

A *Jane Barnaby* ADVENTURE

Finders Keepers



J. J. DiBENEDETTO
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A Jane Barnaby ADVENTURE

*Finders
Keepers*

J. J. DiBENEDETTO

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jane writes home
(part one - welcome to Oxford)

August 30, 1990

Dear Daddy,

I'm sorry it's taken me so long to write, but I've been incredibly busy. Before I go any further, I want to thank you. First, for everything, because I wouldn't be anywhere without you. Second, for making me get on the plane even though I know it's driving you crazy to have me so far away. And third, for convincing me to come two weeks earlier than I would have if it had been left up to me.

Everyone has been very friendly and helpful, but despite that, there are so many things that are far more difficult than I imagined. For example, I spent all morning and part of the afternoon at the bank setting up my checking account. It would have taken a half-hour at most back home.

That's nothing compared to the paperwork I've had to fill out at the University. There's a form for absolutely everything, except possibly for going to the loo (I'm trying to use the British words. I'll never hide my accent and I don't want to anyway, but I think they appreciate me making the effort, vocabulary-wise).

Actually, there probably is a form for using the loo, which probably has to be filled out in triplicate, submitted to two different offices and signed in blood, and I just haven't run across it yet. But I have gotten a lot done. If nothing else, I'm definitely, officially, properly enrolled at Magdalen College, Oxford, so you can tell everyone back home about that!

It's beautiful here. As soon as I have a couple of rolls of film shot, I'll get them developed and send you pictures. Almost everything is so old here - there are parts of the campus where, if I didn't know better, I might think it was the year 1790 instead of 1990! You were right about the weather, though. It's been gray

and damp every day. It feels like November, and I guess that's one more thing I have to thank you for. I've been wearing my new raincoat every day!

I promise I'll write more often. How does twice a week sound? I'll tell you more about my dormitory, and the food, and the special form I have to fill out if I want to have wine with my dinner. Hopefully, by the next time I write, my advisor will be here, so I can tell you about him, too. Until then, I miss you and I'm thinking of you.

All my love,

Jane 



one

(it's pretty far, but it doesn't seem like it)

It was another cold, damp, uninviting day in Oxfordshire, but the young woman in the beige raincoat didn't pay the slightest attention to the miserable weather. She refused to call it "toffee-colored" despite what the label said; beige was beige! The coat was a shade or two lighter than her long light-brown hair, which whipped about in the wind as she knelt down, her hands raking through the dirt until they found what they sought.

Jane Barnaby picked up the small, smooth stone and examined it critically. It would do nicely, she decided. Now, she was ready. She stood up and made her way down to Addison's Walk, just as she'd done every day since she arrived at Oxford back in August. The gray sky didn't bother her at all; by now, Jane was used to not seeing the sun for days at a time. Honestly, this December morning wasn't noticeably different than her first morning here four months ago. Maybe it was a few degrees colder, but no more than that.

The Walk was still beautiful; it made no difference whether it was sunny or cloudy or pouring rain. In her right hand, Jane carried the small round stone that she'd just picked up from the ground outside Holywell House. This, too, she'd done every day since she arrived.

As she walked, Jane didn't feel the wind, cutting through her London Fog coat. She hadn't had the heart to tell her father that the raincoat he'd bought for her as a going-away gift wasn't actually a British product at all. And that wasn't the only thing she hadn't had the heart to tell him - three months here, two letters home a week, and she still hadn't mentioned her daily ritual.

But as she walked, that slipped from her mind, as did nearly everything else.

She wasn't thinking about the meeting she was headed for, or what it might portend. The only thing on her mind now was, as always when she trod this path, her mother. Jane carried on a conversation with her, telling her about everything and nothing.

Her mother had guided her here, not just to Oxford, but specifically to Magdalen College. Jane was certain of that. She knew it that very first day, when she'd been given a brief tour and history lesson by Olivia, one of the two Social Secretaries of the College. Olivia had led Jane along the beautiful Walk, explaining that it had been one of C.S. Lewis' favorite places when he'd been a Fellow here. The moment Jane heard that, she knew. It hadn't been random chance that landed her in this particular College, but her mother's hand.

"The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" was the very first "real" book Jane's mother had ever read to her and her brother. Closing her eyes, her feet moving unerringly along the Walk, Jane was transported back to her childhood bedroom. She saw herself taking the book from her mother's hands, and then slowly, haltingly, reading it back, her voice growing stronger and more confident with each word. Jane remembered the pride shining from her mother's eyes as she and then her brother in turn finished the last chapter and demanded that they start on "Prince Caspian" immediately.

Her mother would be proud of her now, Jane was certain of that. She opened her eyes and returned to the present, squeezing the stone in her fist as she rounded the northeast corner of the Walk, passing by the footbridge that led to the Bat Willow Meadow. It wasn't much farther, maybe fifty feet, to the elm tree. Angela's Tree, with a capital "T," as Jane thought of it now.

There was a pile of stones, carefully placed, right at the base of the old, gnarled tree. You could even call it a cairn, Jane decided, now that it was almost a foot high. She knelt down and placed the new stone just so, keeping the cairn perfectly stable and balanced. Then she made the sign of the cross and whispered, as she did every day, "I know you're with me, Mom. I love you."

Jane remained there, kneeling, a few minutes more, until the wind stilled for a moment. It always seemed to do that; Jane knew it was her mother reaching out to her, telling her it was time to continue on with her day. Jane stood, staring at the cairn for another moment, when she heard footsteps behind her.

She turned to see a fellow graduate student and resident of Holywell House, Melanie Harrington. Melanie wore only a hooded sweatshirt and didn't seem bothered by the cold and the wind and the damp; Jane had three layers on underneath her coat and, now she was done with her daily ritual, she could feel

the miserable weather in spite of all her clothing.

As Jane waited for Melanie to catch up with her, she realized her classmate had probably been standing back, watching her as she left the daily gift for her mother. She knew that her private ritual wasn't really private, that her fellows in the College sometimes saw her at it, and probably wondered what she was doing.

Melanie drew even with Jane and, smiling gently, asked, "How is your mother today?"

"She's very curious what Professor Welldon..." Jane was halfway through her answer before she properly registered what Melanie said. "How do you know about that?" It hadn't occurred to Jane that not only wasn't her ritual private, but in fact it was general public knowledge.

"Everyone knows, Jane," Melanie said, patting Jane's arm. "It's," she took a deep breath, "quite touching, really." The two women resumed walking. Melanie laughed gently and continued, "Professor Chary scolded a pair of undergraduates the other day about it. They were fooling around near your tree, and he told them to show the proper respect."

Jane blushed a deep red. Professor Chary was the President of the College! He knew about her mother, about her daily walk? "He called it '*my tree*'?"

"He did indeed," Melanie answered. "You know how it is here. We love our traditions, even if they are only three months old. Give it a year, and your tree will be a regular item on the walking tours of the grounds."

"Mom would like that," Jane said softly, more to herself than to Melanie. Maybe it was finally time to tell her father about it. Send him a picture of Angela's Tree, tell him about her daily walks and her conversations with Mom. Maybe it was well past time to have a long talk with her father about Mom, and about allowing himself to really live again.



Jane walked into the Middle Common Room and spotted Professor Welldon immediately. He was settled in a plush armchair, deeply engrossed in a book. She couldn't help but smile; her advisor was always "deeply engrossed" in whatever he happened to be doing at the moment. The man had more energy than anyone else Jane had ever met, and he was able to focus it like a laser beam on who or whatever was in front of him.

Jane went over and sat in the next chair, wondering how long it would take for Professor Welldon – she couldn't bring herself to call him Bill, no matter how often he asked – to notice her.

The answer was: until he reached the end of the chapter he was reading, about ten minutes. Her advisor put the book down and grinned at her. “Right on time!” Jane didn’t bother to point out that when she’d gotten here ten minutes ago, she was already ten minutes late; she’d learned the first week of term that Professor Welldon didn’t set much store by the clock.

“You wanted to talk to me, Professor?”

“Yes, indeed,” he said, his voice booming. He wasn’t big, really, but Jane had to keep reminding herself of that. He was hardly taller than she was, maybe an inch or two, if that. And he wasn’t heavy by any measure. But the way he carried himself - his aura, the sheer force of his personality - made him seem like a huge man, a bear. With a voice, and a laugh, to match. “I’ve got an assignment for you, if you’re willing.” Jane also had to remind herself that he’d been living here for the last twenty years; he hadn’t lost a bit of the Bronx accent that she was so familiar with. She had less of it than he did, and she’d only been over here for three months.

Jane wondered, not for the first time, if that was why Professor Welldon had taken her under his wing. Could it really be that simple – a shared hometown? Whatever the reason, Jane wasn’t about to question it; if her advisor liked her, and wanted to push her along, that was just fine by her.

“Yes, Professor. Whatever it is, yes, I’ll do it.” She’d have said that regardless of her feelings towards him, or his towards her. It was a universal truth for graduate students, whether here at Oxford or back in the United States: you don’t say no to your advisor.

His smile got even wider. “Wonderful! You can drive, I assume?”

“Of course,” Jane replied. Not well, as her father or any of her friends would attest, but Professor Welldon didn’t need to know that.

“You can drive a stick?”

“Of course,” she said again, even though she never had. How hard could it be?

“Perfect! I wouldn’t normally impose on a student for something like this,” he said. Jane didn’t react; it didn’t matter why he was asking, or what, precisely, he wanted her to do. “But my wife and I have to leave for Mallorca tomorrow, and the car won’t be delivered until Monday morning. I’d have my daughter do it, but Tali can’t get away. And I know I can trust you, Jane.”

He knew he could trust her. That was that, as far as Jane was concerned. She could learn to drive a stick “on the fly.” She could drive his car wherever it needed to go. “Thank you, Professor.”

“Would you please, for the love of God, call me Bill already? We’re not in

class.”

“Yes, Pro – Bill.” It was never going to sound right, but she’d try to retrain herself. “So where am I driving your car?”

“Nowhere very far.” His smile was as bright as the sun. “Just over to Spain.”

Jane lay on her stomach, stretched out on the bed and staring out at the gray sky and the damp grounds. It really was beautiful; she never tired of the view. But she forced herself to look away, turning her attention to the blank sheet of paper in front of her. “Dear Daddy,” she began.

Like most children, when Jane was very young, she’d called her father Daddy. Somewhere around her eighth birthday, she’d decided that was too immature and began calling him Dad. She’d started calling him Daddy again four years ago, when she first went away to college. Four years ago - or, in other words, three months after her mother’s car accident, and two weeks before her death.

Neither Jane nor her father had ever said a word about the change. It was a week or two before Jane even realized she was doing it, and once she did, she decided that it simply felt right. She could tell that he felt the same. Jane was fairly certain it wasn’t ever going to change back again; he would always be Daddy to her, for the rest of her life.

She lay there, staring at “Dear Daddy” and debating whether she should tell him about the daily walk and the Tree and everything else she wanted to say to him. He deserved to hear it, *needed* to hear it – but this wasn’t the right way. The things she had to say to her father had to be said in person.

He was going to visit her sometime in the spring. He hadn’t come out and said so, but his last few letters hinted at the prospect, with mentions of storing up vacation time and watching his budget. She’d tell him then. She could take him out to the Tree and tell him right there. He would feel Angela’s presence. He’d know his wife wasn’t truly gone, that she was looking after him just as surely as she looked after Jane.

That was definitely the right approach, Jane decided. With that dilemma out of the way, Jane spent an hour telling her father all about her upcoming trip. For the sake of his peace of mind, she left out a few details. He didn’t need to know that she was driving someone else’s brand new car nearly 1,400 miles. Or that she’d be travelling alone across three countries and two bodies of water. He’d only worry, and what was the point of that?

She did make sure to tell him what a big deal it was, and how she’d get to see all the dig sites on Mallorca first-hand. She pointed out that, in the past,

Professor Welldon usually took several students with him, but this time, he'd singled out Jane for the honor. She omitted the fact that it was usually summertime when her advisor brought students out to Mallorca, rather than over Christmas, and that the only reason he'd asked her was because there was no one else to bring the car over.

She finished by mentioning something that was 100% true: Professor Welldon was not only from the Bronx, as Jane and her father were, but from the very same neighborhood. The Professor had grown up less than half a mile from the house that Jane's father had been born in. Of course, Professor Welldon was thirteen years older than her father, and he'd joined the army when he was eighteen, so it was extraordinarily unlikely that the two men had ever crossed paths as children. And it was obviously impossible that either of them would remember if they had. Again, there seemed to be no point in mentioning that.

When she was satisfied that she'd said everything her father needed to know, and nothing he shouldn't, Jane wrote the date in the upper left-hand corner: December 11, 1990. Then she signed the letter, the way she always signed letters to family and to her closest friends - the way her mother had taught her back in kindergarten. Her friends back in college - and high school, for that matter - had laughed at her about it. They'd especially laughed about the little heart at the end, right above the "e" in her name. But her mother had been very definite about it, when she'd explained it to a confused but willing five-year-old Jane. "Anybody who sees that will know everything they need to about you." Jane hadn't questioned it then, or anytime since. If it was good enough for Mom, it was good enough for her, and it was definitely good enough for the rest of the world.

Jane folded the letter, stuffed it into the envelope she'd already addressed, and sealed it. She went to her desk and fished for another envelope; the thought of college reminded her that she had another letter to write.

"Dear Jess," she began, and proceeded to tell her best friend all the details about her upcoming trip that she'd left out of the letter to her father. As she wrote, she began to feel a nervous stirring in the pit of her stomach. When she got to the part about having to drive a stick shift 1,400 miles, when she'd never driven one before, period, the stirring became a rumbling. "I have to be out of my mind. I'm going to wreck his new car and kill myself!"

Jane put her pen down, and as she did so, she imagined Jess' response. She could almost hear her friend's clear, confident voice echoing through her tiny bedroom. *Since when did you ever chicken out on anything, Jane? Think of it a*

road trip, right?

“A road trip,” Jane muttered to herself. *Just like Niagara Falls! You remember, she could just about hear her college roommate say, laughing, us and Mark and Allan and Rita and Tishy. You drove the whole way and you never even got a speeding ticket!*

Jess was right. Jane had made that three and a half hour drive in just over two hours. “I can’t chicken out. I can do this,” she told herself, picking up her pen to finish the letter. “I can do this.”



“This place is a bloody maze!” Tom peered at each doorway in the semidarkness. This was not his job. He was no delivery boy; he was the assistant Print Room supervisor, for Heaven’s sake. Really, he should have been on his way home half an hour ago. But Alice over in the Ancient Egypt and Sudan collection was desperate, and Tom agreed to help, in hopes that a favor today might be repaid after the big Christmas do. To hear some of the other lads tell it, Alice was none too shy about expressing her gratitude.

“She’d better be worth it,” Tom muttered. He hadn’t counted on getting lost in the bowels of the Institute of Archaeology. But this had to be the right corridor. He checked Alice’s scribbled instruction again. “Sub-basement, room 16.” Or was it 18? Alice’s writing was not the neatest.

It was probably 16, he decided. And there it was. The door was ajar; Tom went in, flipped the light switch. There was a wooden table in the center of the room, just as Alice had said. Set it down there, she’d told him. The people from the British Museum will be by in the morning to collect it.

Tom set down the heavy gray box; it was about the size of a large toolbox, and it was closed with a secure-looking padlock. He hadn’t asked what was in it, but he assumed it must be valuable, if the British Museum wanted it. It seemed somewhat dodgy to just leave it here, in this open room, in the basement of a building anyone could walk into, but that’s what Alice wanted, so that’s what he did.



two

(what, me worry?)

The sky was still dark when Jane awoke just after seven o'clock. She assumed that it wouldn't lighten significantly as the day went on; it had been heavy and gray since the middle of last week.

It didn't strike her as a good omen. But, omen or not, the car would be arriving in two hours, and Professor Welldon was expecting her Thursday morning in Mallorca.

Before that, Jane had to take her daily walk with her mother; she threw on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, pulled her coat on over them, and went out, collecting a stone on her way down to Addison's Walk. Jane didn't linger as long as she usually did at Angela's Tree, but she was sure her mother understood; Mom wouldn't want her to keep the gentleman from the Land Rover dealership waiting.

"Melanie will visit you the next couple of weeks," Jane told her mother as she placed today's stone on the cairn. "You'll like her. I'm sure she'll have plenty to say to you. I'll be back after the New Year." Jane crossed herself, stood, and continued down the Walk, whispering, "I love you, Mom. Please wish me luck."

She returned to her room with barely half an hour to shower, dress and make one final search of her luggage and her purse to ensure she had everything packed.

Passport? Check. The ferry tickets and the £500 in traveller's checks Professor Welldon had given her for the trip? Check. The Professor's mail for the last week? Check. As far as Jane could tell, she wasn't missing anything, and if she was, she'd have to do without it. At one minute to nine, Jane dragged her bags

out into the hallway, locked her door and headed downstairs.

Sure enough, when Jane got outside, two cars were approaching up Jowett Walk. In the lead was a huge blue vehicle, followed by a similar, but much smaller car. She hoped the professor's new toy was not the massive blue one, staring with mounting dread at the massive "car" just now coming to a stop only a few feet away.

The smaller car parked right behind it, and both drivers emerged from their vehicles. They wore identical light blue polo shirts with the Land Rover logo emblazoned on them. The driver of the larger car, the younger and taller of the two, came straight up to Jane. He carried a clipboard, which he glanced down at before speaking. "Miss Barnaby?"

"That's me," Jane answered. The man handed her the clipboard.

"Initial the form on line three, line eight and line fourteen. And sign at the bottom, and again on page three." Of course there was a form. There was always a form, usually in triplicate, and sometimes there was a form just to request another form.

Jane initialed and signed as she was instructed. "Here you go," she said, handing the clipboard back. The man reviewed her initials and signatures and nodded. He pulled off the bottom sheet from the clipboard and handed it back to Jane.

"That's your acknowledgement." He led her over to the car – the larger one, of course. "You agree it's the correct model? Land Rover Discovery, Series I, five doors, chromatic blue exterior, sand interior?"

Professor Welldon hadn't actually told her any of that. He said it was a Land Rover; that was it. Jane just had to assume that he had actually ordered the five-door model in chromatic blue; if he hadn't, he was going to be in for a surprise on Thursday morning. "Yes, sir," Jane answered.

The man handed her a keyring. "Enjoy your vehicle, miss," he said, turning to leave with his fellow. They piled into the smaller car, and were gone a moment later. Jane was left behind with this insanely large vehicle that she really didn't know how to drive.

The hour of practice Jane had had Saturday in Melanie's brother's Jaguar had done nothing for her confidence in her ability to drive a stick. The poor man was in tears by the end of the session, thanks to the unnatural sounds Jane had coaxed out of the transmission in her attempts to master the art of shifting gears. Afterward, Melanie had laughed at her brother's reaction, "That was quite an accomplishment, Jane. You should be proud of yourself. No Harrington man has

cried in public for a hundred and thirty years, but a few laps around the car park and you drove him to tears.” Melanie’s comment did nothing to reassure Jane.

Staring at the pristine Land Rover, fresh off the lot, Jane folded the form she’d been given and stuffed it in her pocket. She guessed that the cost of the vehicle was noted there somewhere, and she had absolutely no desire to know what it was.

“I’m not getting anywhere just standing here,” Jane muttered, opening up the rear door and hauling her luggage into the car. With that done, she couldn’t think of any other excuse to delay the inevitable. She had to get behind the wheel and drive this beast. Jane saw her mother’s guiding hand everywhere here at Oxford; maybe this was her work, too. Her mother wouldn’t have put her here if she couldn’t handle this. Jane kept telling herself that as she climbed into the driver’s seat.

Shaking her head, laughing in spite of herself, Jane immediately got out and walked around to the other side. “So long as I don’t forget what side I should be driving on, I’ll be fine,” she said to herself, trying to make herself believe it.

Ten minutes later, still not believing it, Jane took a deep breath, inserted the key into the ignition, and hoped for the best.



It was not a pleasant ride, but Jane drove the two miles to the Institute of Archaeology without major incident, unless you counted stalling three times en route. Still, that was an improvement over how she’d done in the Jaguar over the weekend. And, once she got there, she took it as a good omen that there was a parking space on Beaumont Street, directly in front of the Institute.

This was the last stop before the real trip began. Professor Welldon had left a note in Jane’s mailbox. He needed her to collect a box of pottery shards that had to go back to Mallorca. It was in the sub-basement, so down Jane went. She navigated the corridors easily; she’d spent enough time down here the last three months.

The only question was, which room had the box been left in? The note specified that it would be a large gray box, and that it would be left in plain view. But, like punctuality, penmanship was not one of the Professor’s strong suits. Jane couldn’t tell if he’d written “16” or “18.”

The answer was provided for her. Poking her head in, she saw that there was no box, gray or otherwise, in plain view or anywhere else, in room 18. So room 16 it was, and, sure enough, sitting on a table was her package. It was closed with a heavy padlock, and there was no key to be found. Hopefully Professor

Welldon had one.

The box was surprisingly heavy; Jane didn't expect pottery shards to weigh so much, but she supposed that it was just the box itself, and not the contents. She struggled back up two flights of stairs and through the maze of corridors and finally made it to the car. She put the box in the back seat, slammed the door and got behind the wheel.

Jane sat there for a half hour. She read over Professor Welldon's hand-written directions several times. She pored over the maps. She checked and rechecked to make sure she had her traveler's checks and passport, in case they'd somehow spontaneously vanished. But finally, she couldn't delay any longer. She had no more excuses, no more reasons to delay. It was now, or never.



“In the name of all that's holy, turn that bloody alarm off!”

It took Tom five minutes to remember that he lived alone; there *was* no one else in his tiny flat to turn the bloody alarm off. It took him five more minutes of flailing around before he finally laid hands on the alarm clock, only to find that it was not, in fact, the source of that ungodly ringing.

The phone. Of course it was the bloody phone. Which was in the other bloody room. Tom summoned up the energy to swing his legs off the bed, and immediately regretted it. The room spun, and the contents of his stomach made their way halfway up his throat.

A little while later, and much more slowly, he tried again. By this time, Tom was fairly certain, the ringing in the other room had stopped. The ringing in his head, on the other hand, was still going strong.

One hour, two litres of water and four aspirin later, he felt that he was probably as capable as he was going to get today, and he steeled himself for the task of checking the answerphone. He had no idea who it could be. His brother was in Australia, his parents were in the Canary Islands, his sister hadn't called in three years, the Museum was closed today, just about all his friends had been at the big Christmas do last night and every one of them had to be at least as hungover as he was.

He pushed the play button and clapped his hands over his ears as Alice's voice screeched forth from the tiny speaker. How could such a loud, horrible sound come from such a small speaker? Tom heard none of what Alice had to say, so he rewound the tape, lowered the volume to what he hoped was a tolerable level, and played it again.

“Tom Barker, you great idiot! Where is that box? What did you do with it?”

Alice shrieked on, and Tom sat down on the floor, staring at the answerphone in utter confusion. What box? What did he have to do with anything? And how on God's green Earth did the woman expect him to answer intelligently after last night's party, which she hadn't even had the decency to attend?

As Tom wondered about all that, the phone began to ring again.

three

*(a long way to go and
a short time to get there)*

The trip was not off to an auspicious start. Jane did not like being on the wrong side of the car, driving on the wrong side of the road. The thought that once she crossed the Channel – assuming she made it that far – she'd be on the right side of the road again did not cheer her up. She suspected that being on the wrong side of the car, but the right side of the road, would be even more disconcerting.

