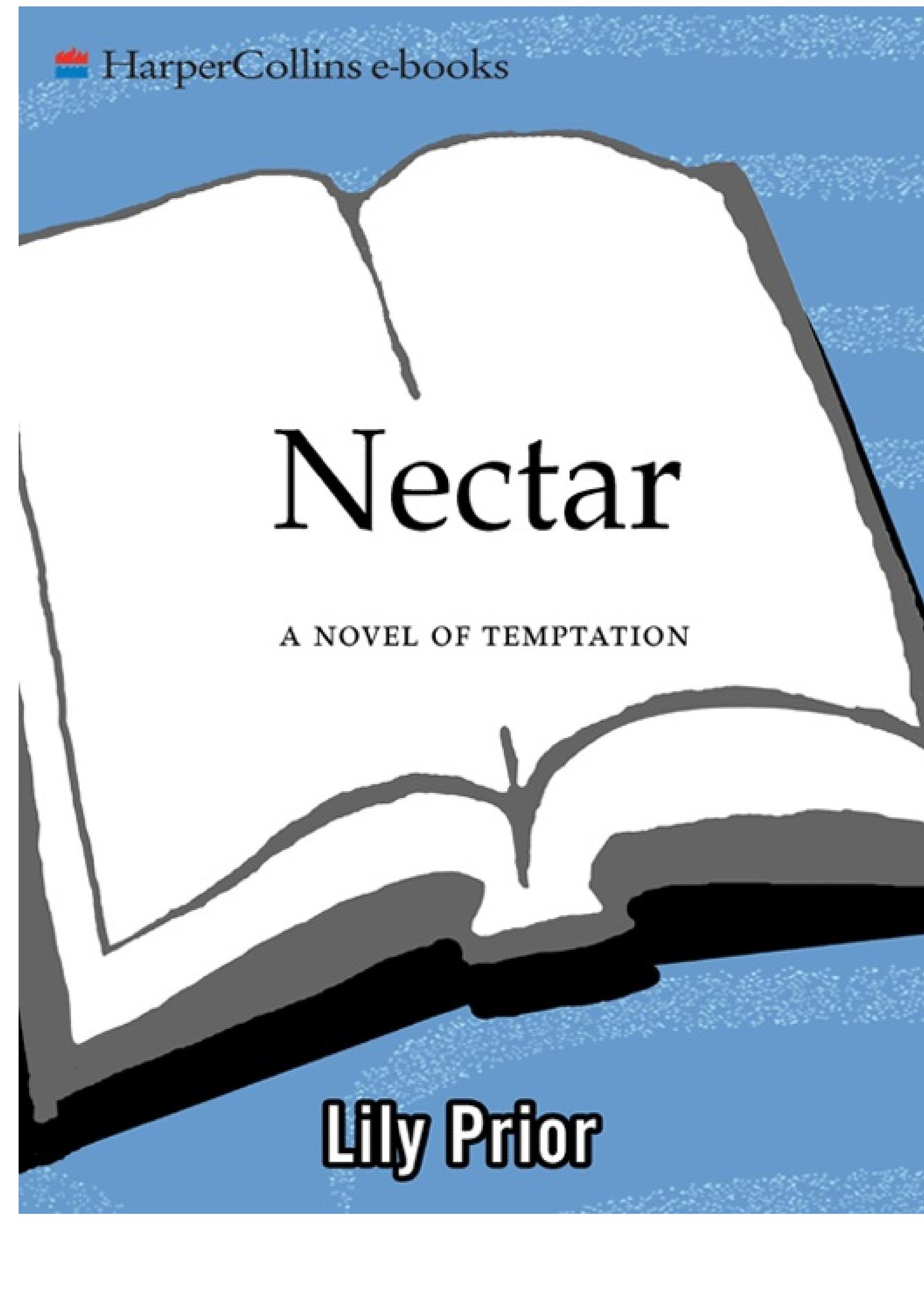




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Nectar

A NOVEL OF TEMPTATION

Lily Prior

Nectar

a novel of temptation

Lily Prior

 HarperCollins e-books

for Christopher

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

ONE In the Country

CHAPTER ONE The Garden

CHAPTER TWO The Beekeeper

CHAPTER THREE The Courtship

CHAPTER FOUR Poetry

CHAPTER FIVE The Eyeglasses

CHAPTER SIX A Sinister Disappearance

CHAPTER SEVEN Ill Luck

CHAPTER EIGHT The Festival

TWO In the City

CHAPTER NINE

The City, at Last!

