

Sample Chapter

That Man in Siena

A week after her visit from Jerry and Angie, Laura boarded a flight to Milan. She got herself settled into her window seat. She was thankful for a seat that would give her a little privacy. Sitting in a window seat made it easier to ignore seatmates and other things going on in the cabin. Her seatmate put his bag in the overhead bin and settled in beside her. They exchanged brief pleasantries. He looked like a business man. She hoped he would be occupied with the papers in his briefcase under the seat in front of him. She didn't feel like talking to anybody about anything. She just needed to think about what she was going to say to Raffaele.

Laura stared out the window as the big jet taxied to their takeoff position. She thought about Barbara's last advice and about Jerry telling her she'd better hightail it to Siena. She was glad to be finally acting on it. The engines revved, and the plane roared down the runway and into the air. Laura sighed. She was glad that this secret trip was underway. Only Jerry had her itinerary. She had sent a text to Heather and Kathy, saying she would be out of town for a week and could be reached via her cell phone. The timeframe was fictitious. She had no idea how long she would be gone. She had bought a one-way ticket and didn't have a clue herself. She did tell Dr. Donaldson she would be taking 10 days of vacation time, but she might return sooner. He had looked at her quizzically, but had not pressed her for more information.

The flight was even more miserable than she had expected it to be. That was saying a lot since she was prepared for the flight from hell. The dinner seemed even more tasteless than most airline food. After she got rid of her tray, she tried to read a book on her iPad, but couldn't keep her mind on it. She finally gave up on it.

She tried to watch the inflight movie, but it was completely boring. She flipped through the inflight magazine and skimmed an article here and there.

Finally she dozed off, listening to her playlist of 70s songs from which she had made the medley for the video, "College Follies of Barbara and Laura."

A series of nightmares sprawled through her mind. Familiar people morphed into ugly strangers leering at her. She tried to get away from them, hurrying down her neighborhood streets that turned into narrow, dark winding streets that she had never seen before. She ran into a little hotel to get away from the people chasing her. The room in the hotel was dark with a cracked ceiling. The bathroom had an overflowing toilet. She ran out of the hotel. Immediately she was lost on the dark street. She had left her cell phone and handbag in the hotel, but she couldn't remember the name of the hotel. She looked up and down the street, straining to remember which way she should go to get back to the hotel and get her purse. Rain was pouring, and an old woman stood in a doorway yelling at her over the rain. She was saying "God will punish you. God will punish you." It was Raffaele's mother. The old woman followed her down the street. Bystanders joined the old woman and took up the damning refrain.

Laura woke with a start. The female flight attendant was saying, "You must buckle your seat belt now. Hurry. Do it now, Miss." The attendant moved up the aisle.

Reaching for her seat belt, Laura saw rain pouring down the window next to her seat. A bolt of lightning cut a jagged path into the darkness outside. She shuddered and pulled down the shade.

A voice from the flight deck advised, "We are changing altitude to get away from the storm. Keep those seat belts fastened, please. We have more chop ahead."

When the plane had climbed above the storm and leveled out, Laura didn't even try to go back to sleep, choosing the droning discomforts of the cabin over her weird nightmares.

She watched a movie on her iPad. When it was over, she raised the shade on her window. Daylight was breaking. Thank goodness the long ugly night was over.

Her seatmate woke up with a start and looked around. He said, "Good morning."

Laura said, "Good morning."

Flight attendants came through the cabin, distributing hot towels. Laura wiped her face and hands.

The man said, "That's a lifesaver. I make this trip several times a year, but it doesn't get any easier."

Black coffee and orange juice came next.

The seatmate asked, "Is this your first trip to Italy?"

Laura said, "No, I came last August."

He said, "I fly into Milan and have my meetings and fly out again. Someday I'm going to stay long enough to be a tourist. Where did you go last year?"

"I went to Siena," she said.

"Did you see the big horse race?" he asked.

Laura replied, "Yes, the Palio."

He said, "I've read about it. Was it fun to see?"

Laura replied, "Yes, it was very exciting."

He checked his watch and dug a small kit from his briefcase. "I guess I'll get in line." He got up and walked to the back of the plane.

Laura was relieved to have the conversation ended. He was a nice guy, but she wasn't in the mood to chat.

When they stopped at the gate, it was hard for her to wait as passengers ahead grabbed their bags from the overhead bins and marched down the aisles of the big jetliner.

When her turn finally came, she was stiff and aching all over as she crept down the aisle and out of the plane.

Remembering very little about the Milan airport, she followed her fellow passengers and signs to the passport control booth. The agent studied her passport and scanned it. He looked at her and asked, "What brings you to Italy again?"

Laura said, "To see a friend. He lives in Siena." Why the hell had she volunteered all that information? The agent smiled and returned her passport. In a friendly tone, he said, "Welcome back. Enjoy your visit."

Outside the airport she hailed a cab and directed the driver to the train station.

She remembered more about the train station than the airport. She bought her ticket from an agent who spoke good English. His Italian accent sounded nice. "Grazie," she said. "Which way is my train?" He

pointed to the left and said, "Track number 6. You'd better hurry. And, remember you have to change in Florence."

She wheeled her bag in the right direction. She sat on a bench in front of where she hoped the first class section of the train would stop. Guessing about that was the hardest thing about traveling by train in Italy.

The agent was right. The train appeared shortly after she sat down on the bench.

She got up and jockeyed for position as people lined up.

