

A PRELUDE TO SIGNATURES IN STONE

A Bomarzo mystery by Linda Lappin

All characters in this publication other than those clearly in the public domain are fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

The present work contains the first three chapters of Linda Lappin's new mystery novel,

Signatures in Stone, and an interview with the author

“Che ognuno v’incontri ciò che più gli sta a cuore, e che tutti vi si smarriscano.”

--inscription in Bomarzo

The Angel and the Snake

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. Further 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, at least according to Clive, to be of worldwide import—at least to the art

world. These statues conceived in full baroque fashion were rumored to portray 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 trip 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 Monster 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 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 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'd 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 much obviously 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 pointed to 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 towards the right as dripping wax spattered 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

towards 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 towards 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 master-piece. 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 oil can, 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 only had 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 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 now 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.

Now 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 ever 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 towards 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 Mosley, Edna Rutherford, and Nigel. And the dreadful thing was that now the stupor was wearing off and the sunlight had 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 now 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 could I 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 decent 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.

The luggage rack on the rear of the car was already full, so Nigel put my bag on the backseat, where more bags were piled, including a leather portmanteau, an easel and a wooden box of oils that smelled of turpentine. Each of these objects looked brand new, as though they had just been removed from a display window and had never been used.

"Clive paints," he said.

I climbed in and occupied the space between one of Nigel's gold-monogrammed leather traveling cases and Clive's painting equipment.

"By the way, Nigel, what has become of the advance I thought I was getting?" I asked as he shut the door and climbed into the driver's seat.

He patted his vest pocket. “Safely put away my dear for your traveling expenses. I shall dole it out to you as needed. But there will be none for any of your nonsense.”

“How generous!” It dawned on me then that my advance might well be paying for the trip for all three of us.

I hadn’t left the city in months, not even for a stroll in the woods of Fontainebleau, so as we made our way on through the cluttered environs of Paris and into the countryside, past fields and humble houses, a feeling of relief gradually settled over me. We hurtled along under an open sky slathered with soft gray clouds, scattered with migrating flocks returning northwards with the spring. Despite all, I was born a country lass, and when I breathed in the tang of warm rain on a newly ploughed field, something long asleep in me stirred.

Often ours was the only car on the road, though we encountered dozens of mule and oxcarts as we drove through the rural heart of France. Peasants out with their cows waved as we passed. Whenever we were hungry, we stopped at country inns to sate ourselves on hearth-roasted eggs and slabs of brown bread thickly spread with *pâté de campagne* and to quench our formidable thirst with heady *vin de pays*. I had forgotten how deliciously restorative country food and wine can be. Wherever we went in those rustic villages, we caused a slight sensation, perhaps because we were such a mismatched assortment. I, a mature lady of fashion with flaming hair and brightly painted Parisian lips; Nigel, the perfect, portly aristocratic Englishman in tweed; and Clive, a gangly American who wore checkered flannel shirts, a string tie set with a turquoise, and boots with pointy toes, just like a cowboy in the films. Fortunately, he had dispensed with his ten-gallon hat, as it attracted too much attention.

At mealtimes, Clive would regale us with funny stories about the land of Texas and the peculiar breed of Americans who live there, and I found him amusing enough. Nigel, I could see, was quite taken with him, and was on his best behavior: he was gallant, solicitous, and kind. At

night, we slept in quaint *auberges* with open hearths in our rooms. I'd sit by the fire and smoke my pipe, grateful to be alone, while the gentlemen discreetly did whatever it was they were doing in their adjoining rooms.

Nigel and Clive at first had proved to be the perfect traveling companions on our trip down. There was no need for me to keep up appearances: to maintain a mask or to be entertaining, coy, or seductive, given the gentlemen's leaning. I could relax and be myself. No need to powder my nose surreptitiously, to pull up sagging stockings or rouge my lips on the sly, to refrain, for the sake of my waistline, from indulging in sweets or potatoes whenever we stopped for a meal and it seemed I was always hungry. There was no need to chatter, for the sound of the motor and the wheels impeded all conversation. For them, the person in the backseat was a writer, not a woman, left to her own musings and I had much to muse about. I thought of Marilyn Moseley, of Edna Rutherford and how I would succeed in engaging their assistance once again.

These two harpies were actually not my creations, but my late husband Peter's. We wrote the first novel as a joke in three days while staying with friends in Cornwall. Edmund, my brother, showed the manuscript to Nigel, who ran a small publishing house, and who then decided to publish it. The reason our book was so readily accepted for publication was not because Nigel considered it a great work of literature. Nigel knew nothing about literature, really, although he was knowledgeable about painting. I always thought that he would have made a much more successful antiquarian than publisher.

The reason why he decided to publish it was because he owed Edmund money as my brother had given him a rather large sum to pay off a printer's debt. Publication of our book was intended as a sort of favor, or partial repayment of Nigel's debt, which in fact never was entirely

repaid. Against all expectations, a thousand copies sold in ten days and Nigel was elated. He urged us to write another, and this was an even greater success, even though our royalties didn't amount to much in the end. Then the war came. First my husband, Peter, was killed, and shortly afterwards I lost the child in my womb – a daughter whom I would have named Persephone. Three months later, my brother Edmund died of influenza. After the war, I tried writing another novel, entitled *Signatures*, on my own, as a sort of methodic distraction for the numbness of grief. I also needed to make some money, since the war and the loss of Peter and Edmund had ruined me financially.

By then Edna had also lost her fiancé, just as I had lost my husband and brother. In *Signatures*, Edna's deceased fiancé intervened from the otherworld leading her to clues which would help her solve the murder of a young girl. The book was a success, I have been told, as it captured the desperate sense of psychic fragmentation we all felt after the war was finally over, and voiced our need to remake an intelligible vision of the world composed of meaningful signs. *These fragments I have shored against my ruins*, as Tom Eliot put it so succinctly. I had used that quote from *The Wasteland* as the incipit of my novel. I had even sent him a copy of *Signatures*, but he never bothered to acknowledge my gift.

As I pictured her, my alter ego, Marilyn Moseley, the author of my books, was a stout gentlewoman with a wattled chin who favored pink and blue tea gowns in the Georgian fashion, lived with her dogs in a genteel home and entertained the pastor and the local commissioner at teatime. From their stories recounted over cream teas, she gathered copy for her novels and became acquainted with police procedures, poisons, and postmortems. A sober spinster, she enjoyed a generous glass of port after dinner, accompanied by a cigar, and as a hobby collected diaries of eighteenth-century gentlewomen.

The heroine of her books, Edna Rutherford, was quite a different woman from her imaginary author. Edna dressed in crisp white blouses with a mannish tie and trim navy skirts. She was an expert horsewoman, could drive and play billiards like any man, did not drink or smoke, and having lost her lad in the war, was determined to remain pure till the end of her days. Marilyn and Edna were my hidden selves, the ones who had found a place in the world where I had failed. What would Miss Ackroyd of Philadelphia say to learn that the aristocratic Miss Moseley was a fraud whose creator inhabited a cold water flat in Paris and lived on absinthe and hashish? I now had the unenviable task of prodding Miss Moseley from her comfortable armchair by the fire, making her put down her cigar and pick up her pen in order to write another novel. What new adventure could await Edna Rutherford, I did not know. I also felt that they were as reluctant to encounter me again as I was to encounter them.

As we drove southwards, I looked out at the changing landscape and dreamed, though when I tried to imagine a new plot, new characters, my head began to ache again, and so I simply allowed myself to absorb the scenery. Spring was just about to break in the Italian Alps, pink-tipped at sunset, where thousands of yellow crocuses peeked out from under patches of melting snow in the fields, and along the banks of half-frozen streams. Descending the Alpine pass guarded by the Hermitage of St Michael, I lifted my face to the sun. How often in Paris had those rays been filtered through the gloomy splendor of Notre Dame, or through the emerald tints glittering in the bottom of an absinthe bottle. I was, despite all, quite grateful to be alive, and heading south.

Somewhere after we had left Turin, I looked up and saw two blue eyes peering at me in the rear view mirror with shy admiration. From village to village, the gaze grew bolder, more provocative, and I quite forgot about the scenery. I'd stare absently across a field or lake, then glance quickly back to the mirror, and there, reflected, Clive's inquisitive eyes flashed into mine

with unmistakable intent. His sensuous mouth was set in the quizzical half-smile of someone who knows how to take his time to get what he wants, and how to savor every moment of delayed gratification. As for me alas, those old coy impulses returned unbidden: the fluttering of eyelashes and the quickening pulse. I was too easy a prey for someone like Clive.

When we had stopped to lunch on perch at a lakeside tavern, Nigel left us for a few minutes while he combed the fishing village for English cigarettes. The young American and I had never been alone together, until that instant. I gazed out at the blue lake barely ruffled by a slight breeze, at happy children in red boats rowing near the shore. Clive pushed aside his plate of fish bones and leaned towards me. The tepid March sun gleamed on the cutlery, on the wine glasses, and on his rather large teeth which he had just finished prodding industriously with a toothpick.

“Your lovely hair,” he said without preamble, and I must have blushed despite myself. In my youth, this coppery mane had been my glory. Did it still have power over men? I had not yet had to take to henna, though for years my enemies in Bloomsbury had sneeringly accused me of such.

“I’d like to paint your portrait when we are in Italy. Would you mind?” he said dreamily, caressing the air in front of my face with his thumb in a painterly fashion. “You’d be a perfect model. You have such an aristocratic profile.” He pulled a small drawing pad out of his breast pocket, made a quick sketch, presumably of my face, and tearing it from the pad, handed it to me. It did not resemble me in the least, and showed little skill, but I accepted it, smiled and put it in my handbag. Then Nigel returned with the cigarettes. He paused before sitting down again, observing us sternly from above and offered us both a cigarette. As he reached down to light mine, I couldn’t help but note the tiny dimple of disapproval that had formed on his close-shaven chin.

Although Nigel was determined to reach Florence by midnight, the three of us decided to explore the town to stretch our legs before spending several more hours in the car. The sound of a barrel organ grinding out “Daisy, Daisy give me your answer do” from a side street led us to a flea market set up in the central square of the town. There at the base of a crumbling clock tower, ragged children, gypsies, and poor maimed veterans from the last war were selling trinkets and old broken bits of furniture, spread on dirty cloths along the cobblestones. Seeing those mismatched pieces of other lives made me melancholy. I imagined the families who had owned them, now disintegrated or dead, the houses from whence they had come, locked up and abandoned. I could just picture all the drawers, cupboards, and attics of a grand old house being emptied out into a heap of meaningless junk. Indeed since the war, Europe had become one vast flea market of meager pickings, and my own ancient family home had met this same fate.

Outside the door of a church, a one-legged man sat hunched over a crate bedecked with silver objects, foreign coins, and army medals. Feeling pity for him, we decided to buy something. Nigel noticed a handsome silver cigarette case with the name *Desire* engraved on the front. The price was very steep, but Nigel purchased it anyway, and promptly gave it to Clive who was very pleased to receive it. There was also a box of photographs, which I thumbed through – weddings, first communions, family portraits, grave aunts and uncles, and so many handsome soldiers. I cried out at the portrait of a lovely little blond girl, about four years old, wearing a white lace dress. She looked exactly like my mental image – the way I had always pictured her in my dreams and fantasies -- of Persephone, my daughter, Peter’s daughter, buried, unconsecrated, beneath the turf of Hawthorne Lodge.

“What is it?” asked Clive, astonished by my reaction, coming over to look at the photograph I held in trembling fingers.

“She resembles ...a child I knew. The likeness ... is startling.”

He frowned, plucked the picture from my hand and studied it with pursed lips.

“I’d say she resembles you, in a way,” he said, returning the photograph to me. I was grateful for his discretion for he made no further comment, except, “Would you like me to buy this for you?” The modern solution to all loss or pain.

I shook my head. What would be the point of possessing such a photograph? Just more tears and remembered sorrow. I led them away from the stall to look at some tarnished silver trinkets spread out on a tarp along the ground.

Later Clive and I stood side by side on the water’s edge, gazing out across the shining slate of water at the blue hills encircling us. Nigel had wandered off again to search for a telephone box, to call ahead to the next *pensione* and inform them we would not arrive until late in the evening. Clive took my hand, lifted it to his lips and caressed my fingers. Then, holding my hand before his nose, he squinted at the topaz flashing on my ring finger.

“That’s a pretty little ring. A family heirloom?”