She'd made it as far as Watlington Road without serious incident, but that's where the trouble began. Dr. Welldon's directions had seemed very clear when she'd read and re-read them back in her room at Holywell House, but in practice they were less so. Jane completely missed the ramp to get onto the M40 motorway. It had taken her ten miles to find a place to turn around, and a maddening half hour after that to get back on Watlington Road going the right direction.

She nearly missed the ramp the second time, too, and had to cut across three lanes of traffic to make it. At a guess, she came within three inches of losing the passenger-side mirror, and maybe a foot, if that, of hitting a delivery van broadside. Her heart rate didn't return to anything close to normal for twenty miles after that, just in time to try and exit the M40.

According to Dr. Welldon, the trip from Oxfordshire to Dover should take two hours, two and a half at the outside. Being careful, Jane had built in extra time. Her intention had been to leave by ten AM and give herself four hours to reach the port, and then an hour to figure out how to get the car aboard the boat. But that was already shot to hell; she didn't start until eleven thirty, and she'd lost nearly an hour missing the ramp onto the M40. She couldn't afford to fall further

behind, and that meant she couldn't miss Exit 1A.

Unfortunately, Jane was so busy thinking about how off schedule she'd gotten that she missed several signs indicating the approach of the exit. The first sign she actually saw told her that it was 250 feet away. And it was a right-hand exit. She was four lanes over to the left. Jane took a deep breath, muttered to herself, "Oh, God, I am an *idiot!*" and proceeded to cut off a taxi, a tour bus and what looked like a brand-new black Mercedes.

Jane only had a momentary glimpse into the Mercedes, but she was pretty sure she saw a Styrofoam cup fly out of the driver's hand and shower him with coffee. She felt guilty, but only for a fraction of a second, just long enough for her brain to register the *other* Mercedes – the one directly in front of her.

The one she nearly rear-ended at fifty miles an hour.

There wasn't enough space to stop, so Jane swerved onto the shoulder, passing the car on the right. She didn't start to breathe again for another mile. After that, things calmed down somewhat. She was able to get onto the M25 with very little trouble, and then it was forty miles of straight driving.

She allowed her mind to wander a bit. She wondered if her father had gotten her latest letter yet, and if he'd really spend Christmas with his next-door neighbor Mr. Parlato like she'd urged him to. Then she mentally checked in with her closest friends from college. Jess would be working – no holidays in the TV business, especially for interns. Tishy would be at a fancy resort, God only knew where, with her grandfather. Rita and Jake were probably arguing right this minute over whether to spend Christmas with her family or his. Allan was back in Minnesota, no doubt digging out from two feet of snow. And Mark – God, she wished he was here right now, in the passenger seat, joking with her, flirting with her, tickling her, keeping her mind off of how out of her depth she was on this trip.

And if she had told him she wanted him to come to England with me, he would be here right now. There was no doubt in her mind that he would have turned down that job in California if she'd asked. He'd more than hinted at it; he did everything short of hiring a plane to write it in the sky, Jane had to admit. And she'd been sorely tempted, especially after that last night, a week after graduation.

But she hadn't, and she wasn't even sure why.

She broke out of her reverie half a mile before the next exit she had to take, no closer to an answer. Plenty of time for her to get over with no trouble. Once she was safely on the next stage of the journey, zipping along the M26 motorway as

it turned into the M20, she took a quick glance at the directions. This was the longest stretch on this side of the English Channel – nearly an hour with no turns, no stopping, nothing to do except maintain a steady sixty miles an hour and keep in her lane.

Even at sixty, cars were passing her, but Jane had no desire to make this a race. It was a quarter to two; so long as nothing unexpected happened, she could still make the three-forty ferry. As the miles ticked by, Jane noticed the black Mercedes with the tinted windows behind her. She wondered idly if it was the same one she'd cut off a while back. If it was, though, the driver gave no indication. In his place, Jane didn't think she would be quite so forgiving. She might have ridden his bumper for a while, occasionally honking at him, just to make sure he got the point. But he – if it was the same driver – just kept a safe and constant three car-lengths distance behind her and otherwise drove like nothing had happened.

Maybe, she thought, she could learn something from him. But she quickly dismissed the idea. She stared out at the lack of scenery – this was a terribly boring drive, really. That was probably for the best, though – the last Jane needed while driving an unfamiliar car on the wrong side of the road was distraction.

The miles passed by, the black Mercedes keeping its distance precisely. It wasn't long before Jane put the other car out of her mind, as her destination neared and she had to think about directions again. Dr. Welldon said that it was "easy as pie" to navigate the port of Dover, but she'd learned early on that his idea of easy wasn't quite the same as hers.

To her extreme surprise, Jane made it from the M20 to the A20, and then through not one, not two but four roundabouts without incident. "Maybe I'm not such an idiot after all," she told herself as she turned off of North Camber Way onto South Camber Way. It was only another half a mile and one more turn after that, and she was there.

She checked the time: two fifty-five. Amazing! Jane followed the signs without any difficulty to the Travel Centre and found parking. The P & O Ferry counter was right in front of her – it couldn't be easier. Five minutes later, she had a tag to place in the window of the car and clear directions to drive to the loading dock. Five minutes after that, she was taking the key out of the ignition and making her way to the elevator that would take her up to the deck of the *Pride of Canterbury*.

Jane walked right past a black Mercedes on her way to the elevator, barely

paying it any notice. Was it the same car that had been behind her all this way? Maybe, maybe not. It wasn't such a big coincidence anyway; the driver was probably just taking a quick holiday in Paris. If he owned a Mercedes, surely a couple of days in Paris were no big deal for him. She put it completely out of her mind as she rode up the elevator, through a short hallway and then outside into the miserable English Channel weather.

She looked out at the waves, which seemed quite choppy. The ferry was rocking a little even now, tied securely to the pier. How rough would it be crossing the Channel? Jane's boating experience was limited to a two hour fishing trip from City Island when she was ten years old, and canoeing during summer camp from third through sixth grade. She'd never been out on the water in bad conditions, and overhearing one of the ferry's crew refer to the churning, turbulent water as being "smooth as glass today, innit?" did nothing to calm her nerves.

There was a map of the ferry, and Jane noted several places to eat and drink. If she didn't have to get behind the wheel as soon as I'm off the boat in France, she would have had a glass of wine...or five. But even without that worry, she wasn't at all confident that she could keep wine – or anything else – down, if the ferry was bobbing up and down like crazy.

As the departure time approached, the deck became progressively more crowded despite the biting wind and spraying sea. Jane stared out into the Channel, losing herself in the rolling waves. She didn't hear the footsteps approaching her; it wasn't until the man approaching her was well within her personal space that she felt his presence looming behind her.

She turned, startled, and looked up. He had to be at least six feet tall, maybe six-one or six-two, Jane guessed, clean-shaven, with dark hair cut quite short. And a strong chin – a very strong chin. "ello, Miss. Enjoying the lovely weather?" She heard the slightest hint of a lilt to his voice. Irish? She was just starting to feel confident in her ability to differentiate the many varieties of English accent with some measure of accuracy, but she wasn't willing to risk annoying a complete stranger. Especially a potentially friendly one...with such a strong chin.

"I'm not sure 'enjoying' is the right word," she replied with a hopefully casual grin. To her own ears, her words didn't have quite the breezy tone she was shooting for. Her flirting muscles were obviously weak from lack of use. All she could think was that Dr. Welldon would be so disappointed in her, and that thought brought a genuine smile to her lips. After all, her advisor had been trying

to set her up with someone for the last month and a half.

They'd been in the Middle Common Room, her advisor just finishing an impromptu lecture on Bronze Age smelting techniques. Dr. Welldon pointed to three men sitting across the room in plush armchairs, each nursing a pint of what had to be Guinness. "Good men, all three of them," he'd told Jane in a fatherly tone. "And I can't speak for your taste, but they all seem handsome enough. I've got the lot of them in my Introduction to Fieldwork course. You pick one, and if he doesn't show you a good time, I'll flunk him."

By that time, there was very little her advisor could say to shock her; attempted matchmaking barely got a reaction. She remembered the three men clearly, and her reactions to them. "Those three? Thomas?" the one on the left, with the scrawny arms, "Have you seen him out on the river? You want to set me up with him?"

"What about Richard?" The one in the middle, sporting a mustache that was never going to come in properly.

"He's got a girlfriend," Jane said, rolling her eyes, "four of them, in fact."

Dr. Welldon shrugged apologetically. She had to hand it to him, Jane had thought. He never gave up. "And what's wrong with Henry?" There was nothing wrong with Henry. Not a thing. Except for his unfortunate resemblance to Jane's twin brother. Jane didn't answer Dr. Welldon; she merely dug into her wallet and pulled out a picture of George. Her advisor looked at it, and for a moment – it had been the first time she'd seen this expression on the man's face – he was genuinely confused. "You've already got a picture of him?"

Jane had laughed, loud enough to turn every head in the MCR. "That's not him, professor. That's my brother."

Comprehension dawned on Dr. Welldon's face. "Yes. Well. That could be awkward for you." Then he'd patted her arm and smiled his gentle smile, so much like her father's. "I'm not giving up. You're a beautiful girl, Jane. I'll find someone for you yet, unless you take some responsibility and do it for yourself."

Jane shook her head and fixed her thoughts back on the present, and on the handsome – no, *very* handsome – man standing next to her. He asked, "American?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm just..." she caught herself; she was about to tell this man, whom she knew not at all, every one of her personal details. Dr. Welldon was right – she clearly had been single too long if she was ready to spill all my secrets to someone she didn't even know! She took a deep breath and continued, "I'm just taking a quick trip to France. Maybe do some Christmas shopping in

Paris,” she said, a little too quickly. She hoped he wouldn’t notice.

“Lovely place for it,” he answered her smoothly. “I’ve business there myself.” Too smoothly. He was a professional, Jane decided, not really sure where that thought came from, or what, exactly, he might be a professional at. Still, concentrating on his voice was a pleasant distraction from the unpleasant way her stomach was behaving.

“Really?” Jane didn’t trust herself to say anything more.

“You know what they say,” he smiled. “No rest for the wicked.” Oh, that smile! If his business was charming the socks off of American graduate students with shredded nerves and incipient seasickness, Jane thought, he must be a millionaire. She pushed that thought away, trying to look at the man objectively. He had to be in his twenties – older than her, surely, but not *that* much older. What could his business be? A salesman, maybe? He had the personality for it, no question.

“What kind of business?” Jane tried to keep her voice level, not show how much he was getting to her without even seeming to try. She wasn’t sure she managed it.

“Art,” he said, and Jane’s interest in the man increased, if that was possible. “I work at the Saatchi Gallery.” She hadn’t been yet, and modern art wasn’t really her thing, but she knew about the Saatchi, and how prestigious it was. Obviously this man wasn’t just gorgeous, with a killer voice and charm to spare – he had real talent and serious brains going for him as well.

He was too good to be true. But was he really? Jane immediately dismissed the idea. Why shouldn’t he be exactly what he seemed? The Saatchi Gallery was hardly the kind of name you’d drop as a pickup line, and he had no way to know she was studying at Oxford and was the rare exception who *would* be impressed by it. She let him tell her all about his assignment, to try and obtain a series of photographs to complete an exhibit that was opening next month. She let him walk her below, to a café, and buy her a soda just as the ferry cast off from the pier, pushing out into the Channel. “No coffee. I need something to calm my stomach,” she explained.

She let him put a gentle yet somehow possessive hand on the small of her back as he guided her to a lounge where they could look out at the sea in dry, climate-controlled comfort. She gave him her name then, with her best version of a coy smile. “Jane Barnaby,” she said, extending her right hand.

“Alex Coggin,” he replied, taking her hand and kissing it. Jane grabbed the arm of her seat with her left hand and gripped tightly to keep from swooning at

Alex's gesture. Too good to be true or not, she was about three heartbeats away from standing up, grabbing Alex's hand, leading him down to the Land Rover parked belowdecks and having her way with him.

The Land Rover...crap! She caught herself before those words spilled out of her mouth, but they were echoing back and forth in her head.

Jane stood suddenly, all thoughts of passion in the back seat cast away. "Excuse me. I have to go, right now. I don't think I locked the car." Alex grabbed her arm and she pulled it away from him. "It's not my car, I have to go and check. Wait here. Please, I'll be back in five minutes," she said, forcing herself not to turn her head, not to get caught in his entrancing gaze. She set off for the elevator, making herself walk as quickly as she could and not daring to turn back.

She stepped off the elevator and headed straight for zone B-2, space number twelve. It was still there. Of course it was. Jane shook her head at the absurdity of her fears. Even if someone wanted to steal the car, it wasn't as though they could drive it anywhere. But someone could break in, vandalize the car, or – the New Yorker in her poked its head up – steal the radio.

She was only a few feet away, walking through the cavernous, dimly-lit parking level, when the ferry lurched and she lost her footing. She uttered a curse and then, an instant later heard another. An echo. It had to be an echo. And so were the footsteps she heard coming from – she thought – ahead of her. Her own footsteps, echoing back to her at odd angles in this huge space.

And there was the car. Dr. Welldon's brand new Land Rover Discovery, Series I, five doors, chromatic blue exterior. She *had* locked the car, she could see that at a glance but Jane walked around and tested all five doors, just to be sure. All locked, all safe. The windows were all unbroken, her luggage and Dr. Welldon's box of pottery shards were all safe in the back. She could go back up and continue what she hoped she'd started with Alex. There was absolutely nothing to worry about down here. Not a thing.



"Eighteen! That is an eight! Can you not read?"

Tom didn't answer; there seemed little point. Alice was more interested in berating him than in hearing anything he had to say. At any rate, what *was* there to say? He thought he was meant to leave the box in room 16, but he'd really been meant to leave it in room 18. And when the man from the British Museum had come, he'd found no box in room 18 – or room 16.

"Perhaps you can read this, then," Alice continued, shoving a paper into his

hand. Some women became more attractive when they were angry, Tom mused, not looking at what he'd just been handed. Alice was decidedly not one of them.

She tapped her foot impatiently and Tom held the paper up. The first thing that caught his eye was a figure: £6,500,000. He blinked, shook his head and looked again. The number did not change.

“You understand now? The money is the least of it, you - you bloody fool!” Tom imagined that much stronger words were going through Alice's mind. “Those items are irreplaceable! You think we can just go to the market and purchase more Third Dynasty relics?”

Tom understood. He understood that he was going to be out on his arse and on the dole shortly, and that not just Alice but likely half her office would be joining him. He began to say “I'm sorry” but caught himself. Not only was it wholly inadequate, but it would probably get him slapped. Or worse; the letter opener on Alice's desk appeared to be quite sharp, and her hand was edging ever nearer to it.

“I've managed to put them off,” Alice said, trying vainly to control her anger. “I've bought us three days. That's how long you've got to find those items and have them back here.”

“Me?”

Alice's hand was no more than an inch from the letter opener now. “Even you are not that stupid,” she said with exaggerated patience. “Yes, you. Who else? Now get over to the Institute of Archaeology. You can start by talking to security over there. I don't care how you do it, but find that box and have it back here by Friday. Do you understand me?”

Her hand was on the letter opener now. Tom understood her, very clearly.



four
(a three hour tour)

Jane returned to the café, the deck rolling beneath her with every step. She focused on the thought of Alex – Alex and his strong chin, piercing gaze and entrancing voice – to keep her mind off of the nasty things her stomach was threatening to do. It worked; she made it to the café without incident, but when she stepped inside, there was no sign of the man.

She debated whether to buy for herself the soda he'd promised her. Under normal circumstances, it almost always worked to calm her stomach, but this was far from normal. The rain pelting against the windows was not helping, nor was Alex's absence.

The fact that his absence was bothering her, also bothered Jane. She'd known the man for fifteen minutes; how could she be missing him? He was handsome – hot, really, she admitted to herself – but she'd never been one to let her hormones make decisions for her. Except for one time, right after final exams were over, with Mark...

The thought of Mark Bainbridge was like a bucket of ice-water poured on her newfound feelings for the charming stranger with the strong chin who had disappeared on her. It had taken four years for Jane to let Mark into her bed; she wasn't going to let herself lose her mind over this guy, no matter how sexy his accent was.

With that settled, Jane decided that she would risk a soda. It didn't seem to be doing much good, though; the ferry continued to roll, and Jane's guts were rolling right along with it. The only thing that helped, to her surprise, was going back to the window. She supposed that watching the crashing waves helped her

brain to reconcile the motion she was feeling with what she was seeing. But it didn't help *that* much; she was still gripping the railing below the window tightly with both hands.

While she looked at the frothing water beating against the ferry and slowly lost feeling in her hands, Jane cast her thoughts towards the next stage of her journey. She hoped that this miserable weather would confine itself to the English Channel; the idea of being accompanied by high winds and driving rain as she attempted to navigate unfamiliar French roads was not a happy one.

Every two minutes or so, she firmly reminded herself that she would be driving on the right side once she was off of the ferry. She was afraid that she might, however briefly, get confused, which would probably put a quick and permanent halt to her trip – not to mention her life.

Something else about the car was bothering Jane; it had been fine when she checked on it, but...what? She couldn't put her finger on it, but when she'd been down belowdecks – she'd heard that echo. Was that really all it was? It had sounded quite a bit deeper than her voice, now that she really thought about it. On the other hand, it was a huge space and that was bound to do strange things to the sounds she heard.

Still, it couldn't hurt to check again, just to be safe; it wasn't as though she had anything better to do at the moment. So off she went, out of the café, down three corridors to the elevator and then down. Five minutes later, she was reassured; the car was still in one piece; all her luggage and Dr. Welldon's box were still in the back, and there was clearly nothing at all to worry about.

As she headed back towards the elevator, she had to laugh at herself. Panicking over echoes and shadows? It was ridiculous, really. She shook her head, amused at her overreaction – and walked straight into someone.

It was Alex – of course it was. Who else could it possibly be? Jane felt his arms wrap around her, holding her up. She found herself looking into his face from a distance of maybe six inches. That really was some chin he had, but it was, for a moment, accompanied by a flash of annoyance in his eyes. But that quickly replaced by an amused glint. She tried to think of something, anything to say that wouldn't be completely embarrassing. She failed.

“Not that I mind having you in my arms,” he said, filling the silence, “but you really should watch out. You could hurt yourself.”

“At least it was only my pride this time,” Jane said, forcing a laugh. She had her feet back under her now, and, after a few more seconds he loosened his grip on her. She wasn't at all sure how she felt about that. “You weren't in the café. I

had to buy my own soda,” she went on, in what she already knew was a futile effort to reestablish her dignity.

“Perhaps I can make it up to you in Paris,” he replied. Jane felt her stomach do something uncomfortable, and this time it had nothing whatsoever to do with the motion of the ferry. “We’re both headed there, are we not? Do you think you could allow me to buy you dinner?”

Jane tried to say both “Yes!” and “No” at the same time, and managed an unintelligible sound that brought a devilish grin to Alex’s lips. Not his lips! That was the absolutely last thing she should be thinking about.

“I didn’t quite catch that,” he said, that grin still there and becoming even more devilish, if that were possible.

Jane struggled to regain control of herself. “I – uh – I don’t know,” she said, her voice trailing off weakly. What was the problem? She had to eat, after all. It couldn’t do any harm, could it? And yet, she could not bring herself to agree. “It’ll be awfully late by the time we – uh, I get to Paris.”

Alex had an immediate answer. “I’m sure a woman as cosmopolitan as you knows that it’s a European custom to dine late. When in Rome, as they say...”

According to her plan, Jane would hit the outskirts of Paris sometime after eleven PM. Even for a cosmopolitan European, that was very late for dinner. And dining at that hour suggested the possibility that dessert might not be served at the restaurant, but in her hotel room.

No! Don’t go there!

Jane shouted at herself, but she was facing a full-blown rebellion led by her hormones and aided by traitorous elements all throughout her usually obedient mind. “How about lunch tomorrow?” That was a good counteroffer. She’d have a long drive to clear her head, and a good night’s sleep to work out all the disloyal impulses that were urging her to just give in to Alex already. With a rational and well-rested mind, she would start back on her journey first thing in the morning. She’d leave Alex a regretful message, and perhaps include some contact information.

When the trip was over and she was back at Oxford, she could try to dig up some information on him; surely there was someone at Magdalen College who had a contact at the Saatchi Gallery to give her whatever dirt there might be on Alex. *Then*, depending on what came out, she might have dinner with him. That was a good plan. A great plan, really.

Then Alex asked, “What about breakfast?”

Jane sighed. What was the quote her old European History professor liked to

use? No battle plan survives contact with the enemy? Something like that. But she could still work with that. She'd just have to make sure she was up and out at the crack of dawn.

"I guess so," she said, failing to inject any confidence at all into her voice. What *was* it about him? He wasn't *that* handsome, or at least, that's what Jane tried to tell herself. "Tell me where you're staying, and I'll call you first thing in the morning." That much was true, anyway.

"With a friend," Alex said. Jane felt his arm around her waist, wondering when he'd put it there, and how she'd failed to notice it. She'd also failed to notice that he'd walked her all the way back upstairs to the café. "You've got some color back. I think you're getting your sea legs," he told her. Now that was a lie, but Jane couldn't help being impressed at the way he told it, with such a perfectly straight face, as though he honestly believed it.

Jane tried to rally herself. "A friend?" It came out almost as teasingly as she'd intended it to. "Should I be jealous?" In response, he pulled her closer, and she couldn't pretend that it didn't feel good.

"That depends," he said, and if his grin before was devilish, Jane needed a new word to describe the one he wore now. "Jean-Louis has quite the liquor cabinet, but – forgive me – most Americans I've met don't have the taste to appreciate it properly. If you're one of the exceptions, you ought to be very jealous indeed."

Jane wasn't sure whether to be offended or amused. She felt that she ought to stick up for her country, but the fact was, Alex was right. When it came to alcohol, she was more used to quantity than quality; back in college her budget didn't really allow for anything else. "I hate to admit it, but my education is a little bit lacking, when it comes to the finer things in life," she said, with what she hoped was a winning smile.

"I'd be happy to begin the process of remedying that," Alex responded, pulling her still closer. Jane felt herself weakening; if she didn't get away from him, soon, she'd be kissing him, and once that happened, she knew, any hope of saying no to anything else he might do would be gone.

"I wouldn't want to impose," Jane said, her voice weak. As she spoke, the ferry pitched violently. It was only Alex's very firm hold that kept her on her feet. The soda in her left hand, however, did not stay where it was supposed to. The cup went flying, and Jane watched it rising as though it were in slow motion; she imagined she could see every individual drop of Coca-Cola spill out in mid-air. And then the cup hit Alex, right in the forehead, and the rest of the soda splashed all over him. Jane took the opportunity to pull away from him and

grab hold of the railing for support.

For an instant – just as it had belowdecks – emotion flashed across his face before he got control of himself. This time, however, it was not mere annoyance but straight-up anger. It was gone as quickly as it appeared, but Jane could not mistake what she'd seen. "I'll buy you another one," Alex said, all charm again, as though nothing had happened. "Just give me a moment to clean up."

Before he turned to head for the bathroom, he gave Jane a look that, had she not seen his anger a moment ago, would have kept her rooted to the spot awaiting his return breathlessly. But she was not rooted, and the moment he disappeared into the bathroom, she made her disappearance from the café.