When she was seated and the train started pulling out of the station, Laura took a deep breath, glad to be on the next to last leg of her journey.

It was a long enough ride to accommodate a lot of what ifs. What if Raffaele wasn't in town? What if he was in a serious relationship with another woman? What if he told her to get out and never come back? His response to her email apology had been totally non-committal.

She changed trains in Florence without a problem.

When she arrived at the Siena station, she noted there was not much competition for cabs. She was inside one in minutes.

"The Balducci Bed and Breakfast in Siena," she said. The driver nodded that he understood. Once inside the Siena gates, the driver tore down the narrow streets. Fast, reckless driving must be a hiring requirement, she thought.

They pulled up in front of The Balducci Bakery. She paid the driver and pulled her bag to the front door. She hesitated a moment before pushing it open. She stepped in, hoping like hell that she could pass through the bakery without being noticed. She got almost to the stairway when Raffaele's mother saw her. The old woman cursed loudly. Laura looked at her and said, "Hello, Mrs. Balducci." The cursing continued. Ignoring it, Laura called up the stairway, "Carmine. Carmine. Can you help me upstairs please?"

In a minute or two, Carmine appeared. "Mrs. Langston. Hello. We weren't expecting you."

Laura said, "Please, Carmine, let's just get out of the bakery and up the stairs."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, reaching for her wheeled bag.

She followed him up the stairs. They stopped at the front desk. "Do you have a room for me?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "You can stay in Jazz 1." He handed her a sign-in sheet. "How many nights?" he asked.

She said, "I don't know yet. Just put me down for one, and I'll tell you later if I want to stay longer."

She followed him down the hall. He opened the door of Jazz 1 and stood back, letting her walk in before he brought in the bag.

He gave her the key to Jazz 1 and the key to the outside stairs.

"It's good to have you back, Mrs. Langston," he said.

Laura said, "Wait. This is a little surprise visit to Raffaele, so please don't tell him I've checked in. And, Carmine, I need to ask you something. Is Raffaele...does he have a woman now?"

Carmine shook his head no. He said, "I have seen no women on the second or third floors since you left last summer. Not even a female guest. We have had a few male guests, but not many. It's been very quiet."

Laura said, "Good. Thank you, Carmine. Do you know where Raffaele is now?"

Carmine said, "He has been in his studio all day. It is my day to clean in there, but I haven't been able to get in. I never disturb him there."

Laura said, "Yes, I remember that. Thank you, Carmine. I'll see you later."

Carmine smiled. He said, "Yes, ma'am," and closed her door.

Laura looked around the room. It looked exactly as it had the day she had checked in last August. She dared not put her clothes in the chifforobe. If things didn't go well, she might be checking out very soon.

She unzipped her wheeled bag and picked out her skinny black jeans and a dark green ruffled shirt that she had bought for the trip. She took a shower without washing her hair. She wanted to get to the studio as quickly as possible. Looking into the mirror over the beautiful little bowl, she examined the dark circles under her eyes. Her travel day/night/whatever it was had been very unkind to her face. She applied more cleansing cream, knowing it would not work miracles, but she had to try. She did the best she could with the makeup and fussed with her hair. Finally she pronounced herself ready to go up to the studio.

She locked her door and walked out into the hallway and around the front desk. Carmine was nowhere in sight. She proceeded to the stairway and stopped. Her heart was pounding. She was scared to death, but she couldn't put this off any longer. As she started up the stairs, she could hear faint strains of the Tijuana Brass coming from above.

She walked up very slowly and quietly and stopped in front of the open studio door. She eased her carryon bag and handbag to the floor.

Raffaele was sitting at his potter's wheel, with his white shirt unbuttoned a third of the way down and both sleeves rolled up. His hands pressed and shaped the clay beneath them. Laura stood motionless, watching his hands. Then she tiptoed into the room, put her hands around him and placed both of her hands over his.

She whispered, "I feel the power of your hands. I love you, Raffaele."

Raffaele turned his head ever so slightly so that he could rub his cheek against her arm. He said, "Laura? My sweet Laura? Thank God, you came back to me."

She leaned closer to him and kissed his head.

"Don't let me interrupt your work," she teased.

He carefully steadied the clay and stopped the wheel. She leaned away from him so that he could get up. He turned around. Her eyes met his. He held up his hands and smiled. "Just a minute. I'll wash my hands and then give you the kind of welcome you deserve."

She watched him go over to the sink and wash his hands. He turned from the sink and searched her face as he dried his hands. Then he walked back to where she was standing and took her into his arms and kissed her. His kisses were hungry and hard.

He pulled away and studied her face. He said, "I will never let you get away from me again. Not for any reason." He pulled her close and kissed her, gently this time.

Laura said, "I am so sorry..." He put his hand on her lips. "You are here. That's what matters. Don't say a word. Not a word."

He held her to him and kissed her again.

"Do you want to go up to my apartment?"

She said, "Yes."

Raffaele held Laura's hand while he moved around the studio, putting things away with his other hand. She helped him take the vinyl record off the player and place it back into its like-new original cover. Laura smiled to herself as she looked at the familiar cover featuring a model wearing only whipped cream. With her free hand, Laura reached up and put it on the top of the stack of records. Raffaele turned off the light, and they stepped into the hall. He let go of her hand long enough for her to put her handbag over her shoulder. Then he picked up her carryon. They walked down the stairs hand in hand.