his due. I hated writing those novels.

“But Nigel, darling, try to understand. After all that’s happened, I am quite simply devastated. I have run out of ideas. I haven’t got the strength, or the mental concentration, to write another novel. I don’t know how I managed the last one. And I couldn’t bear to be bashed about by those idiotic critics any more. I’d much prefer to write about daffodils and delphiniums for the *Lady Gardner* who are at least more punctual with their pay.”

Nigel’s thin lips repressed a grimace. He smiled as though a wire had been pulled through his gums. It had taken him two years to pay me my due for *Signatures*, my most recent novel, and I was convinced, despite his professed dedication to my family, that he had been dishonest in calculating my royalties.

“A contract is a contract,” he intoned, then seized my hands in his. I looked at his long, pale, pudgy fingers. How immaculate the nails, how perfectly buffed by his professional manicurist. I had to admit that being

touched by him still summoned up in me a strong, but not entirely pleasant sensation.

“Although the critics battered you a bit, your readers love you. They want another book from you.”

“It is not me they love!” I protested, wriggling out of his grip. “They love Marilyn Moseley and Edna Rutherford, both of whom I find to be particularly detestable.” Edna Rutherford was the name of my heroine.

“But Daphne, you *are* Marilyn Moseley and Edna Rutherford. And now, *Signatures* is to be published in America, and I have brought you your advance of one hundred dollars for Edna Rutherford’s new adventure. And they are clamoring for more. Here,” he said, thrusting his hand into his jacket pocket and pulling out a crumpled envelope. “The latest missal addressed to Marilyn Moseley, in praise of *Signatures* that has reached my desk, from a Mrs. Alice Ackroyd of Philadelphia.” He tossed the letter at me. I opened it and read:

Dear Marilyn Moseley,

I have never written to an authoress before, but I want you to know that I am an avid reader of your books, which I obtain by special order from London. Your character Edna Rutherford serves as a shining example of modern British womanhood. I strive to follow her example in my daily life. You see, I, too, lost my husband in the war. Actually, I was wondering if my own life story might not provide inspiration for your next book...

I groaned, tilted my head back against the sofa, and closed my eyes. There was another hundred such letters—from England, Australia, India, in a hatbox in the cupboard—to which Nigel had ordered me to reply with a personable, hand-written note, enclosing a photograph signed “Marilyn Moseley,” in each hand-addressed envelope. In actual fact, it was not a photograph of myself that was to be mailed to Miss Moseley’s many admirers, but of Nigel’s great aunt Mildred, whom he claimed looked more like a proper authoress than I. Nigel had had over five hundred pictures printed up for this purpose.

He knelt on the rug before me and took my hands in his again. If I hadn’t had such a headache, I might have found the scene comic. Still I managed to say, “Nigel, is this a declaration?”

“Daphne,” he said, pressing harder, modulating that irresistible tone of urgent appeal he knew how to manipulate so well. I had always wondered why he had never gone into politics. “This is better than a declaration. This is your ticket to success.”

Ah...that word, “success” freshly delivered from the rough and ready streets of New York, with their stink of smoke and petrol, gin and vermouth and well-handled hundred-dollar bills. What had success to do with me?

“I know nothing can never replace Hawthorne Lodge or what it meant to you....”

For a moment, my vision blurred with an unwelcome sting of salt and I clutched his hands tighter to keep from sinking into the abyss opening beneath me. I saw my home, Hawthorne Lodge, as it had appeared to me in childhood. A looming, benign, mysterious entity with its many corridors and stuffy rooms with low wooden ceilings, its scarred tea tables and shelves of musty books whose brittle pages broke off at the corners when you turned them. Its rows of white marble busts of Roman Caesars swathed in dusty red velvet, its broken spinet and moth-eaten maroon drapes—for family fortunes had been in decline for over a century. I saw a girl at thirteen in a white muslin dress, running across the turf toward the meadow where a single stone stood erect beside the old well, near a trough where ruddy horses drank. Then all was lost. Nigel Havelon, childhood friend and adult companion of my idiotic, indebted, and deceased brother, was the only human being left, and certainly the only human being in Paris, who knew where I had come from, what I had lost, what it signified. In his own way, I suppose he had tried to help.

“Daphne, are you listening to me?”

I nodded and repeated numbly, “Ticket to success. Never replace Hawthorne Lodge.” I sighed, let go his hands and wiped aside my tears. The strong tea had made my brain begin to buzz and crackle. My headache had abated. The marmalade had revived the faint pulsing of blood in my veins. I took stock of myself and of my surroundings. The dreary and now scorched wallpaper; the little stove to feed with charcoal when one had money, though there was never enough of either charcoal or money; the sofa just big enough for one human body to lie on with its feet poking over the end; the battered table where I dined alone and scribbled out my poems and novels in the wee hours of the morning—this was my whole little world. A shelf of beloved books with unstitched bindings and a few items

of clothing were practically all I owned. I was penniless—to all effects—loveless, without prospects, and with no friends in the world, it would seem, save Marilyn Moseley, Edna Rutherford, and Nigel. And the dreadful thing was that now that the stupor had worn off and the sunlight pierced my reluctant eyelids, the body had begun to churn its unfathomable gears, and the will to walk and breathe returned.

“I feel responsible for you,” he said, “I promised your brother on his death bed...”

His voice gave out. Speaking of Edmund still brought him to tears.