There were four passenger lounges; surely he would come looking for her in one of them, but the only other options were to keep moving constantly, or to go back down to the parking level, so Jane selected the starboard lounge on the next deck up. Once she got there, she positioned herself in the middle of a row of empty seats with a perfect view of the door she'd just come through.

Jane wasn't honestly sure why she wanted to avoid Alex. Yes, he'd been angry, but wouldn't she be angry if someone had – accidentally, but still – thrown Coca-Cola in her face?

Was it an accident in the first place, though? Her brother – who'd taken exactly one psychology class in college – loved to insist that "like Freud said, there *are* no accidents." In this case – loath though she was to admit that George was ever right, about anything – he might well have a point. She was nervous; she had wanted to get away from Alex before she crossed the point of no return. What better way than throwing a drink on him?

She couldn't be certain, and she had no desire to delve too deeply into her psyche to be sure. Rather than dwell on it, she kept a constant watch on the door while going over the next stage of her journey. By the time she was satisfied beyond any question that she knew the route from Calais to Paris cold, an hour had passed and – in theory – the ferry would be making port in only a few minutes.



Tom started at the Institute of Archaeology, just as Alice had ordered. If he hadn't been in fear of both his job and his life, he might have found the whole thing amusing. He was sent from office to office in search of someone who might know something about the artifacts that he'd mistakenly placed in room 16.

After three hours, he was able to establish that an identical box to the one he'd

been entrusted with had been in room 18. That box contained pottery shards; valuable to the man who'd dug them up, but not particularly remarkable to anyone else. He'd further learned that a girl from Oxford, a student of the archaeologist to whom the shards belonged, had come to collect them and deliver them to her professor.

It was clear at that point what must have happened: someone had stolen the pottery shards, believing that they were Alice's priceless Third Dynasty relics. Then the girl had shown up and taken the relics, believing them to be simple, near-worthless pottery.

He'd learned the name of the girl, and where she might be found at the University. She was in Magdalen College, living in the Holywell House dormitory. Tom's luck did not hold, however; she was not in her room, or anywhere else in the building. Which left him at a dead end.

Standing there in the lobby of Holywell House, Tom sighed deeply. The College was quite large, and the girl could be absolutely anywhere. If she were even on the grounds at all. Despairing at the prospect of a building-to-building search, Tom didn't notice for a good five minutes that a young woman was staring impatiently at him.

"Excuse me, sir," she said. "Do you have business here?"

"I was looking for a Miss Barnaby. Professor Grigsbody at the Institute of Archaeology said I could find her here."

"She's not here," the woman answered, softening slightly. "But," she seemed on the verge of revealing something, and then caught herself. Tom held back from swearing under his breath, but it was a close thing. "But you didn't say who you were."

"Tom Addison. I'm with the Bodleian Library. I was told Miss Barnaby could help me with a problem we're having." He showed his ID, and at the sight of it, the woman relaxed again, and this time stayed relaxed.

"I don't know where she is, but if anyone does, it'll be Melanie." Two minutes later he was armed with a description of Melanie Harrington, friend of the elusive Miss Barnaby, and several guesses as to her current whereabouts in descending order of likelihood.

The way his luck had been running, Tom considered, he might as well start at the bottom and work his way back up. Which turned out to be the correct choice: Tom found Melanie only a few minutes later, halfway down Addison's Walk, standing out in the cold and wet. She was a pretty one, to be sure: tall, blonde, and as his brother liked to say, "old enough to know better, young enough not to

care.” Tom had to close his eyes, shake his head and look again to convince himself that he was seeing what he thought he was: the girl was standing there, calm and collected as you like, and she was talking to a tree.



five

(I see London, I see France...)

Jane had been sitting in the starboard passenger lounge, eyes fixed on the door, for nearly an hour. The ferry should have docked at least thirty minutes ago; she assumed it was the choppy seas that were drawing the process out.

She hadn't moved the entire time, and while the door had opened and closed several times, there was no sign of Alex. Either he had given up on his pursuit of her, or he wasn't nearly as proficient at the hunt as Jane would have guessed.

No, she decided. If there was one thing Alex would be good at, it was hunting. If he had wanted to find her, he would have. Which meant he wasn't coming after her. That was good, wasn't it?

Why didn't she feel good about it, then?

It was those same traitorous elements in her mind – and elsewhere – that had been urging her to throw caution to the winds an hour ago. The rebellion within Jane had not, she realized, been quelled, but only postponed. The best way – the only way she could think of – to keep it postponed, was to occupy herself.

She stood, somewhat unsteadily, and – very slowly – made her way to the door, down the corridor and then to the elevator. She would wait out the final few minutes of the trip in her car, and she'd be one of the first to drive out once the ferry was safely docked and the all-clear given.

The ferry continued to rock gently – and, occasionally, not-so-gently – as Jane made her way down to Zone B-2, space number twelve. The Land Rover was still there, still undisturbed. Professor Welldon's box was still safely locked away in the back. Jane couldn't say why she feared otherwise. The car was new, but it wasn't as though anyone could drive it off until the ferry docked. And, at any

rate, there were much more expensive cars all around – just from her vantage point, she could see three Mercedes, two BMWs and a Jaguar.

They could be trying to steal the box, but that was ridiculous. Who would bother stealing pottery shards? Granted, to Professor Welldon they were priceless, but they'd be almost worthless to anyone else, other than possibly a rival scholar in the very narrow specialty of European Copper Age archaeology.

She was being irrational. There was no reason to worry. But she unlocked the car, got inside and locked the doors again anyway. Jane waited, busying herself with the directions from Calais to Barcelona. As ten minutes turned to twenty, and then thirty, it occurred to her that she had no idea what to expect, as far as an indication that the ferry was docked.

The indication turned out to be three blasts of a horn, loud enough to rattle the windows of the Land Rover, followed by an announcement first in French and then in English. The words echoed weirdly across the parking deck; Jane had to concentrate to understand them. "Disembarkation will commence in six minutes. Drivers are reminded not to start their engines until the green 'All Clear' lights are activated on the parking levels."

Jane pulled her hand back from the ignition. She must have taken the key out of her purse unconsciously; she didn't recall deciding to do it. She looked up at herself in the rearview mirror and asked the nervous, almost unfamiliar woman staring back at her, "What is wrong with you?" She waited, as though expecting an answer. She was almost surprised not to hear one. "A hot guy puts the moves on you, and you completely lose your mind? Seriously?"

The woman in the mirror didn't answer, but Jane had to admit that, yes, she did indeed seem to have lost her mind. What other explanation was there? But if she'd lost it, surely she could find it again. So what if she was in a foreign country, driving a brand new and totally unfamiliar car halfway across Europe? So what if Alex was impossibly handsome and unspeakably sexy and wanted to take her out for dinner, dessert and breakfast in Paris? So what if her entire professional future might hinge on how well she handled herself over the next few days?

To heck with all of that. She was smart, and resourceful and ready to take on anything the world could throw at her. Right?

"Damn right," Jane muttered, just as the green lights switched on all across the parking deck.

She heard the echoes of rumbling engines all around her; clearly she wasn't the only one who'd come down to their car early, ready to go the moment the

doors were opened. She turned her key and the Land Rover roared to life. Clearly, it was as ready as she was to get off of the ferry.

It took forty minutes for Jane to emerge from the parking deck and out onto French soil. While most of her fellow drivers waited patiently, there were a few attempts to cut into the line of departing cars. Back home, the offending drivers would have been lucky to get away with a chorus of horns and a torrent of curses. But apparently European drivers were more restrained, and limited themselves to disapproving stares at their impatient fellows.

Jane wasn't tempted to try it herself. Back home, she might have, especially in her own car, on streets she knew intimately. Here, she just waited her turn, driving out into the rain at 7:15 PM according to the clock in the dashboard. Or was it an hour later? Was she now in a different time zone?

She got her answer a few minutes later, at the passport control booth. While the officer checked her papers, she glanced over his shoulder to see that the clock read 8:25 – she'd lost an hour. It didn't matter, she supposed. She was on a schedule, but it wasn't exactly strict. If she arrived in Mallorca an hour or two late, she doubted Professor Welldon would much care.

“All is well, Mademoiselle,” the young man in the booth said, finally. “Enjoy your visit to France.”

She took back the passport from his outstretched hand. “*Merci*,” she answered, exhausting her knowledge of French vocabulary. It earned her a smile, at least. Hopefully that was a good omen for the trip ahead.

Jane rolled up the window and took a deep breath. This next stretch, she knew, would be tricky. According to the directions, there were several roundabouts to navigate before she would get to Route A16, which would get her moving towards Paris.

Driving on the right side of the road, but also on the right side of the car, was not making her task any easier. She'd been worried about that, and it felt even stranger than she'd feared. She was so focused on making sure she remained on the correct side of the road that she nearly missed her exit out of the first roundabout.

Jane cut across two lanes, and cut off a black car – possibly another Mercedes, although she didn't get a good enough look that she would swear to it. She didn't do any better at the next roundabout. By the time she finally exited the last one and – thank God! – saw the sign for *Autoroute des Estuaires*, her hands were white and bloodless from gripping the steering wheel so tightly.

Now she had a little time to relax; it was a straight shot for fifteen miles,

before she had to merge onto another highway, the A26. It was too dark to really make out much of the countryside, and she knew her father would be disappointed in that. He had asked her to take some pictures, if she had the chance, of the territory *his* father had marched through during World War II. But even if she had the time to spare and had her camera handy, there wasn't much of anything to see.

As she drove, she tried to imagine Grandpa Tommy, dirty and tired, a heavy pack on his back, trudging along the side of the road. He would have been keeping an eye peeled for the Germans, expecting an ambush waiting for his squad that might come anytime.

And here she was worrying about driving on the wrong side of the road. That was absurd, wasn't it? What did she have, really, to worry about? Her grandfather would have laughed at her fears.

Maybe he was, right now. Maybe he was watching over her right alongside her mother, shaking his head at how nervous she was.

"I bet he is, too," Jane muttered. She had to shake herself up, and while she wondered how she might do that, she noticed her hand, of its own accord, reaching for the radio. She let it go, and was immediately rewarded with a blast of static. She took a deep breath and looked away from the road for a moment, to glance down and see where the controls to adjust the station were.

After some trial and error, she managed to tune in something that sounded halfway decent. She couldn't make heads or tails of the lyrics, but the tune was catchy enough. And so were the next two; apparently she'd found northwestern France's version of top-forty radio.

The miles – kilometers, she corrected herself – went by swiftly, now that she had musical accompaniment. She merged onto the *Autoroute des Anglais* without difficulty, just as a song ended and the host came on. Jane wondered what he was saying. She also wondered if he even was a "he" – the host talked so fast and with such a high-pitched voice that she couldn't be sure whether it was a man or a woman.

It didn't matter, really. Just hearing another human voice was enough for Jane to relax and – almost – enjoy the drive. The traffic was light, and the rain had stopped. She was cruising along at eighty miles an hour, and she was just keeping up with the other cars on the road. She didn't have to worry about any more navigation for almost an hour.

When she got to that point, though, she had a decision to make. It would be close to ten o'clock by the time she reached the on-ramp to route E15, the road

that would take her to, and through, Paris. She had a reservation at a hotel just west of Orly Airport – not that she had a good mental picture of what that meant, of course. But the directions were clear enough, Jane didn't think she'd have too much trouble finding it. And they already knew she wouldn't be arriving until very late.

But she suddenly wasn't sure about that plan. She could stop for the night before she got onto the E15. Surely there'd be a hotel or motel with a vacancy, and she could pack it in early. She'd also be guaranteed of not running into Alex. It seemed absurd to think that she might encounter him purely by chance if she pressed on towards Paris, but what if it happened anyway? She wasn't at all sure she could refuse him if he somehow found her and repeated his offer of a late-night dinner.

What would Jess say about that? She could hear her best friend's words as clearly as though she was actually in the car: "Get it together, Barnaby!"

And she'd be right, too. Letting herself be rattled by the one-in-a million possibility that a good-looking guy might find her in a foreign city and put the moves on her? No.

If nothing else, Jane would never live it down if Jess found out. And she knew herself well enough to know she couldn't keep that kind of secret from her best friend. That decided the matter: Paris it was.



"This is more than my job's worth," Tom muttered, staring out at the dim lights of the French coast. The ferry bucked and rolled underneath him, and he wasn't sure how he was managing to keep his early supper in his stomach.

He tried to remember his grandfather's words, something about being born to the sea, an Englishman's birthright, some or other rot like that. He doubted, even if he could remember the correct words, that they'd help at all. He did not want to be on this ferry. He did not want to go to France. He did not want to chase down some dotty American student across the length and breadth of Frog-land.

But the sad the truth was, this miserable task was not more than his job was worth.

The lights slowly grew brighter; it was probably only another half-hour or so until the ferry docked. He was probably only an hour behind the girl, and, really, that wasn't so bad. He knew which hotel the girl was going to stop at; her friend Melanie had been quite forthcoming once he'd explained everything.

Surely the girl would be reasonable. Why wouldn't she be? The relics didn't belong to her professor, after all. Surely she would hand the box over without

any trouble, and he could head back home, head held high.
What could possibly go wrong?



jane writes home
(part two - Jane the matchmaker)

September 28, 1990

Dear Cassie,

I probably shouldn't be writing this letter. I know that what I'm going to say is absolutely none of my business, and I've got no right to ask you what I'm going to ask you. But I'm doing it anyway, because I know I'm right.

Life here at Oxford is wonderful, so far. Everyone here at Magdalen College has been very friendly. I love my advisor. I'm keeping up with my studies (although the stack of unread books in my room is getting alarmingly high). The only thing that isn't so great is that I miss my father – and he won't say it, because he doesn't want to make me feel bad, but I know he's very lonely.

That's where you come in. Like I said, it's none of my business. But I saw the way you looked at him, the last few times we came to the restaurant. I know you like him. I also know he hasn't given you any sign that he likes you.

So here's the thing I don't have the right to ask you. Let him know how you feel. And give him the time to get used to the idea. You know that my mother died four years ago. I'm not sure you know that he's still not over it. Or that even the idea he could have feelings for another woman makes him feel like he's cheating on my mother. He's never said that directly, but I can see it – it's very clear to me.

I'm going to talk to him about it. I'm still working up the courage myself. I'm sure you can imagine – it's not exactly an easy subject to bring up. But it's long past time for him to start living again. My mother would want him to. She wouldn't want him to be lonely for the rest of his life. And you'd be perfect for him, if you don't mind me saying so.

I hope I'm not too out of line. I know this is the kind of thing that I should be saying to you in person, ideally over a plate of your shrimp dumplings with Special Brown Sauce and a nice bottle of wine, but for the moment, this letter will have to do.

Think about it. Please?

Jane 



six

*(what's a nice girl like you doing
in a place like this?)*

Professor Welldon's directions had been surprisingly easy to follow. Jane had no difficulty at all finding the hotel. She couldn't help but laugh when she saw the first sign for *Le Green des Impressionnistes*, and then the sign for a golf course right beside it.

It couldn't have been her advisor's idea. She doubted the man had ever picked up a golf club in his life. He must have asked around the Middle Common Room for a recommendation for an inexpensive but still decent hotel somewhere near Paris. That was the only reasonable explanation.

It was 11:30 when she pulled into the parking lot. It was nearly full; there were only a couple of spaces available, and it took her a few minutes to ease the Land Rover into one of them. She felt almost comfortable with the huge vehicle after several hours behind the wheel, but that was on the open road. Close-quarters maneuvering was something else altogether. The passenger-side mirror came within a quarter inch of being ripped clean off before Jane finally managed to safely park.

That task accomplished, Jane got out, locked the car and double-checked every one of the doors. It wasn't as though anyone would want to steal a box of pottery shards, but habit was habit.

After she reassured herself that every door was secure, she began to feel the cold. Jane's hands were starting to shake, and she ran for the hotel lobby. She was nearly out of breath – from the freezing air as much as from her exertion – when she got inside and the warmth immediately washed over her. Jane had to fight the sudden urge to drop to the floor and just fall asleep right there in front

of the door.

She wasn't sure how long she stood on the spot before she heard the voice. *His* voice. "Miss Barnaby. Fancy meeting you here."

Alex. How on Earth could he be here? Had he followed her? He must have. Followed her all the way from the ferry. Stalked her, more like.

Except, his voice was coming from in front of her. He was already inside the hotel; he hadn't come in the door behind her. Which meant that he couldn't have followed her. Didn't it? She hadn't noticed a car behind her when she turned into the hotel lot.

What did that prove, though? She wasn't exactly paying strict attention at that point, she had to admit. But even if he had been following her, surely she'd have seen him circling around the parking lot.

No, he had to have arrived here before her. Which meant – what? He couldn't have known where she was going to stop. She hadn't told anyone. Which wasn't true, of course. Melanie knew, and Professor Welldon, obviously. But Alex couldn't have found out from them.

When you eliminate the impossible, whatever's left must be the truth. Jane knew her Sherlock Holmes, and she could certainly do worse than follow the great detective's advice. Alex got here first, and it was just a ridiculous bit of luck that he'd picked the same hotel.

It was like that time in Atlantic City a year ago, Jane decided, when Jess' mother had hit the jackpot three times in a row on the same slot machine. Things like that happened. It wasn't something to ever bet on, but even a million-to-one shot had to come in sometimes.

The problem was, hitting a jackpot and getting hit by lightning were both million-to-one shots, and Jane had no idea which one Alex counted as. There was only one way to find out. "Some coincidence, isn't it?" It didn't sound anywhere near as nonchalant as she'd intended it to, and Jane could tell from the momentary smirk on Alex's face that he knew it.

But that was gone as quickly as it appeared, and the smile that replaced it appeared for all the world to be genuine. "Indeed, Miss Barnaby. A happy coincidence, I'd call it."

Jane tried to match his smile. "That remains to be seen," she said. This time her voice sounded a lot closer to the words in her head.

His eyes twinkled, which Jane thought was simply unfair. "What can I do to convince you it *is* happy?"

Several responses came to Jane, but none of them originated from her brain.

She kept the smile plastered on her face as she fought her rebellious impulses for control. “You could find out if the kitchen is still open and get us a table in the restaurant while I check myself in.” It was a delaying tactic, against both Alex and her own hormones, but what else could she do when she was threatened on two fronts?

“Your wish is my command,” Alex said, eyes still atwinkle. Jane stood rooted to the spot for a moment, watching him walk away. She had to admit that the view from the back was every bit as enticing as his strong chin and merry eyes.

She shook her head violently, trying to clear that thought away. It wasn’t helping, not at all. With great difficulty, she forced her protesting legs into motion, headed for the reception desk. The woman sitting there lifted her head as Jane approached.

Jane noted that the woman’s hair and makeup were perfect. At nearly midnight, after God only knew how many hours sitting at that desk. Jane hadn’t properly looked in a mirror since she’d gotten out of the shower this morning, but she was fairly certain nothing about her own appearance was anywhere close to perfect.

“You are *Mademoiselle* Barnaby?”

For an instant, Jane was confused. How did this woman know her name? But of course it made sense; the hotel knew she was arriving late, there was probably a note about her somewhere. “That’s me,” she answered. She was grateful that the receptionist spoke English. It must have been in the note that she was arriving from England.

“I have your room ready, unless perhaps you no longer need it?” Jane was again confused, and it wasn’t until the receptionist nodded towards the hotel restaurant that she realized what the woman meant.

“Him?” There hadn’t been a teasing note in the woman’s voice, or a disapproving one. She said it very matter-of-factly. As though it was a perfectly reasonable idea. “No. No!” Jane’s words were intended for herself as much as for the receptionist. There was a part of her – a big part – that agreed it was a perfectly reasonable suggestion. Which it absolutely wasn’t. At all. “No, my room will be fine, thank you,” she went on, in a voice that was a lot shakier than Jane would have preferred.

A moment later, Jane had her key and she really took stock of the lobby for the first time. It was brighter than she expected, more colorful. The golf course next door made her think of the one time she’d ever visited a country club. It was two years ago, for Uncle Jack’s seventy-fifth birthday, and that place had looked –

and smelled – as though it had come through a time warp straight from 1953 or so.

This place, though, had comfortable-looking furniture, plastic chairs in bold reds and yellows and art on the walls that was, if not exactly to Jane's taste, at least eye-catching. But there was something else eye-catching waiting for her in the restaurant, and she had no choice but to go meet him.

He did not disappoint. Jane saw him, sitting by a window, illuminated by a thin sliver of moonlight. Of course he was. And – again, of course – there was a bottle of wine already there, and two glasses.

As she slowly walked over, noticing the absence of any other diners, she idly wondered if it was champagne. Surely he wouldn't have done something that – what? Presumptuous? Clichéd? Could something even be both presumptuous and clichéd at the same time?

No, it would be wine. Expensive wine, though. Not that she knew enough about wine to appreciate it. Up until a few months ago, just a bottle with an actual cork in it would have been an extravagance, never mind what was inside. She'd just have to fake it.

Jane couldn't help but laugh. Apparently, she should have paid better attention when Mrs. Parlato next door used to watch "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." She hadn't realized she'd be tested on it one day.

She was still laughing when she got to Alex's table. He stood, pulled out her chair. Exactly like the perfect gentleman he undoubtedly wasn't. No matter how much he acted like one, sounded like one. She had to be on her toes, at the top of her game – one silly sports metaphor after another went through her mind, and she kept on laughing at her own unspoken jokes.

Which was good; her laughter might keep Alex off balance, give her the advantage here.

It didn't. He grinned at her as he took his seat, and made a show of looking for a stain on his shirt or any other reason she might be laughing at him. "I love a good joke," he said, after a moment or two of that. "Care to share it, whatever it is?"

"It was nothing," Jane said, her laughter finally subsiding. "But I would care for a glass of wine." That was good. She had to keep acting as his equal rather than his prey.

"Your wish is my command," he answered, and Jane felt the rebellion inside her stirring itself up again. She focused her attention on the bottle, trying to fill her mind with the French writing on the label instead of Alex's well-muscled

arms flexing as he poured the wine.

“We’ll have to see about that,” she said. “My wishes aren’t always that simple.” Jane was quite proud of herself for managing that line without a self-conscious giggle. It had been easy, back in college, to talk like that with Mark and Allan. But she’d trusted them, trusted them absolutely. She’d known from the first week of classes, four years ago, that neither of them would ever hurt her, let alone try to force her to do anything she didn’t want to do.

Alex might. He might not resort to physical force – although Jane wasn’t totally convinced on that point – but he’d use anything short of that to get what he wanted. It was in his eyes, even now when he was at his most charming. Maybe especially because of that. She could see it clearly.

So why was she sitting down with him? Why couldn’t she get control over herself and just walk away, go to her room and put the deadbolt on the door?

Jane didn’t know, and that scared her more than anything she saw in his eyes.



“I hate this bloody country! Bloody Frogs! Bloody stupid wrong side of the road!” Tom had come close to an accident more times in the past two hours than he had in the previous fifteen years he’d been driving. It was ridiculous. The French were, without question, the worst drivers on Earth.

The hotel had to be coming up soon, and as he kept an eye peeled for any indication of it, Tom kept up his tirade against France. “Bloody miserable country. Should’ve let Hitler keep it. Would’ve served them right.”

