

PART I
THE GOAT

1.

ROME It struck me, as the cell door clanged shut, that the road to hell is paved, not so much with good intentions, nor even a single violent, murderous act, although that too occurred. No, the road is a series of small choices, almost imperceptible rents in the moral fabric, that taken together, over time, like drops of water on stone, erode our sense of right and wrong.

In my case, the journey began with a beast that could not possibly have lived, much less taken human form, and a man some still say didn't exist. The creature was a chimera, the kind of monster that lurks in your subconscious, rising up to haunt your sleep. The man was Crawford Lake.

Lake was one of those people, who, like former Presidents and Hollywood legends, are saddled with a two word descriptor permanently attached to their names. In Lake's case, those words were reclusive billionaire.

I will leave the explanation of the latter word to the financial analysts, who have of late enjoyed something of a feeding frenzy over the carcass of Lake's once powerful empire, a rather hydra-like conglomerate with tentacles insinuating themselves throughout the so-called global economy. I can, however, speak with some authority on the first word, and I can assure anyone who wants to know that reclusive doesn't half cut it when it comes to describing the man.

Indeed, when I first met him in his apartment in Rome, Crawford Lake had not been seen in public in at least fifteen years. The media was reduced to using photos taken, I swear, by the same people who purport to have spotted Bigfoot and the Loch Ness monster, grainy snaps of a shadowy figure disappearing in the distance, or, if not prepared to pay the price the paparazzi demanded for these pictures, suspect though they might be, to reproducing Lake's school yearbook portrait. Even in those youthful days, Lake exhibited a tendency to secrecy, but perhaps, being the sixties, the scraggly hair that pretty much hid his eyes, was merely a fashion statement. Why he would want to live that way I didn't know at the time, but I suppose I assumed that anyone as rich as he was could be as antisocial as they pleased.

Still, from my perspective he took it too far.

"Surely this isn't necessary," I told my escort, as he beckoned me to turn around so that he could tie a dark scarf across my eyes.

"No, I suppose not," he said, smiling not at me, but at his own reflection in the car mirror. He was an attractive young man, and he knew it, with perfect teeth, dark skin and eyes, dressed in a rumpled linen suit and shirt, with a flash of gold chain at his chest, one of those young Italian men who find themselves rather fetching and think the women of the world should too. "But then," but he added, placing the cloth over my eyes, "if you knew where my employer lives, I'd have to kill you."

I wasn't entirely sure he was kidding. The scarf securely in place, he tapped the glass between the us and the driver, and the limousine pulled away. My hotel was on a side street off the top of the Spanish steps, and I tried to figure out -- what else was there for me to do, sitting there blindfolded? -- where we were going. I gave up, however, after several turns, and stops and

starts in the traffic. After about ten minutes or so by my estimation, the car stopped, and I felt myself being led up a couple of steps, then into an elevator which rumbled slowly upwards, then just a few more steps and, as a door closed behind me, the blindfold was removed.

I was standing in a room that almost defied description, filled as it was with so much to look at. Heavy dark green curtains were drawn across the large windows and securely fastened in a way that prevented me from seeing outside and thereby gaining some clue as to where I was, but still allowed a bright shaft of sunshine into the room near the top of the window. There was a jumble of furniture, most of it ornate but rather worn, and almost every inch of the place, walls, tables, even the floor, was covered with objets d'art. The most striking feature was two large frescoes, faded in spots, probably nineteenth century, depicting bucolic Italian scenes. There were gold cupids, dozens of them, all over the place, and piles of old books on the floor and on every table, lovely old ones with leather covers and gold titles embossed on the spines. On top of some of these piles rested small sculptures, most of them bronze. A coffee table was awash in vases -- urns in black and red, possibly Greek, but also perhaps Etruscan, and several in a burnished black material called bucchero, and a couple of very nice marble busts of eminent Roman citizens.

It was almost as good as a museum. In just one glance I could see Greek, Roman and Etruscan objects, Meissen porcelain figures, what looked to be a stone head from Cambodia, several oil paintings on the few inches of wall not covered with frescoes, baroque mirrors, a wooden horse, probably late eighteenth century, and not one, not two, but three chandeliers, not in Murano glass, as one might expect in this part of the world, but rather crystal, probably eighteenth century Bohemian.