CHAPTER TEN

The House of Castorelli

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Disgrace at Spinelli's

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Fontana Refreshment Rooms

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Humpback's Prediction

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Audition

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Opera

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Rinaldo Becomes Possessed

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Exorcism

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A Baby

CHAPTER NINETEEN

An Eruption of the Volcano

CHAPTER TWENTY

A Case of Mistaken Identity

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Humpback in Heaven

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The New Arrival

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Smell Vanishes

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

To the Circus

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Sweet Charity

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“Never seen her before, Bubbone”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Seduction of Signor Filangieri

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Eager Cleaver of Liberio Borrelli

THREE

The Country Once More

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Out on the Highway

CHAPTER THIRTY

Ramona Drottoveo Is Back!

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Fever

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Beef Tea

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The New Signora

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The Wedding

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The Wedding Journey

[CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX](#)

[The Homecoming](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN](#)

[The Performance](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT](#)

[A Crop of Boys](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE](#)

[Blandina Blossoms](#)

[CHAPTER FORTY](#)

[Remedies](#)

[CHAPTER FORTY-ONE](#)

[In Which the Signor Clings to Life](#)

[CHAPTER FORTY-TWO](#)

[In Which the Signor's Eyes Are Opened](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Praise](#)

[Other Books by Lily Prior](#)

[Copyright](#)

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CHARACTERS

In the Country

Ramona Drottoveo, *the albino*

The Signora, *owner of the estate, and her husband, the Signor*

Ovidio Gondulfo, *the head gardener*

Stiliano Mamiliano, *the pig keeper*

Ludovico Mamiliano, *Stiliano's younger brother*

Filippo Mamiliano, *the boys' father, the retired pig keeper*

Padre Jacopo Basolo, *the parish priest*

Blocco, *the old doctor*

Alfonsina, *Dr. Blocco's wife, later marries Dr. Stipa*

Stipa, *the new doctor*

The beekeeper (*the first of three*)

San Ambrose, *patron saint of beekeepers*

Pupolo Floscio, *the pastry cook's assistant*

Trofimo Barile, *the innkeeper at the Black Toad*

Isolda Barile, *Trofimo's wife*

Dalinda Scandone, *the kitchen maid*

Sant'Ursula, *invoked against plague*

Immacolata Pescatore, *the head cook*

Ernesto Conticello, *the rose gardener*

Camilla Conticello, *wife of the rose gardener*

Roberto Pedretti, *potboy, lover of Dalinda Scandone*

Ugo Rossi, *the under-butler*

Margherita Rossi, *wife of the under-butler*

Beata Viola, *the silver maid*

Rinaldo Buffi, *the second beekeeper*

Semprebene Metrofano, *the steward*

San Antonio di Padua, *invoked to find lost objects*

Santa Margherita, *patron saint of childbirth*

Floriana Redenta, *famous for giving birth to a piglet*

San Ansovinus, *invoked for plentiful harvests*

Signor Raymondo Barbuzzi, *dignitary in the town of Urbino* Signora Barbuzzi, *widow of the above, maker of celebrated almond biscotti*

Silvestro Bernini, *the carpenter*

The beekeeper's mother

Virna Fuga, *dairymaid*

Tito Livio Feriani, *the Signor's personal valet* Bernardino Bergonzoni, *the cowman*

Saturnina Floscio, *aunt of Pupolo*

Bibiana Mamiliano, *mother of the pig men*

Gloriana Tomacelli, *the weaver*

Andromeda Doria, *the gamekeeper's wife*

Milvia Lucentini, *the midwife*

Pudenziana Esposito, *Isolda Barile's serving maid* Sant'Irina, *invoked for peace*