There! There was the sign. *Le Green des Impressionnistes*, three kilometers. Thank God, he was almost there. But even that positive development set him off again. “Kilometers! Miles were good enough for Grandfather Alfred when he was parachuting down to save the bloody Frogs, they damned well ought to be good enough now.”

It would all be over soon, though, and he could return to civilization in triumph. A conquering hero, even. Maybe Alice would even be grateful enough...

Tom shook his head. *No*. He’d seen the look in her eyes when she sent him off on this task. She’d looked perfectly capable of murder, and he suspected that might be at the kind and merciful end of the spectrum where her temper was concerned.

Much better to simply hand over the box and forget about her entirely. Forget about the whole wretched experience, if he could. Only one and a half kilometers now, then a simple conversation, and he could put all of this madness

behind him.

seven

*(have you ever danced with the Devil
in the pale moonlight?)*

If he thought getting her drunk was going to get her into his bed, he had another thing coming. Jane laughed at the idea. He had no clue; she could drink all her friends under the table. Three glasses of wine was nothing. She could keep up, and keep her wits, as long as he wanted to keep pouring. She might pay for it in the morning, but she'd be paying alone, safe in her own room.

"The joke wasn't that funny," Alex was saying. Jane must have laughed at her own thoughts without realizing it. That had to be it, because he was right, his joke wasn't really funny at all.

"No," she agreed. "But it made me think of a much funnier one. That's what I was laughing at." He stared at her expectantly, and she held his eyes. Only a few seconds passed, but it felt like minutes. Or, possibly, hours. But in the end, he was the one to blink first. "I don't know you nearly well enough to tell you that one," she said, a smug grin on her lips.

"That's hardly fair." His tone was playful, but Jane thought she heard real annoyance there, too. Score one for her.

She decided to show him some mercy; she could be gracious in victory. "There's another one I could tell you," she said, searching her memory for a good joke. And there it was – Professor Welldon's attempt at matchmaking. She told him about that day in the Middle Common Room, and his three choices for her.

"You're making that up," was his reply. "You really expect me to believe that. Thomas, Richard and Henry. Give me a little credit, Ms. Barnaby."

She played the story over in her mind. Why would he think she was making it

up? It had really happened, and she hadn't even exaggerated anything! "It's the truth. Cross my heart, hope to die," she said.

"You really expect me to believe your advisor introduced you to three men, and they were Tom, Dick and Harry?"

Thomas, Richard – she got that. They never actually used the shorter names, at least not while she was in earshot, but she understood. Henry, though, she didn't see. She puzzled over it for a minute, until it came to her. She *had* heard it. Harry was a nickname for Henry, at least in England. She'd seen it in the newspaper, articles about young Prince Harry. "I expect you to remember that I'm American."

"And what has that got to do with anything?"

Her grin was back. "We don't use Harry as a nickname for Henry. At least, I never heard it back home. So I didn't make the connection." She'd scored another point, and from his sigh, she knew he knew it, too. Jane pressed her advantage. "And, for your information, all three of them really are in my classes. Didn't anyone ever teach you never to question a lady's word?"

She realized the opening she'd left him too late; the words were already out. But he didn't take it. "My apologies, Jane," he said. "You're right, of course. I should have made allowances. It's not your fault that you have such a poor grasp of the English language; you didn't have the benefit of a British education growing up, after all."

His eyes twinkled so prettily as he said it, Jane couldn't work up any annoyance over the insult. "Not like you, I'm sure. Eton, right?" She paused for an instant, trying to recall the names of other posh boarding schools she'd heard in her time at Oxford. She didn't want him to assume she was some silly, ignorant American who'd only heard of Eton because everyone knew that one, even if they didn't know anything else about it. To her surprise, several names came to her quickly. "Or was it Harrow? Winchester? Maybe Brookfield?"

He grinned again, his eyes twinkled again. "Oh, yes. Dear old Brookfield! How I loved to walk by the statue of old Mr. Chipping every day on my way to the cricket pitch." She'd stepped in it, but she had no idea how, exactly. And then, after a moment's reflection, she did.

Brookfield! Of course! The name had come not from one of her current classmates, but from an old, old movie, one that her mother had loved. Jane couldn't believe she'd botched things so completely.

But it was done now, and she had to say something. What would her mother have done if she were in Jane's position? Jane remembered times that Mom had

been caught in a white lie or a little joke, and her mother had always brazened it out regardless. Surely Jane could do the same? “I’ve heard the cricket pitch is lovely,” she said, meeting his eyes. Just barely, but it *was* eye contact. “And the Latin teachers are second to none, aren’t they?”

He refilled his glass, still grinning from ear to ear. “Naturally!” But Alex couldn’t keep up his end of the pretense. He shook his head in mock sadness. “Brookfield. Really.” Now he heaved a dramatic sigh. “You’ll have to do better than that to get one past me, my dear lady.”

“I see that now,” Jane answered, still not blinking away. “I was just testing. I like my dinner companions to be sharp. It keeps things interesting, don’t you agree?” Mom would have been proud, Jane decided, at the way she’d said that, her voice strong and clear, not cracking at all.

“Oh, absolutely,” he agreed. “And I like a dinner companion who can dance.” Alex stood, holding a hand out expectantly. Jane just sat there, wondering what he was up to. No, not precisely; she knew what he was up to, of course, but there wasn’t even any music.

No, that wasn’t right, either. There was music. She’d tuned it out, but it was there. A jazzy tune, not terribly loud, but like Dick Clark might have said, it had a good beat and she could dance to it. So she did.

She let Alex lead, and smiled at the surprise in his eyes when she kept up with him. “My mother made us take ballroom dancing lessons in high school,” Jane said. “She said knowing how to dance properly was the mark of a civilized person.”

“What else did your mother say?” The teasing tone was back in his voice.

“To watch out for men like you.” She gave it right back to him.

“Well, I’m glad you don’t always listen to her, then.” Jane’s self-control slipped, just for a moment. She knew Alex could see the pain that suddenly filled her eyes, before she pushed it away. He didn’t say anything, though. Instead, let his loose grip on her hand become a momentary squeeze, enough to let her know that he’d seen, he understood, and he wasn’t going to ask about it.

Not that he needed to; he had to know, more or less, why she’d reacted. Still, she appreciated his restraint and she acknowledged it by not acknowledging it. Jane simply allowed him to lead her all around the empty restaurant, keeping up with him step for step.

She kept up with him for ten minutes, or maybe twenty; it was so easy to lose track of time. He kept edging closer to her, without ever doing anything that felt really threatening. They were very nearly cheek to cheek now, as the old song

had it; he'd only have to lean in another couple of inches to kiss her. Or she could lean in and...

She didn't complete the thought – if that was even the right word for it. The clink of china plates on their table caught her attention first, and then something else did, something glimpsed through the window. A shape, a man-sized shape, momentarily illuminated in the moonlight. That same light fell on a vehicle next to the man, out in the parking lot. A huge vehicle, towering over the tiny French cars on either side of it.

A Land Rover.

Her Land Rover.



This had to be it. Tom had circled the whole parking lot three times, and this was the only Land Rover. He couldn't see anything inside clearly, not without shining a flashlight into the window, and someone in the hotel might notice that. It probably wasn't terribly likely, but there was no reason to take a chance.

So his information was right; everything that dotty girl back at Oxford had told him was true so far. The hotel, the car, exactly as advertised. Now all he had to do was go inside, find the other girl, the elusive Miss Barnaby, and he could reclaim the box and be on his way home.

But how would he accomplish that? He hadn't given it much thought on the drive here. He'd assumed an answer would present itself, but here he was, and no brilliant ideas were coming to mind.

The girl was in her room, probably asleep already. He could hardly walk up to the receptionist and ask what room she was in. The Frogs were pretty loose when it came to sexual mores, but surely even they had their limits.

He could get a room himself – if there even was one available – and wake up at the crack of dawn, stake out the lobby and catch her on her way out. But that would cost money he didn't actually have, and there were no guarantees it would work anyway. Who knew how early she'd leave? And what if she didn't believe him? He had nothing except his word; Alice hadn't given him anything he could show the Barnaby girl as proof. She might turn tail and run, and then where would he be? He didn't fancy a car chase across the length and breadth of Frogland, that was for sure.

What to do?

An idea began to form – he had a toolkit in the boot of his car, didn't he? And he'd watched Leo, his brother's best mate, break into a car once. It hadn't looked complicated, and, truth be told, Leo wasn't terribly bright. If he could do it, how

hard could it possibly be?



eight

(just punks stealing luggage)

Jane stood there, in the middle of the impromptu dance floor that the nearly-empty restaurant had become, frozen in place. She stared out the window while Alex stared at her, nearly identical expressions of shock on both their faces.

He still held her hand, his other arm around her waist. Without really thinking about what she was doing, she pulled away, turned towards the door.

“Jane?”

She didn't hear him, took no notice of him at all until he reached out and grabbed her wrist. She snapped at him without turning her head. “Let go! Somebody's breaking into my car!” His grip was no match for the adrenaline suddenly coursing through her, and she ripped free from his grasp. Jane was out the door and halfway through the hotel lobby before the first dissenting thought made itself heard. *You're losing your mind. Breaking into your car? Seriously?*

She didn't stop running, but she did address the rebellious voice in her head. She reminded it that car theft didn't only happen in the Bronx. There were car thieves everywhere, even in Paris. She also reminded the disbelieving voice that it wasn't her car, that its true owner would have her head on a plate if anything happened to it.

That probably wasn't true. It was hard to picture Professor Welldon calling for anybody's head, for any reason. In four months, she'd never seen him get angry. On the other hand, letting his brand-new car get stolen on her watch might be the thing to do it. Better not to find out.

Jane didn't feel the cold when she got outside, even though she'd left her coat back in the restaurant. She barely noticed it when she stepped into a slushy

puddle and her shoe filled with icy liquid. All her senses were focused ahead, on the car, and the man who was – what else could he possibly be doing? – trying to steal it.

She reached her parking spot, panting, and for a fraction of a second she was relieved to see it there: one Land Rover Discovery, Series I, in chromatic blue, five doors. Her relief fled as soon as she noticed what wasn't there: a rear window.

That wasn't precisely true, she realized. The glass that had made up the window still existed. But it was no longer part of the car. It was spread all around, some crunching beneath her feet, some in chunks fallen into the back of the vehicle.

The *empty* back of the vehicle.

And then she took a good look at the man, the one she'd spotted from the restaurant. He wasn't much to look at, truth be told. Skinny, a puffy parka that didn't suit him at all, bad teeth. He faced Jane, but he wasn't looking at her. His eyes were focused beyond her, at what – or whom – she neither knew nor cared. What she did care about was the screwdriver clutched in his hand.

Now he was talking. Shouting, really. Pointing wildly over Jane's shoulder, and shouting. Jane couldn't distinguish his words, though. The sound of her heart beating, the roar of the blood rushing through her veins, drowned his voice out. It didn't matter that she couldn't tell what he was saying. What *could* he say? The screwdriver was obviously his tool of choice for lockpicking. Equally obviously it hadn't done him any good. He'd given up almost immediately, and resorted to smashing the window. Did he have any idea that he might have smashed her career to pieces, too?

It didn't matter. Who cared what he was thinking? All that mattered was that he, clearly, was responsible, and, more importantly, he was right there. And that made all the difference. She should have been scared – terrified beyond rational thought – over this disaster. Jane could feel all that, bubbling away in the back of her mind. Had there not been something else for her to focus on, she'd probably be curled up in the fetal position, crying over the loss of her career before it even began. But there he was, and instead of fear, another emotion took control. Blinding rage.

Jane gave in to it without a fight. She let it do whatever it wanted, and there was only one thing it wanted to do. Only one thing it could do.

She made a fist, reared back, and punched him as hard as she could, right in the jaw. He didn't see it coming, and the man's shout of pain as he staggered

back was immensely satisfying. He went back three steps, and the loud thunk as the back of his head hit the top of the rear door of the car was nearly as satisfying.

Jane stepped forward, ready to deliver the knockout blow, but before she could complete it, she felt hands on her, pulling her back. “He can’t talk to us if he’s unconscious,” she heard Alex say. There was alarm in his voice, and Jane smiled at that.

The terror in the thief’s eyes, and the already-red mark on his jaw that looked like it would blossom into a spectacular bruise, was exactly what Jane needed to see. Her rage began to subside, and she allowed herself to listen to Alex. “That’s true,” she said as she relaxed her muscles, letting Alex pull her back another step or two.

“Assuming he *can* still talk. You might have broken his jaw.”

She turned to face Alex, grinned at him. “Nope. I know what that sounds like.” The sound of a jaw breaking was impossible to forget once you heard it. It had been back in freshman year, during a game of intramural football. Poor Sanjay from the third floor got hit at just the wrong angle, and everyone on the field knew instantly what had happened. He’d had to have his jaw wired shut for a month. “But he might have a concussion.” It would serve him right if he did, Jane decided.

“I’m right here,” the thief whined, and Jane focused on him again.

“Yeah, let’s talk about that. Why did you break into my car, and what did you do with the box that was in the back?” Her voice was even, she was back in full control of herself. Jane wasn’t at all sure how long she could maintain that, however.

“I didn’t!” Jane’s control began to falter immediately, the unreasoning anger threatening to take hold again. She raised her fist, and this time it took all Alex’s strength – she could feel him straining – to hold her back.

She took a moment to compose herself before answering. “Seriously?” Brazen was one thing; denying his crime when he was literally standing in the midst of the evidence required a whole other word. “We caught you red-handed!”

“Jane,” Alex said, a little nervously. Focused as she was on the thief, Jane still was able to register the change in Alex’s tone, and to note that it was the first time since she’d met him that he’d shown any fear. That thought lifted her spirits. “I’m not sure he did break in. He’s only got the screwdriver. I don’t know that he could have broken the window with just that. He doesn’t really look strong enough, does he?”

The thief began to respond to that, but the words never made it to his lips. Something in Alex's face must have told him to keep whatever he was going to say to himself. Probably a feeble protest that he certainly was strong enough to break the window.

If she were honest, Jane had to agree with Alex. He was probably right. It wasn't easy to break a car window, at least not if you didn't have the right tool. Which, she couldn't deny, a screwdriver certainly wasn't.

But if he didn't break the window, why was he standing right beside the car with a screwdriver? That still wasn't the behavior of an innocent man. He must have been planning to break in, except someone else beat him to it. But that begged belief – what were the odds that *two different people* would try to break into the same car in a quiet parking lot in the far suburbs of Paris? A million to one? No, Jane decided. Maybe a billion to one.

But even a billion to one chance had to come in sometime, didn't it?



She'd punched him! Women weren't supposed to do that! If they got angry at you, they were only supposed to slap you. Tom had endured his share of angry slaps – what bloke hadn't? But they were never very hard. He'd step a little too far over the line, and some bird would slap his cheek, and later she'd get over it and they'd get on with business, or not. Usually not. That's just how things were done.

None of them had ever punched him. Nobody had, not since he was sixteen, anyway. And this girl had given it all she had. He didn't dare touch his teeth with his tongue, in case she'd loosened any of them. She hadn't bothered to listen to a word he'd said – what sort of lunatic was she? He cursed himself for believing that dotty girl back at Oxford, that this Jane Barnaby was a reasonable person, that of course she'd understand the situation and help him bring the artifacts back home.

Why had he listened to a girl who talked to trees? How could he ever have imagined anything good would come of that?

But he had, and now here he was, his jaw throbbing, the box of artifacts he was to retrieve gone, and the Barnaby girl looking perfectly ready to hit him again. And then there was the guy behind her – the boyfriend, not that the tree-speaker had mentioned anything about that. Tom could defend himself against the girl, especially now that he knew how crazy she was, but he didn't fancy his odds with the boyfriend involved, too.

Worse still, there was the possibility – probably closer to a certainty, now he

thought about it - that they'd summon the police and he'd spend the night in a Parisian jail.

His only chance was to get the girl to listen to him, which didn't appear to be something she was very interested in doing. But he had to try.



nine

(it takes a thief)

Adrenaline and anger were still flowing freely through Jane, keeping her from a complete meltdown. She still had the presence of mind to form coherent questions. “OK, before we call the cops, you’ve got one chance. Why did you want to break into my car?” In calmer circumstances, she might have lost her train of thought, wondering what the French slang for “policeman” was, since it couldn’t possibly be “cop.” But she kept her focus, watching the thief’s reaction intently.

He looked desperate, afraid, about two steps from either collapsing to the ground in tears or trying to run for it. Jane didn’t want to bet on which one he might opt for, but he ended up choosing neither. Instead, he answered her, in a voice that somehow combined hysteria and impatience. “I didn’t want to break into anything! I’m with the Bodleian Library, you took the wrong box, you were carrying around Egyptian relics that were supposed to go to the British Museum! They sent me to bring them back, and what do I find after following you for hours and hours? A broken window, no box, and instead of chasing after the people who actually did steal it, you try to kill me!”

She wanted to just punch him again, but Jane fought back the impulse and considered the man’s words. The Bodleian Library was a pretty random name to drop, if he was just lying to save his skin. It seemed very unlikely that a garden-variety thief would come up with that. And the fact was, someone else had to have broken the window. She had to accept that. So if he was telling the truth about where he was from, and if he was telling the truth that he didn’t break the window, then, logically, he had to be right that every second she stood here

wanting to knock him unconscious was another second for the actual thief to get farther away.

She looked back at Alex, and she didn't need to ask the question. She saw in his eyes that he knew what she was thinking, and he simply nodded his agreement.

Fine, they all agreed. That didn't answer the next question: what to do next?

The answer, of course, had been obvious. They had to pursue the thief. Jane was unwilling to leave the Land Rover at the hotel, and Alex was proving to be a very agreeable partner, so the matter of who would drive and in which car was quickly settled. Jane managed to scrounge enough plastic wrap from the restaurant kitchen to produce a makeshift cover for the shattered rear window, while Alex questioned the hotel's security guard.

"Good thing I remember my French lessons from Brookfield," he reported, smiling, when he finished with the guard. "He saw a car – a black Mercedes – leaving just a minute or two before we came outside. He even saw where it turned."

That was welcome news. At least she had somewhere to start from. She didn't know where the thief might be headed, but something was better than nothing. "Let's go," she said, gesturing for Tom – she'd finally gotten around to asking the screwdriver man his name – to get into the passenger seat.

"Are you crazy? You think I'm leaving my car here and going off God knows where with you?"

That was precisely what Jane thought. "It's that or we call the police right now. Your choice." He was lucky she hadn't done it already, and after a moment, he apparently came to the same conclusion, nodding sullenly and trooping around the side of the car to the passenger-side door.

Jane got behind the wheel and started the car. The plan was simple: Alex would drive on ahead, with Jane keeping pace a few car lengths behind him, following the route that the thief – or thieves – had taken. It made sense; he was familiar – or at least more so than Jane was – with the Parisian roads, and he had a couple of thoughts as to parties based in the City of Light who might have an interest in the artifacts Tom had supposedly been sent here to retrieve.

"Explain it to me again," she said as she backed out of her parking space. "Why do you think I was carrying Egyptian artifacts? I had a box, but it was filled with Beaker Pottery." To Professor Welldon, they were every bit as priceless as the Egyptian pieces Tom sought. But only to him; to anyone not

interested in the lives of Copper Age peoples and their elaborately-decorated stoneware – which was basically everyone outside of the Welldon household and his students – they were just shards of old pottery.

“Because I left the artifacts there in the Institute. In Room 16.” Jane thought back. That was only hours ago, yet it felt like days. But he was right. She hadn’t been sure of the Professor’s writing, whether he meant for her to go to Room 16 or Room 18, but ultimately it hadn’t mattered because there *was* no box in Room 18.

Jane considered that. Unless Tom had been following her step-by-step all day long, there’s no way he could have known the room number. Which meant, as insane as it seemed, he had to be telling the truth. “That means – hang on, let me think this through.”

“Take your time. No hurry,” Tom muttered. Jane bit back an angry response, and continued thinking aloud, puzzling the whole thing out.

“Somebody knew about your box. So they went to the Institute, and they got the room wrong, they went to Room 18.” Which, obviously, was where Professor Welldon had meant her to go. “And they took the pottery shards, which they didn’t know until they got the box back to – I don’t know, their hideout, I guess? And in the meantime, I took the only box that was still there, which wasn’t mine, only I didn’t know it because it was locked.”

It all made sense. As much sense as this situation could make, anyway. “Lovely. You’ve got it all figured out, you and your boyfriend in the Mercedes up there.” Tom made what Jane had come to recognize as a very rude gesture towards Alex’s car out there in the distance.

“He’s not my boyfriend! I only met him a few hours ago!” He wasn’t a friend of any kind. And yet here she was treating him as – what? A partner in crime? A co-conspirator? When exactly had she stopped measuring his every word and facial expression, watching for the slightest hint of danger?

When he followed her outside the hotel, held her back from knocking Tom out, helped her to see reason. He didn’t have to do any of that. He could have decided she was too much trouble and left her to fend for herself. But he stepped forward instead, allied himself to her. It was possible, she knew, that this was all part of his act, playing the white knight to better seduce her. Surely, though, there were easier ways for him to do that. And, probably, easier women to do it to. This *was* France, after all.

Tom broke her out of her thoughts. “Whatever you need to tell yourself,” he muttered. Then, louder, he added, “Whatever you call him, he’d best know

what's he's doing or I'm going to get the sack. If I come home without that box..."

"You and me both," Jane answered. Fired, dismissed, expelled – whatever word you chose, it was all the same. If she showed up in Mallorca with a damaged car, and without the box that represented five years of painstaking excavation, of course Professor Welldon would boot her right out of the program. The university would cancel her visa. And good luck getting into another Ph.D. program with a disaster like this on her record.



She was American. That explained the punch, Tom supposed. She came from the country that gave the world Rambo and the Terminator and John Wayne. Of course the women would be as violent as the men.

But now the pain had faded to a dull and occasional throbbing, he could think about the situation a little more clearly. If he wandered out to the car park to find his window shattered and some bloke with a screwdriver standing in front of it, he might well assume the worst and take a swing himself. And if it wasn't his own car, but his boss's brand new Land Rover? Yes, he had to admit, there probably would be punches thrown.

The girl had listened to him, too, he had to give her that. Once she'd given the matter a little thought, she saw the truth. She'd brought him along, which she didn't have to do. And which the boyfriend was not at all pleased about. Tom wasn't sure why that thought amused him.

It wasn't as though the girl – Jane – was his type. She was too young, for one thing, and then there was the accent. It wasn't exactly the same as the stereotypical "mafia" accent from all those mobster movies his brother loved to watch, but it was close enough. How on Earth did they stand it, listening to each other talk like that all day long?

Despite her age, and her accent, and the fact that she was too tall for his liking, Tom had to admit that Jane was – well, not bad looking at all. And obviously no idiot, to be where she was, doing the work she was doing. He could certainly do worse, and had, far too often.

If they found his missing box, and hers, maybe she'd be as grateful as he'd imagined Alice would be, before this whole mess got started. Stranger things had happened, hadn't they?



ten

*(who is more foolish, the fool
or the fool who follows him?)*

She'd been driving for twenty minutes, and there had been no signal from Alex. Before he drove off, they'd come up with a code: if he saw anything, he'd switch the dome light in his car on and then off again to let her know. It would have been easier if they had CB radios, like in Mr. Parlato's fleet of oil trucks back home.