Delicately I withdrew my hand from his. “All that is left of a family fortune for centuries in decline,” I explained, somewhat piqued. It would not do for him to imagine me an heiress rolling in money. It now occurred to me then that this mistaken idea might be the motive for his recent warming of attention. Vaguely I knew I should be on guard.

We walked along the bank and watched a boy wading out with a net to scoop up hapless minnows. Clive stopped abruptly, and grabbing my hand, kissed it with sudden rapture, saying, “I feel as though I have always known you. As though somehow you felt the same as me, inside.” He clasped my hand firmly to his chest, where beneath his flannel shirt, I felt the thumping of a virile and seemingly reliable heart.

Who would not be flattered by such words? Something in me vibrated dangerously, but I shrugged off the sensation. Glancing aside, I noticed Nigel about a thirty yards away, walking

towards us on the shore, pretending to read a newspaper as he shuffled along the sand. I had the immediate impression that he had been watching us. He must have seen Clive kiss my hand – with an impetus that went a little farther than mere gallantry.

“Well then,” I said briskly, giving Clive’s hand a friendly squeeze and promptly letting go, “that means you must be wanting your tea as well? Shall we see if they might give us some at that café near the boathouse? Oh look, here’s Nigel,” and I waved to him brightly. He returned the signal with a stiff flick of his fingers and stuck his nose back into his wind-blown *Times*.

Having a lover is a bit like being brought back from the dead. After so much loss, I just didn’t expect any more love at my age. But two days later, in Florence, I didn’t push Clive away that night when he stood in the doorway of my room at the *Pensione Balestra*, clad only in his American boxer shorts, and a calico shirt unbuttoned to reveal the golden furze on his chest. When he wagged a bottle of champagne, which I guessed had probably been bought with *my* money, before my nose, I knew what was about to happen. But I stepped aside, let him come in and ordered him to close the shutters above the murky, odorous waters of the Arno.

I hoped that Nigel wasn’t too disappointed about the recent change in Clive. Observing the two men during the latter part of our trip down from Paris, while my intimacy with Clive had begun to flower, I dimly realized what sort of predicament I was getting myself into by stealing Nigel’s friend. Seducing this young man had been the last thing on my mind when we set off from Paris on this journey, which was not even of my own choosing. I merely succumbed in my loneliness to Clive’s ardent insistence. Indeed, who in my position could have resisted that ready smile? Those manly shoulders? The sleek flaxen hair and the electric touch? I could hardly believe my passion was returned. A boon better left uninvestigated, for the time being.

Later that first time in Florence, we shared a cigarette in my narrow bed at the *pensione*, beneath a bronze crucifix and a framed notice from the tourist police banning visits from

unregistered guests. I asked, “What accounts for this change of heart? If not of sexual orientation?”

He laughed at my question. “I play *both* ways and in some you may never have even thought of!”

“Oh heavens! Well then, don’t tell me I’d rather not know! I am a bit old fashioned, you know.”

To this he did not reply, but just lay languorously beside me, toying with a strand of my hair spread out on the pillow, winding it tightly around his index finger, as if to keep me captive. I shrieked in protest as he tugged once –hard – at the roots.

“So this red stuff is real!”

“Silly boy! Of course it is!”

“It’s so Venetian, so Titian. And you’re such a *very* sophisticated lady. Nobody like you, back where I come from.”

“You mean Texas.”

“Yes ma’am.”

The clock tower in the piazza struck two o’clock.

I sighed and caressed him. “Maybe it’s time you returned to your room. Do you suppose Nigel heard you go out ? Try not to make too much noise on your way in again.”

“What does it matter?”

“Well,” I reflected, still stroking the blond hairs on his chest, thinking somewhat regrettably that this amorous encounter had been a pleasant occasion unlikely to be repeated.

“Perhaps he wouldn’t like it to know that you are here with me.”

“Why should it bother Nigel to know that we are friends?” he kissed my hands.

I shook my head. “Nigel is a very...sensitive...person, and a very jealous one. He has always been possessive about his friends.” God knows, he was very possessive about my brother.

“Nobody owns me, and certainly not Nigel. I belong to me,” and giving me a devilish smile, he rolled over on his right side and fell asleep.

Next morning meeting Nigel at breakfast while Clive still snored in my bed and the maids clambered about in the corridor, banging open shutters and stirring clouds of dust, I bowed my head contrite before the man who fancied himself my benefactor and only friend.

Over rubbery eggs, cold toast and tough strips of bacon, Nigel clipped, “So. Love has blossomed,” and swilled down a cup of watery tea.

“Forgive me, Nigel,” I hesitated in forming my apology... Never had we broached the question of his “friends,” not even when my brother Edmund died, though it was the suspicion of something between them that had broken my poor mother at the end. As a dear friend of mine once remarked: Oh, men’s love for other men. It is truly the most jealous of human passions. Nigel stopped me cold with his curt remark.

“Best beware, dearest Daphne. The boy is winsome but he’s callow.”

I hated dealing such a dirty blow to Nigel by stealing his charming friend. After all, he had done so much for me. Looking back over the decades of our friendship, I felt guilty for betraying his trust, for not renouncing at once this newfound pleasure. And yet, Nigel Havelon had always called up in me rather ambiguous feelings. There was a time, many years ago, when my foolish mother considered him marriageable material for me. That was long before he had squandered his family’s fortune in unwise business schemes in Kenya before turning to publishing. He was damnably handsome then, the unflattering jowls had not yet plumped out the sides of his face, giving him the corpulent, houndish look which distinguishes him today. As a girl, I had enjoyed his company for dancing and tennis and found him, yes, sexually appealing. I

was older than Nigel by two years, and when I was twenty-three, we had had a brief liaison, very unsatisfactory, which ended with Nigel profusely apologizing and blaming the fiasco on the abundant champagne we had drunk all through the evening. I remember being disappointed at the outcome, for despite all, at the time, I fancied him.

It was then that I began to notice his interest in men, though I did not understand all its repercussions, and observed in silence the evolution of his friendship with my younger brother, Edmund. I had not yet learned to interpret the unguarded looks that sometimes flashed between them, nor could quite guess what went on during their long evenings together supposedly spent “at the club” or their frequent escapes to Paris for which my brother footed the bill. God knows what sort of awkward triangle we would have made if I had followed my mother’s advice and married Nigel. When I met my future husband, Peter Reynard-Simms, I had outgrown my silly attraction to my brother’s bosom friend. Despite my mother’s conviction that Nigel would not be averse to the idea of marrying me, which she had heard from his aunt, he had indeed never brought the subject up with me and most certainly had never proposed. Yet for a time after my marriage to Peter, I had the impression that Nigel’s feelings for me had grown frostier. Then the war, my widowhood, and Edmund’s death drew us closer in unexpected ways and now business interests bound us.

That first night in Bomarzo, I must have dozed off shortly after midnight as I lay waiting for Clive. After the long drive, he too probably felt exhausted and wanted to settle into his new room. My bed was comfortable enough, but the pillows and bedclothes felt damp, and I welcomed the warmth of the fire which brought a flush to my face, although my feet were freezing. Deep in the night, I woke with a start – half perceiving a bang or thump nearby, but the room was perfectly still. An animal on the terrace, I thought, a cat perhaps, remembering the

white thing in the kitchen. Restless dreams followed; then I was wakened by a noise in the alcove, a tapping in the wall. I bolted upright, terrified there might be a rat in the wardrobe. Lighting a candle, I advanced to the alcove, where I discovered the noise was coming from the ceiling. I banged my fist on the wall, hoping to chase whatever it was – a big rat probably -- away.

“Daphne, you’re finally awake! Open up!”

“Clive? Where are you? ” I could not tell where his voice was coming from.

“Up here. There’s a trapdoor leading into your room! But I can’t open it,” he hissed. “See if you can open it from your side!”

I held up my candle to the ceiling where I noted a panel about four feet square disguised by an arabesque design. In the center of the panel was a small a brass ring.

“There’s a ring!” I said.

“Well, pull it!”

The ceiling of the alcove was low enough to reach if I stood on a chair, so I fetched one and climbed up. I rather risked toppling off and breaking my leg, or worse, as I reached upwards to grab the ring, but it wouldn’t budge. I tried again, tugging for all I was worth, then inadvertently I must have turned it the right way and immediately set in motion a grinding of wheels. The panel shot open, and there was Clive, in his underwear, grinning down at me.

“Stand aside, baby. Let’s see how this works!” I jumped off the chair and pulled it aside just in time, as he touched a mechanism and a folding stair slid out into the alcove.

Down he toddled in bare feet and swept me up in his arms.

“How did you get up there?” I asked in between kisses .

“There’s a trapdoor in my room leading up to there, too. Great room for a studio with a skylight! I am going to set up shop there tomorrow.”

“You don’t think Finestone will mind? Might we have to pay more?”

“I doubt it. I mean, he gave us the rooms that were connected. He must have known we’d find out.”

“Wasn’t that wise?”

“Yes ma’am.” And he carried me to the bed.

CHAPTER TWO

Clive must have snuck back to his room before dawn while I was still asleep, for I woke alone and with a slight headache, perhaps from the damp air or from the stink of ashes permeating the room. Manu had promised hot water in the morning, and out in the corridor, I found a tin kettle of cold water set outside my door – another one waited outside Clive’s across the hall– evidently we were expected to boil the water ourselves! I brought the kettle in and poured some into the basin on the dresser in the alcove to wash my hands and face, wondering indeed when I would finally enjoy a long soak in the tub. I dressed and before going downstairs, tapped on Clive’s door, but the boy gave no reply. Wandering down to the dining room then across the hall to the kitchen, I found the place deserted. There was no sign of Amelia or Manu, but the table in the kitchen had been laid for three. The little white cat stood on a counter licking a butter dish left uncovered. I flicked my hand at it and it leapt off the counter and out through an open window. There was nothing for breakfast except a pot of cold tea, which looked very much as though it had been made with the dregs of last night’s brew, and a basket of buns as hard as stones.

An envelope addressed *To Our English Guests* lay near the teapot. I opened it and read:

“Welcome to Bomarzo. My research has taken me to Rome for a few days. Everything has been arranged for your visit which I hope will be pleasant and productive. Amelia and Manu will help you with every need.

One thing I would like to ask of you is this: please do not enter the park gates until my return. This is mainly for your own safety – there are unmarked excavated areas into which you

might stumble, causing harm to yourselves and there are sculptures in need of restoration – they could be accidentally damaged, or they could even cause harm to one of you if a loose piece should detach itself and fall. The whole area is also home to a very venomous viper which awakens in spring. Therefore I beg you all to refrain from exploring beyond the immediate grounds or visiting the park , until I have returned. At that time, I will be delighted not only to make your acquaintance, but to show you the mysteries of Bomarzo and its “monsters”, and arrange for you to enjoy access to the park during your stay, at your pleasure. Lastly, and please forgive me if this seems overly prohibitive, according to the wishes of the owners, taking photographs of the villa or park is forbidden at this time. You are of course free to make as many sketches and drawings as you like.

Cordially,

Jacob Finestone.

Vipers ! That sounded like a lame excuse to me. What mysteries did the Monster Park hold which required such stringent secrecy? The effect of this prohibition was, of course, to sharpen my resolve to see the place immediately.

As I headed towards the park that morning, I learned that although it was off limits to us during Finestone’s absence, it was not locked to everyone. I saw our maid, Amelia, wearing a ludicrous sun hat, with a basket on her arm, slip inside, followed by the little white cat, and lock the gate behind her. After both had disappeared amid the thick vegetation, I strolled over to the entrance. The massive black iron gate was over twelve feet tall, with a row of sharp spearheads along the top to discourage intruders. I peered inside. The only sculpture I could see resembled the hindquarters of a lion or perhaps a sphinx half covered in vines, but through a gap in an unclipped hedge, I could make out a small army of workmen, uprooting stumps, clearing briars

and weeds under Manu's supervision. There was no sneaking in as long as they were there. For the moment, I'd have to satisfy my curiosity with other amusements.