Two things surprised me about the room. First was that there was just way too much of it. And I'm not a neatness freak. As anyone who has seen either my antiques shop or my house can tell you, less is more is hardly my decorating credo. I like a certain amount of clutter, different objects and styles playing off each other. This, however, was just over the top, the marriage of a compulsive collector with a bottomless pot of cash.

Secondly, most of it was what people in my line of business rather condescendingly call stuff, which is to say that there were no really exceptional, by which we normally mean breathtakingly expensive, pieces. There was a painting over the mantelpiece that was clearly a copy -- the original was well known and in an art museum. The other pieces were good, but there were few that would have cost him much over \$25,000, not one that would have cost him over \$75,000. I'd have been happy to sell Lake just about anything in the room, but there was nothing there that would indicate the kind of financial resources a man like Lake would have, and not the collector that I knew Lake to be. He regularly made the news in collector's magazines, and was clearly prepared to pay millions if he had to for something he wanted. None of it was in evidence here.

As I struggled to take it all in, a handsome man of about fifty, with a nice head of dark hair sprinkled with gray and the kind of perfect tan that makes you think tanning beds or extended holidays on a private yacht, briskly entered the room. I searched in vain for vestiges of the rather retiring young man of the yearbook photo. Lake's self confidence had evidently soared in the intervening thirty years or so. No doubt acquiring a net worth of six billion dollars will do that for you. He also looked young for a man who'd come of age in the

sixties, but I put that down to the fact that he had the resources to take good care of himself.

"Lara McClintoch," he said, extending his hand. He was standing in the shaft of sunlight, which gave a kind of halo-like quality to him which I found amusing. "I'm Crawford Lake. Thank you for coming. I apologize for all the drama, and for keeping you waiting. I hope you will forgive me. Unfortunately I find such secrecy necessary. I was attending to some business when you arrived, and given I am so rarely here in Rome, I needed to get it done. Now, tea? Or perhaps something stronger?"

"Tea would be lovely," I replied, thinking that the fact that Lake used the apartment so infrequently explained both the art and the rather airless quality the place had. He rang a bell, and a maid appeared instantly, as if she'd been hovering in the hall, awaiting a summons.

"Tea, please, Anna," he said. "And some of that lovely lemon cake of yours."

"Right away, Mr Lake," the woman said, inclining her head slightly, as of bowing to lesser royalty.

"Well, what do you think?" he said, waving his arm around the room. "Do you see anything you like?"

"The alabaster vases are exquisite," I said carefully.

"Fourteenth century," he said. "Not very old, but yes, lovely aren't they? What do you think of the paintings?"

"The frescoes are superb," I said. "I have been admiring the oil over the mantelpiece," I added, choosing my words carefully. "I'm wondering where I've seen the original. The Louvre, perhaps?" It had surprised me, indeed, to see what was obviously a copy amongst all this exceptional art, and I wanted Lake to know I knew a copy when I saw it.

He frowned. "This is the original," he said. "But you are correct in one respect. The copy is in the Louvre."

"Oh," was the best I could muster. To my relief, tea arrived, in a stunning silver tea service, and, as promised, slices of lemon cake on a Sevres porcelain plate.

We engaged in small talk for awhile, he pointing out a number of objects in the room and telling me how he'd acquired them, while I made appreciative sounds. I knew that Lake was South African originally, but his accent was what I think is called mid-Atlantic, a slightly British, slightly American sound that he must have worked hard to acquire. Everything about him was very polished, in fact, which came as something of a relief, given my sleepless hours of the night before when I'd imagined a cross between a Howard Hughes type recluse with long hair and toe nails, and a pathologically shy computer nerd of some kind.

"Now to business," he said at last, struggling for a moment to find an empty place on which to set down his teacup. "No doubt you're wondering why I asked you here."

I nodded. I was delighted to be invited to be sure, but perplexed as to why.

"I need you to purchase something for me," he said. "A work of art. Very old. From someone in France. You'll get a commission, of course, and I'll cover all your expenses. Will you do it?"

"I'm flattered to be asked," I said cautiously. "But if you will forgive me for being so blunt, why me? Why not send a member of your staff?"