"Just like 'Smokey and the Bandit,' she muttered, earning a puzzled look from her companion. "Never mind, I was just thinking out loud." The idea brought a smile to her face, imagining herself in the movie. Not as the Burt Reynolds character, but his best friend – she couldn't recall his name - the guy in the truck following behind Burt and his black Trans-Am. Exactly like she was following Alex in his black Mercedes.

That had given her pause, when she saw what car he was driving. Had he been the driver she'd cut off and nearly hit, back in England? But she'd dismissed the idea nearly as quickly as it had come to her. Mercedes were a lot more common here in Europe than back home, and black was a popular color. It was just a coincidence that she'd been followed by one for a couple of hours, and that both Alex and the thief – or thieves – were driving the same kind of car.

What was the alternative? That they were all together in this, conspiring to steal her cargo, and the only model of car in the criminal motor pool was a Mercedes? That was crazy. Which didn't stop her passenger from raising the possibility. "Funny how your boyfriend's driving the same car as the blokes we're after." Jane turned momentarily from the road to glare at him, and he quickly got the message. "Your *friend*. Fine. But it's still quite the coincidence,

isn't it?"

"It is a coincidence. They do happen. Anyway, if he was really working with the thieves, he could have just stayed behind at the hotel. Or he could have let me hit you again." She noted with some satisfaction that Tom didn't have a ready answer to that. "I trust him, and really that's all that matters right now." She caught herself before adding that if he didn't like it, she could pull over to the side of the road and let him out right here. That, she decided, would be mean just for the sake of it. Besides, she had to admit that she was grateful for the company, as ill-tempered as it was.

She also had to admit that he wasn't quite as unpleasant to look at as she'd first thought. Yes, his parka looked stupid, but he did have some muscles after all, now that she'd had a good look at him up close. As for his teeth, they were far from perfect, they really weren't any worse than what she saw every day at school. And he did work at the Bodleian Library, so he was no idiot. He was probably capable of perfectly interesting conversation, under other circumstances.

Age was an issue, of course. He wasn't really *old*, like her father or something. At a guess, he was thirty, or maybe thirty-five. Somewhere in that range, for sure. Not old, but too old for her.

No, it was silly to think about him that way. Jane couldn't figure out why she was even having these thoughts. First Alex, and now Tom – taking a serious look at two men in one day. Was she truly that desperate? That lonely?

She signed with relief when she saw a light ahead blink on and off – Alex's signal. She had no desire to answer her question to herself, and now she didn't have to. "There! He saw something!" Alex wasn't slowing down, though. So the signal was just a warning, but to do what? "Keep your eyes open," she told Tom. She hoped he wouldn't ask her, "for what?"

She snuck a glance over to him, and she could tell he was about to speak, probably those exact words. But their eyes met, and he took pity on her. "Yes, ma'am," he said, instead of the pointless question. And then he did see something. "He's turning! See?"

Jane did. Alex's right-turn light was on, and then there he went, following several eighteen-wheelers – just like the one that Burt Reynolds' friend was driving. She came up on the turn a moment later, and luck was with her. She caught the traffic light and turned onto *Avenue des Bellevues*. Jane hoped that wasn't a bad omen – it put her in mind of the only other Bellevue she knew, the mental hospital back home in New York.

Maybe it was accurate, though. If someone had told her she'd be chasing after a box of ancient Egyptian artifacts through the suburbs of Paris accompanied by two strange men, she'd have called them crazy. And if it was crazy for somebody to imagine she'd be doing this, how much crazier was she to actually *be* doing it?

Heaven knew she'd been involved in enough crazy stunts back in college. Expeditions into the steam tunnels beneath the campus, impromptu road trips, pranks that could have gone horribly wrong – she'd done dozens, or maybe hundreds of stupid, irresponsible, dangerous things with Jess and the rest of her friends. But none of them had felt as completely insane as this did.

“I must be an idiot *be* doing this,” she muttered. She made a point of not glancing over to see if Tom agreed with her. There was no need anyway; she knew that he must. He probably thought she was not just an idiot, but the biggest idiot in the world. The *Queen* of the Idiots.

As they drove into an industrial park that put her in mind of northern New Jersey, Jane couldn't help but laugh. Queen of the Idiots was a title she'd have been proud to claim just a few months ago. Her friends would have loved it. But here, now, despite her laughter, it wasn't really funny at all. Anything – anyone – could be waiting for her among the nondescript corporate buildings and warehouses she was driving past.

A tap on her shoulder broker her out of her thoughts. “There, he's stopping.” Tom was pointing, and Jane strained to see what he saw.

It took her a couple of seconds to find Alex's car, but she finally spotted it, maybe a hundred feet ahead. She continued on, pulling over just behind a driveway. Alex was parked on the other side of it. He stood beside a sign, which read: *SDV Logistique Internationale*. She considered that – International Logistics could mean anything. It was exactly the sort of vague name that the front company for a villain in a James Bond movie might have. Next to the name were two flags – the French tricolor, and below it, a dozen yellow stars on a blue background, the European Union flag.

Alex emerged from his car, and Jane opened her door and exited the Land Rover, making sure to remove the keys before she did. She wasn't going to give Tom the chance to make off with it – she believed his story, but there was still no point in taking chances.

She heard Tom's footsteps behind her as she walked over to Alex. It made sense – he'd want to hear whatever was said. “So?” Jane gestured towards the sign.

“This is our – what’s that American phrase? Our best bet. I’ve dealt with these people before. They helped us to complete a couple of troublesome collections.” Jane had no illusions about the art world. It didn’t surprise her that even as well-known and respected a place as the Saatchi Gallery might be forced to turn to less-reputable sources for some of their exhibits. It definitely didn’t surprise her that Alex would have been the man to do it.

“So they are a front company. I was wondering,” she said, as much to herself as to Alex. He nodded. That wasn’t reassuring, but on the other hand, the villains in James Bond movies usually weren’t art thieves.

“Precisely.”

Tom caught up to them. “Care to tell me what’s going on?”

“I know these people,” Alex said. “They’re – well, let us say they tend to operate in a gray area where the law is concerned. But I’ve never known them to be dangerous.”

Jane bit back her first response – breaking into her car was quite dangerous enough for her taste – and tried to imagine what their next move ought to be. “Let’s hope you’re right. But even if you are, I’m thinking they’re not just going to turn over the box to us if we ask nicely.”

Alex smiled then, a roguish smile if ever Jane had seen one. “Who said we were going to ask?”



This was madness. Utter madness. He had not signed on for this!

Standing in the bitter cold in the middle of the night, conspiring to break into a French warehouse run by international art thieves was not something Tom Barker had ever pictured himself doing. When he’d voiced that opinion, and the Irishman had corrected him, explaining that they were in fact “sneaking in” rather than “breaking in,” he had not been reassured.

At least Tom understood the Irishman, though. He was obviously a shady character and a fast talker, with no doubt endless experience in crooked dealings. He had no doubt that Alex – if that even was his real name – would be able to wriggle out of any trouble they might find themselves in. The girl, on the other hand, simply had to be a lunatic. There was no other explanation. Any sane person would have waited until the morning, gotten her car window repaired, and then driven on to meet her professor, batting her pretty – there was no denying it – eyes at him until he took pity on her and let the matter drop.

This girl, Jane, would have none of it. She seemed almost eager to go along with this mad scheme, to commit multiple crimes, to risk her career, her

freedom, maybe even her life. It had to be her American upbringing. That was it.

They were all crazy. Grandfather Alfred had had very strong opinions about them. “When they get an idea in their heads, there’s no stopping them. Good idea, bad idea, mad idea, doesn’t matter. Tommy, if you get mixed up with one of them when they’re on a mission, you’ve only two choices. Hang on for the ride, or get the hell out of the way.”

His grandfather, it seemed, had been right. Tom was mixed up with one of them right now, she was most certainly on a mission, and getting the hell out of the way was not an option.



eleven

*(something good? something bad?
little bit of both?)*

From moment to moment, Jane's confidence level was on a roller-coaster ride. On the plus side, this really wasn't much crazier than some of the stunts she'd gotten up to in college, and at least here she had a reason other than boredom or drunken stupidity.

On the minus side, the worst that could have happened back in college was a stern talking-to by someone in the Residence Life office, or an unpleasant visit with campus security. The consequences here were potentially far more dire.

Their plan was solid, and they had the element of surprise in their favor, which was a good thing. Then again, surprising international art thieves – experienced criminals by definition – might not be the best idea in the world.

So it went, the pros and cons running through her mind as she crouched down in the back seat of Alex's Mercedes, hopefully out of sight from any observers. Tom was next to her, and from the constant muttering under his breath, it was clear that there were no pros, only cons, in his view.

She'd been warming up to him, but the close quarters and incessant complaints were wearing on her. She finally glared at him, just as the car came to a stop. A moment later, Alex opened his door and exited. According to the plan, they were to wait five minutes, then exit themselves. They'd head, as stealthily as possible, to the loading dock around the back of the building. If it was open, or if they could get it open, they'd go in, look for the box and, once they found it, grab it and run like hell back to the car. While they were doing that, Alex would be buying time, keeping the thieves occupied by pretending to negotiate for the box.

If they couldn't find the box, or they couldn't sneak or force their way into the

building in the first place – well, they hadn't had enough time to come up with a Plan B. So it had to work.

Of course, there was another possible outcome. Alex could be completely wrong. His thieves might not be the ones who took the box at all. Or, they might have abandoned this location weeks or even months ago. But there was no point thinking about that – if it wasn't here, Jane had no leads at all, and no choices except to inform the police and admit her failure to Professor Welldon, and to the actual owners of the stolen artifacts, too.

"This is madness," Tom whispered, for probably the twentieth time. "We can still go. Leave your boyfriend here, go to the police."

It *was* madness, but that didn't matter. They were here, and the plan was in motion. "No! We have to get that box back ourselves, that's all there is to it. And you're staying with me, so I can keep an eye on you. And," she glanced at her watch, "it's time anyway. Let's go."

She opened the door and clambered out, keeping as low as she could. She heard Tom following behind, despite his opposition to the whole thing. She could see no one: no guards, no police, no anything. She supposed it made sense – the thieves might be smart and well-informed, but they weren't supervillains. Nobody in real life had secret lairs with teams of armed guards all wearing identical jumpsuits. If Alex was right – and he'd dealt with these people before – there weren't more than three or four of them here, and they were probably all sitting down with him right now.

That's what she'd do. She wouldn't be the one left to stand outside in the middle of winter like a chump while her fellow thieves sat inside and worked out how much the profits would be. Nobody in their right mind would do that. Especially knowing that you were *all* thieves – how could you possibly trust them? "Keep your enemies closer," she heard herself say.

She laughed at herself. Jane and her brother had been next door at Mr. Parlato's house one Sunday afternoon, back when they were in fifth or sixth grade. "The Godfather" was playing on TV and, over dinner, their neighbor had preached the gospel of Vito Corleone. "You listen to me. Everything you need to know about life, it's in this movie. Any time you got a question, you got a situation you don't know how to handle, you just ask yourself, what would Vito do, and that's what you do, too."

Tom didn't hear her words, or her laughter; they were carried away on the wind. She heard nothing from him, either, as they rounded the corner, still unobserved. He remained silent as they slowly, carefully, made their way to the

loading dock. So far, things were going perfectly. Jane didn't see a silhouette in a window, didn't hear footsteps crunching on gravel, didn't notice any sign of any security.

It was only when they reached the door that she finally heard Tom speak. His voice was jittery, even more so than it had been back in the car. "We don't have to do this. We can go back to the car, give it up for a bad job. I'm not saying I like the idea, but I'd rather be sacked than spend the holidays in Frog jail."

Jane shook her head. What would Vito Corleone do, if he were in her place? As if there were any question. "Look, Tom, this isn't what I expected to be doing tonight, either. But here's the thing. If Vito was here, he'd take his box back, and that's what I'm going to do, too. And I need your help, so get it together!"

The big door, the one that slid open to admit cars and trucks, was securely padlocked. Unless Tom was hiding a pair of heavy bolt cutters in his back pocket, they weren't getting through that. But there had to be another way. Things got overlooked, there was always some detail that you could use to work around a problem. And sometimes – Jane grinned broadly when she saw the other door, the flimsy-looking one a few feet to the right of the big door – that detail was right in front of you.

"Amazing," she said, to herself as much as to Tom. "They have those big heavy sliding doors, they put a big heavy lock on them, and they don't even bother to put a deadbolt on the other door."

Jane wasn't watching Tom's eyes when she pulled out her wallet and extracted her driver's license, then slid it in the gap between the door and the doorjamb. From his horrified gasp, though, she could picture the exact expression on his face. She put that out of her mind and continued at her task. It only took a moment, and the doorknob turned in her hand. She pushed it open and walked inside.



He followed her inside. What choice did he have?

He could run, but where? He didn't have the keys to the Mercedes, or the Land Rover. He'd told himself – was it only an hour ago? – that he could open the lock of a car, but even if he managed it, he didn't know the first thing about starting one without a key.

How on Earth would he get back to his car? He could call a taxi, if there were a payphone, which there probably wasn't for at least a mile. And if he had any Frog money in his pockets, which he didn't.

No, he didn't have any other choice. All he could do was follow this

madwoman and hope the old saying was true, that God really did protect fools, drunks and Americans. And that it applied to everyone else in their vicinity, too.



twelve

(never tell me the odds)

When she finally relaxed, when she was finally convinced there was nobody in the room besides her and Tom, she looked down to see that her car keys were in her right hand. Her hand was sore; she hadn't realized it, but she'd been clenching those keys tightly for the last few minutes.

She'd learned that in a self-defense class four years ago, in her freshman year. Her campus itself was safe, but you didn't have to wander very far off of it to find yourself in less-friendly streets. There'd been a couple of incidents those first few weeks, nothing serious, but enough to put a scare into a lot of students just the same.

One of the lessons – the only one that had stuck with Jane, apparently - had been, if you don't have anything else handy, and running away isn't possible, you can do some damage to an attacker with your keys. Clearly it had sunk deep enough into her brain to become instinct. Whether she actually could bring herself to stab or gouge at another person with them was a whole other question, which, hopefully, she wouldn't have to face.

She wouldn't face it in this room, at any rate. There were two vehicles, and no people. One of them was a black Mercedes; it had to be the car the thieves drove away from the hotel in. It couldn't possibly be a coincidence; what were the odds?

The other was a white van, with the SDV logo on the side. She presumed that, if the box of artifacts really was here, it would be transported in that van to its final destination, whatever that might be. It made sense. Maybe it was already inside, just waiting for the driver?

Neither she nor Tom had spoken a word since they'd entered the building. He'd spent the entire time two feet from the door, rooted to the spot as though his feet were set into the concrete floor, while she'd shined her – well, Alex's – flashlight around for signs of life. She walked back over to him. "I've got a feeling," she whispered, and he shook his head violently.

"It can't be that easy! You don't seriously think they'd just leave it sitting right there for anyone to walk in and take it, do you?" His voice was as low as hers, but it sounded near hysteria all the same.

"Why not? If they thought anybody might walk in, they'd have better security. We have to at least take a look." Then she proceeded to do just that. Unfortunately, the van was not like the ones Mr. Parlato's company used back home. His vans, the ones he sent out to do heating and air conditioning repairs, did not have the rear closed off from the driver's seat. You could see all the way back, looking in from the windshield. But this van had a bulkhead behind the driver's seat. There was no way to know what was in the back.

Well, there was one way. She went back to Tom. "You know how break into a car, right? You were planning to break into mine, weren't you?" He just stared at her, horrified. That, Jane decided, wouldn't do at all. Vito Corleone wouldn't accept "no" for an answer and neither would she. "Look, I don't know how to do it. It's not the same trick as the door. And we need to get in there. You're the one who really needs that box anyway, right?"

"You're – you are out of your mind."

Jane smiled brightly. "I know. You've been telling me. So what? We still need to see if the box is in there."

She kept her eyes on his, waiting for him to do something. She half-expected him to throw up his hands, turn tail and run out into the frigid night. He surprised her, though. He heaved a resigned sigh, said, "Oh, for God's sake," fished his screwdriver out of a pocket somewhere, and crept towards the van.

She followed right behind him. It didn't seem wise to give him any opportunity to change his mind. When he got to the van, standing at the rear doors, he pulled on his gloves and then – nothing.

Jane knew the answer, but she asked the question anyway: "What's wrong?"

He turned and glared at her, which, she supposed, was answer enough. She kept smiling, and she had to hold back laughter when the thought occurred to her that he was actually pretty cute when he was annoyed. That wasn't something she needed to share with him.

After a minute, he turned back to the door. He reached out with the

screwdriver. Jane crowded closer to him; she was curious how this was done. Another trick to add to her repertoire, not that she'd ever need to do it herself. Hopefully.

Before he got to work, he reached out with his other hand, his empty one. His fingers closed around the door handle, and – now she couldn't hold back the laughter – it opened. They hadn't locked it! How dumb were these guys? They steal priceless, irreplaceable artifacts, and then they don't even bother to lock them up?

She shined the flashlight inside, and – this was almost too easy – the box was there. She had trouble believing it, but it was right there in front of her.

“You must be kidding me,” Tom said, shaking his head in wonderment.

“Grab it and let's go.” This was just like college; when she and her friends got up to something crazy, it was usually Jane who ended up in charge. Tom obeyed, not even grumbling until he lifted the box out and nearly stumbled under its weight. Jane reached out a gloved hand and closed the van door, then she urged Tom outside.

It was slow going; she knew how heavy the box was, and harassing Tom wouldn't make him go any faster. The last thing they needed was for him to drop it and attract the notice of the thieves.

She could hear his labored breathing over the wind. The box wasn't just heavy, it was awkward, too. She had to give him credit, though; he was doing a good job. And they were almost back to Alex's Mercedes. No one had spotted them, everything was going according to plan. In the reflection from the car's window, Jane saw the relief on Tom's face.

All they had to do now was load the box in, and hide in the back seat themselves until Alex returned, and then – what?

They'd drive back to the Land Rover, but that was as far as their plan had gotten. Back at the hotel, when Alex had returned with the information he'd gotten from the security guard, everything was a rush – he didn't want to lose any more time and let the trail of the thieves get cold. She'd agreed; there wasn't anything else they could have done.

But in that rush, there had been no discussion of how, exactly, stealing the artifacts back might lead to them retrieving Professor Welldon's pottery shards. She wanted the Bodleian Library and the British Museum to get their Third Dynasty relics back, and she wanted Tom to return home in triumph, rather than incurring the wrath of his superiors. That was all well and good, and it would earn her some positive karma. But karma wasn't the same thing as a box full of

Beaker Folk pottery that had taken her advisor a decade to collect.

Maybe now, with the box back in her possession, was the perfect time to give that question some thought. Or, maybe, there were some other questions to answer first. Was it truly a coincidence that Alex also drove a black Mercedes? Was it just dumb luck that he happened to see the sign that had led them here? Did he really not know anything about the theft? Was he really planning on returning the artifacts at all?

She'd trusted him, especially after he ran after her in the parking lot, but, was it possible that she'd been totally mistaken? That everything he'd said and done was part of an act? She hoped her judgment wasn't that faulty, and, in her heart of hearts, she didn't think it was. But she also had to admit it was a possibility.

Which meant that returning to his car, sticking with the current plan – his plan – might not be the wisest course of action. And with that thought, came several more, one after another, like dominoes falling into place.

They were standing just a few feet from Alex's car now. Just a couple more steps, but she didn't take them. Instead, she tugged at Tom's arm, pulling him away from the Mercedes. "Come on. Change in plans..."



He didn't like taking orders from insane women; that's what had landed him in this mess in the first place. But at least Jane's latest demand was one he could wholeheartedly support: ditching that Irish pretty boy and driving straight back home with the artifacts.

Tom was so relieved at this turn of events that he could feel himself actually smiling; it was the first time he'd done that and meant it since the horrible phone call from Alice.

He staggered up to the Land Rover, waiting for Jane to unlock the door so he could put the box down. But she wasn't doing it. She wasn't, as he had assumed, right behind him. He hadn't heard her, but he chalked that up to the wind carrying away any sounds she might have made.

He turned, panting from the effort of hauling the artifacts without any help at all, and there she was, jogging towards him. When she reached him, she put a hand on his shoulder and gave him what he assumed was meant to be a sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry! You were faster than I thought. Anyway, here you go," she said, unlocking the rear door.

She left him to load the box in, and by the time he'd made his way back around to the passenger side, she'd already started the car. She didn't even wait until he'd put on his seatbelt – or closed the door! – before she pulled away from

the curb and made a U-turn in the middle of *Avenue des Bellevues*.

She didn't say a word as she retraced their route back to the D-14 motorway, which was fine with Tom. This had all been too much for him; he needed the peace and quiet to try and get his head straight. He wondered if she'd head back to the hotel so he could pick up his car, but he decided that was unlikely. The woman was insane, but not stupid. That was the first place the Irishman would expect them to go. He was not thrilled with the prospect of having to retrieve the car tomorrow, or the next day, but heading straight back to England was probably safer. And however much another trip would cost, it would be far cheaper than losing his job, his flat and any future prospects of a civilized life.

Jane continued to not say a word when she reached the intersection and turned right, heading southeast, instead of left and northwest, as he expected. Heading north on the D-14 would, after an hour or so, lead them back to the A-15, which would take them straight to Calais.

Tom considered that, and thought, perhaps, she was just heading south for a few miles to throw any possible pursuers off the trail. It seemed a reasonable idea; after the hotel, the next logical assumption the Irishman and the thieves would make was that they were headed back to England by the most direct route.

But with each passing minute, as her silence accumulated, he became less convinced that was the case. When Jane passed yet another turn without any sign of planning to change her route, he finally asked, "Where are you going? We have to head north. That's where Calais is. That's where we catch the ferry."

She turned to him, smiled that lunatic smile that, in just a few short hours, he had learned to dread. "We're not catching the ferry. We're going to Spain, and we're getting my pottery shards back."



jane writes home
(part three – all about royalty)

September 28, 1990

Dear Jess,

I know we just talked on the phone the other day, but two things happened that I just had to share with you. I'm not calling again because we were on the phone way too long, and I blew my phone budget for the next two months. And there's no point emailing, because I know you don't ever check yours. So a letter it is.

First thing: I've met royalty. Actual, title-and-everything royalty. It probably won't mean much to you, with all the famous people you're meeting every day on the Today Show set (and I don't want to hear anything more about how you're "just an intern." I bet Tom Brokaw and Bryant Gumbel started out fetching coffee and picking up their bosses' dry cleaning, too). Anyway, I got to talking with the woman who lives directly downstairs from me, Melanie Harrington. She's very nice, not stuck-up at all. She mentioned in passing, as though it was just an interesting little fact, that her father is the Earl of Bristol. I'm not sure what I did, but I must have made quite a face; she was very surprised at my reaction.

Later on, I asked around, and everyone else already knew about her. It just wasn't that big a deal. I guess, if you're raised that way and it's just a fact of life, it isn't a big deal. I did a better job of not reacting when she very casually told me that she's 122nd in line for the throne. The next day I got up my courage and asked her if she kept a list and marked names off it. She laughed and said, "No, but my brother used to." And then she bought my lunch. So I think I've got a "friend in high places" now.

I only thought of this just now, but I wonder if she knows Tishy's grandfather?

He was a general in the Royal Army, and that's almost as good as royalty, isn't it? So I really have two friends in high places. And as soon as you get yourself promoted and become a famous newswoman, it'll be three!

