

MURDER UNDER A MYSTIC MOON EXCERPT

Having missed lunch, Mona and Robert were famished and dove into their food. They ate heartily until a shadow fell across their table and they heard, "Well, look what the cat dragged in."

Mona and Robert looked up.

There stood Martha Gellhorn, an American journalist who had traveled on the same ocean liner to Great Britain as they.

Mona jumped up from her chair and gave Martha a hearty welcome. "What are you doing in Malta? I thought you were going to some fascist conference."

Robert called to the waiter as Martha joined them at the table.

"I did, and then I wandered about Europe a bit. Now I'm here. Hey, what are you eating? Smells divine."

Robert motioned the waiter over. "Another bowl of aljotta for my friend and the house wine. Thank you."

Martha happily put down her rucksack and pulled a chunk from Mona's bread, dipping it into the olive oil. "I am very hungry. So glad I found you at a restaurant."

"How was the conference?" Robert asked, very interested.

In a low voice, Martha said, "Very concerning. These men are serious about taking over the world."

"The world is a very big place," Robert said, drolly.

Martha said, "And yet the sun never sets on the British Empire, so the world is not so big with a country that has a steadfast will to colonize. I hope you see the irony of your statement, Robert."

Mona asked, "What do they want with this power?"

"Control. Control over people. Control over markets. Control over industrial power. Control over borders. Control over inventions. Control over thought."

"That's frightening, but surely the world will stand up to them," Robert said.

"Really?" Martha chided. "Like the Germans did to the Nazis? It will take a few years and a few wars but they might succeed. Democracy is messy. Fascism is straightforward—do as I command or watch your family shot by a firing squad."

"Now, Martha, you exaggerate," Robert commented, getting out a cigarette case and lighting a cigarette. He offered one to Martha, and she gratefully accepted. He lit it for her with a gold lighter Mona had given to him.

Martha inhaled deeply and blew out the smoke. "I'm not, Robert. I'm a good reporter, and I'm scared for the future. Take a good look at Malta, Robert. The island is crawling with Germans officers and Italian fascists. They mean to take Malta, and if they can't get it, either the Germans or the Italians will bomb it out of existence. It's too important a port to let the British keep."

"Martha, I don't believe this is a coincidence and that you just happened to find us in a small café on the island of Gozo," Mona said.

"You're right. I called your maid, Violet, in Paris, and she told me where you would be. I went to your hotel and bumped into one of the Pinkertons who crossed the Atlantic with us. He told me that you were sightseeing on Gozo. I went to the Ggantija ruins first and then headed to Mgarr where I knew

you had to pick up the ferry back to Valletta. I've been hitting every bar and cafe in the village. It's not that big, and then I saw those big galoots over there walking about the village, so I followed them."

Martha thrust her chin at the Pinkertons guarding Robert and Mona, sitting at a table near the doorway. "I waited across the piazza to see if there were more Pinkertons. And you know what I discovered? You two are being followed."

Robert put his cigarette out in his empty plate. "We know. The chubby man with gray hair in the gray suit and wilted silk waistcoat. He was in the hotel lobby last night, and then on the ferry, at Ggantija, and now watching the café from the plaza. That's not all. We spotted him in Rhodes, Crete, and Alexandria. He is relentless."

"We've been followed everywhere we go," Mona said, taking a piece of bread and dipping it into the olive oil. She pushed the olive oil bowl and the plate of ftira over to Martha. "Usually him, but sometimes a woman or a youth. We saw him in Egypt, Cyprus, and Turkey—now here."

"That's why I sought you out before going back to New York. At the conference, much was said about the need for minerals. Copper was top of their list along with tin and gold. Mona, I think you are being followed because of your vast copper holdings. I wanted to warn you."

"Thank you, Martha. When are you going back?"

Martha looked surprised at both Robert and Mona. "Hey, I don't understand why you are acting so unconcerned."

"We have implemented safeguards," Mona said. "We are never without protection anymore."

Pushing the issue, Martha shot back, "Who will inherit the copper mines if you die?"

"Robert would oversee the mines for the Moon family, and then they would pass to any children we might have."

"And if Robert is dead and there are no children?"

"The mines revert to a family trust. No one person can get their hands on the mines after my death."

"Surely, someone has to make decisions if you are dead and Robert incapacitated."

"My lawyer, Dexter Deatherage."

"And if he dies?"

"To an already elected board of directors."

Exasperated, Martha huffed, "Don't you see they will kill anyone in their way until they get their hands on your copper? Who is the weakest link in your chain?"

"My aunt, Melanie Moon and her children."

Martha leaned back in her chair. "See there."

Keeping her voice low, Mona said, "I don't understand your concern, Martha. We know I am always someone's target because of Moon Enterprises, but I have taken the necessary precautions. You needn't fear for my safety, but I thank you for thinking of me."

Martha gave Mona a haughty stare. "Oh, is that right? You have everything under control? Here is something you don't know. I passed a group of men gabbing at the Montreux Fascist Conference, who didn't know I speak a little Italian. I definitely heard your name mentioned and the Italian word *assassina*. I believe they are sending a woman to kill you, Mona!"