Vittorino Broschi, *the postilion*

Guendalina Fumagalli, *laundry maid, goes mad*

Virgin Notburga, *patron saint of servants*

San Gregorio, *patron saint of music*

San Cristoforo, *patron saint of journeys*

Selma Venerosa, *the cheese maker's one-eyed assistant*

The lady Margherita, *the Signor's married sister*

Contessa Magina, *a wedding guest*

The lady Lydia, *the Signor's third cousin once removed*

Aunt Crispina, *the Signor's aunt, dies during the wedding*

The Duc'd'Alba, *the Signor's oldest friend*

The first Signora's brother at Roccamonfina

The lady Donatella, *wife of the above, known as the Beast of Roccamonfina*

Nuccio Pandolfo, *the third beekeeper*

Belinda Filippucci, *Ramona's personal maid*

Sebaldo Metrofano, *son of Immacolata and Semprebene Metrofano*

Casto and Polo, *twin sons of Immacolata and Semprebene Metrofano*

Maurilio Bergonzoni, *son of the cowman*

Silvestro Barbalace, *Trofimo Barile's brother-in-law at Sparanise*

Perseo, *a young man who reeks of onions*

Basilio Barile, *son of Trofimo and Isolda Barile*

Tullio, *the Signor's prize hunter*

Gordio Rossi, Gianluca Fuga, Lamberto Pedretti, *all suitors of Blandina*

San Andrea Corsini, *invoked against sudden death*

In the City

Nonna Pino, *the shrine keeper*

Amando Castorelli, *landlord*

Rupinello, *the humpback*

Santa Casilda, *invoked for good luck*

Amalasunta Castorelli, *Amando Castorelli's wife, daughter of Nonna Pino*

Signor Procopio Pastini, *an admirer of Ramona*

A dowager, *patron of the Fontana*

Modesta, *companion of the dowager*

Quintilla, *Signor Pastini's cook*

Policarpo Tebaldi, *owner of the rag shop in the Via Acquaviva*

Brunella Tosti, *the whore who lives above Policarpo's shop*

Giambattista Po, *the artistic director of the opera house*

Fanzago and Bottiglieri, *Signor Po's enemies at the opera house*

Panfilo, *the janitor at the opera house*

The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, *invoked against insomnia*

Padre Buonconte, *the priest at the Chiesa di Santa Maria del Fede*

Santa Maria Margherita, *oversees the rite of exorcism*

Rambaldo Melandri, *the crib maker*

Everardo Donadio, *the ringmaster at the Donadio Brothers Circus*

Nabore, Valdo, and Oddo, *the injured man's sons*

Blandina Buffi, *Ramona and Rinaldo's child*

Signor Scarpetta, *a neighbor in the Via Vecchia Poggioreale*

Selmo Filangieri, *the owner of the Filangieri cook shop*

Monalda Spantigati, *the bearded lady*

The Great Massimo, *the strong man at the circus*

Bubbone, *Signor Pastini's butler*

Liberio Borrelli, *the butcher, one of Amalasantia Castorelli's suitors*

PROLOGUE

At dawn, before the town of Aversa awoke from its slumbers, a sugar-pink woman with white hair was observed by the gargoyles sneaking toward the portal of the convent of Santa Maria della Pieta. She was holding by the hand a tiny replica of herself, a girl aged about three, who was biting and wailing and dragging her little feet in the dust so that it rose around them in a cloud. The two disappeared into the vestibule and seconds later the woman reappeared alone, closing the heavy door firmly behind her, and hurrying away. She did not look back.

In the Country

The Garden

Ramona Drottoveo was one of the chambermaids up at La Casa, the white marble palace in the valley of the Volturno, on the vast estate that had been in the Signora's family since the time of the Etruscans.

As Ramona worked "indoors" rather than "outdoors," and "upstairs" rather than "downstairs," she considered herself somewhat more important than the other workers on the estate.

She began to look down on those who tilled the land, laboring in the lemon groves, the vineyard and the orchards, raising crops of sunflowers, chili peppers, tomatoes, olives, and big-bellied melons and she disdained those who tended the buffaloes and other livestock and those who worked in the dairy and the stables.

Ramona now thought herself above those who beautified the Signora's magical gardens, where peacocks strutted and fountains played orchestral music, where rare orchids bloomed, roses blushed, and where the lushest lawns stretched into the blue distance as far as the eye could see.

She even put on airs before those who roasted hogs, stuffed thrushes, sculpted ice, kneaded bread, plucked ducks, prepared pastries, and polished silver plates and crystal goblets in the great vaulted kitchens.

Ramona was universally hated by the women, though not for this reason; being uppity was the least offensive of her sins. That which made women hate her made men worship her; and this made the women hate her most.

Yet they weren't jealous of her looks, for she was ugly. Had Ramona been a beauty, they would have found the adoration she inspired less obscene, and far more tolerable.

The truth was, Ramona was an albino. Her plump body was bereft of all pigment. Her hair was as white as the feathers of the doves in the Signora's ornamental dovecote, and she refused to braid it, wearing it always loose in a halo around her face and shoulders.

Her skin was a violent shade of pink, so colored by the blood flowing through it, and her livid moon face formed an ugly contrast with the white shade of her hair.

Ramona's eyelashes were long and white, leading some of the female staff to compare them to those of the pigs in the pens beyond the vegetable gardens. Her eyes, where most of the color in her body was concentrated, were also pink, like the eyes of the white rabbit you see in magic shows and picture books.