The second thing: I finally met my advisor. Dr. Bill Welldon, from – I swear to you this is true – the Bronx! And he still has the accent. I've lost more of it in three weeks here than he's lost in twenty years. He's an amazing man, though. And – I swear I'm not making this up, either – he told me he picked me out specially. I couldn't answer him. I must have been sitting there with my jaw hanging down for ten minutes before I got myself together enough to say anything. So now I have something to live up to. As though just being at Oxford wasn't enough pressure!

So that's the update. If you want more, you'll have to call me. Maybe you can use the phone at work. There have to be some advantages to being the intern, right?

Your best friend (you'll never be replaced, not even by royalty!),

Jane 

thirteen

(I don't think you even have a plan)

“You know that expression ‘if looks could kill’ really is just an expression, right? You can stare at me like that all night if you want, but I’m not changing my mind.”

When she’d told him her new plan, Jane had worried, just for a moment or two, that Tom might try to grab the wheel or do something else equally drastic. She wasn’t sure what would have happened if he had; fighting for control of the car with a hostile passenger had not come up in her Driver’s Ed classes back in high school.

Forgoing violence, he’d settled for stunned disbelief, followed by an extended string of what Jane had to admit was pretty creative cursing. She’d smiled through all of it, and she kept smiling when he changed tactics to a one-sided staring contest. But it was starting to become tiresome. His response to her words, though, was equally annoying.

“You are insane. You understand that, don’t you? You are committing a crime. You are making me a party to crimes. Do you honestly not realize that?”

The smile fell from her face, and Jane sighed. “What crime?” Really, she thought, she shouldn’t have to explain this. It wasn’t that complicated. “I was told to pick up a box in the basement of the Institute, and drive it to Professor Welldon in Mallorca. That’s still what I’m doing.”

Jane glanced over, mainly out of curiosity. She wondered precisely what color his face was. It appeared to have passed straight through the usual visual spectrum and was well on its way towards ultraviolet. With great effort, he managed to keep his voice almost under control, though. “It’s the wrong box!

It's our artifacts, not your pottery pieces!"

"Yes," she agreed. "But I only have your word on that. You don't have a badge, or a warrant or even a nasty letter to prove it." She could feel the frustration emanating from him in increasing waves, and she held up a hand towards him. "I know it's the wrong box! But the point is, it's not the wrong box *officially*. As far as anyone outside this car knows, I'm carrying pottery in the back of the car. You see what I mean? There's no crime. The box isn't stolen."

"But it is! The blokes back at the warehouse stole it from you, you stole it back, and you are continuing to steal it!"

Jane wanted very much to point out that you couldn't "continue to steal" something; you either stole something, or you didn't. But that might be the final straw for him, it might push him into doing something rash, and she did not need that. Instead, she tried, again, to reason with him. "Look, you're here, the box is here, you're in the same car with it. So you know where it is, you know it's safe." That was, she knew, a relative term at the moment, but she didn't give him the chance to point that out. "We're just going to drive into Paris, and we'll see if Alex meets us..."

He shouted something. Jane couldn't quite tell what; she suspected he might have been trying to say two or three things at once, and they all came out together in a jumble of anger and spittle. It only confirmed that she'd been right not to mention that part of the new plan to him until now.

"It's foolproof." That almost certainly wasn't true, but saying it out loud made her feel better all the same. "I thought it through." That also wasn't true, except by the loosest possible definition of "thought." She went on, talking fast to forestall his inevitable objections. "He might have found something out from the thieves. He might know where the pottery shards are. It's worth taking a little risk to find out." That part was true, more or less. She left out the fact that she couldn't honestly say that her brain had sole responsibility for her decision to leave him a note.

"What did you do?" His voice was barely controlled. Jane heard notes of hysteria creeping into it.

"It's fine! He might not even find the note at all." In the moment, it had seemed like a reasonable thing to do. She'd left the note on the underside of the sun visor on the passenger side of Alex's car. It wasn't in plain sight, but with any luck he'd figure out what she'd done, and look for a message. If he did it quickly, everything might still work out.

"A note?" Tom's voice was no longer controlled. There were still sounds

coming from him, but Jane couldn't understand them. She wasn't sure even a dog's ears would register them. She let him go on; she knew from experience that once someone got to the dog-whistle stage, there was no talking them down. You had to wait until the madness ran its course.

While Tom sputtered and yelped, Jane kept her focus on the road. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning, and fatigue was beginning to set in. This was not a good time for it. She needed her wits about her to navigate the streets of Paris. She imagined that Paris, like her hometown, never really slept. It seemed likely that there'd be traffic even at this hour. And once she got where she was going – assuming she could find it in the first place – she'd need to be sharp both to make arrangements for the car and to talk with Alex. Assuming he found the note, and took her at her word, and managed to follow her without being followed himself, of course.

Tom had, finally, run out of synonyms for “insane” and gone silent. Maybe, she decided, telling him how unlikely it was that Alex would find them might cheer him up. Besides, he did need to know the plan before they got to their destination. “Chances are, even if he does find the note, he won't get there in time anyway.”

“Get where?” The words came out in a gravelly whisper. Jane felt a moment of sympathy for her passenger; his throat was probably very sore from all the yelling.

“I told him to meet us at the Hotel Ritz Paris at three AM. I said we'd wait fifteen minutes, and if he didn't show, then it was on to Plan C.”

It had been the only place she could think of on short notice. That particular hotel was only in her mind at all thanks to the disastrous afternoon practicing in the Jaguar last week. At one point, Melanie had mentioned that she and her brother stayed there whenever they had to be in Paris. But it was perfect. There would be a garage, where the car could be stashed out-of-sight. There would be people around, even at three AM, so she'd have witnesses in case Alex was tempted to try anything desperate. It all made sense.

“And what is Plan C?”

Jane sighed. She knew the question was coming, and all she could do was give Tom an embarrassed grin. “No idea. If he's not there at three-fifteen, I guess I'll figure it out then.”



Despite his anger, Tom couldn't help but find a small bit of amusement in his current situation. Memories of some of the reckless things he and his brother had

done in his younger days poked their way to the forefront of his brain. And in his not-so-younger days as well. That business at Blackpool with his brother and the identical twins on holiday from Oslo had happened only two years ago, after all.

He also had to admit that if he had to be stuck in a car with a raving lunatic in pursuit of stolen artifacts, it didn't hurt that the lunatic was easy to look at.

None of that, unfortunately, altered the central fact: Jane didn't know what she was doing, and he could see a dozen ways the box might be lost again.

Even more unfortunately, short of knocking her unconscious and commandeering the car, he could see nothing he might do that would improve his odds of returning home with the artifacts in his possession.

fourteen

(I've got a bad feeling about this)

So far, things were going better than Jane could have hoped. The traffic was light, and she'd only gotten in two near-accidents as she navigated the streets of Paris. It had taken her a few minutes to recall the entire conversation with Melanie, and to remember that her friend had specifically mentioned where it was: on the *Place Vendome*, not far from *Notre Dame* and the *Louvre*.

Tom had contributed what little he knew about the streets in the heart of Paris, which actually turned out to be helpful. They'd gotten to the general area with little difficulty; it was only now that they were basically right there that she was having trouble. She'd assumed there was an underground garage for the hotel. The plan depended on that. She needed the car safe and out of sight.

But if there was a garage, she wasn't seeing it. Nor was her passenger. "Have you thought about your Plan C yet?"

She hadn't, but she had to admit it was looking like it might be time to begin coming up with one. Except – was that an entrance? She wasn't sure, but there was a man in a frilly red uniform standing by a large double door she hadn't paid any attention to on her previous three circles around the block. Could he be the parking valet?

It was worth a shot. Jane drove right up to him, hitting the brakes too close for the man's comfort. He leapt back, but just as quickly seemed to recover his composure. He came around to her window. "*Mademoiselle?*"

She hoped to God he spoke English. There was only one way to find out. "Is this the garage for the hotel?"

Jane caught the hint of a frown, but, again, it was gone as quickly as it had

appeared. “*Oui*. Yes, mademoiselle. You are a guest of the hotel?”

She was pretty sure answering honestly would not get her a space in the garage. “Yes. I mean, *oui*.” She had no reservation, but a story came immediately to her. “My best friend, Jess, she’s with NBC News? You know, Tom Brokaw?” The man nodded. “I’m meeting her. I got sidetracked,” that earned her a frown, “I mean, I picked up a hitchhiker, I would have been here two hours ago otherwise. Anyway, I finally made it.” She turned to Tom, silently praying he’d follow her lead. “As promised, here you are. Downtown Paris. End of the line.”

Tom did, without even any visible reluctance. He exited, giving her a nod of the head and a mumbled, “Thanks, Miss.” She hoped he’d walk around to the hotel lobby, rather than heading to the nearest policeman and enlisting official help to reclaim his box.

He probably wouldn’t. Even if he did, it would be his word against hers, and she suspected that a French policeman would more likely side with a young American woman than a thirty-year-old Londoner. He had to know that as well as she did. Besides, she’d caught him looking at her in the car, and more than once she’d seen something other than exasperation in his eyes.

Either way, she had to get out of the car and let the valet drive it into the garage. “This is my father’s car,” she told him, meeting his eyes. “Nobody touches it, nobody gets in it, nobody gets near it.” A stern gaze wasn’t enough to ensure he’d follow her instructions, Jane knew. There was another requirement, but without any French money, she couldn’t fulfill it.

Yes, she could. She pulled one of her traveler’s checks, worth a hundred pounds, out of her purse, along with a pen. The valet understood immediately. He was too professional to smile, but the recognition in his eyes was easy to read. “What’s your name?”

“Jacques,” he answered, followed by a last name he had to repeat three times before she got it down. He took the check, and gave her a valet ticket in return. “No one will touch it, Mademoiselle. You have my word.”

“You keep that word and there’s another hundred when I pick up the car.” With that, Jacques opened the garage doors, got in the car, and drove it down the ramp.

She checked her watch. It was a quarter after two. Even if Alex had found her note immediately, even if he set off right away, he had to be at least ten or fifteen minutes behind her. Enough time to use the restroom, go to the hotel bar and get some caffeine into her, and prepare for his arrival.

Fifteen minutes, and one detour to the concierge desk to cash in two more

traveler's checks later, Jane sat down on a comfortable black leather chair and took a sip of her triple espresso. Tom was already there, and he did not look happy. She could guess what he was going to say to her, and she had no interest in hearing it.

"Hi, Tom," she began in a bright voice. "Before you say anything, I have to warn you. If I hear one word about how I'm crazy, or a lunatic or anything else like that, I'm going to throw this," she gestured with her cup, "in your face. And just so you know, it cost me fifty francs, so please don't make me do it, OK?" He shook his head, and a half-smile that had to be involuntary slowly appeared on his face. He muttered something Jane couldn't hear. "You'll have to repeat that," she said, not at all sure she actually wanted him to.

"My grandfather warned me about Americans," he said, sighing, but still half-smiling. "He was right, God love him."

Jane knew better than to ask what the warning was; she was fairly sure it would break the rule she'd just given him. Instead, she laughed. "I'm glad I'm living up to expectations, I guess." She patted his arm, hoping he'd take it as intended, simply a friendly gesture. "Look, just so we're clear. I understand how valuable the artifacts are. They have to go back to the Bodleian Library. That's obvious, I know that. Any other time, I'd be happy to drive you back to that hotel, put the box in your car and wish you good luck home."

He nodded along with her. "But this time?"

"This time," she took a deep breath, "I can't take you back, and I can't let the box out of my hands until I get the pottery back. Or at least until I give it my best shot. Professor Welldon worked for ten years to collect it. I owe it to him to try." She heard the note of pleading that had crept into her voice. What else could she say, though? It was the truth.

It was also the truth that even if she weren't Professor Welldon's student, even if she didn't fear for her place in his program, she'd still be doing this. She'd grown to like – maybe even love – the old man in the few months she'd known him. It was impossible not to, really. How could she possibly give him anything less than her best effort?



He had to admire her bloody single-mindedness. There was no getting around it; it was impressive. Then again, so was a lightning storm, or the big cats on the nature shows when they chased down a poor, innocent gazelle. He wished he could admire Jane the way he admired them – safely, from a great distance.

He was tempted to do just that; walk away from her right now. But aside from

the practical considerations, he didn't have the heart to leave her to face the Irishman alone, assuming he came at all. He also didn't trust her resolve; he'd seen how she'd looked at him, back at the hotel out in the suburbs. And if the Irish could do one thing well, it was talk. Especially ones like that Alex; there was no denying the man had a silver tongue. He might charm the box right out from under her before she knew what was happening.

No, better to stay and be sure. So he sat and chatted with Jane, sipping the dreadful tea he'd bought. He'd have expected a hotel that probably charged five hundred pounds a night for a room to be able to make better tea than the swill they'd served him, but they *were* French, after all. He only hoped he wouldn't have to order a second cup before whatever was going to happen, happened.



He walked into the lobby at precisely 3:14 AM. Jane was watching the big grandfather clock, the one that had probably been in that very spot for a century, when she saw Alex.

She'd been waiting for the clock to hit 3:15, and wondering what, exactly, her Plan C might be, but now it didn't matter. She could tell the instant he caught sight of her; half a dozen expressions flashed across his face in the space of a heartbeat before it settled on a wary smile.

"Miss Barnaby," he said, in a breezy tone that, she was certain, did not reflect his true feelings. "You're a woman of your word. Not that I doubted it for a moment." She had to admire the way he told the lie so calmly and easily. "And your new English friend, too. Such a pleasure, Mr. – I didn't catch your surname earlier."

"No, you didn't," Tom growled. It was only now that Jane realized there might be reason for hostility between the two men beyond the obvious. It rarely came up in the Middle Common Room, but "the Troubles" were in the news often enough. She had no time for a civil war, though. If they wanted to fight, they could do it after she had her pottery back.

"Boys, behave. I need both of you helping me, right?" She turned from one to the other, giving each man her brightest, most hopeful smile. "We can all get along, we're all adults here, we're all scholars, aren't we?" Both men relaxed, not much, but enough to satisfy her for the moment. "Good. That's much better."

Alex sat down across from her. "I agree. Much more civilized. As I said, I knew you'd be here. It was a very clever trick, although the gentlemen at the

warehouse were not especially pleased.”

Jane shrugged. “I’m not sorry about that. They’re thieves. They shouldn’t be pleased.” She did feel somewhat guilty about leaving Alex to face their wrath, but he looked unharmed. They didn’t even give him a black eye, as far as she could tell.

“Yes, well, I can’t say I’m sorry, either. It did take some fast talking to convince them I had nothing to do with the loss of the artifacts.” He grinned, and this time Jane believed there was real humor behind it. “I imagine it helped that my surprise at finding you gone was quite genuine.”

She could picture the scene: Alex walking out to his Mercedes to find it empty, and then the thieves running from the loading dock, hurling curses at him in rapid French.

Her mental picture was jarred loose; it felt, just for a moment, as though there’d been an earthquake. And had there been a loud crash, too? Yes, the sound was echoing through the lobby. She could hear the murmuring all across the lobby, and then Tom was up and running for the main entrance. As he went, he shouted over his shoulder, “You stupid bloody mick, they followed you!”

Jane needed only an instant to understand exactly what Tom meant, and she was up and after him. She was only three or four steps behind him when he threw open the door, and she saw a sight that belonged in a movie. The valet she’d so generously tipped was running alongside her Land Rover, both hands clutched around the handle of the passenger-side door. The car couldn’t have been going more than ten miles an hour, but, still, the poor man couldn’t keep it up for more than another few seconds.

Tom sprinted out, faster than Jane would have thought possible, trying to get in front of the car. She assumed that his plan was to force the driver to stop. Considering that whoever was behind the wheel of her car had just smashed through the garage doors, however, she wasn’t convinced he was right.

She shouted at the top of her lungs, hoping Alex had done the sensible thing and followed her, “Alex, get your car! Now!”

She heard footsteps behind her, first closing in and then trailing off. She didn’t bother looking to see if it was Alex or not; she was focused on the Land Rover. It reached the corner, and Tom crossed in front of it. But, as she suspected, the driver had no intention of stopping, and he leapt out of the way just in time. An instant later, the valet fell away from the car with two sounds that Jane didn’t think she’d soon forget: an unholy howl of pain, and a deafening crack that had to mean a broken bone.

She ran to her valet, Jacques. His right leg was bent at an impossible angle, and it was covered in blood. She leaned down, and, not sure what else to do, she reached out and grabbed the whistle that hung around his neck, held it to her lips and blew. It only took seconds for more red-uniformed hotel personnel to come running, and right behind them she heard a car approaching.

A door was thrown open; the warm air of the car's interior washed over her, and she felt arms lifting her up. Tom's, she assumed. He shoved her into the passenger seat, then pulled himself in beside her, pulling the door closed. "Go, you great bloody idiot!"

Alex went, accelerating into the left turn around the corner. Jane saw – hoped she saw – the Land Rover two blocks ahead. "Follow them!"

"What do you imagine I'm trying to do?"

Tom, still panting, let loose a string of curses. "You're so bloody smart, right? Mr. fancy-car, sweet-talking, look-at-me-I-know-everyone bloody art expert! You let them follow you all the way here, and you had no idea!"

Alex's hands were nearly white from gripping the steering wheel so tightly. He shouted right back at Tom, "How was I supposed to know I was being followed? This isn't one of those stupid American car-chase movies! This is real life!"

Under other circumstances, Jane would have been doubled over with laughter. Now, though, all she could concentrate on was what the Land Rover ahead of them was doing. "He's turning! Follow him!"



When Tom was ten years old, his father had taken him to the cinema. It was the new James Bond movie, the first one Tom had seen. He had been thrilled, and for weeks afterwards, he imagined himself in the role, engaging in dramatic chases through foreign cities in fancy cars with a beautiful woman at his side.

Here, now, engaged in precisely such a chase, Tom wished for nothing more than the ability to travel back in time twenty years and slap his younger self until every such romantic notion was beaten out of him. As a second-choice wish, Tom would happily take the opportunity to beat Alex senseless, but, as he was driving, that seemed unwise.

Unwise though it might be, the thought was quite satisfying. He wondered, momentarily, if the resulting crash and likely fiery, painful death, would be worth it, for the joy of knocking the Irishman unconscious.

Reason prevailed; Tom held his fists, and even his tongue. But it was a close-run decision.

sixteen

(you're not very good at this, are you?)

Her Land Rover was still in sight, still only two blocks ahead of them. She assumed the thief wasn't heading in any specific direction, but was simply trying to lose them.

Alex was doing his best to stay on the Land Rover's tail, but it clearly wasn't easy. She could see the beads of sweat on his brow, and she had a good guess as to what he was muttering under his breath.

They rounded another corner, Alex taking the turn too fast. Jane was thrown up against Tom, who was thrown against the door. She cringed at the thump of his head hitting the window, and rather than pull away from him once the car straightened out, she took his head in her hands, turned his face to her.

His eyes were open, and clear. It didn't look as though he had a concussion, or any other injury. His hands reached up and took hers, holding them for a moment. She wondered, odd as it seemed considering the circumstances, if he might be about to kiss her. She wondered if she'd let him.

"Bloody hell!"

Alex's shout broke the moment. Jane dropped her hands from Tom's face and whirled around to see what had caused his outburst.

It was a bus, moving through the cross street, a block and a half ahead of them. And directly in front of the Land Rover. Her car had already begun turning before she saw it, and now it was nearly sideways.

As they approached, the Land Rover kept moving for another second or two, only coming to a stop when it was halfway onto the sidewalk. All worries about Tom forgotten, she reached across him and opened the door. The car hadn't even

stopped yet before she was clambering over her stunned companion.

As soon as she was clear of the car, she ran towards the Land Rover. She could see clearly now, there were two men in the front seat. Neither of them seemed to be moving very quickly; she hoped they, too, were stunned. Maybe they'd both been injured – it had been a violent maneuver, they could easily have hit their heads. As she ran towards them, the passenger-side door opened and one of them, who looked to be about her father's age, stepped out onto the pavement.

He walked directly into Jane's fist. As her punch connected, she heard the curses spilling out of her mouth and, despite herself, despite the situation, she couldn't help but blush and wonder what her father would say if he could hear her right now.

The man's head snapped back and slammed against the side of the car, and he slid down, unconscious. Jane's embarrassment disappeared as quickly as it had come. She'd knocked the man out with one punch – she'd punched two men in one day! The madness of all of this hit her suddenly, and it took a supreme effort of will to keep control of herself. She could analyze everything later, but there was still business to attend to. The driver of the car was still there. He was frantically looking back and forth between Jane and something on the other side of the car, his blue beret nearly sliding off his head as he did.

The thing on the other side of the car was Alex. He was banging on the driver's-side window. Jane climbed into the car from her side. "I think you'd better open the door and get out of my car," she told him. She had no idea if he spoke English or not, but between her waving a fist menacingly at him, and Alex's increasingly insistent hammering on the window, he got the message. On his way out, he glanced over to Jane and said something in French that she assumed was quite rude. He pushed past Alex once he was outside, saying something to him, too. Then he was gone, down the street, around the corner and out of sight.

She didn't give Alex the chance to get in; she slid behind the wheel, noting that the key was in the ignition; they hadn't hotwired the car. The sensible thing to do would be to turn the car off, remove the keys, and take a good look all around to see what further damage had been done by the thieves in their escape from the hotel garage. Once that was done, anyone else, anyone remotely sane, would wait for the police and give a full statement, and turn the box – it was still there in the back of the car, thank God – over to them. Let Tom and the Bodleian Library and the British Museum and whomever else sort the whole mess out. Then, anybody with any sense at all would take the car to a garage and call

home, begging her father to wire enough money for whatever repairs could be made in a day or two. Then, and only then, that hypothetical rational person would continue the drive to Mallorca, tell Professor Welldon everything, and beg his forgiveness.

Jane, of course, had no intention of doing anything of the kind.

Instead, she closed the door, cutting Alex off in mid-sentence. Not that she heard the beginning of it anyway. She put the car in reverse, allowing Tom to climb into the passenger seat before she backed off the sidewalk. At first, the car didn't want to move; something was caught behind one of the front wheels, she guessed. She had no interest in getting out to see what it might be; that would only give Alex the chance to try and talk sense into her. She floored it instead, and with a bone-crunching bounce, the car finally moved.

In her mirror, she saw Alex running back to his Mercedes. That was fine. She didn't plan on going far – at least, not just yet. For the moment she only wanted to get back to the hotel and square things there. That would – she hoped – satisfy them and keep the police out of things. Then she could have a chat with Alex and find out what he knew about the thieves.

“Where are you going?”

Tom's tone was hesitant, as though he was afraid to hear the answer. Jane couldn't really blame him if he was. “Back to the hotel. I've still got my valet slip,” she said, grinning. He had no answer for her words, or her smile. Again, she couldn't blame him.

It only took a couple of minutes to get back to the hotel, just in time to park behind an ambulance. Poor Jacques, her brave valet, was being loaded in. She turned the car off and removed the keys – nobody else would be driving off with it tonight! – and went over to the injured man. He was awake, and clearly in a lot of pain. She reached down, touched his cheek. “*Merci*,” she told him, and then to the EMT's, “Wait! Just one minute, please!” She pulled out another traveler's check, quickly signed it over to Jacques and placed it in his hand. “I did promise. Get well soon!”

There were half a dozen hotel employees staring at her when she turned away from Jacques. One of them – the hotel manager, maybe – walked up to her, opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Jane held a hand up.