"They don't know antiquities," he said, with a dismissive wave. "I'm told you do."

"Mondragon, then," I said, referring to a well known art dealer. "He often buys for you, does he not? And he knows antiquities rather well."

Lake looked impatient. "You will no doubt understand that when my name is associated with an important purchase, the price invariably rises," he said slowly. "Way beyond it's true value."

"The Apollo," I said.

"The Apollo," he agreed. "Aplu or Apulu to the Etruscans. Regrettably, yes. I see you do your homework, Ms McClintoch."

I did my homework all right, mildly patronizing though his comment might be. Not that research on Lake was difficult to do. His financial escapades were regularly featured in just about any newspaper you'd care to mention, as were some rather aggressive art purchases. There was no question he was very rich. But he couldn't buy everything. He'd gone after a 2300 year old statue of Apollo, a gorgeous piece of work, Etruscan as he'd indicated, and he'd lost to a California collector who probably didn't have Lake's resources, but who had proved adept at outflanking him on this particular acquisition. Before that, Lake had been on just about every art magazine's one hundred top collectors list on an annual basis. Post Apollo, however, he seemed to pretty much have abandoned the field to others.

"It wasn't worth half what Mariani paid for it," Lake said, referring to the proud owner of the Apollo. "I still have regrets. Having said that, you will understand, I think, that I did not reach this rather enviable financial position by paying more than anything is worth, even for something as wonderful as that. I need someone who will not be linked to me in any way to purchase the object I wish."

"Which is?"

"We'll discuss that in a moment."

"You've explained why you want to deal with someone new, but not, I think, why you chose me."

He shrugged ever so slightly. "I do my research. You've just demonstrated you do yours. I'm told you're honest, know your stuff, and that you're persistent, if not stubborn. I admire persistence. It is a quality we may share. Furthermore -- I hope I do not offend you in saying this -- your business is not well known internationally. McClintoch & Swain is not," he hesitated, "the kind of firm with which I would normally do business."

I could hardly disagree, being reasonably certain that McClintoch & Swain, the shop I co-own with my ex-husband Clive Swain, was pretty much unknown beyond a two-block radius of the shop, let alone internationally.

"Do you know what a chimera is?" he asked, abruptly.

"A mythological creature, isn't it? Part lion, part snake, part something else."

"Goat," he nodded.

"Goat," I agreed.

"You do not disappoint me, Ms McClintoch," Lake said. "You could have said it was a term used by scientists for any hybrid, plant or animal, or you could have said it was a name for a creature that changes its appearance at will. But you picked the right one, as far as I'm concerned. Now, do you know the Chimera of Arezzo?"

"The bronze Chimera in the archaeological museum in Florence, you mean? The one found in Arezzo in Tuscany?"

"Yes," he said, reaching for a large envelope on the table beside him and then placing a photograph in front of me. "Lovely, isn't it? Bronze, late fifth or early fourth century BC. One of the truly great pieces of Etruscan art. We owe its discovery to Cosimo de Medici. He rather fancied himself as an archaeologist. It is said that he cleaned the finds himself, a painstaking bit of work. He found the Chimera in 1553, and also the Arringatore, the Orator, in 1566, both Etruscan. I expect he undertook the work because he loved it. But it also suited his political aspirations. His successor was declared Dux Magnus Etruscus, Great Etruscan Leader, did you know that? Not enough that Cosimo was declared Grand Duke of Tuscany in 1569. Silly really, the Dux Magnus Etruscus business, given that the Etruscans had been defeated by the Romans more than two thousand years earlier, but I suppose it speaks to the power the glorious past has over us. Magnificent work of art, is it not? Look at the power in the head and haunches of the lion, the menace in the serpent tail, and the intractable nature of the goat, so evident."

No question about it, the Chimera of Arezzo was indeed a showpiece of Etruscan bronze work. It was a beast with the head and haunches of a lion, a second head of a goat, and a tail ending in a serpent's head that curved around and looked about to bite the goat.