There were many other things to explore in the villa and for the first day or two I did my best to become acquainted with them. There was the magnificent library which Finestone had adopted as a studio, where we were also allowed to browse. Stocked with hundreds of old leather-bound, musty-smelling books and decorated with many fine landscapes and antique maps and prints, it was a perfect place for a writer to dream. Cast-off curios from older days were crammed into crystal cupboards: seashells, embalmed reptiles, silver knickknacks, bits of pottery which looked like genuine Etruscan artifacts. In the symbolism of the Renaissance, the library represented the Mind of the Master of the house and the mind of the man who had created these collections was both commanding and fanciful: the range of interests displayed ran from instruments of navigation to alembics and alchemical equipment. I was sure I'd find some inspiration here.

I discovered passageways, concealed corridors, secondary staircases connecting unrelated rooms. Niches hid doorways which had been sealed centuries ago, or perhaps, only yesterday. A button touched by accident in the library opened a panel to reveal a secret chamber filled with dust and spiders, occupied by an abandoned broom and a bicycle wheel. All this delighted me. I imagined the love trysts, murders, escapes, and rescues which these now forgotten spaces once made possible, the treasures or cadavers they might once have contained.

And then there was the villa's exquisite collection of paintings: portraits, landscapes, icons to study one by one. My favorite piece of artwork was the one Manu had so cursorily dismissed: the Angel icon in the niche across from the library. Its velvet curtains were always kept closed, I noted, perhaps to protect it from sunlight or dust. Was it more valuable than he wanted us to know? Or did the owners of the villa consider the gaze of angel and snake a bit too

disturbing? Was that why they kept the picture partly hidden when foreign tenants came to stay at the villa? Did it hold some heretical meaning better hid from public view? Angels are usually shown slaying snakes, not conniving with them, as this one seemed to do. On my way along the hall, I would stop and move aside the curtain to peek into those eyes. What things they must have witnessed! If only those lips could speak.

With admission to the Monster Park denied for the time being, we settled down to the tasks we had come here for. I to my writing, Clive to his painting, and as for Nigel, he had decided to brush up his Italian and reread the *Divine Comedy*, a handsomely illustrated edition of which occupied an entire shelf of the library. But my good intentions came to naught. I sat blankly before my desk, pen in hand, lamenting the absence of a proper smoke, for I had consumed the supply I had brought from Paris, with no new ideas in store. Nigel didn't seem to understand that Miss Moseley and Edna Rutherford were produced by the pipe he had dashed from my lips. Without inspiration, I could not write. What was needed was a new batch of *signatures*, those curious messages our waking life sends us from our own unconscious, which I have come to see as promptings from the muse, and even as a spiritual guide for my own existence.

For this was the mystery I had discovered when I wrote my novel, *Signatures*. We are constantly immersed in a network of signs and symbols whose meaning eludes us, but which, if only we could read them, would reveal every detail of our past and even predict our future. Like anticipatory echoes, they tingle in our consciousness, building in crescendo until the event they herald becomes fully manifest. Afterwards, they linger for a time before being drowned out by a new tide of signs rushing in upon us. Such signatures are everywhere-- a glove dropped in the street, an unusual design of seaweed washed up on the beach, a picture postcard addressed to a stranger, slipped in between the pages of a borrowed book.

Signatures often take the form of curious coincidences, but we usually fail to notice when they present themselves. For example, on your way downstairs one morning, you nearly stumble on a toy boat left on the stairs by a neighbor's child. At breakfast an article on the front page of *The Times* catches your eye, telling of some catastrophe at sea. Stepping out to the street, you nearly collide with a delivery boy carrying a bucket of live eels to a nearby restaurant. As the day passes, you overhear snatches of conversation in which the words "water" or "island" are repeated. Returning home, you find the pipes have burst and a puddle has formed on the bathroom floor.

Now, the ordinarily inattentive mind will not pause to consider these coincidences. Many people would not even notice that they are connected one to another, as it were, thematically to the concept of "sea voyage." But suppose the very next day, urgent business affairs oblige you to book passage to New York. These insignificant events occurring throughout the previous day may then be understood as a premonitory experience composed of dozens of minor "correspondences" or "signatures." Most likely, you will remember but a few fragments of the whole mosaic. *But* if you could piece them all together and properly interpret them, you'd not only foresee your journey, but also the outcome of the business affairs taking you abroad. We are never attentive enough to what is happening around us. Mr. Ouspensky knew what he was talking about when he said, "There is no coincidence in a meaningful universe."

In my novel, *Signatures*, Edna's ghostly fiancé had communicated with her by scattering signs about her and leading her to their discovery: a book fallen open to a page where a tea stain called attention to a woman's name; the hands of a clock stopped on the stroke of ten; a letter delivered to a wrong address, all of which turned out to have a bearing on the case. For all of these events there was a cause explainable by the laws of physics. A gust of wind had disarranged the pages of the book; she herself had forgotten to wind the clock the night before; that day there

was a new postman unfamiliar with the route. Yet behind all, there loomed a supernatural intelligence which had preordained that these signatures should manifest themselves to Edna at a specific moment in time, so that our detective, could link them together as precisely as the elements in a mathematical equation, whose final product was the murderer's name and motive. That supernatural intelligence was none other than her own unconscious mind.

The mind talks to itself not with *words*, but with scrambled symbols, pictures, fragments often severed from any literal meaning. If we wish to learn to read them, we must abandon the rational links of words to thoughts. Signatures are always there waiting for us, like unopened letters slid beneath the front door, accumulating after a long period of absence, written in a hieroglyphic alphabet we have forgotten. Perhaps the secret of reading the signs lies in a stimulated, heightened attention. But how may that stimulation be best attained?

Whenever I needed to stretch my legs after sitting unproductively for an hour or two, staring at an empty page, I used my "hidden passageway," the staircase leading down from the terrace, where at the bottom, a door opened out into a narrow space behind the hedge where garden tools and tarpaulins were kept. The topiary of the hedge, trimmed in elongated rectangular and pyramid shapes, made a perfect camouflage and I loved the resinous smell of the bushes when they were thickly covered in dew. I'd spy out from my hiding place watching hares or toads leaping in the wet grass and smoke a cigarette, staring at the locked gates of the Monster Park down at the end of the lawn. Sometimes I'd listen to a concert by screech owls or nightingales. One evening my work was interrupted by the tinkling of bells, and sneaking down the staircase and out through the door behind the hedge, I found a herd of dingy sheep, grazing placidly on the huge lawn, blanching in the moonlight, while their shepherdess, a child hardly more than twelve years old, dozed on a stone nearby and a dog watched over both sheep and

mistress. I suppose she kept her flock out in the moon all night in hopes of whitening their wool – a common belief amid country folk the world over.

After a refreshing pause, I'd step back through the iron door, remembering to bolt it shut behind me, climb back up to my room and return to my desk. But not even a breath of chill air and a smoke would get my brain churning. The words refused to flow, and in any case, the schedule of Clive's visits quite put an end to my concentration. Way after midnight just in those hours most fruitful for my writing, he would scramble down through the trapdoor into the alcove and I would have to push aside my scribblings with a sigh, wondering how on earth I'd ever manage to produce the book I had promised Nigel if things kept on this way.

Alas, the poor boy didn't turn out to be much of a painter. Although he claimed to have studied at Sargent's studio in Paris, it was clear he had no talent and little training in design, drawing, or perspective. Yet he spent most of the day up in his studio, or trudging about the grounds with a foldable American easel, which he would proudly display to anyone who demonstrated even the slightest interest. It folded up into a compact bundle of sticks which easily fit into a pocket or rucksack and Clive seemed to think it was the cleverest device in the world. It had, however, one defect. Through so much repeated opening and closing, the screws of its joints had come loose, and tended to fall out and scatter on the ground. The latter part of Clive's demonstration of this novelty involved everyone picking through the grass or sand to retrieve them. This folding easel was the only piece of equipment he had brought from New York; everything else had been purchased brand new in Paris at a little shop in Montmartre where all the young painters bought their supplies. I recognized the shop label stuck on every piece.

Each day Clive worked away for hours, earnestly daubing globs of color upon his canvases, smudging his face, hands, and clothes with cadmium and vermilion. Whenever he embraced me, he smelled of linseed oil and turpentine and his nails were always edged in black

and green. More than one of my chic black jerseys had been spoiled by little spots of paint after an encounter with Clive. Twice a day, right before lunch and then again in the late afternoon, I would climb through the trapdoor to his studio to see what he had produced. Timidly, he stood back from the canvas, begging approval for his handiwork. How to deny what was so easy to give? I tried to be encouraging.

I knew how eager Clive was to be considered as an artist. He loved to rattle on to us over coffee or a glass of wine about questions of technique, and if we were in a crowded café, he would slightly raise his voice and drop the names of “Cezanne” or “Renoir,” until at least one head at another table turned in our direction. During our drive down from Paris, whenever we stopped at a *pensione*, he would write his name in the guestbook: *Clive Brentwood, painter, Paris -New York* and had even had a calling card printed in Paris, which he showed me, *Clive Brentwood, peintre*, with a Montmartre address. These he had left with the shopkeepers and with *patrons*, especially the *patronnes* of restaurants and taverns where we ate, if he liked the food, hoping I suppose to impress them, or ingratiate himself with them so that at his next visit, he might be offered a free meal or at least a discount on the bill. Though I must say, the Italians we met did not seem to hold artists in high regard, or to take any special notice of them at all. How unlike France where artists and writers are universally respected and esteemed.

It was the artist’s mystique and status he craved, the excitement of exhibitions and gallery openings watered with champagne, of provocative experiments sparking controversy and rage. Alas, *his* work would never set the Seine on fire. His pictures were arid splotches of paint, a glorified form of play and self-indulgence by a boy who refused to grow up.

To the boy’s credit, it must be said, however, that he had an extraordinary gift for grinding and mixing his own pigments. The knowledge he had of this technical aspect was the only thing that might suggest he had indeed frequented an important studio or school in Paris or

elsewhere. Patient and painstaking as alchemist, he would stand by the window, blending his colors on a palette, his face hardened in concentration, his eyes narrowed, as he squeezed out his tubes, adding powdered specks of the most unexpected hues to create his final result. “There you see, Daphne,” he’d say proudly – “This is the exact color of the pink in the lady’s earlobe,” or here “This is the shade of the moonlight in that landscape.” I found it touching that this precision should be coupled with such a total lack of artistic talent in every other regard.

Those first few days, Nigel, deprived of Clive’s attentions, moped around the house and frankly, I felt guilty. He clearly was uninterested in Clive’s pictures now, which further wounded the boy’s pride, but then, what else could Clive have expected after what had happened? Still, the fact that Nigel no longer took his work seriously was a blow to his ego and they both took pains to ignore each other except when we met for meals. When weather permitted, Nigel would go off exploring our immediate surroundings, but I am sure he found the Tuscia countryside tedious. It held none of the civilized and quaint attractions of Tuscany or Liguria – it was craggy with overhanging cliffs, riddled with gullies, punctuated with dilapidated farmhouses, and populated by immense flocks of sheep. The inhabitants were as rough and obdurate as their landscape, and like Manu and his daughter, often shifty-eyed and unfriendly. I’m sure Nigel would have bolted and headed off to Rome or Naples if it hadn’t been for the lease, which had been paid to the full in advance. The three of us were rather stuck there, waiting for Finestone to come unlock the park and provide some entertainment or at least distraction, while the rains set in.

A gloom permeated the house in this bout of bad weather. The gray stone walls absorbed the damp like sponges. Threads of fine green moss crept across walls indoors and out, in between tiles and cobblestones, under the window ledges. One could almost feel it settling into the interstices of one’s bowels and one’s brain. As I sat reading in an armchair, writing at my desk, or while walking down the long, dim corridors, I would become aware of an unpleasant

sensation: a prickling of chill in my left shoulder, which at first I attributed to the dampness of the villa, to its many airs and draughts. Soon it grew to be more than just a vague, half-unnoticed perception. It was as though my body had somehow sensed a movement just out of range of my peripheral vision, like the slight rippling of a curtain before an open window, or the flapping of dark wings. At times I'd wheel around abruptly to see if there was something – or someone -- there. Of course, there never was. Sometimes, though, I'd turn to lock eyes with one of the portraits hanging on the stairway or in the corridor. So life-like were they in the flickering candlelight, their pupils seemed to dilate, their eyelids flutter, their lips to twitch.