She knew exactly how to handle this. Back in college, over Christmas one year, Tishy's grandfather had come to visit from England, and he'd invited Jane and all her other friends to dinner. Something had happened, Jane couldn't remember exactly what, but it had infuriated old General McCall. She *did*

remember the calm but absolutely icy tone with which he'd addressed the Maitre D', and how quickly the Maitre D' had scrambled to address whatever it was that had so offended Tishy's grandfather.

Jane took a second, no more than that, for the memory to wash over her. She stood up as straight as she could, looked the manager in the eye and did her best to channel her friend's grandfather. "I must say, I'm shocked. With the reputation of this hotel, I never imagined anything like this could happen." She handed the valet slip to the man, still not giving him the chance to speak. "I already have my car, so I think this concludes our business. I expect you will explain matters to the local authorities, and I will not pursue the matter any further. I would rather not dwell on this debacle any further. Good evening to you, sir."

She didn't wait for a response, she just turned on her heel and marched back to the car. She didn't dare look back to see what the manager was doing; she didn't know how long she could keep the façade up.

She turned the car back on, put it in gear, and before Tom had even closed the passenger-side door, she was pulling out into the street again. As she did, her self-control collapsed, and she began laughing hysterically. "I can't believe I did that! And it worked! I just – oh, my God, this is the craziest night ever, isn't it?"



Tom had no idea where Jane intended to go now. He very much doubted that she did, either. She was clearly operating purely on instinct at this point, making decisions as they came up without anything resembling a plan. Just in the last five minutes, she'd nearly kissed him, punched out the man who stole her car and berated a no-doubt snooty-as-they-come Parisian hotel manager.

He wasn't sure whether to be curious or terrified about what she might decide to do next. Best to be both, he decided. There really was nothing else he could do. And, he had to admit to himself, nothing else he really wanted to do.

seventeen

(don't worry. she'll hold together)

Jane had been driving for nearly half an hour, and Tom was not protesting at all. He wasn't asking what her plan was, he wasn't calling her a lunatic, he was oddly – maybe even troublingly – calm about everything.

He wasn't sure if he was just temporarily shellshocked, or if he'd suffered a complete mental breakdown. He did have nearly the same expression that Ferris Bueller's best friend did, after they killed his father's Ferrari.

Up ahead, she saw what had to be a restaurant. The building had no lights on, but there was a parking lot, and that's all she really needed. She pulled in, parked beside a lamppost and got out of the car. She needed to take a good look at the Land Rover and see how badly it had been damaged, and she had to talk to Alex, too. He'd been there, a few car lengths behind her, all the way from the Ritz, and here he was now, parking a couple of spaces away from her.

The left front headlight was smashed. She'd known something was wrong with it, as it hadn't been working for the last half hour, but hadn't known quite how bad it was.

It was bad – completely destroyed. As for the front grille, "That's not so bad," she said, to herself as much as to Tom or Alex. "Five minutes in a decent body shop, it'll be good as new." The scratches – gouges, really – all down the passenger side, from just below the front door handle and the whole length of the car, would take a little more work. None of the windows seemed to be damaged, thankfully. And the makeshift plastic window in back had – somehow – remained intact the whole time.

As far as the engine went, the car was running perfectly. Granted, the engine

protested every time she shifted gears, but it had been doing that all along. Definitely a case of pilot error rather than mechanical failure.

All in all, Jane saw no reason the car couldn't make it all the way to Mallorca as it was. Obviously it would be preferable to get it repaired and present a pristine vehicle to Professor Welldon, but much more important was presenting his pottery to him. That was out of her hands, though – any hope of retrieving it depended on Alex.

He walked up to her, giving her his most charming smile. Jane wasn't surprised; he'd had plenty of time to calm down and put on a good face for her. She wondered if his presence might snap Tom out of the state he was in. She wasn't entirely sure that would be a good thing, considering his earlier hostility.

Alex stopped just a couple of paces from Jane. All she could think, seeing him this close for the first time in a little while, was that he must have some sort of turbo-boost for his charm, because it was getting through to her. She knew she probably couldn't and definitely shouldn't trust him, and yet she was vanishingly close to breaking down and apologizing to him for everything that had happened.

The voice in her head screaming *all of this is his fault!* was being drowned out by other voices, most of them originating elsewhere. She reached over to Tom, who had walked up next to her, grabbed his arm for moral support. She squeezed his forearm, probably hard enough to leave marks, but the Englishman didn't react. He was still in his fugue state, if that was what it was called. Jane supposed she ought to have paid more attention in the one psychology class she'd taken back in college.

"I trust you've had a pleasant drive?"

If Alex had turned the power on his smile up to eleven, then the lilt in his voice was right off the charts. Jane squeezed Tom's arm even tighter to try and keep control of herself. "It was fine, thank you. I'm glad you were able to follow us." She did her best to ignore the messages coming up throughout her body that "glad" didn't really begin to describe the feeling.

"And I am glad you picked such a lovely spot to stop and chat." Jane was certain that Tom had to be losing feeling in his right hand, with the iron grip she had on him now. She didn't let up. "We do have so much to talk about."

Jane couldn't understand where her sudden urge to skip the talking entirely and move on to other activities came from. No, that wasn't true. She understood perfectly well. What she didn't know was, why now, and why were they so overwhelming? Hadn't she nearly kissed Tom only a little while ago? Didn't she

suspect Alex of – well, she wasn't sure precisely what, but definitely something bad? And since when did she let her hormones take charge like this anyway?

Maybe it was the fatigue. That could be it. It was after four o'clock in the morning. She'd been awake for close to twenty-four hours straight. She hadn't eaten a proper meal since before she'd left Oxfordshire. Her blood sugar was probably all out of whack, and she was most likely dehydrated, too, on top of desperately needing sleep. All that was a perfect recipe for poor decision-making and loss of control.

That was good, though. Knowing you had a problem was the first step to dealing with it. She just had to keep from making any irrevocable choices until she could get some food and water into her. She could handle that. She'd had more than her share of all-nighters, hadn't she? How often had she drunk enough wine, or the horrible forty-proof vodka from the grocery store just off campus, to knock a lesser mortal flat for a week, and kept her wits about her anyway? Jane wasn't going to let an empty stomach and a tired brain defeat her now.

Besides, she had an ace in the hole. She could shove Tom at Alex, get the two men fighting, and escape while they were busy beating the snot out of one another. Having an Irishman take a swing at him would surely snap Tom out of his current state, and the ensuing fight would probably buy her at least ten or fifteen minutes. That would be plenty of time to drive away from here, get off the highway and disappear into the French countryside until she could find a motel somewhere that they'd never be able to follow her to. Then she could eat, sleep and shower, and when she felt more or less human again, she could continue on to Mallorca and hand over the artifacts to Professor Welldon with her apologies.

It wasn't a good plan, really, but as last resorts went, it could be worse.

She'd been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't realized Alex was still talking. "Jane? Are you quite all right?" She nodded, forcing her attention back on him. With his next words, all thoughts of last resorts went right out the window: "I was just saying, I know exactly where to find your pottery."



Ever since they'd left the hotel, back in Paris, Tom had been "out of it," a dreadful phrase he'd heard Jane already use on several occasions in the short time he'd known her. It described his current mental state perfectly.

He wasn't even worried about getting the sack. It seemed very probable now, but there wasn't anything he could do about it, and at some point his brain had simply decided to stop fighting the inevitable. If Jane wanted to drive straight

through until dawn, heading Heaven only knew where, than that's what she was going to do. If she changed her mind and decided to stop and have a chat with the Irishman, well, that was out of his hands as well. If she suddenly sprouted wings and claws, snatched up the box of artifacts in her newfound talons and soared away into the night sky, he'd be fine with that, too. It was as likely as anything else, at this point. Nothing could surprise him, nothing could shock him.

Except for the Irishman's words to Jane, and what they meant. The instant he heard them, it was as though a jigsaw puzzle suddenly came together. A puzzle he hadn't even realized he was working on, and without a picture to guide him in assembling it.

This was all Alex's fault, the Irishman was behind *everything*. Right from the beginning, from the moment he'd been dispatched to the bowels of the Institute of Archaeology to drop off the box in the first place. It all made sense. And this American madwoman was listening to him, eating up every bloody word, without the slightest idea who she was really dealing with.

eighteen

(who do you trust?)

Tom wasn't saying anything, but he had come back from whatever mental vacation spot he'd been visiting for the last half-hour. Jane could feel the change in him by the way he straightened up, standing nearly at attention now.

She let go of his arm; his sudden reawakening broke whatever spell Alex's voice was casting on her. It happened the instant Alex had said the word "pottery." She glanced over to get a look at Tom's face, and his distrust of Alex was clear enough to read from a mile away. The rational part of her agreed; there was no reason on Earth to believe him, and a million reasons to get away from him as quickly as she could manage it.

She didn't. She just smiled, an innocent smile that she was certain Alex saw through immediately, and said, "Really?"

"Indeed, Jane." Alex turned his charm up even higher. Jane wasn't sure how that was possible, but he was doing it.

Maybe he didn't see through her act. Maybe he really thought she was in his power, that she was helpless in the face of his strong chin and the lilting song of his voice. That was fine with her. "The driver told you, didn't he? After he got out of my car, before he ran away, he told you then, right?" She put what she hoped was just the right note of eagerness into her voice.

"Actually, Jean-Louis said, 'this is even worse than that business with Aunt Reggie and the stamps. I'm done with it.'" Alex waved a hand carelessly. "I have no idea what he was talking about. But in any event, I found out back at the warehouse. I was about to tell you when your car was stolen from the garage."

That had been part of the plan at the time; Alex would find out whatever he

could from the thieves while she and Tom looked for the box. Her part had worked perfectly; was it possible that Alex's part had, too? Even if he was trying much too hard to charm her, could he still be telling the truth? "Well, we're here now, and nobody can sneak up or surprise us."

Tom still hadn't spoken, but Jane could see from another brief glance that it was taking all his willpower to keep silent. She appreciated him making the effort.

"The gentlemen back at the warehouse didn't steal your pottery. The people that did, didn't open the box they took until they got it to France. They took it right out of the basement it was in, in Oxfordshire. They took the ferry over, a day ahead of you." That fit with what Tom had told her. He'd brought a box down to the Institute of Archaeology on instructions from a co-worker a couple of days ago, and one of Professor Welldon's assistants must have delivered the pottery to the room next door, around the same time.

The thieves simply made a mistake. Whether Tom had put his box in the wrong room, or whether the thieves had gotten their wires crossed, who knew? She'd had trouble reading Professor Welldon's writing; she hadn't been sure if she was meant to go to Room 16 or Room 18 herself. It hadn't mattered because the thieves had already gotten there and made the choice for her.

"When they finally got where they were going, they opened it up, and you can imagine their surprise." Jane noted the vagueness there; she assumed Alex knew exactly where that was and, for whatever reason, didn't want to say. She didn't challenge him; she kept up her happy façade instead, and he went on. "They knew they couldn't go back and steal the right box, but they had the label on your pottery, they knew where it was supposed to go."

"They're headed to Mallorca!" Jane couldn't help herself; the words just poured out. "They're going to wait there until I show up and try to trade, the pottery for the artifacts!"

She knew she'd said too much. Alex's eyes lit up, just for an instant, when she mentioned Mallorca. That was something, obviously, he *hadn't* known. But he caught himself almost immediately, and so did she. She wondered if he knew that she knew he was putting on an act. She wondered if he knew that she knew that he knew she was, too. And she wondered if she had any aspirin in her purse, because that train of thought was giving her a headache.

"I believe that's their plan now, yes. But to use your term, that's their Plan C."

"Plan B was hiring your friends from the warehouse to steal the box out of my car, wasn't it?" He nodded, not even wincing at her use of "your friends." He

was a good actor, there was no denying that.

Tom remained silent. Jane didn't think it could last much longer; she only hoped Alex would say everything he had to say before her English companion snapped and took a swing at him. "Precisely. I imagine we're done with them. Henri is surely in the hospital by now. He's the one you knocked unconscious. Jean-Louis is – I think you would say 'lying low.' I can think of a dozen women who would happily help him hide from the authorities as long as he needed."

He'd mentioned that name before. Back on the ferry, Jane recalled. It was too much of a coincidence to think that the Jean-Louis with the amazing liquor cabinet and the Jean-Louis who'd stolen her car were not the same man. Alex had given himself away in the first few minutes, and she'd had no idea. But there would be time for self-recrimination later; she still had a box of pottery to retrieve.

She played over her own words and saw another problem. "Lucky him," she said, hoping that her smile was still convincing. "But the thing is, if the original thieves think Professor Welldon would make a deal like that, they've got another thing coming. He would never do it." She knew how much effort had gone into collecting the Beaker pottery, how much backbreaking labor. Despite all that, he wouldn't trade the product of someone else's equally hard work to get it back.

She wouldn't make that trade, either. Not in a million years. The Egyptian artifacts belonged in a museum, and she was going to do her part to make sure they ended up there. But Alex didn't have to know that.

"No," he agreed. "But it's not up to your professor, Jane. He's not here. You are. It's your decision."



It was killing him to stand here and listen to this, but Tom was managing it. The Irishman was tempting Jane with a devil's bargain, and she was giving every indication that she was seriously considering it.

She *had* looked over to him, caught his eye just for an instant, and he'd taken that to mean she was fully aware that she was being fed a steady diet of lies. But he couldn't be sure. He might have misinterpreted her. He couldn't deny that his history with reading nonverbal communication from the fairer sex was somewhat less than stellar.

Even if he had been right, she might have changed her mind. God alone knew how her thought process worked. She was honest; that, he was certain of. But honest people were often the first ones to fall prey to smooth talkers. And if you tried to warn them, they never listened; he'd learned that the hard way. Maureen,

his baby sister, wouldn't hear a word when he'd tried to tell her that her boyfriend was a liar and a thief, and those were his most positive qualities.

The boyfriend had robbed her blind; she was still paying off his debts three years later. And rather than being grateful for his attempts to help her, she'd blamed Tom for "trying to poison me against Robbie," and their relationship was just as chilly today as it was the day she discovered Robbie had emptied her bank account.

No, warning them never worked. Going for the Irishman's throat wouldn't work, either. He was no fighter, really. And if he did try it, he might push Jane over to Alex's side for good. The only thing he could do right now was bite his lip and hope his self-control didn't fail him.

nineteen

*(there's a fine line between
genius and madness)*

This trip was proving to be educational, if nothing else. In the past few minutes, Jane had learned something new: French truck drivers were every bit as ill-tempered as American ones when you cut them off on the highway.

Poor Tom had lost what little color remained on his face when the eighteen-wheeler blasted his horn at them half a kilometer from the exit onto route D-445. Jane didn't care how angry the trucker was; all that mattered was that dangerous maneuver had accomplished its purpose: Alex's Mercedes was gone from her rearview mirror. He'd already been losing ground on them, but Jane kept it up for another fifteen minutes, driving more recklessly than she ever had in her life.

When she got to the next exit, onto route D-810, she crossed two lanes of traffic to barely make it off the highway. She was sure there would be a motel somewhere along this road, someplace for them to rest for a few hours. She knew she wasn't finished with Alex; he'd catch up with them again. But not until after she'd slept, showered and eaten a proper meal, if Jane had anything to say about it.

Tom obviously agreed. "I was hoping you didn't believe that pack of lies he was trying to sell you," he said, once he'd calmed down a bit.

"Not for a second. And I'm sure you've got more to tell me, too, but it can wait until we find someplace to stop."

Fifteen minutes later, they did. It was a clean-looking motel on the *Rue Jean Jacques Rousseau*. Jane handed over three hundred francs, and received a key to a room on the back side of the building, which was a blessing – even if Alex somehow figured out which exit she'd taken, and luckily managed to guess

where she'd gone after that, he still wouldn't see the Land Rover even if he drove right past the motel.

Tom hauled the box into the room while she ransacked the vending machine in the hallway – another thing that was apparently universal, besides rude truck drivers. All the items were labelled in French, of course, but it was difficult to mistake a candy bar in any language. Besides, the way her stomach was growling, she was prepared to eat anything that looked even vaguely like food.

The clock read 4:12 AM when she and Tom sat down to their meal of stale-but-edible chocolate bars and watery coffee. “Now you can tell me whatever it is that had you so itchy back with Alex.”

He did. The words gushed forth like water from a fire hose. As he went on, he got louder and angrier, and his accent got thicker and thicker. She could barely understand him once he really got going, but she picked up the main point of the story. He was convinced that Alex was behind the whole plot to steal the artifacts in the first place, and that his co-worker, the woman who'd asked him to put the artifacts in the basement of the Institute of Archaeology, was working with the Irishman.

“Deirdre! That's the name! Alice's flatmate, Deirdre! I should have known! Another bloody Irish, they're all thick as thieves, aren't they? Deirdre was the connection, she put Alex into contact with Alice.”

Jane had to stop him. That seemed like an awfully big leap to make. “This Deirdre, you think she's working with Alex just because she has an Irish-sounding name?” Tom stared at her as though she'd just denied that one plus one equaled two. She had to force herself not to laugh. “Fine. My mistake. Go on. Please.”

“I don't know if they're brother and sister, or if she's his girlfriend or maybe they're both, for all I know. But I guarantee you, they know each other. That's how it had to happen, don't you see?”

Jane didn't. Tom gave her the same incredulous stare again before he went on. “Alice told Deirdre about moving the artifacts to the museum. Deirdre told Alex, and he got the bright idea to steal them.” Now Tom made a face that Jane could not adequately describe; it was so far beyond “sneering” that she thought a new word ought to be invented for it. “But he wouldn't do it himself. Not our pretty Irish lad, no. Too much work, that was. No, what he did then, I can tell you exactly. He called his Frog friends, and he made a deal with them. He gives them the location of the artifacts, tells them when there won't be any security around, and they pay him off. Then he cuts Alice in, and who's left holding the bag when

all he does is what he's told? Poor old Tom, that's who."

Other than the part about Deirdre, whose only crime was probably having an excessively Irish-sounding name, Tom's theory sounded quite plausible. The thieves had to find out about the artifacts from *someone*, after all. And the only people who could have known where they were, were Alice, Tom himself, and the British Museum personnel who were supposed to pick them up.

Three possibilities. Except there weren't, really. If the men who were meant to collect the box and take it to the British Museum wanted to steal it, they would have just done it themselves. Why would they need to hire some Frenchmen to come and do it for them? So that was out.

And obviously Tom wasn't involved in any plot. Which left Alice. Tom had had a lot to say about her, none of it very pleasant. He was obviously biased against her, but Jane couldn't argue the point: she pretty much had to be the one who provided the information to Alex, or to the thieves directly.

She wasn't yet convinced that Alex was the mastermind of the entire thing. He was involved, no question. But the thieves could have contacted him after they discovered they had the wrong box. Or *they* contacted the guys from the warehouse, and they brought Alex into it. Maybe they didn't want to cross the Channel and risk getting caught, so they reached out to a local, someone they'd dealt with before.

That was all possible.

On the other hand, Tom could be right, that Alex was the one who reached out to the thieves in the first place. What did she really know about him? Everything he'd told her could be a lie. He might not even work at the Saatchi Gallery. It wasn't as though she had any easy way to check that part of Alex's story. She could find a payphone, and, sure, she could track down a phone number for the Saatchi. But it was a big place, and they probably wouldn't give out any information about employees.

She could ask Alex for a business card, when they met up in a few hours. But even that wouldn't be any proof, really. Anyone could get a fake business card printed. And the phone number on the fake card would, surely, have an answering machine set up to fool anyone who went that extra step to try and check.

But all that would have to wait, because right now Jane felt herself fading, and she needed to work out the sleeping arrangements before she collapsed. "I don't mean to be rude, but I did pay for the room, and, besides, chivalry and all, so I'm taking the bed." There was only the one bed in the room. It was a queen, big

enough that she could have shared it with Tom and still had plenty of space to herself. But that definitely wasn't an option.

"Fine," Tom said. He didn't sound surprised. "I've slept on the floor often enough." Jane imagined that it was more often a matter of him passing out on the floor and none of his friends bothering to pick him up and put him on a bed or a couch. Probably because they were passed out right beside him. To be fair, though, there had been nights like that for her and her friends, too. She was in no position to pass judgment. She was simply grateful he didn't make a fuss about it.

With the question of the bed settled, Jane next checked the perimeter, making sure all the windows were locked, as well as the deadbolt on the door. Then she dragged a chair over to the door and wedged it under the doorknob. When she was done, she turned to find Tom staring at her, and, she thought, barely holding back laughter. "What? I just want to be sure, OK?" If she were really being sure, there was more she could do, but at some point, she had to trust someone. "Look, by rights I ought to make you sleep in the bathroom and use the other chair to jam that shut, too, and lock you in there for the rest of the night. I'm taking a chance on you, so show a little respect, will you?"

Her trust only went so far, however. When she climbed into bed five minutes later, she held her car keys tightly in her hand. She'd set the box down on the other side of the bed, nearest the wall, so that if Tom got it in his head to try and steal it while she was asleep, he'd have to walk around the bed to get it. And, while he was in the bathroom, she put a couple of water glasses on the floor a few inches away from the box. If Tom did try anything, he'd either step on the glasses and scream bloody murder, or trip over them and make a huge commotion. Either way, she'd wake up in time to stop him.

She could think of nothing else to do, and as the clock struck five AM, Jane finally drifted off to sleep.



She snored!

Of course she did. He shouldn't have expected anything less. Everything else had gone wrong today, why should this be any different?

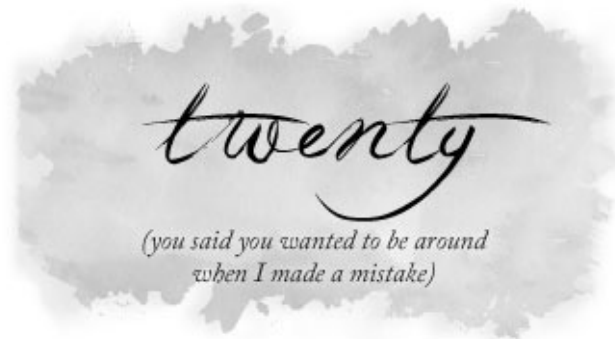
Before this whole business with the artifacts had started, if he'd been offered the opportunity to spend the night in a hotel room near Paris with a pretty American girl who also happened to be a little bit crazy, he would have leapt at the chance. He'd have said, "Sign me up, mate! What could possibly go wrong?"

He had his answer now.

His back was already sore after only half an hour of lying on the hard floor. Every time he began to fall asleep, there'd come a terrible, almost inhuman sound from the bed. What made it worse was that it wasn't even regular. If her snoring had a pattern, he could get used to it, put it out of mind. But it was random, both in the timing and the volume, and it was clear he wasn't going to get to sleep anytime soon.

At the moment, his greatest desire was to go back in time a few days and smack his hypothetical younger self until that week-ago Tom came to his senses. He built up the scene in his mind, picturing every detail of how he'd approach his past self, what he'd say and how many times he'd have to hit week-old-Tom before the message got through to him.

The idea of literally beating himself up was probably, he realized, not indicative of great mental health, but at least it was a distraction from the hideous and irregular sounds emanating from the bed. If losing his mind was the only way to try and put himself to sleep, so be it.



Jane was grateful that the bathroom was actually in the room. She'd heard horror stories from some of her classmates about hotels where that wasn't the case, and the misadventures that happened when several strangers in different rooms shared one bathroom.