Interesting, though, that Lake was going on about Cosimo de Medici. Like the Medici family, Lake had made his fortune in banking -- conventional financial services at first, but then moving aggressively and early into internet banking -- and he shared with Cosimo both aspirations to empire and a rather ruthless way of dealing with his adversaries. Where Cosimo had expelled all his rivals from his city of Florence, and had annexed the neighboring city of Siena, sending his enemies to be beheaded or imprisoned in terrible dungeons, Lake had initiated, and successfully completed, a couple of really hostile takeovers of rival companies. Lake, allegedly a fan of all things Italian, had called his company Marzocco, after the heraldic lion of Florence. It is said that the defeated enemies of that city were once required to kiss the rear end of a statue of the animal, and figuratively speaking, that was pretty much what anybody who came in conflict with Lake eventually had to do.

On a more positive note, both Lake and de Medici, although separated by almost five hundred years, were significant patrons of the arts. Still, it was difficult to see where this conversation about art and empire was going. There was no way the Arezzo Chimera was up for sale, and I sincerely hoped he wasn't thinking I'd break into the Archaeological museum in Florence to get it for him.

"It's so life like, isn't it?" he mused. "Even if it could never really exist. I mean, look at it. Doesn't it seem to be about to strike at something, a fight to the death?"

"Something or someone," I agreed. "Bellerophon, wasn't it, the hero who killed the chimera?"

"Brava," he said. "Again, you do live up to your advance billing, Ms McClintoch. Bellerophon, indeed. Homer's Iliad, book six. The creature, a horrifying beast that breathed fire, was said to live in Lycia in Asia Minor, and yes, she -- have you noticed how many of the monsters of ancient mythology were female? -- was killed at last by the hero, Bellerophon. A Persian St George in some respects. I suppose the chimera could be an early version of a dragon myth. Do you recall how Bellerophon managed this rather daunting task his enemies had set for him?"

"Didn't he fly over the creature on a winged horse and shoot an arrow with a plug of some kind on it that was melted by the chimera's breath? Something like that, anyway."

"That's correct. I see you know your mythology as well as your antiquities. Bellerophon was given the winged horse Pegasus, by his father Poseidon, god of the sea, and flew over the chimera. He put a plug of lead on the tip of his arrow and shot it down her throat. It melted and seared the entrails of the chimera, killing her. She would have died in agony. Rather ingenious, wouldn't you say?"

"No doubt," I replied. There was something about his tone that bothered me, the rather gleeful spirit in which he recounted the tale, and his emphasis on the fact that the chimera was a she. Could it be that the billionaire had a misogynistic streak? "Look, this is all very interesting, Mr. Lake, but I still don't know what you want from me."

"Why, Bellerophon, of course," he said to me, placing a second photo in front of me. It showed a rearing winged horse, with a man astride it, about to shoot an arrow. The photo was not as clear as the first, more of the home rather than the professional variety, but I could see it was an impressive piece of sculpture. Lake moved the two photos together, and it did, indeed, look as if the Arezzo Chimera was snarling up at the rearing horse and rider.

"What about the dimensions?" I said. "I can't tell from these photographs."

"Perfect," he replied. "The Arezzo Chimera is only about 32 inches high, rather small for monumental sculpture, really. The Bellerophon is about six and a half feet. Towers over her."

"I don't recall any indication that there was a Bellerophon statue with the Chimera," I said, rather dubiously, but I could feel myself getting excited.

"Ah, now this is where it gets interesting," Lake said. "I searched the city archives of Arezzo for that time period, the 1550's," he said, then paused

abruptly as if he'd misspoken himself. "Rather, to be more accurate, I should say I had the archives searched for me. There is a reference to a large bronze like the Chimera being discovered outside the city gates on November 15, 1553, along with several smaller bronzes. There's a later notation to the effect that the tail was missing.

"Giorgio Vasari -- Cosimo de Medici was his patron and Vasari recorded many of his exploits -- writing in 1568 says it was found in 1554, a year later than the archival records. He also mentions the missing tail. Some say Benvenuto Cellini replaced the tail -- Cellini was an artist supported by de Medici -- but I doubt that's true. In any event, the Chimera is not my interest. The Bellerophon is. I believe there are enough indications that there was more than one large bronze found in Arezzo, and given the legend, and this photo, I think there's a good chance I've located it. I want this one, Ms McClintoch, and I want you to get it for me. Are you up to the challenge?"

"Well, I.... What would you want to do with it once you had it, Mr. Lake?" I asked.