Dreadful storms woke us at night with the clattering of hail against the windows and terrifying explosions of revelatory lighting. During the day the rain poured ceaselessly down, staining the walls with streaks of damp where water seeped in through cracks in between the roof tiles and somehow trickled down to the lower floors. Nigel reacted to this situation by promptly catching a nasty cold that kept him confined to his room, dining off trays and comforted by whisky, with an armload of old books from the library stacked on his bedside table for amusement. Left to our own devices, Clive and I whiled away the hours doing what lovers do in similar circumstances to keep warm and pass the time. Indeed, we had no choice. In such miserable weather, the only solution was to crawl into bed where a bed-warmer heaped with glowing coals, had preceded us.

Clive's love-making was tender, boyish, but he was not particularly virile. Still, it was the solace for my fifty years, *une amitié amoureuse*. As those first few days of our affair progressed, we became quite close. During our long talks in bed as the rain battered the windows, he told me of his lonely childhood. Clive was the illegitimate son of a banker who had adored him and his mother, a saloon maid, thirty years her lover's junior. Unfortunately, the banker had failed to make to provisions for them in the event of his demise, which, alas, occurred sooner than anyone

expected. He died peacefully in his bed, in the arms of his mistress, one afternoon, while Clive was at school. Afterwards, with the scandal ringing through the town, the boy and his mother had literally been run out of town by the banker's widow. At the age of eighteen, he had left home when his mother took a new lover to support her, a violent man who abused her. Clive could not bear to see her weep or to witness their quarrels which always ended in his mother's being beaten black and blue. The only possible outcome would have been murder, he confessed to me – and since his mother refused to abandon her protector, by now the only source of support, with much regret, he had struck out on his own, worked his way eastwards and set sail for Europe on a steamer transporting timber to Cardiff. From there he had found his way to Paris, where he had met Sargent at a café frequented by artists. Recognizing his eager determination, the master allowed him to work awhile in his studio. He had recently returned to Texas to settle some “family business,” there, for in the meantime his mother had died, and he was now all alone in the world. En route back to Paris, he had stayed awhile in New York, where he had met Nigel, and had returned with him to Paris.

At least that was the story he told me. I had no reason to doubt it was true. Yes, I admit, as he recounted episodes of his past and of his more recent life in Paris, I noted inconsistencies, and a certain reticence. What other people did he know in Paris, where had he lived, in what cafés had he spent his idle afternoons? Perhaps we might have crossed paths before? Right after the war was over, there were so many young Americans crowding the cafés and bistros of Montparnasse and Montmartre. Had he ever met my friends Virgil, the musician, or Ezra, the poet? Had he ever been invited by Nancy, or by that formidable gray whale, Gertrude? But he would sidle away from any questions with an enigmatic half-smile, and pay me some compliment, such as “And how could I have forgotten seeing your lovely head of fire,” or some such nonsense, kiss me on the neck, and deftly change the subject.

I did not want to pry too deeply and could but feel for him. How much we had in common. Loss, humiliation, loneliness, homelessness and financial hardship were no strangers to me! He would press himself close to me in the darkness, compelled not only by passion or appetite, but by a need for comfort. But he clung far too hard, I thought. I did not want him to be hurt. Then something happened, which quite reversed our roles and set in motion the workings of a destiny none of us could control.

Ten days or so after our arrival in Bomarzo I was awoken by an unfamiliar sound – a vigorous thumping accompanied by a shrill female voice singing in quartertones. The weather had turned, too, for bright sun filtered in through the chinks in my shutters. Donning a dressing gown and stepping out onto the terrace, I lifted my grateful face to welcome the return of the sun, then noticed Amelia in the yard below, beating out a pair of ottoman carpets hanging on a line strung between two cypress trees. Clouds of thick dust billowed forth with every whack of her beater. Nearby Manu wielding a small hand scythe was shaping a topiary pyramid from a giant yew tree. I dressed and went down alone to breakfast. Clive and Nigel were either still asleep, which I doubted – for nobody could sleep through that ruckus, or were already up and about.

I marveled at the metamorphosis which had occurred in the villa overnight. The marble floors were not only swept, they sparkled under a coat of fresh wax. Brass railings gleamed and drapes were pulled back to reveal spotless windows. But the most amazing thing was the transformation in the kitchen where every surface had been scrubbed and polished, and delightful smells of roasts, pies and sauces issued from a dozen copper pots bubbling on the stovetop, and from within the incandescent womb of the wood oven. Tea and rolls with butter and jam had been laid out on the table, so I helped myself to breakfast. Going back upstairs again, I saw Manu bringing up the carpets on his shoulder and carrying them into one of Finestone's rooms.

These labors of housekeeping continued all morning and afternoon, not only in the villa and on the grounds but also in the Monster Park, where the men were burning huge piles of debris and rubbish. Neither lunch or tea was prepared for us that day. Amelia left cold food for us in the kitchen, and I met neither Clive nor Nigel throughout the entire day. I had no idea where they were. I spent the hours reading, scribbling, mending a chemise --- and by late afternoon was bored to tears. Slipping down the spiral staircase to smoke a cigarette in my favorite hiding place behind the hedge, I pushed open the iron door and hit someone smack in the face.

“What the devil!” cursed an angry voice. The person with whom I had just collided was Clive, accompanied by a bald, plumpish, gentleman with a bushy red beard tufted with gray. From behind thick lenses, the stranger’s watery-green, bloodshot eyes inspected me with curiosity. He was dressed in overalls of coarse blue cotton and a collarless white linen shirt. In his hand, he held a silver-headed cane. I knew of course it could be none other than Professor Jacob Finestone.

“Clive, darling ! I beg your pardon! I hope I did not injure you?”

“Not at all, my dear. Daphne, I was just talking about you. Please meet Dr. Jacob Finestone. Dr. Finestone, my friend, Madame Daphne DuBlanc.”

The gentleman bowed stiffly and touched his lips to the back of my hand as we were introduced. His hand was cool and clammy, his fingers hirsute, perfumed, like his beard, with cigar smoke.

“The professor is just back from Rome.”

“I came across this young man sketching on the lawn, and I guessed he must belong to the party of British artists who had arranged to share with me this magnificent villa. I hope you have found it comfortable, suitable, and above all, inspiring. I understand you are a writer.”

I smiled at Clive and noted that he was not carrying any of his equipment.

“Yes,” I said, “ and I am most curious about the sculpture garden, the famous Monster Park.”

“I have just told the men to fill in some holes, and to stake off unsafe areas. Tomorrow morning I will have the pleasure of showing you the park myself. You’ll soon be able to visit it at your leisure. I believe, though, it is nearly dinner time. Are you joining us Madame, or are you out for an early evening stroll?”

I hadn’t realized it was so late, and I wanted to dress for dinner, especially since our host had arrived. I renounced my cigarette, slipped back in through the door from which I had just come, and climbed back up to the terrace, with the gentlemen chatting behind me. I paused a minute to catch my breath on the terrace, while Clive and Finestone still engaged in conversation went to the far edge of the terrace to admire the view. Then Finestone gave Clive a little pat on the back and the two men turned and went into the villa by way of the library door. I remarked to myself that it hadn’t taken Clive very long to make friends with Jacob Finestone.

That night at dinner, the professor captivated us all with his intriguing banter, ranging from the present whereabouts of the Holy Grail (which he claimed was located in a sewer in Turin) to the qualities of aged pecorino cheese. I found him a genial conversationalist and by no means a pedant, as I had feared. He had a sort of fatherly appeal and I took to him at once. After dinner, we withdrew to the library, where Finestone showed us a portfolio of sixteenth-century prints depicting winged monsters, wag-tongued masks, and sundry gargoyles which he believed had been inspired by the bizarre menagerie of stone figures populating the grounds of Bomarzo. Before retiring to our separate rooms that night, he promised again to take us all on a tour of the park the next morning, but warned us we must be on time. He would not wait for us, if we happened to sleep late, for he had much work to do.

Clive and I were excited by the prospect of finally gaining admittance to the forbidden precinct of Finestone's mysterious research, but Nigel, who had at last recovered from his cold, deferred. He planned to go to Rome to see about some business. Besides, the dampness of the villa had been bothering his arthritic knee. Clive and I assured Finestone that we would meet him for breakfast at eight o'clock sharp, ready to visit the Monster Park.

Later that night towards one o'clock, Clive came to me. When we had done, I rose to rinse my face in the basin of cold water on the dresser, and stood before the mirror, brushing my hair a hundred strokes before bedtime, as I have done since my childhood. Clive lounged naked on the bed, with one knee drawn up in what could only be described as a lascivious pose, smoking, gazing dreamily at me. I was looking well, I thought, admiring my reflection, as the sparks crackled at the ends of my red mane, glad I had decided to pack this emerald negligee, though heaven knows I hadn't expected it to come in so handy. I had just slipped off my topaz ring and replaced it in its little velvet box in the dresser drawer where I kept my jewelry, makeup, and bit a of cash, when Clive said. "Let's go away together. Now. Tomorrow."

"But we *are* together, here in Italy, a lover's paradise." I daubed a spot of cold cream on my neck and tried futilely to rub away the wrinkles there.

"I want to be alone somewhere with you. Just the two of us."

I was touched by his urgency. "I can't go anywhere," I said, continuing to massage cream into my skin. "Nigel won't give me my money until I have given him a book. And I must confess, with all these distractions you have been creating for me, I fear it may take me much longer than I expected."

"To hell with Nigel!" he burst out, stabbing his cigarette in the ashtray.

I was surprised by this vehemence. I sat down on the bed beside him, took off my fur-topped mules and began to rub my ankles and the soles of my feet with cold cream. At my age, not even a new lover could keep me from my nightly rituals.

“Haven’t you got any other money we could live on?” he asked.

I shook my head sadly. *Money*, then, was the real motive behind his ardor. “Neither have you, I take it?”

He did not answer this directly, but stared up at the portrait hanging over the bed. “Now supposing that little treasure were mine, I’d know just what to do with it.”

“Don’t tell me you are an art thief?”

“Haven’t you noticed how many valuable little things are scattered all over this place, just waiting for someone to walk off with them? Who’d notice? Tomorrow we could be in rolling in dough, living it up in Paris or Berlin with our futures secure.”

“A future secure behind bars! Don’t even think of it, my boy,” I said, shaking my head in stern disapproval, “And if you don’t heed my warning, please leave me out of it. Besides, I thought you were here to immortalize the Monster Park with your paintings?”

“I was only joking,” he shrugged. “Never stole a thing in my life. I swear! Except you!” and he gave me that radiant smile.

“I would imagine Nigel has quite a different perception of who stole whom,” I sighed and rubbed cream into my hands and cuticles.

“I love you, Daphne,” he said so earnestly my whole body tingled. The words cut deep with their charge of joy and their throb of old, old pain.

I lay my finger on his lips. “Say you love my hair, my lips. Say you love the way I stir the sugar in my tea. But please, say no more.”

Playfully he nipped at my finger with his teeth, which were surprisingly sharp. It hurt and I winced.

“Say you love me,” he said.

“You know I adore you.” I laughed at his petulance.

“Say you *love* me,” he growled in a tone so menacing I might have been shocked had I had time to take stock of my reaction. But this I was not granted. He seized me roughly by the waist, threw me back on the pillows, and straddled me like a sheep at the shearing, with his knees pinning my hips to the bed. An insatiable kiss sucked my breath away, as in sweet delirium the room whirled round and round. I opened an eye at the center of this vortex to catch sight of the portrait reflected in the mirror. The lady pictured there seemed to be regarding me with a new sneer of disdain.

“Stop it darling!” I gasped, “I can’t breathe.”

He tore another kiss from me and pushed my negligee up around my waist. “I won’t stop unless you say that word. “

There was no resisting the body’s complicity to this game, to the little stabs of wild pleasure, the surge and shower of physical joy, till I cried out in sheer exhaustion the words he commanded me to speak. “Love,” I croaked with what breath I had left, “ I love you.”

The moment I pronounced that phrase, he rolled away from me. Yawning, he stretched himself with a silly smile, pulled on his boxer shorts, and left the room. I lay there, a heap of overripe, overwrought, quivering flesh, dazed by the intensity of sensation and need he had awoken in this half-broken body of fifty-some years. *Lilacs stirred in the dead land.* I drowsed for a while in lazy expectancy, thinking that he had gone out to wash himself or have a smoke on the terrace, to snatch some bread or cheese from the pantry...those things men do after the act of

love, when women crave to curl up in their arms and sleep. I was sure he would return, for we had slept side by side every night since our affair had begun.