“Stop there!” I commanded and shot out a hand to restrain him. Why drag on with these stories of sorrow and failure? I looked around at the ghastly yellow wallpaper. “I suppose it’s worth a shot. I’d much rather breathe my last in more congenial surroundings than be strangled by snakes in the wallpaper.”

His eyes widened at my comment, but I patted his hand to reassure him, “I am speaking figuratively, of course.”

“Very well,” he said, “I have brought you this to sign,” and he swept out a piece of paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and pushed it under my nose. Squinting at the fine print, I regretted not having ordered a pair of eyeglasses, which I had promised to do at my last birthday. Still I was able to read what it said. It was another one of his “standard contracts,” offering this time, I was surprised to note, somewhat better conditions for the advance and the royalties than I had been given before. Then near the bottom of the document, I saw he had added a clause in very fine print naming himself as my literary executor. Perplexed, I looked up at him as I read it aloud. It did not seem to me that my literary estate was worth enough to be cited in a contract, and I told him so.

“We did discuss this, if you remember, and at that time you agreed.”

It was true, we had discussed the issue after my husband Peter had died and *Signatures* had been such a success, bringing me for once, some financial reward. And at that time, I had indeed agreed to name Nigel as my literary executor. The war had made life seem very uncertain. It seemed the right thing to do at the time. After all, I was utterly alone.

“If you would prefer not to include the clause in your contract this time, we’ll have my secretary type another copy, omitting it. But I can’t leave you your advance until you sign, most regretfully.”

I glared at the neat stack of dollars on the table, then back at the contract again. Nigel Havelon had just saved my life. Who else had I to turn to? I saw no reason not to sign, so I took the gold fountain pen Nigel held out to me and wrote my name at the bottom of the page.

“Excellent,” he said, looking not only pleased, but relieved, as he smoothed back his glossy hair where a bit of telltale gray showed at the roots. Until then I had never noticed that he had begun to dye it. Perhaps he had started in New York. He clapped his hands and rubbed them together as if before a feast. “Now I shall take you somewhere where you shall write in peace.”

“In peace? I doubt it.”

“But without this.”

He picked up my pipe again, snapped it in two, which must have taken considerable strength, and stuffed the pieces into his trouser pocket. Then he went to my writing table, rifled through a drawer until he found a sack of my hashish paste and pocketed that as well. Thank goodness, he did not know *all* my hiding places.

“Promise me.”

“Promise you what?”

“That you will stop this nonsense before it kills you or coddles your brain.”

I shrugged. “You want a book? I’ll give you one. That’s as far as I’ll go.”

“You’ll go all right,” he said, slipping on his charred overcoat and brushing off a few flakes of ash. “Be ready in an hour.”

“Go where?”

“To Italy, of course, where else but to the land of artistic inspiration?”

And with that he was out the door. I went to count the money on the table, but it was gone. Nigel had taken every dollar of it back.

That afternoon before setting out for Italy, I had managed to reassemble myself in an hour and tossed a few things into my suitcase, imagining that in that country of pagan gods, I would soon be enjoying luncheons on terraces in Rome overlooking the ruins of the Forum, Venetian sunsets viewed from a gondola near the Zattera, and musical evenings in Fiesole. I packed a lovely dress for formal wear: a dark plum silk gown that set off my coppery hair, a dramatic black wool cape with a hood, which I thought

would be just the thing for Venice; a black silk kimono; a bathing suit, hoping I might make it to a spa somewhere; and an emerald green silk negligee with matching peignoir. Not that I expected then to make a show of myself in bed for anyone, but I would have hated for the concierge to confiscate these items in my absence and sell them to a *marchand d'abis*, or worse, wear them to bed herself and burn them full of holes with her cheap cigarettes. They had been a gift from my late husband Peter. Nearly everything else I packed for morning or afternoon wear was respectably black, the nun's color of denial, except for a few pairs of white gloves and some white blouses. I also packed my little Florentine notebook and the only valuables that I still owned: a moonstone necklace and a topaz ring, my second favorite pipe, and a little stash of hashish paste in a silver box.

I looked around the room and said goodbye to my few remaining possessions then slunk down the stairs past the cubicle where the concierge lurked at this hour of the evening. Luckily, she was out somewhere on an errand. The tawdry paisley curtain of her cubicle was pulled shut and fastened with a safety pin. I was glad not to have to explain my departure. She had already warned me a few days earlier that I was two months late with the rent, and now there was the embarrassing question of the bashed-in door and the blackened wallpaper and curtains, which would have to be replaced at my expense. Nigel's plan to pack me off to Italy appeared to be an act of providence in some ways. I left her no forwarding notice for mail or bills. I had no idea how long I would be gone.

I had waited only ten minutes on the curb when Nigel drew up in his shiny black Packard just brought back from America. He was not alone.

Up front beside him sat a sunny-faced fellow of about thirty-five, with couperose cheeks and a shock of blond hair tumbling into not-quite-innocent eyes of intense blue. Nigel introduced him as Clive Brentwood, his new traveling companion whom he had met in New York. When Clive reached up to shake my hand through the open car window, I felt a jolt, as if I had just stuck a wet finger into an electric wall socket. But good heavens, he was at least fifteen years younger than I and, after my recent descent into hell, I must have looked at least ten years older than I actually was, and that is, old enough to be his grandmother. Clive was an American, from Texas, of all places, of which I had only a remote imagining. I adored his twang from the moment he opened his mouth.

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