"What would I do with it? Oh, I see what you mean. My intention is to turn it over to the museum in Florence. The Chimera, while magnificent, is not all that impressive by itself, I'm sure you'll agree. A question of scale, really. But with Bellerophon, the two pieces as they were meant to be will be truly astounding. They deserve to be together."

"That's a very generous gesture, Mr. Lake," I said. It was not unheard of, in Lake's case. I did recall he'd donated some very fine antiquities to various museums over the years, but still, I was on my guard.

"Yes and no," he said, with a rather disarming smile. "To be honest, I am launching a new high tech fund here in Europe, and I want to make a positive impression, something that will make people sit up and notice, and then, of course, buy in. I think finding the Bellerophon and then donating it to the archaeological museum might do that for me. Wealthy philanthropist spends ten years tracking down missing Bellerophon, buys masterpiece for Italy, etcetera, etcetera. Then a couple of days later I launch the fund. Not entirely unselfish, of course, but still worth doing, I hope you agree." He spoke with the authority of someone who expects everyone to agree with him, and I found, somewhat to my surprise, that I did. What did it matter what the motivation? The important thing was that the Bellerophon be reunited with the Chimera, and that everyone have an opportunity to appreciate them.

"I ask you again. Are you up to the challenge?" he said. "I'll pay you and pay you well. You'll get a commission on the purchase -- we can discuss how much -- and I will cover all your expenses. I have taken the liberty of opening a Swiss bank account for you, electronic, and my bank, of course, and if you agree, then \$10,000 US will be deposited in it to defray expenses. Now," he said, naming a commission rate, "would that be worth your time?"

I've never actually figured out what my time is worth, believing that dividing the rather paltry profit McClintoch & Swain turns from time to time by the number of hours I put into the business would just depress me. However, while I prefer not to discuss money in general, and my commission in particular, I will say that there was no question that the sum would be more than my time would normally fetch.

Still I hesitated, and he, poor man, took that to mean the amount wasn't enough. "If you can keep the selling price under two million, I'll up your commission another percentage point. Under a million and a half, one more."

"I'm sure that will be satisfactory, Mr. Lake," I replied, in as neutral a tone as I could muster. My heart soared like a hawk, actually. Even if no one ever knew that Lake had been the purchaser, this would be my entree into a level of the art world I'd never thought I'd see. And for a good cause, too: uniting the Chimera with the missing hero.

"Good," he said, handing me a piece of paper. "Anything else?"

"What if I can't get the Bellerophon, for whatever reason?"

"I reward success, not failure, Ms McClintoch. However, I do try to be fair. The ten thousand I will deposit in your account should more than cover your out-of-pocket expenses, and I will consider it non refundable, no matter how much or how little of it you spend. Is that satisfactory?" I nodded.

"Then, here is the account number and password. I suggest you memorize both and throw away the paper."

I looked at it. The bank was Marzocco Financial Online, and the account number was 14M24S -- one for the money and two for the show. The password was easy, too. It was Chimera. I tore up the piece of paper and handed the scraps back to Lake. "Got it," I said. "Now, who has the Bellerophon?"

"I believe, on fairly good authority," he said, "that it's in the hands of a collector in France by the name of Robert Godard. I've never met the man, but I think he's had it for a few years now. It may even have been in his family for a generation or two. I'm not sure Godard knows what he's got, the missing half of the Arezzo bronzes, I mean. I'm sure he knows it's good. He's a collector after all, but he may not have put two and two together, as it were. Probably thinks he has a rather unusual equestrian statue. I'd like it to stay that way. It will keep the price down."

I nodded. "I'm not entirely sure myself that the two pieces go together," Lake went on, "But I believe they do, and when we see them side by side, I think it will be clear they do."

"You say Godard has had the bronze for a long time. What makes you think he'll sell it now?"

"My sources tell me he's ready to sell. Financial hardship, is, I think, the term that comes immediately to mind." He must have seen something in my face. "I've heard you have a somewhat suspicious nature," he said.

Who, I wondered, had he been talking to about me? I wouldn't characterize myself as suspicious, just cautiously skeptical, that's all, what I'd call a healthy attitude in a business that occasionally appeals to people with baser motives and where the phrase caveat emptor, buyer beware, is a useful phrase to remember. What I'm trying to say is that fakes abound in the antiques trade. I like to think I haven't been had very often.