While waiting, I caressed the impress of his body on the rumpled white sheet. Then I sat up and lit the lamp on the bedside table, smoked a cigarette and then another. I got up to tidy the bed, tucked the sheets back in, plumped and smoothed the pillows, and as I did so found a long fine hair which I plucked with disgust from my lover's pillow. Examining in the lamplight, I saw it was golden blond. Amelia! That girl should be more careful when making my bed. I would have to tell her that she must wear a cap while doing her chores. When I burned it in the flame of the lamp, it gave off a strong odor of singed chicken skin.

After an hour or so, I began to pace the room. The boy is exhausted. I said to myself. He has fallen asleep on the couch in his studio, poor thing, and will awake with his neck out of joint.

I lay down but could not sleep and kept staring at the lamp till the oil burned away. My lips and nipples were bruised, my whole body ached, but I would have willingly submitted again. His delayed return first annoyed and then alarmed me. Restless I got up again, lit a candle and pulled on a wrap, thinking I should go to look for him, but the chill touch of the brass doorknob stopped me as I was about to open the door. Once again I felt that prickling in my shoulder, a cold sensation, almost a cramp which I tried to relieve with a brief massage. I reflected it would not do to go to him now. I *must* restrain the impulse. I *must* give him time to return to me of his own accord. I went to my desk to write a note in my diary, but my mind went blank as soon as I dipped my pen in the ink. I rifled through the drawers, though I knew there was not a bit of paste left for my pipe. I had smoked the last of it days ago. I held my head in my hands for a moment and closed my eyes.

I must have dozed off in that uncomfortable position, for I soon became aware of a soft singsong murmuring in my ear, and I thought I recognized Clive's low, amorous whisper. I

snapped awake instantly and looked around at the darkened room where the candle had gone out. I half-expected to see my young lover sprawled in a seductive pose, but the bed was empty. I took a match from a desk drawer, lit the candle and inspected the room more closely. Clive had not returned. The murmuring had only been a dream, but it left me feeling unsettled, with a rapid, uneven heartbeat and a slight headache.

I sat there a few moments, listening to the silence in the house. The clock in the library next door struck four. Then, almost in response to the chiming of the clock, an owl hooted outside. It sounded so near, as though the bird had alighted on the terrace right outside my bedroom.

I surmised it was the owl I had heard while asleep, which my dreaming brain had interpreted as a human, indeed as Clive's voice. If the bird was still there, I wanted to have a look at it. I tried to open the shutter without making any noise, but the latch was rusty. As I tugged and pushed, the shutter burst open and banged against the wall, and there came a loud rustling of wings as a large bird departed from the terrace with an eerie little shriek, giving me a bit of a start.

Candle in hand, I stepped onto the terrace. The air was damp and fresh and smelled of new grass and boxwood. It must have rained earlier in the night, for everything was drenched, but a cold wind from the north had swept the clouds away, leaving a terse black sky with a whorl of stars overhead and a bright waning moon near the zenith. I was surprised to see a very faint light glowing at this late hour in between the slats of the shutters of Finestone's room, which like mine, had access to the terrace. He too was still awake, and I did not want to disturb him. The light in his room explained the owl's presence on the terrace. I knew from my childhood in the English countryside that owls are attracted to lights burning late at night.

Walking to the edge of the terrace, and looking out toward the park, I was seized by the irresistible urge – or perhaps the caprice -- to see it in the moonlight. I unhooked a lantern from the terrace wall, lit it with my candle, and hurried down my hidden staircase, out from behind the shrubs and on across the lawn towards the gate.

The lantern shone a bright cone of light on the ground as I made my way through the long dripping grass, crunching an occasional snail beneath my slippers as the rain soaked the hem of my dressing gown and bits of weeds stuck to my bare ankles. The stars seemed to grow bigger as I wandered away from the villa. Such a spectacle! I could make out Casseopeia and Ursa Major. Behind me the moonlit villa seemed dwarfed by the shadowy mass of the ridge overhanging it where the old stone houses and towers of the town clung to the edge like moldering teeth set in a jawbone. The gate to the Monster Park was locked, of course, and tall walls of shaggy yew hedges obscured the view within. I peered in through the iron bars, but all I could see was a gray sphinx crouching at the head of a path vanishing amid the thick vegetation where boulders were visible beyond. Somewhere nearby a stream, or perhaps a fountain, bubbled noisily.

The night was chill. There was a feral tang in the air, left perhaps by a fox that had scurried by in the night, returning to her den. A lone anticipatory cricket chirped in a ferny recess, and then with no prelude, a nightingale struck up her rich, thrilling song from the depths of the trees. I stood there entranced, pressing my face against the cold bars, tasting the rusted iron on my lips as I murmured my Keats to the night. *Thou wast not born for death immortal bird! No hungry generations tread thee down!*

An inexplicable nostalgia welled up in me then. *Ah love, let us be true to one another.* How I longed to share this sight with Clive --I sighed like a schoolgirl, then had to stop and laugh at myself, and pinched my cheeks to make sure these feelings were real and not a dream. *One must not cling to beauty or to joy,* I warned myself. Or one would find oneself in an untenable

position. A position in which, I must add, neither Marilyn Moseley nor Edna Rutherford would ever be caught dead.

A movement deep within caught my eye, or perhaps it was just a branch waving, followed by a rustling sound, made, perhaps, by the owl I had frightened away from the terrace or by some night-roving animal, like a cat or a weasel out on a hunt. But this was only a vague impression, and was immediately supplanted by a far more definite sensation. I heard a door open behind me, for sound can travel very far on damp nights, which caused me to whirl around. On the moon-washed terrace I saw a white figure exit from Finestone's room, where lights were still burning, cross the terrace, and dart down the very staircase from where I had come, but instead of emerging onto the lawn, it disappeared into the ragged shrubbery to the side of the villa.

I had recognized the fleeing figure at once. Amelia had been visiting the professor! The door to his room opened again, shedding a wedge of light on the terrace, and Finestone appeared in his dressing gown, puffing a cigar. He waddled to the parapet on the far edge, craned his neck forward, looking out into the night. I doubted that he could distinguish my shape in the darkness from such a distance, but for precaution's sake, I turned down the flame of my lantern and stepped into the shadows, shielding the light with my hand, and waiting for him to finish his smoke and go back inside, which he did shortly.

So this was a discovery. Amelia provided other services besides cleaning, cooking and laundry. I wondered if her father knew.

As I made my way back along the path, musing about the relations between Amelia and Finestone, I noticed a small white object gleaming in the tall grass. I crouched down to see what it was and found the half-crushed head of a china doll, the size of a tangerine, one blue eye gouged out. So cold to the touch was it after lying out in the dew, a shiver rippled up my spine as I plucked it from the ground to inspect it. No cheap trinket, this head was finely modeled with a

pixie nose and painted with a cupid's bow mouth. It looked as though it had come from an expensive Paris toyshop. I felt a pang of melancholy as I stared into its one remaining eye, then wiping it with my handkerchief, slipped the head into the pocket of my dressing gown. I knew what I had found: the first signature of my Italian adventure, but a severed head was no auspicious omen. I poked about the grass for other pieces, but there were none.

Where had it come from? I had seen no children anywhere near the villa – except for the shepherdess who sometimes brought her sheep at night to graze on the lawn. Though she was not likely to own a doll with such a fine china head, she might have had a broken remnant of one picked out of the trash somewhere and had dropped it while tending her sheep. Or perhaps a dog had dragged it here from a rubbish heap. I looked up at the villa all dark and shuttered and reflected that one reason the place seemed so austere was indeed its absence of any sign of children even in the past. No portraits of children hung in its picture galleries, no antique toys were on display. No primers or picture books or easy piano pieces were lined up on its library shelves. It occurred to me now that this was odd, for surely at one time there had to have been children in the villa, generations of youngsters must have occupied the house, run shouting down its corridors and played hide-and-seek among the statues in the park. Why was there no trace of them? Puzzling this over, I mounted to my bedroom – and setting the doll's head on my bedside table, slid beneath the covers and was instantly asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Next morning I woke before dawn from an unquiet dream of shadowy figures glimpsed under water although my throat was parched. I lit a candle, and got up to fetch a drink of water, but tripped on the rug, nearly knocking something off the bedside table. That doll's head! It stared at me in an uncanny way with its one good eye, giving me, once again, a mournful feeling. I sensed it was somehow unlucky and decided to keep it out of sight, for I suspected it had influenced my nightmare. I always keep my "signatures" – all those odds and ends I gather while working on a new book—together in a box and use them for inspiration when I run out of ideas. In a desk drawer I had found an old cedar box which seemed perfect for holding such a collection. I dropped the head into it, closed the lid, and put it back in the drawer. Then I crawled back into bed and slept another hour or two.

I suppose it was the excitement of finally seeing the Monster Park that prompted me to get up and get dressed in time to meet Finestone at eight o'clock. Although the sky was overcast again, the weather was warm enough to sit outdoors, so he had arranged for breakfast on the terrace. It was only the two of us, however. Nigel had risen very early to drive into Rome as planned, in search of sunshine and amusement. Clive was still asleep after our exhausting night of love. I had knocked softly on his door, but had received no answer. Like me, he hated to rise before ten. I admit, I was disappointed that he would not be joining us.

I found the professor standing at the parapet of the terrace, surveying the park, where we could see three young men industriously at work under Manu's supervision, hacking at the ivy with axes and scythes. Finestone looked like one of the workmen himself, for he was wearing

blue overalls which starkly set off the gingery color of his beard. Tilted jauntily low over one ear was an expensive white linen fedora with a very broad brim, for he claimed to be sensitive to the sun especially on cloudy days. I must say that like many Americans I have met, he had a rather unusual idea of style.

I sat down to the table where his breakfast had already been served on a silver tray: strong black coffee boiled up with sugar and a bundle of very brittle breadsticks, tasting of pencils and sawdust. The terrace was actually the roof of a building which must have been added on and attached to the rear of the villa in the centuries past, and which now housed the modern kitchens, pantry, and scullery, located right below us. The wide windows below had been flung open to the tepid air, and I could hear Amelia at work banging the stove door, dropping the iron stove rings to the floor with a clatter, and cursing as blasphemously as a Neapolitan sailor might as she went about her chores. I smiled to myself, surmising that her foul mood was very probably due to lack of sleep, considering how late it must have been when she had finally crept off to bed. And I knew her secret. It would seem that this cold, drafty villa was really the House of Love and Pleasure.

As I waited for the girl to bring my English breakfast of poached eggs, toast, and tea, Finestone told me a little about the sculptures. He explained that since the park had been overgrown and literally forgotten for so many years, except by tenuous local legends, there were almost no textual descriptions of it by visitors or scholars and very few drawings, prints, or other documents concerning it produced later than the seventeenth century. The sixteenth-century prints he had shown us the evening before were probably the only pictorial documentation in existence.

Sifting through the historical archives in Bomarzo and in Rome, he had discovered a few patchy descriptions of it in letters, diaries, and poems by the sixteenth-century nobleman, Vicino

Orsini, who had first commissioned the park to be created, and in some legal documents and deeds relating to the lease of the land in the eighteenth century. That was all. There were no *modern* interpretations of its bizarre symbolism. Finestone's monograph would be the first, and he was convinced it would win him fame and recognition. He was working in great haste and secrecy, since he did not want any scholarly rivals from Florence or Rome to get wind of his research. From what he said, I realized it was a great privilege for us to be there witnessing the park's "unveiling" so to speak, day by day as the vegetation was stripped away from the statues and the paths.

"But antiquarians and art historians have been combing Italy for centuries, rooting out all its treasures," I objected. "How could such an important park containing such a huge sculpture garden, so close to Rome and Florence, have been ignored for so long? Why did its owners let it become so overgrown?"

"The answer to both those questions will become apparent to you as we explore it this morning." was his cryptic reply. "You may think of the place," he continued, "as a sort of *Divine Comedy* in reverse, a plunge from paradise to hell. Some of the sculptures you will see today may symbolize the emotional torments experienced by Vicino Orsini, who created the park as a memorial to his wife and had its statues sculpted by students of a local atelier. Others may be interpreted as a dream diary recorded in sculptural form of figures plucked from a lifetime of nightmares." He dabbed a pencil breadstick into his coffee and nibbled it efficiently with his small, yellow teeth. "Or there may be an even more esoteric explanation," he said casually, draining his cup.

Finestone had begun to intrigue me. The mind, not the man. I adore esoteric explanations.

"Indeed?"