Yet, although she was coarse and candy-striped, the men of the estate flocked to Ramona, and vied with one another for her favors. The women accused her of being a witch and of using evil arts to lure their men away; but Ramona was no witch. She simply had that scent about her, that made a man in her presence forget the whole of his past life and seek to reinvent himself as a dog, if at that particular moment she wanted a dog. Or a cherry, or a new bonnet. Work could be lost, opportunities discarded, wives and babes could go hungry, poverty and death could be biting at his heels, but still he would kick them up in the air and risk it all for one whiff of Ramona's elixir.

This is really what made the women hate her.

During daylight hours, especially in summertime, Ramona would not emerge from La Casa, for the world was too bright a place for her to inhabit by day. In the evening, however, she walked in the gardens, in the manner of the Signora herself, taking the air, and singing softly to herself the local folk songs, for she fancied she had a voice and loved to sing.

The Signora knew of this nightly intrusion into her gardens, and sought to put Ramona in her place, but on the advice of her husband, who was then enjoying the benefits of a regular coupling with the upstart maid, the Signora said nothing.

And so Ramona strolled with the peacocks through the walkways where the grass was manicured by a dedicated team of twenty under-gardeners. It was as green as crunchy apples and so springy it still bore the trace of her footprints long after she had passed by. Indeed, it is said that Ovidio Gondulfo, the head gardener himself, was once seen prostrate in the acacia walk licking the imprints lovingly with his tongue after Ramona had left him for the bed of another man.

Then, when the scent hung plump in the air, and the wistful tenderness of the declining light made the garden the most romantic place on earth, Ramona would be accosted by countless admirers hiding in the topiary, imploring her to take pity on them and satisfy the agonized longing of their loins.

They came, not only from the estate, but also from the surrounding hills and sometimes even beyond. From the plains to the northeast and the west, and from the towns of Dragoni, Teano, Carinola, and Mondragone. The admirers came from all walks of life, and it is fair to say that as word of her charms spread and her popularity increased, Ramona grew cold toward the field laborers with whom, in the early days, she had been content to satisfy her urges in the hayricks and beneath the hedgerows.

"What, Stiliano Mamiliano, are you here again? Do you think I will do it with you after the last time? Why, the acorn that you feed to your pigs is a bigger prize than that which hangs between your legs."

Deflated, Stiliano's head disappeared into the foliage, only to be replaced by that of his younger brother, Ludovico, fresh-faced and blushing.

"Will you do it with me, Ramona Drottoveo?" he asked in a hoarse voice. "My thing is much bigger than Stiliano's." A thump followed as Stiliano's boot met the seat of Ludovico's pants behind the hedge.

"I've no time for boys," replied Ramona. "I need a man who knows what's what."

"Then take me, Ramona, please, I beg you," came the voice of Papa Mamiliano, his head framed by lilac blossoms. "I know what it takes to please a woman. Just give me the chance."

"Take your two stupid boys and go home to your stupid wife, Filippo Mamiliano. And do it quickly before I lose my temper."

Ramona marched ahead, her nose in the air, which was drenched with her scent so that even the waters of the tinkling fountains were flavored by it.

A little further along the walk, in the arbor of Venus, the parish priest, Padre Jacopo, was lurking behind the marble statue of the goddess, waiting for Ramona to appear.

There was a time when Ramona had welcomed the Padre's attentions. But now that she could afford to pick and choose she was not so sure. What did the grizzle-haired priest have to offer her, anyway? Only his garlic breath and shrunken member.

"Ramona, Ramona. Bend over, I implore you, and let down your drawers. Just imagine your upturned bottom with my magnificent manhood thrusting in and out of it."

"Favor someone else with your magnificent manhood, Padre," she replied. "I'm not interested."

Ramona, as the saying goes, had bigger fish to fry. The doctor had been at La Casa today, tending to her ladyship, who had taken to her bed with some imagined ailment. Ramona noticed she made a favorable impression on him when she carried a mustard footbath into the Signora's chamber, and hoped he would be waiting for her somewhere in the gardens.

Sure enough, as she walked through the beds of creamy lilies, she caught a glimpse of the doctor. He was skulking by the great sundial at the far end of the garden of the hours, hoping he was not visible from the house. He was sucking on a pipe and the smoke hung in a blue trail along the walk.

"Good evening, Doctor," said Ramona in a low voice.

He jumped, already feeling the guilt that was to mar his life. As he turned to face her, something inside him heaved. He fell to his knees and embraced her skirts. His sobs broke loudly. His yearning was so strong it had turned him inside out. He knew he was ruined. He would lose his wife and five children, his flourishing practice, his friends, his fine house in Santa Maria la Fossa. And yet he could not hold back.

Lifting the hem of Ramona's skirts, he kissed her stout boots, sobbing all the while, and then kissed her dirty stockings, all the way up her legs. Ramona was not accustomed to such preliminaries

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