"I had nothing to do with his current situation, I assure you," Lake said. "He brought it on himself. I merely hope to profit from it. Godard is a collector who doesn't know when to stop. I do." He looked about the room for a moment,

at the jumble of art and artifacts, and then permitted himself a small laugh. "Although I'll grant you this may not be apparent at first glance." I laughed too. I rather liked the man.

"Do you know where I can find him?"

"The best way to contact him is through a dealer, a freelance type -- he doesn't have a retail operation -- by the name of Yves Boucher. You can get in touch with Boucher in Paris. Antonio will give you his number," he added. I gathered Antonio was the rather pretty young man who'd accompanied me to the house. "I suggest you go to Paris right away, as early as tomorrow morning if possible. Antonio will give you some cash to cover your expenses until the money is transferred. It will be there this evening. You can check any time tomorrow. Antonio will also give you a phone number where he can be reached. He'll be our go-between. When you've gotten in touch with Boucher and then Godard, and have some idea of the price range, you can call Antonio. Once we've agreed on the price, I'll transfer the money to your account. You understand I don't want my name associated with this in any way, do you not?"

"I do," I replied. "You have my word that your name will never be mentioned."

"Thank you," he said. "And you have mine in this matter." I'd heard that Lake was one of those people who closed multimillion-dollar deals on the strength of a handshake. I decided if it was good enough for him, it was good enough for me. Heaven knows I'd had occasion to discover from time to time how worthless signed contracts could be.

"You'll have to arrange the bank transfers," he went on. "It will all be in your name. But I'll ensure the money is there. Don't worry about that. You'll probably have to give them a deposit on it. Just let Antonio know. Now I must get back to work, although this is much more interesting, and I'm afraid you will have to submit to the rather theatrical device of the blindfold again. I do apologize for it," he said, extending his hand and smiling rather engagingly. "Anna will see you to the door."

"Do you mind if I use the facilities before I go?" I said, trying to look embarrassed. "All that tea....."

"But of course," he said. "How thoughtless of me. Anna will show you the way."

He rang for the maid. "I will get it, by the way," he said, as we awaited Anna's arrival.

"The Bellerophon? Of course you will," I said.

"The Bellerophon, yes. But I meant the Apollo. Mariani finds himself in some financial difficulties. I confess this time I had a hand in some of them. He'll have to sell it any day now, at much less than he paid for it, and rather closer to what it's worth. It's a matter of time. I'll be there." The tone was mild, but there was no doubt in my mind that there was a ruthless mind behind it. I found myself feeling a little sorry for Mariani, and, for the first time, more than a little apprehensive about my own dealings with Lake. I didn't think he'd brook failure on my part. It also occurred to me that at least where Etruscan statuary was concerned, Lake, like Cosimo de Medici before him, rather aspired to the title of Dux Magnus Etruscus himself.

The feeling lasted for only a moment, however. "It's been a pleasure, Ms McClintoch," he said. "I'm glad we'll be doing business together." He gave me another lovely smile, and despite my misgivings, for a fleeting second or two, I found myself hoping our relationship would be a long and mutually rewarding one. He nodded in my general direction, then disappeared down the hall.

Anna not only accompanied me along a rather gloomy hallway, the doors on either of it shut tight against prying eyes like mine, but also waited outside the door. The window was frosted glass on the bottom, but not on the top, and as quickly and quietly as I could, I stood on the toilet seat and peered out. I found myself looking out on to a rather spectacular roof top garden, with cascading flowers and shrubs, a small table with two chairs, and off in one corner, the dominant feature, a statue of Michelangelo's David, life size. I smiled to myself. I was sure if I asked Lake about it -- which I couldn't, of course, given my subterfuge -- he'd tell me the David in the Accademia in Florence was the copy, the one on his roof the genuine article. Craning my neck, I could see down the street a little to some café umbrellas and the letters FECIT on the edge of a high building. I was almost certain I pretty much knew where I was.

I stepped down carefully, flushed the toilet and ran the water for Anna's benefit, then opened the door. It was time to check out of my hotel and get myself to Paris to pick up the trail of Bellerophon.