“The park may conceivably contain an encoded message. Its statues and sculptures may spell out a formula for making gold, or for what making gold symbolized to the alchemists. Immortality. Redemption, Eternal Love. Wisdom. Something of a sort dissimulated by private pictograms.”

Signatures! I thought. The language of our inner gods. “So the Monster Park is a sort of book,” I ventured, “a book of emblems hewn in stone, conveying a message, telling a story, revealing an enigma.”

“You mean concealing one,” he replied with a patronizing smile.

Amelia arrived finally with my breakfast. As she exited the library and crossed the terrace, carrying a heavy brass tray in trembling arms, Finestone glanced at her in a manner which quite confirmed to me that it had most certainly been Amelia’s lithe little shape I had seen scurrying through the topiary at four o’clock in the morning. That was no look of benign fatherly attention, but a searing flash of undisguised lust. It hit its mark, the girl colored. I saw then what had previously escaped me. With her hair nicely combed and that spot of pink in her pale cheek, she was undeniably lovely. I noted her pretty linen blouse with lacework decorating a tightly - fitted bodice, her trim waist in a full striped skirt. Today her hair was clean and golden, recently bleached, I supposed, with chamomile from the kitchen garden, or lemons pinched from the *limonaia*. Around her neck she wore a silver trinket bound with a black velvet ribbon. A gift perhaps from Finestone? Or had she pinched that from some bedroom drawer in the villa? Vaguely, she reminded me of someone, though I could not think who.

“Breakfast, Signora,” she said primly, but a vain smile quivered at the corner of her pinkish lips as her hands unsteadily lowered the tray to the table. Though she was quite pretty, I found this girl’s manners decidedly unpleasant. She had a way of mocking one on the sly. I glanced at her hands clutching the tray. They were the red and muscular hands of a thirty-year-

old country woman roughened by housework, with bitten, discolored nails. They were certainly an odd contrast to her youthful face and her delicate pallor. I could imagine them very well moving across the good scholar's plump, hairy flesh. After depositing the tray, she scuttled away, and glanced back to exchange a coy look with Finestone. He gave a barely perceptible nod, which I interpreted to mean: "Later." Or maybe, "Tonight."

I lifted the lid of the silver serving dish on the tray, scalding hot to the touch, and gasped as it burned my fingertips. The lid flew out of my hand and tumbled to the terrace floor with a reverberating clang. I looked down at the food in dismay. The toast was scorched black. The egg yolk was runny and flecked with black crumbs of burnt toast. When I poured a cup of tea, out streamed a cold yellowish liquid.

Finestone stared at the disgusting contents of the serving dish, then grunted apologetically, "She's a good girl but hasn't yet perfected the art of the English breakfast," and offered to share the rest of his coffee and breadsticks with me.

"That's very kind of you. But I shall call her back and tell her to prepare me another breakfast."

Finestone squinted at his pocket watch, "It will be quite a wait, I'm afraid. She will soon be on her way to town. Today is market day." Looking from the terrace, we saw her hurrying out of the scullery with a wicker basket in tow, and a wide-brimmed straw hat on her head. The little white cat trotted at her heels.

Finestone smiled. "Such amazing devotion in an animal."

We watched the cat follow Amelia for a distance, until she turned and spoke to it, at which the cat bounded back towards the villa. Mistress and pet reminded me of nothing so much as a witch with her familiar.

Reluctantly I accepted Finestone's proposal to share with him what was left of his breakfast and once we had finished, we descended the spiral staircase from the terrace down to the lawn and headed toward the park. Finestone walked with a slight limp owing to a childhood injury when a gypsy cart ran over his foot, or so he had told us the night before at dinner, and required the support of a cane when walking long stretches outdoors. Remembering the doll's head I had picked up from the grass along the way the night before, I scanned the ground for other broken bits of its limbs and body, but found nothing.

When we reached the gate, Finestone produced a key from the breast pocket of his overalls and handed it to me. It was a huge iron key made by a blacksmith, weighing at least a pound, almost a potential weapon, and icy cold to the touch.

"Madame, I leave this privilege to you," he said, inviting me to unlock the gate.

What gallantry, I thought as I turned the key and pushed open the gate. Before stepping inside, I held my breath for a second as a swimmer might do before a dive. Immediately I felt the air temperature drop a degree or two. A chill flickered through my knees, up my spine, and across my scalp, though there was no logical explanation for such a sharp change in temperature.

Finestone paused on the threshold, as if waiting to see my reaction, then stepped in behind me, seized my arm, and began my guided tour.

"In the mid sixteenth century, when this place was created, parks and gardens were meant to offer more than just an aesthetic experience, a pleasant promenade in the shade or a showcase for flowerbeds. They were models of the cosmos and also tools for altering one's consciousness, possibly for changing one's destiny. Entering a place like this was like succumbing to a dream. Every detail was intended to produce a specific effect on the mind and body, to excite and soothe the senses like a drug. To awaken the unconscious self.

“The colors, textures, odors and shapes of the plants, like yew and mistletoe and belladonna, all capable of inducing catatonia, nightmares, prophetic dreams ... contributed to create such an impression, along with the tinkling of running water, and the cries and shrieks of exotic birds kept captive here in aviaries. All this was intended to catapult the visitor into a primordial state of awareness.”

Closing his eyes, Finestone snorted in short gusts of air, like a yogi, as if to force oxygen straight to his brain ; I too inhaled deeply the fragrance of the dew-drenched vegetation surrounding us. Clumps of laurel, rosemary, ilex, juniper, yew, pine, moss, fennel, rocket and wild mint exuded their perfumes. Above our heads crows cawed in the tree tops. It truly seemed an enchanted place.

A few feet away from where we stood, a trail snaked through the underbrush. He motioned for me to follow as he loped along with his cane. The path wove in between bushes and outcroppings of rock where ferns lashed out in our faces and thorns ripped our clothes. Picking our way through fronds and brambles, we reached the sphinx I had noted the evening before, situated in a small clearing from where an even narrower trail wound into the interior. Not far off we could hear the men working.

“This sphinx is probably a copy of a genuine Etruscan piece from Vicino’s collection of antiquities. The surrounding hills and valleys are full of Etruscan tombs that must have provided an endless source of income to the duke. Such artifacts were prized highly by his aristocratic cohorts who used them to decorate their homes and sold them at great profit to English ladies of fashion. Many collectors and museums today would pay a pretty penny to add this copy to their collection. Here she crumbles beneath rain, and cold, and lichen.”

Pensively, he patted the sphinx’s haunches.

“Set here at the entryway, she suggests that this place is a riddle the visitor must solve.”

An inscription, barely visible, encrusted with moss and lichen, was chiseled on the base of the statue. I deciphered the letters and read aloud,

“Tu ch’entri qui pon mente parte a parte Et dimmi poi se tante maraviglie sian fatte per inganno o pur per arte...”

Finestone complimented me on my pronunciation.

“My brother and I learned Italian at school,” I explained. “My family had a passion for opera.”

I ventured a partial translation. “You who enter ...tell me whether or not these marvels have been created through deceit or art.”

Inganno o arte? Deceit or art? An intriguing proposition. Was the Monster Park a sort of “trick” or illusion? A flight of fancy only meant to entertain? Or did it artfully conceal a deeper meaning? “*Pon mente parte a parte....*” I repeated. That was the phrase that I did not understand. “Literally, the words mean *put your mind side to side,*” I said. I reflected on this. “Could it mean that the visitor must examine all sides? Or that one should stand outside oneself when making judgments?”

“Perhaps it is asking us to set aside the rational mind and not to make our final judgment until we have seen and pondered the whole.” With a sweeping gesture, he embraced the park that lay before us, still immersed by copious vegetation from which emerged a few rough sculptures and massive boulders, resembling forlorn islands rising from a lake of green.

“But she is only the preamble to this eccentric representation of hell on earth, as you will see,” he said, pointing to an area nearby where the men had succeeded in ripping off a tangled mound of brambles from a colossus. We wended our way towards it, waist high in weeds. Manu and the workmen greeted us deferentially when we reached them, withdrawing under an ilex tree several yards away, where a grinding wheel to sharpen their cutting tools was set up on a trestle.

All the workmen seemed to hold Finestone slightly in awe, and admittedly he did cut a bizarre figure, with his ginger-colored beard, blue overalls, and scholarly air. Manu, I noted, kept glancing our way, as though to keep an eye on us as he sharpened the blade of a scythe on the wheel, sparks flying into the air.

“The horrific statues carved here may be viewed as fragments of consciousness itself, the residue of violent emotions.”

The sculpture, at least twenty feet tall, crudely carved all of a piece from an enormous boulder, depicted twin giants in combat. Their thighs were as massive as tree trunks. The victor had seized his opponent by the legs and was dashing his head against the ground, while tearing the poor fellow in two through the crotch and up through his torso. The features of their roughhewn faces had eroded beneath scales of lichen, but those blank eyes and crumbling lips were still legible enough. The victim was screaming in horror and pain as his conqueror gnashed his teeth in the throes of a savage fury.

Placed so close to the entrance, this hideous sight seemed to serve as an introduction to what was to come. It was a statement, a challenge, a setting of the tone, the opening notes of an overture. It was meant to shock and warn visitors to the park, perhaps even, I thought, to terrorize them.

As if reading my thoughts, Finestone said, “The local peasants once believed that the statues came to life at night. Were they not held down and impeded by all these brambles and vines, they might break loose and go marauding through the town.”

I pictured these two entwined figures, like some great golem, thundering down the streets, smashing windows and rooftops, wrestling and rolling in a deadly embrace. “So, I suppose that explains why the owners allowed it to become so overgrown? They were glad when nature reclaimed it.”

Finestone smiled again and added “After all, the Ancient Egyptians knew how to breathe life into their statues of the gods, and performed special rites for this purpose. Perhaps this knowledge was preserved and transmitted to the Romans and then down to us through the Renaissance. Perhaps Vicino himself – or more likely the artist who sculpted them -- knew the secret art of animating statues. Or perhaps this superstition arose in the local population because Vicino’s clever sculptor may have invented devices, water works, or wind-driven mechanisms to produce sound or even the illusion of movement. Even in recent times, they have been known to roar in the night.”

I shot a sidelong glance at the scholar. I could see he was teasing me, so I said, “And have you heard them roar?”

“Only in my dreams.”

“How will the superstitious townspeople react now that you are rescuing the statues from oblivion, rendering beasts like these two, potentially dangerous again?”

“After my monograph is published, tourists will come. Scholars and curiosity-seekers, students and painters armed with sketch books like our young Clive. Honeymoon couples will buy postcards and souvenirs at shops, and illustrious personages, like you and I, will sign the guestbook in the hotels that will spring up around the entrance. That will surely dissipate some of their destructive power.”

I shuddered at the thought of such barbarization. “That is what had happened in England too, with many of its old homes. My own for instance.”

Finestone nodded, “The place is destined to become a beautiful cadaver trampled by hordes and picked by crows. It is the national destiny of the entire country, you might say.”

“Will you not be contributing to this desecration by publishing your monograph and bringing crowds to this forgotten place?”

“Art historians are a species of crow, but a relatively harmless variety. I like to think my discoveries will bring prosperity to this poor, backward town.”

“And to yourself as well, I take it.”

He smiled, but made no reply.

We stood for a moment contemplating the sculpture. These naked, time-blackened figures carved from a single outcropping of stone and still partly imprisoned there called to mind unfinished statues of Michelangelo I had seen years ago in Florence: incomplete figures stirring to life, struggling to assume human shape within their rocky matrix. Finestone was right, there *was* a dreamlike quality about the place which immediately exerted an influence upon my imagination. With a flash of insight, I suddenly understood the sculpture’s message. I knew exactly why it had been placed in that particular spot and what it meant, though I have no idea from whence my certainty had come. I suppose I had read its signature.

“It’s a reversal. A very painful reversal,” I said, staring up at the statue. “I believe it is saying: now that you have entered here, your perspective will be violently turned on its head. The resulting vision will make you mad. It will cause an inner division that will make you feel as though you have been ripped apart.”

Finestone arched an eyebrow and nodded. His eyes glittered. I could see we were of a similar cast of mind. We both enjoyed guessing at emblems and riddles, as I had already realized the previous night at dinner when he had talked of the Holy Grail. We were two of a kind who find sermons in stones and personal meaning in the patterns of nature and art.

“And of course a rape, a violation,” I continued. For through the loops of ivy clinging to their limbs, one could clearly see that in the process of tearing apart his victim, the giant aggressor seemed to be engaged in something else as well. The lower part of his body was

pressed firmly into the buttocks of his victim. “It is saying: your most basic beliefs about yourself and the world will undergo violation. You must become impure.”

“Perhaps...” Finestone said stroking his beard and squinting at the sculpture through his bifocals.

“What is your interpretation?” I asked.

“From the evidence I have gathered concerning the life of Vicino Orsini, it may represent his own anger and madness when his wife, Giulia Farnese, died. After her death, he wished to tear the world the pieces. Or perhaps instead the duke identified himself not with the slayer but with the victim lacerated by grief and loss. Or it may be warning in a Neoplatonic vein -- “Passionate love leads only to madness.” Or perhaps it says, “the body will be brutally sacrificed for the survival of the soul.”

I said nothing in reply to this, but I did not agree in the least with Finestone’s interpretations. They were much too meek and rational. Something far more basic and bloody was being enacted here. One could see why the local people found this sculpture so frightening, invested with a power that might come alive and wreak havoc in their midst. And what of the artist who had conceived this rape and these monstrous grimaces? Had he experienced such wrath or pain or had he only imagined them? Or had he tapped into the world soul where all emotions and all transgressions exist in potentiality?

“Tell me, Professor. You say the Monster Park is a sort of book or diary, that these statues are the residue of violent emotions and fragments of nightmares. You suggest they represent the patron’s dark feelings and dreams, those of Vicino Orsini, but what about the artist who first imagined these forms? Might they also refer to his own life and experiences?”

“A very acute question, dear lady. If we knew for certain who the architect of the park was and the precise purpose for which it was designed, we might be able to answer that question

more satisfactorily. But for the moment, you understand, I am not at liberty to disclose any of my findings, which are concerned with that very question, so, it must remain a matter of speculation, at least for the time being. Undoubtedly these figures contain autobiographical references to the lives of both men.”

I pondered this as I gazed up at the sculptures and then was disturbed by the buzzing of a bee around my ankles. I looked down into the nest of ferns and weeds where I stood – and there at my feet I noted a little white glimmer. Thinking it might be a piece of the decapitated doll, I reached down to the grass, but must have stuck my hand into an ants nest, for when I pulled the object out of the tall grass my fingers were swarming with ants, which I brushed off in disgust. The tiny object I had retrieved proved to be a piece of mother- of- pearl, the face of a button or perhaps a cufflink. I glanced at Finestone’s shirt where the cuffs were tightly buttoned, American style. This dainty decoration most certainly did not belong to him. It was small enough to have come from a child’s shoe. Staring at the button which seemed to burn into my palm like a small lump of ice, I suddenly saw in my mind a child’s shoe dunked in water. I frowned at this impression which had possessed me for a moment, then blinked twice to dispel it. Holding the button out to the professor, I asked, “Have you lost a button?”

Finestone checked his cuffs and shook his head.

“I’m no medium, but my guess is that this comes from a child’s shoe and that it was torn off in unfortunate circumstances.”

Finestone’s eyes widened behind his bifocals. He went a trifle pale. “Perhaps. The daughter of the villa’s owner met with a dreadful accident here about ten years ago.”

“Oh?”

“She slipped and fell into a fountain, and was not found till it was too late.”

“But didn’t you say that the entire park has been overgrown for centuries? Wouldn’t the fountains have gone dry in the meantime?”

“At that time, it seems, one or two had been rediscovered and put to use in a period of drought. After the child’s death, they were allowed to be swallowed up again by the vegetation. At this latitude , it didn’t take long for them to be covered over like the rest of the place.”

My mental image of the child’s shoe in water had been only too accurate. “I was struck by the fact that there is no trace of any children ever having lived in the villa.”

“Everything was removed which might recall the tragedy to mind.”

“I see.” I supposed that explained why the owners of the villa had decided to lease the villa out to strangers, like ourselves. Having lost a daughter myself, I could empathize with their grief. It gave me an eerie feeling to think that the doll’s head I had found might also be related to that sad event. “No foul play?”

He shook his head. “A dreadful accident. An act of fate.”

“Do you know which fountain it was?”

“I believe it is somewhere near the center of the Wood, but I haven’t located it yet . I expect it is quite large.” He gestured towards an unbroken expanse of green, “Over in that direction.”

I put the button in my pocket and mused on the story as we walked towards another area where some men were working. Finestone was absorbed in his thoughts.

When we passed a ferocious Cerebus, three heads snapping in all directions, Finestone seized the opportunity to introduce a new topic of conversation, one which he knew would appeal to me.

Amicably patting each of the hell dog’s heads and caressing the tips of their fangs, he said, “These sweet creatures guarded the gates of hell, where you were allowed in, but not out

again. Local legend claims these dogs are also guardians of a hidden treasure. If read correctly in the proper order, the statues in Vicino's park might guide the seeker's steps to where a treasure is buried. Although Vicino's descendants may not have given credence to such ideas, they may also have allowed the sculptures to become overgrown in order to prevent armies of potential thieves from invading the grounds with picks and axes, hoping to unearth treasure chests."

"That also sounds like a logical explanation for its abandonment," I said. "Do you believe there is a treasure buried here?" I did not voice my real thoughts, "Is that why *you* are here? To piece together a scattered map from these signatures or clues?" I thought it very likely.

Finestone laughed. "It depends on what you mean by treasure. When ordinary people think of treasure, they imagine precious stones or gold; a more cultured person may imagine some exquisite work of ancient art or an artifact which might be made from iron or bronze. Still they think of treasure in terms of something *material*. For a scholar like myself, "treasure" might simply be the confirmation of a name, a date, a mathematical formula, a missing word in a text. Then again, if a treasure exists here in any material sense, it may be an object which to an untrained eye may seem as dull and unremarkable as an old brick, but which to a person able to understand its meaning would represent a boon of inestimable value."

"Like the philosopher's stone, which allowed alchemists to transmute lead into gold?"

He laughed again. "Perhaps something less lucrative."

"Such as?"

He smiled but did not answer. I suppose he thought further revelations might compromise his research. Still, I was eager to know more.

"If there is a treasure – then aside from the clues represented by the symbolism or placement of the sculptures themselves, there ought to be a map. I mean, the sort of map one

sketches in a book, or on a piece of parchment, or rolled up in a bottle or stuck beneath a floor tile.”

“That might make a good story for our novelist! Or it may be engraved on the bottom of a copper pot long since blackened by use, or painted on a wall destroyed by a fire or an earthquake. Or it may be encoded in the text of a poem, or it may have fallen into other hands and been transported elsewhere. To Rome. To Paris. To London. Or it may simply have been eaten by rats.” He shrugged. “If there is such a map – or such a treasure – so far in my research, I have found no trace of it. But as I said before, the so-called treasure may be so apparently uninteresting that we may have it constantly before our eyes and noses, without even noticing it. For what better way to hide something than by keeping it in full view? In which case, a map would be useless, for even when face to face with the object of our quest, we would be unable to perceive it, and we might be persuaded that someone has stolen it, that it has gone missing in the night of centuries, or even that it never existed and is purely an object of fantasy. Remember, if there is a treasure in Bomarzo, it may also be something totally intangible, like an idea, a state of mind, an emotion or a dream.”

It was my turn to laugh. “In which case,” I replied, “there is no hope of finding it until it wishes to make itself known.”

“Exactly. When we are ready for it.”

We descended to a lower part of the park where the path followed a streambed chiseled in volcanic rock. No crystalline fount, the waters were sluggish and putrid, choked by dead leaves and rotting tree roots. A yellowish green scum clotted the surface, and frogs croaked from a patch of reeds. The path along the bank was slick with mud and I had to cling to the scholar’s arm to keep from slipping.

Finestone used his cane to push nettles and briars aside along the path as we picked our way through the undergrowth, crushing wild mint beneath our heels. “Watch where you put your feet,” he warned. “Be on the lookout for snakes. They sometimes come to the stream to drink.”

“Poisonous ones?” He had made a reference to snakes in the instructions he had left us when we had first arrived, but I hadn’t taken it very seriously.

“My dear lady, this is viper country. In spring they crawl up from their holes when the sun warms the ground.”

I looked down in consternation at my little suede pumps and silk stockings to calculate how much protection they might offer against a viper bite

Seeing my concern, Finestone laughed again.

“Don’t worry, this will discourage them,” and he brandished his cane in the air like a sword and then speared a dead leaf on the ground with its steel tip.

“I’m not afraid of snakes,” I said tossing my head, “The woods around my childhood home were full of adders. We were always finding them in the currant bushes.”

We walked on in silence. I stepped gingerly through the mud, eyes trained on the ground, wishing I were wearing a sturdy pair of boots of the sort that Edna Rutherford might wear, but I didn’t own a single pair of sensible shoes. Life always seems to find me unprepared. I mused over the story of Vicino – how grief can trigger madness, how art allows us to express passions which we may never act out in the flesh, but which may be enacted by those who have been inspired by our poems, paintings, or thoughts Thinking of passions and art led me to reflect on portraits, and portraits led me to the painting hanging above my bed. What passion did that glacial dame conceal? And who was she? I was sure Finestone must know, so I asked him.

“I believe it may be a portrait of Vicino’s wife, Giulia Farnese.”

“She seems to keep me under observation night and day.”

He cast me a curious look and grunted in assent. “Probably by the school of Lotto, and worth quite a bit.”

More than in the identity of the painter or the monetary value of the painting – which Clive had already suggested to me -- I was interested in the woman whose death had moved her husband to create this astonishing park. I asked Finestone how she died.

“Murdered. Poisoned by her husband, perhaps. Maybe even in the very bed where you sleep, Madame.”

“Really?” I said, a bit taken aback, but I thought this was probably a fabrication told for the benefit of the mystery writer who had come to Bomarzo to write a novel. But it was exactly the sort of detail I relish, which he must have guessed, so I laughed. “First he murdered and then he mourned her in madness. Very typical indeed of male perfidiousness. But why would he have murdered her?”

“Maybe she betrayed him.”

“An excellent motive for murder, indeed.” I agreed. “I think there is only one other motive that may outweigh it – money.”

“That too might have played a part. She is buried there in that chapel,” He pointed out a dome not far off.

“To whom does this property belong now?” I asked.

“It has returned into the hands of a minor branch of the noble Orsini family.”

That explained the monogram on my bed linens. O for Orsini.

“So the child who died was an Orsini?”

He nodded, then changed the subject. Speaking about the child’s death seemed to make him uncomfortable.

“Vicino and his wife did not live in the villa where we are lodged,” he continued. “That was only a guest house for visiting friends and dignitaries who came to see his park, which was quite famous in his times. The duke and his wife lived in that palace up there on the cliff,” and he indicated a massive yellow building with its windows all broken out, perched along the rim of the gorge wall directly above us. I had noticed it before, but had wrongly guessed it to be a monastery.

We had reached the next group of sculptures, where only one had been completely unveiled of its greenery. This was a giant turtle, bearing a trumpeting angel of victory on its back. In a way, it made me think of Amelia and Finestone.

“It illustrates the motto *Festina Lente*,” he informed me. “*Make haste slowly*, credo of the Renaissance.”

I took these words as a warning for my own situation. It certainly fit the circumstances for a person of my age and state.

Not far off lounged an androgynous figure with huge legs completely out of proportion. “I have seen this kind of distortion before,” I said, “the typical hallucinatory effect one often experiences in dreams when under the influence of opiates.”

Finestone snorted in agreement, “Or in the delusion of a prolonged nightmare.”

From where we stood, two trails diverged. One led straight up an embankment to the chapel where Giulia Farnese’s aristocratic bones lay interred. The other meandered along the stream, then steeply descended to a wooded area where more sculptures were still hidden beneath mounds of overgrowth. Here and there a huge hand or head stuck up from a nest of brambles and weeds reminding me of drowning persons caught in a vortex, begging to be rescued.

“Which way shall we go?” Finestone asked, pointing out one, then the other road with his silver-headed cane, “straight to the chapel or down through hell?”

The road to the chapel was a sheer vertical climb over slick muddy patches and jagged rocks. I could never attempt it in my dainty suede pumps. I'd never reach the top, and would only slide back down, ruin my stockings, and I dare say, break my neck.

"There's no guarantee I'll reach the goal." I said.

He chuckled. "Then we have no choice but to wend our way more comfortably to hell."

We rambled on to a clearing where a few smaller figures had toppled over obstructing the path, and we had to climb over them to proceed. At last we stopped to rest and sat down on a stone bench beneath an ilex tree. I turned my face to the sky, where a broad sunbeam cut through the dull clouds and shimmered on the green canopy above us. It was almost noon, the hour of Pan, but I could not feel the heat of the sun. Set deep in a gorge, the Monster Park was steeped in perpetual shadow broken only by the dappled effect of sunlight reflecting on the tiny leaves of the ilex and olive trees glinting in restless motion, stirred by the slight breeze. If stared at long enough, the ceaseless movement of foliage had a hypnotic effect, and after a few moments, I had to shut my eyes.

The Monster Park was certainly the strangest sculpture garden I had ever set foot in. There were none of the flowering vines and bushes commonly planted for decoration in this temperate climate, no azaleas, hydrangeas, peonies, or camellias. Not even heather or dog roses. No attempt had been made to give the illusion of eternal spring. Nor were there any decorative plants to mark the cycle of the seasons with colorful berries, fruit or turning leaves. The only trees were evergreens – pines or cypresses, and massive ilex trees which also keep their leaves all winter, at whose gnarled roots grew a ragged underbrush of scrub oaks, ferns, nettles, and foul-smelling weeds in continual decay.

It struck me then that what was missing was the element of mind or intellect. There was no architectural design to the place at all. There were no parterres laid out in geometrical patterns;

no logical arrangement of the figures to connect them in a meaningful sequence, from what I could see. They came at you helter-skelter, truly like images in a dream. There wherever a crest of rock or boulder protruded from the ground, there had the sculptor's chisel captured another frenzied spirit from the underworld. The author of this book of stone did not intend to tranquilize or soothe. This was not a park where one could hunt deer, make music, or have picnics. No place for play, meditation, or love. For what purpose, then, had it been created? In some ways, the random placement of the statues reminded me of the aftermath of an earthquake, or perhaps, of an explosion. Strewn around us were river gods, pouting putti, and lustful pans; ogres, nymphs and beasties, creatures shaken free from the bowels of the earth by some cataclysm, ready to sink back in at a moment's notice if the earth should heave again.

Since the days of the Ancient Greeks and Romans, philosophers of both East and West have held that the function of parks and gardens is to delight the senses, restore the soul, and bring a person back in harmony with nature and with himself. The Babylonians with their terraced marvels, the Japanese with their raked plots of gravel simulating water, the English with their wild rose and herb gardens all shared this aim, if achieved through different means. The creator of this place had had something else in mind. His garden was roughhewn rock and wild vegetation. Pleasure, sensual delight, order, harmony of spirit, or a meditative mood were very far from the mind of the man who had stamped such bestial faces upon these stones. Guilt, perhaps, and pain were foremost in his thoughts. Or a sort of perverse lust.

"*The Lady Gardener* would never approve of this," I ventured facetiously as we rose and made our way toward the gate. "They certainly would not consider it a proper garden."

"Neither did Vicino," Finestone replied flatly. "He actually never referred to it as a garden or even as a park. but as his Sacred Wood, his "Bosco Sacro" and that is the term I suggest you use in thinking and speaking of it from now on. "

I was puzzled that Finestone had not mentioned such an important detail before, but now that I had explored a bit of the place, this term “sacred wood,” made perfect sense. It was not really a park or garden at all but an arena for some kind of initiation, as Finestone had intimated. An initiation of what sort?

On our way out, we passed a small fountain I had not noticed before, although we had walked right by it, just half an hour ago on our little tour. But that is how it was in the Sacred Wood. What you saw and understood was determined by your perspective, which was always shifting in relationship to time and space. You noted things only when you were ready to see them and if you were standing on a spot from which they could be properly seen. And each visitor saw something different.

The fountain was composed of three figures. Two creatures with moth wings and fishtails had grasped a third cherub-like figure by the waist. Holding him upside down, they plunged his head into the overflowing basin of water from which their fishtails emerged. One could not tell if the figures were playing a splashing game or committing a murder by drowning. The features of the cherub’s face had eroded away. Was that mouth desperately sucking for air or emitting a laugh of delight? Or had the artist meant just that: to leave the scene ambiguous? Given the tragic story of a child’s death by drowning in the park , it seemed to me a sinister signature indeed.

“Do you think they are playing or are they drowning that cherub?” I asked Finestone, pointing back at the fountain as we stepped out the gate. “Or might it be a sort of baptism?”

Finestone blinked behind his bifocals and locked the gate behind us. “Some days I think one thing, some days another.”

Here ends the preview of *Signatures in Stone.*, to be released on April 15, 2013 by Caravel books, an Imprint of Pleasure Boat Studio , New York.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

S. Baldassarre of Centro Pekkoli interviews Linda Lappin, author of *Signatures in Stone*

SB: First question. Readers unfamiliar with the setting probably want to know if the sculpture garden you describe in *Signatures in Stone* really exists or not.

LL: Yes, indeed the Sacred Wood of Bomarzo, also known as the Monster Park really exists. It was created by the Italian nobleman, Vicino Orsini, in the sixteenth century as a memorial to his wife. The descriptions of the sculptures and inscriptions given in the novel correspond to what visitors to Bomarzo will find today. However, only a handful of the sculptures appear in my novel. There are many, many more to discover in the park itself. I hope my readers will be curious enough to come explore the park, too.

SB: In your interview with Sandy Sims appearing in *The Writers' Chronicle*, you mentioned how important places are in germinating stories in your fiction.

LL: All my longer works of fiction were inspired by real places in the world and by my love affairs with their souls of place. My first as yet unpublished novel *Prisoner of Palmary* was inspired by my explorations of the Pontian archipelago. *Katherine's Wish*, historical fiction about the life of Katherine Mansfield was inspired by a visit to the Priore outside Paris where Mansfield died. Like *The Etruscan*, which was my first published novel (Wynkin deWorde 2004), *Signatures in Stone* is set in Tuscia, a fascinating area between Tuscany and Rome, heartland of Etruscan culture, and playground of the great aristocratic Renaissance families from Rome who vacationed there in the villas and parks they created throughout the territory. Vicino's own Monster Park was part of that trend.

SB: Elsewhere you have emphasized that Tuscany and Tuscia are not to be confused with each other.

LL: No, they are not the same place at all! They are contingent geographical areas of Central Italy. Tuscia is the northern tip of the Lazio Region which borders Tuscany. They are both Etruscan country. Tuscia is a bit wilder, rougher, and less refined than Tuscany, although they share many similar traditions. Tuscia is far less known and less frequented by tourists.

It is an area of stunning natural beauty, with gorges and canyons, massive rock formations, geothermic activity, hot springs and volcanic lakes, thick woods teeming with wild boars. Every hilltop boasts a quaint medieval tower, castle, church, or Renaissance villa. And of course Etruscan and pre- Etruscan ruins are scattered everywhere, many just out in the open, in isolated places in the countryside, in the middle of woods or on abandoned farmland for you to explore at any time of day.

SB: Yes, in your novel *The Etruscan*, you recreate the natural setting in very vivid detail, as well as the tombs and other sacred sites of which there seem to be dozens.

LL : In his book, *Sacred Earth*, photographer Martin Gray provides a list of types of sacred sites that exist around the world. Tuscia has them all: temples, altars, tombs, pre-Etruscan cave dwellings, even step pyramids, which authors such as the archaeologist Stephan Steingraber, have documented. Many writers have called Tuscia a “place of power” or “place of mystery” ... and I certainly would agree with that, not only because of its Etruscan ruins, but also because of the other cultural traces it holds, many of which have influenced my fiction. There is a tradition of witchcraft and related superstitions connected to the Great Mother and her fertility rites throughout the area. The witches of Bagnaia, a topic which Pier Isa Della Rupe explores in her writings and in the tours she organizes are just one example of an anthropological phenomenon that has been studied by many. There is also a cult dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel which has thrived in the area for centuries. There is the Renaissance celebration of paganism and the Gods of Ancient Greece and Rome for which the great Renaissance and Baroque villas and

gardens located in Tuscia are showcases. All of these play a part in my new novel, *Signatures in Stone*.

SB: In *Signatures in Stone*, Jacob Finestone, the art historian who is in the process of discovering and writing about the garden, claims that it might contain a secret message of some kind or a treasure.

LL: All the theories I discuss in the book regarding the origins of the Sacred Wood are based on research that actually has been done by art history scholars, including the mystery regarding the identity of the artist who designed the entire park. I didn't make that up.

Everyone who visits the place comes away bewildered, for the Sacred Wood clearly has some meaning that we no longer have the key to understand. Of course, that is what Vicino wanted, to create a sense of awe and the supernatural in people visiting his park. But he also wanted his visitors to make the effort of decoding the message he had planted there, and for this reason he put inscriptions to guide visitors along. Still, after centuries, the Sacred Wood eludes interpretation. Tomes have been written explaining the individual sculptures and their composite meaning. These studies are extremely erudite, showing the relation of the figures to great works of literature, such as *Orlando Furioso*, or to Seneca, to alchemy, or to that mysterious book the *Hypnerotomachia of Poliphili*, by Francesco Colonna, a sort of initiatory journey through emblems.

I am not an art history scholar, but I was fascinated by these studies and I did read them and ponder them after visiting the place many times, and from them got my own picture, so to speak which I try to express in my novel. The thing that convinces me most is that the Sacred Wood was designed as a sort of "learning experience" in the Baroque sense. It forced the visitor to make a journey through the underworld, to undergo a series of trials and tests in order to face up to his or her own darkness, obsessions, illusions, fears, whatever, manifested by the monstrous

statues. Its whole point was to lead the visitor down into hell in search of rebirth, as in the myth of Demeter and Persephone.

SB: That is what happens in *Signatures in Stone*, Daphne, the main character undergoes harrowing experiences one right after the other, is even accused of murder and must make a great effort to save herself.

LL: All the characters undergo a similar experience.

Years ago, I read a study of *The Tempest* by the critic G. Wilson Knight which suggested that Shakespeare had been inspired by the Eleusinian mysteries, the central religious experience in Ancient Greece, in creating the plot of his last masterpiece. Only fragments have survived to give us an idea what went on during the celebration of the mysteries. We know that aspiring initiates had to undergo a test, by wandering in a desolate place in search of a lost child. This quest was a reenactment of Demeter's journey to the underworld to rescue her daughter Persephone from Hades. Wilson Knight saw this pattern in Prospero's manipulation of the characters through his magic. In *The Tempest*, they are caused to traipse about the island in search of Ferdinand, the missing prince, and are subjected to visions of all kinds conjured by Prospero which lead some but not all to a state of purification or self-knowledge. Whoever created the Bomarzo park had something similar in mind, except the visions are hewn in stone, and are not simply illusions created through stagecraft, as Ariel's are. But the underlying purpose was similar to what we find in *The Tempest*, to evoke strong emotions through a work of art which would lead visitors down into hell and out again, towards self knowledge and rebirth. To innocence regained.

SB: In that process, Daphne must also come to terms with her hashish habit.

LL: Daphne struggles not only with her addiction, but with her mutable and distorted vision of reality, born of the need to escape from pain. Part of her quest involves just that, acknowledging pain and moving on from there.

Daphne is very very loosely based on Mary Butts, an English writer of the twenties, who has written some very beautiful but little known works of fiction and nonfiction, who had a passion for occult philosophy. Her notebooks discuss a theory of signatures, or correspondences, according to which every sign in the outer world points to a meaning in the inner world, an idea developed by Swedenborg. Daphne adopts this concept when attempting to solve crimes.

SB: What are you working on now?

LL: It seems I am not done with St. Michael, or maybe, he isn't done with me. He will appear in my new novel *THE BROTHERHOOD OF MIGUEL*. A project related to *Signatures in Stone* that I am working on now with a visual artist is a sort of tarot deck, based on the main archetypal figures in the novel, which I hope to make available on my website.

SB: When will *Signatures in Stone* be available for purchase?

LL: *Signatures in Stone* is scheduled for publication on April 15, by Caravel Books, an imprint of Pleasure Boat Studio. The ebook version will be available shortly after that.

SB: Thank you. I am sure many readers are looking forward to its release.

LL: Thank you and the Pokkoli for your interest. I would like to add that both *The Etruscan* and *Katherine's Wish* are currently available as ebooks on Kindle Direct Publishing.