The best thing about it was being able to bring the box into the bathroom with her. She didn't really think there was any possibility of Tom running off with it while she showered, but there was no point in taking chances.

She was in and out in ten minutes, which was close to a personal record. She didn't want to keep Tom waiting; he was already in a foul mood, and there was no reason to make it any worse.

Not that she could fault him. Sleeping on the floor couldn't have been comfortable, and it had only been four hours of sleep anyway. He also had to be starving, because she was, and since he weighed probably fifty pounds more than her, he needed that much more food than she did.

She emerged from the bathroom clean and feeling almost human. "All done! If you want to shower, too, we've got time. We're still ahead of schedule." It was just nine o'clock, and the original schedule had her departing from the hotel right now. But that hotel was sixty miles northwest of here, which meant she had a whole extra hour, maybe even two.

On the other hand, she might lose that hour or two just south of Orleans, where Alex would be waiting to meet up with them. Assuming, of course, he kept up his end of the arrangement they'd made last night. He had no reason not to, as far as she could tell. As long as he saw a chance of ending up with the artifacts,

or profiting some other way from this whole mess, he'd be there.

"No need. I'm fine," Tom said, derailing Jane's train of thought.

She sniffed in his direction, and all it took was one whiff to know he was wrong about that. She considered the various ways she might tell him, before settling on what seemed like the least offensive. "You'll feel better. And we really do have plenty of time." She hoped he wouldn't force her to escalate to one of the ruder options. If it came to it, she'd have to; she had no intention of allowing him back into the car smelling like *that*.

It took a couple of minutes to convince him. "Oh my God, you must feel so gross," was what finally clinched the deal. Once he got in the shower, he took his sweet time, which surprised Jane. She hadn't figured him for someone who'd primp and preen forever in the bathroom. By the time he was done, they'd lost most of one of their extra hours.

They lost the rest of it and half of the other one in a little café half a mile down the road, but there was no helping it. They were both ravenous, and neither of them displayed exemplary table manners. Jane was pretty sure that, in the eyes of everyone else in the café, she'd confirmed every single stereotype of the Ugly American, and maybe invented a couple of new ones. But she'd never see any of those people again, and, besides, she was properly fed for the first time in more than twenty-four hours, which left her feeling too good to care about anyone's opinion anyway.

The good feeling stayed with her for the next two hours. She made excellent time, the car seemed to be in perfect working order, and she was finally able to focus on the scenery around her. She'd almost forgotten that Christmas was only a week away, but the signs of the season were visible as she cruised down route A-10. One of those signs was a beautiful handpainted billboard on the side of the road announcing a *Marche de Noel* in the town of Chevilly. According to another sign, this one an official road sign, Chevilly was only six miles away.

No, six kilometers, which was even better. They'd be there in less than five minutes. "We should stop!" Even knowing basically no French, it was obvious what the sign meant. And after the all the madness of yesterday – and the craziness surely still to come – she could definitely do with an hour of something as normal as Christmas shopping.

"Stop where?"

"Didn't you see the sign? It's a Christmas market. A real French country Christmas market! It'll be fun!" As she was behind the wheel, Tom didn't really get a say in the matter, but it seemed wise to allow him to believe he did. He

hadn't seen it, and he wasn't thrilled at the prospect. "They'll probably have wine. I bet you can get a really good deal."

The prospect of quality wine at a bargain price convinced Tom. His disdain for all things French clearly did not extend to their alcoholic beverages. With the matter settled, Jane turned her attention to actually finding the *marche*. She exited the A-10, but quickly realized she was heading the wrong direction. It took a harrowing U-turn that nearly cost her the driver's-side mirror, but she got them back on track. From there, the colorful signs led them straight into the center of the little town. She passed a whole series of tents and wooden booths, some of them quite large, and parked the Land Rover in front of a bank on the *Avenue du Chateau*.

"Let's synchronize our watches," she told Tom when they got out of the car. He rolled his eyes. "I've just always wanted to say that." Another eye roll. She supposed she deserved it. "But seriously, it's one o'clock now. So long as we're on the road again by two, we're good. Come on."

She peeked into every tent, and spent every franc in her wallet. She even took pity on Tom and gave him a hundred francs to buy some of the wine she'd tempted him with. In return, he served as her pack mule with a minimum of grumbling. Between the cheese, the wine, the bread and the handmade wooden ornaments she planned to send home to her father, her brother and Jess, her companion was carrying four heavy bags back to the car.

The car which now had what looked suspiciously like a parking ticket on the windshield. And which had another one about to be placed there by a serious-looking woman in what Jane had to admit was a very stylish uniform. "No! We're leaving! Please don't!" Jane shouted as she ran towards the woman.

The woman stopped in mid-ticket and looked Jane up and down. "*Madame*, you are American?"

"Yes. I mean, *oui*. I mean, yes. But no. I'm not a *madame*." Jane held up her left hand to display the absence of a ring. She couldn't say why she felt it necessary to correct the meter maid, or whatever they were called in French, but it seemed important to do so nonetheless.

"*Mademoiselle*, I was about to order this vehicle removed." Jane's heart stopped for a moment. Removed? Towed? And there was the tow truck, just turning onto the street, probably not even a hundred feet away. How on Earth would she ever get the Land Rover back?

But the woman said "was." Jane focused on that detail, hung her hopes on it, and on the chance that the woman might take pity on a young American. The

fact she spoke English was probably a good sign. Wasn't it? Besides, until the car was actually hooked up to the tow truck, there was still hope. That's how it worked back home, at least.

"But you're not now, right? I mean, I'm sorry I parked illegally. I didn't know. But I'll pay the fine." She had no French currency left, but she did have one traveler's check remaining. Surely that would be enough. She took the ticket off the windshield, scanned it quickly. She couldn't read most of it, but she did note the spot where a checkmark had been made, next to the notation "100F."

"*La Mairie* – how would you say, City Hall, I think you would call it – is closed until tomorrow. You cannot pay until then. And it is not merely the parking fine. This vehicle is not – ah, English is difficult – not in a legal state. Your headlight is broken, and your rear window," she gestured to the plastic covering the back of the car, "mon Dieu, you must be chilled to the bone driving in it."

That did not bode well. Obviously that was the second ticket "la maid de meter" was writing. If she was right about the parking ticket, a hundred francs was no problem, but being stuck here the rest of the day until the City Hall was open, was. And who knew how much the ticket for driving an unsafe car – or however they described it – would be? On top of that, it was obvious they were just passing through, and if the woman had any sense at all, she'd know that Jane was very unlikely to come back through town to pay the fine, if they drove away now.

Which, no doubt, was why she'd summoned the tow truck.

Back in sophomore year, she'd talked her way out of a speeding ticket. Jess had been with her, and Jane felt herself going red as she recalled precisely what they'd said – and, much worse, what they'd implied – to a young and handsome Ohio highway patrolman. Thank God he'd had a sense of humor and didn't call their bluff.

Even if she were willing to go that route here, it wouldn't work on this woman. Or would it? Maybe it wasn't a question of what was said, but who said it.

She gave Tom a tiny nod, and he stepped forward. By the time the tow truck driver had his vehicle lined up in position to hitch up the Land Rover and take it away, the parking woman was smiling warmly, and she said something to the tow driver in French. He protested, but she shook her head firmly, and that appeared to be that.

"There is still the matter of the hundred francs," she said, once the tow truck had gone.

“We’re headed to Spain,” Jane replied. “There must be something we can do about it now, isn’t there?”

“Yes, we’re on a tight schedule,” Tom agreed. “But I’m sure you can help us.”

It turned out she could. Ten minutes later, and minus one full bag, Jane and Tom were on their way, the ticket torn up.

The parking woman had insisted on the wine Tom had bought as the price for forgetting about the whole thing. Jane tried gamely to comfort him. “It shows you have good taste. Doesn’t that make you feel a little better?” His icy glare suggested that it didn’t. She wondered if offering him the wine she’d bought might console him, but that bottle was intended for an evening by the fire in the Middle Common Room telling Melanie Harrington all about her adventures.

Maybe a loaf of bread and some fancy cheese whose name she couldn’t pronounce would be good enough instead. It would have to be, because the only other thing she could think of to offer by way of apology was a kiss, and she was very sure – well, pretty sure – she didn’t want to go there.



He simply didn’t know what to make of Jane. One minute, she was calling him a disgusting slob and demanding he get in the shower immediately, the next minute she was giving him a moony stare that could only mean one thing.

He had to admit that the shower had been a good idea. He was fairly certain that Jacqueline the parking enforcement woman would not have been nearly as cooperative had he still smelled the way he did when he woke up this morning. And Jane had not appeared the slightest bit jealous when he’d been chatting Jacqueline up; to the contrary, she’d basically pushed him at the woman.

So why had she been behaving so oddly from the moment they’d gotten back on the highway? She’d glance at him, with those eyes, as though she were ready to pull off to the side of the road and get down to snogging at any moment.

He understood the girl was out of her depth, and, perhaps more importantly, she knew it herself. When people got themselves into situations they couldn’t handle, sometimes they reacted very strangely indeed. It was like the robots on “Star Trek” when Captain Kirk would confuse them with illogic. They would have a short circuit or blow a fuse, and then who knew what they’d do?

The thing about that, though, was, sometimes the robots self-destructed. They blew themselves up, and everyone nearby got hit as well. He hoped that if Jane was going to go off like one of them, she’d provide enough advance warning for him to take cover. But he didn’t think he could rely on that. And, worst of all, he couldn’t say whether her snogging him – if she ever did – would be a sign of

normal service being resumed, or imminent explosion.

twenty-one

*(you don't really think
you'll win, do you?)*

By Jane's estimation, they were only ten minutes from the rendezvous point when Tom asked the question she'd studiously avoided since they retrieved the box from the warehouse last night.

"How do we even know the artifacts are still in the box?"

"We don't," she answered. The directness, and calmness, of her words did not go over well with him.

"And you see no problem with that?"

She laughed. What else was there to do? "No, I don't." She didn't look over at him, but she knew he was giving her the same unbelieving stare he was so fond of. "Look, it *isn't* a problem. Seriously. First of all, we couldn't open the box right now even if we wanted to. Not unless you've got a pair of bolt cutters hidden in your pocket that I've been missing all this time, anyway." Now she did glance over, and she saw his expression of disbelief had relaxed a bit, and she went on. "Besides, think about it. After we stole it back, they followed us all the way to Paris and tried to steal my car. What does that tell you?"

He had the good grace to actually answer her, which surprised Jane a little. "The same thing it tells you, I imagine. They wouldn't have gone to all that trouble if the artifacts weren't still in the box. Which means..."

"They still are," she finished for him, smiling brightly. "Like I said, it isn't a problem." Hopefully, anyway. It all sounded logical, and she did actually believe it, but there was always the possibility she was wrong. She hadn't paid attention to the lock on the box when she'd picked it up back in Oxfordshire. It was a padlock, sure, but was it the same padlock that now kept the box sealed shut?

She hadn't examined it closely. She thought it looked the same, but she couldn't honestly swear to it.

Was it possible the thieves had double-crossed one another? She had no idea how many of them there had even been back at the warehouse. Maybe the two who'd come to Paris and stolen the Land Rover had been cheated by their own allies. Maybe the artifacts were on their way right now to some shadowy private buyer who would display them in their own personal collection. After all, "honor among thieves" was just something from the movies. Real life didn't work that way.

There was no point worrying, though. There was absolutely nothing she could do about it, so she did her best to put the idea out of her mind. She was going to plow onwards under the assumption that she was still carrying the real artifacts. What else could she do?

Thankfully, Tom didn't pursue the subject any further. Jane needed all her wits about her to navigate the last couple of miles to the little café overlooking the Loire River that Professor Welldon had recommended. "Best croissants I've ever had. And it's only a little out of the way," he'd said.

There it was, and there was Alex's Mercedes. It was empty; she assumed he was already saving a table for her. Or perhaps he was watching from a hidden spot across the street, waiting until she and Tom went inside so he could swoop in and steal the box right out of the car.

Even if he was inside himself, he might have allies. Who knew what sort of deal he might have cut back at the warehouse? She couldn't risk leaving the Land Rover unattended. "I hate to do this to you," she told Tom, and he nodded his understanding. He didn't expect her to turn the car off and remove the keys, though.

"Oi! It's bloody cold! What am I supposed to do without any heat? Just sit out here and freeze, and you aren't even leaving me the radio to listen to Frog music?"

She didn't really think he'd seize the chance to drive off and leave her stuck here. Not now that they'd spent so much time together; she thought she had a good handle on him and how he thought. But it wasn't impossible. "I said I hate to do it. But, yes. No heat, no Frog music. I won't be long, though. And I've got a good article about Copper Age building techniques in the back seat if you get too bored."

She didn't wait for him to answer, but he was loud enough that she could hear him perfectly well even after she got out and shut the door. He was very creative

with his profanity, she had to give him credit for that, if nothing else.

When she stepped into the café, she saw her guess was right; Alex was there, wearing the same clothes he'd had on yesterday. She decided to take the offensive; when she sat down across from him, she looked him up and down, gave him a half-frown and said, "I guess you didn't make it to Jean Louis' apartment last night after all."

His eyes went wide for a moment; that was round one to her. "I saw you driving up. Your English friend didn't change, either. I imagine he's rather ripe this morning." Jane shook her head sadly. That was a weak response. Round two to her as well.

"Not at all. We both showered," she told him. He could take that however he liked.

He didn't rise to her bait. "I'm grateful, for your sake. A lady shouldn't have to tolerate foul odors, certainly not for hours at a time." No, a lady shouldn't, Jane agreed wholeheartedly with that. "But why isn't he with you now? The tea here is excellent." He saluted her with his cup.

Round three to Alex; he knew perfectly well why Tom wasn't here, and she wasn't about to admit it to him. Instead, she excused herself and ordered a double espresso and two of the famous croissants. When she returned, he lifted an eyebrow at her purchase. "You bought one for me? How charming."

"No, they're both mine. Didn't anyone at Brookfield ever teach you not to assume? *Especially* where a lady is concerned?" That one, Jane thought, was a draw. The way she figured it, she was ahead on points, but it was time to stop sparring and get down to business. "Apparently not. But did they at least teach you not to double-cross a lady and try to rob her blind?"

There was the same flash of anger she'd seen back on the ferry. That had been less than twenty-four hours ago, but it felt like ages. His anger was, just as it was yesterday, gone as quickly as it had appeared. "I did neither of those things." He spoke calmly, evenly, in full control of himself. "And I think, if you really thought I had, you wouldn't be sitting here chatting with me."

Jane wasn't at all sure that was true. But she went along with it for the moment anyway. "Fair enough. But you don't seriously expect me to believe it was just a coincidence that we were on the ferry together, and then the hotel, do you?"

He took a moment to answer, and Jane had a good idea what was going on in his head. How much should he reveal to her? Did she know more than he thought she did? "No. But I would like you to believe that after our brief dinner date at the hotel, I decided to back out of the deal. Once I got to know you better,

I couldn't allow you to get hurt." His eyes held hers as he said it. She saw none of the supposedly telltale signs of a lie. And – she hated to admit it – he sounded so sincere, it was making her heart melt. Not just her heart, either.

But it was cold outside, and nothing there was melting. She reminded herself of poor Tom, freezing out there in the car, standing watch against robbers who probably weren't even there. "I believe you," she said, and she thought she might even mean it. "But I remember something President Reagan said, too. 'Trust, but verify.' You know what I mean? There's too much going on, and I can't just take your word without something more."

"What else can I do? What would satisfy you?"

Jane gripped the edge of the table tightly to keep herself under control. Did he have to say it that way? She forced her mind back outdoors again, into the cold. What *could* he do that would really be proof of his good – or at least reformed – intentions?

"You can tell me everything. Starting from the beginning, and ending up with how you're going to help me get my pottery back." She still wouldn't really know if he was telling the truth, but the more he talked, the more chances there were that he'd trip himself up if he wasn't. That would have to be good enough, because she didn't have any better ideas.



He could take the box and leave. For reasons best known to herself, Jane was in the café letting that Irish wanker sell her yet another pack of lies. God alone knew how long she'd be there; he probably had enough time to find a car rental shop and get started back to that hotel north of Paris and his own car. The way the Irishman loved the sound of his own voice, Tom might be fifty miles away before Jane came back out to discover an empty Land Rover.

He could do it. It would be easy. He had his credit card, and he was fairly certain he'd made his regular payment last month. He shouldn't have any problem renting a car; surely there'd be someone there who spoke English, even here in the very heart of Frogland.

He could do it. He could end the madness, save his job, return to the Print Room a conquering hero. But he didn't.

He wasn't sure why. It wasn't that he had fallen in love with the tall American girl. He wasn't even thinking about the possibility of shagging her, not really. She was pretty, and he imagined her madness would enliven things in the bedroom, but the God's honest truth was, she was ten years younger than him, and a student and – not that he'd ever admit this to any of his mates – it just

didn't feel right.

If she forced the issue, he doubted he would, or even could, say no – he was only human, after all. But she'd have to take the lead, drag him into the bedroom, or onto a couch or wherever else lunatic American girls liked to conduct their intimate business.

His internal debate was interrupted by a knock at the window. It was the lunatic American girl in question, and she was alone. He looked behind her, and then all around the car just to make sure nobody else was lurking, waiting for him to unlock the doors to make their move. But – as her countrymen said in the movies – the coast was clear.

"I'm sorry," she said, as soon as she climbed in and slammed the door shut. "I really am. I know it's cold out here. But it was safer this way. And, anyway, I doubt he would have been nearly as talkative if you were at the table with us."

"If you believed a word that Irish..."

She cut him off. "How stupid do you think I am?" She shook her head, clearly realizing she'd set herself up for the obvious response. "Don't you dare answer that. Anyway, of course I don't believe him. But it doesn't matter."

Tom was confused, which he'd come to realize was an occupational hazard when speaking to Jane. "Why on Earth not?"

"Because even if everything he said was a lie, it's the only lead we've got to where my pottery is." He noted that she said "we" rather than "I." He wondered if she even realized it. "And also because, according to him, the pottery is right where we're going anyway. The original thieves are in Barcelona. So I don't see that we have a choice." There was the "we" again. Twice in ten seconds.

Were they a "we?" They'd come this far together, hadn't they? What was another few hundred miles?

The truth was, he couldn't help but be a little bit curious to see the pottery Jane was willing to cross a continent, break a dozen laws and throw all reason and common sense to the winds in order to recover.

And, if there was even the slightest chance of putting one over on the Irishman, sending him home empty-handed or, even better, landing him in jail, that was surely worth another day of his time, wasn't it?


"I see," he said. He put on his best posh voice and went on, "if it were done when 'tis done, 'twere well it were done quickly."

Jane surprised him. She answered in a passable English accent of her own. "Screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we'll not fail." He stared at her, and she switched back to her usual voice. "What? You think just because I'm

American, I've never read any Shakespeare?"

"Then you know how it ends." He laughed; the first genuine laugh he'd had since leaving Oxfordshire. "I'm with you. I'll help you get your pottery back. But if I hear you say 'out, out, damn spot,' the deal is off. Agreed?"

She extended a hand; he shook it. "Agreed." She turned on the car, buckled her seatbelt and pulled out onto the street. "Let's go to Barcelona already!"



jane writes home
(part four - sibling rivalry)

November 10, 1990

Dear George,

As you can see from the postmark on the envelope, I'm still in England. I have not "washed out" or "packed it in" or, my personal favorite, "come crawling home with my tail between my legs." How would that even work, anyway? It's not anatomically possible, even if I had a tail.

I have not been driven mad by the weather, or the thick accents and the different spellings of everyday words, or the inability to watch new episodes of "Star Trek: the Next Generation." They do actually show it here, every Wednesday night. We all get together in the Middle Common Room to watch. Shows what you know.

Besides, I'm sure you don't even have a Middle Common Room back there at Cornell, do you? Certainly not one that C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien once sat in. I could be sitting in the very same seat that the first draft of one of the Narnia books was written in. Where are you sitting to watch "Star Trek?" Some crummy dorm lounge with ugly furniture that doesn't match the carpeting, to judge by the photo you sent last month.

Seriously, how are you doing? That last letter was cryptic, even for you. I can only assume that you have a crush on the "study partner" who "isn't pulling her weight" but whom you "aren't ready to cut loose yet." Does she have a name? Perhaps you could describe her, using words of more than one syllable, in your next letter?

I understand that boys mature more slowly than girls, so you may not know how to express your feelings to her. If I were there, or if international phone

rates weren't so outrageous, I could give you some advice in person. As a substitute, I'm enclosing Jessica's phone number. Call her. She'll be happy to explain the birds and the bees to you, in as much detail as you need. You shouldn't feel awkward about talking to her. We're as close as sisters, or maybe closer than we would be if we actually were related, so you should think of her as family, too. Someone needs to point you in the right direction, and since I can't be there to do it, Jess will have to take my place.

As for me, I really am doing well. I love my classes, I love my advisor, I love Magdalen College and I love don't totally hate the weather.

Your loving (really!) sister,,

Jane 

P.S. I don't have the heart to lie to you. They do show "Star Trek" on Wednesday nights, but they're three years behind. They're running episodes from the first season, so I have to sit there and pretend I don't know what's going to happen. Feel better now?



twenty-two

(I could go for miles and miles and miles)

“Only a hundred and fifty miles to go,” Jane said, once the traffic thinned out and she could look at the directions without risking disaster.

“Good Lord!”

Jane sighed. Tom had begun this leg of the journey in good spirits, but it hadn’t taken long for the French countryside to lose its charm. She wasn’t sure what had changed; they’d begun by quoting Shakespeare at each other, hadn’t they? According to a few of her classmates, that was the equivalent of heavy flirting, or maybe even a serious make-out session. What had gotten into him since then?

Maybe that was the problem; maybe she’d gone too far and freaked him out. She decided to try a different approach. “France is big. Can’t help that. We’ve got another two hours to go. We could play Auto Bingo, it might help pass the time.” She looked over, saw him mouthing the words repeatedly. “Maybe you call it something different. My brother and I used to play it on long trips. You have a card with all the things you might see along the road, like a bingo card, you know? And you mark them off when you see one.”

“And you were how old when you did this?”

Jane heard the insult in his tone, but she chose to ignore it. “It was fun! Maybe it’s an American thing, I don’t know. But, you know what, we don’t have cards anyway. How about eye-spy, instead?”

Tom’s silence indicated he hadn’t heard of that game, either. “Oh, come on. Seriously? You do take children on car trips in England, don’t you? Eye-spy? One person looks out and picks something, and she says, ‘I spy with my little

eye, something,' well, you can go with the first letter, like C if it's a car, or what color it is, you see what I mean? And then everybody else has to guess what it is."

"I spy with my little eye something starting with a C," Tom said in a bored voice.

Jane sighed again. "You're not getting into the spirit of this *at all*." It was going to be a long two hours.



It ended up being an interminable three and a half hours. They ran into terrible traffic about halfway into the drive. An accident closed the highway for nearly an hour, and when they finally did get moving again, Tom was in such a foul mood that Jane gave up on any effort to engage him in conversation.

Jane pulled into the garage of the *Hotel Belle Inn*, only a mile past the off-ramp of the E-11 highway. She was grateful for the covered, hidden parking. Just like last night, Alex – or someone working with him – wouldn't be able to spot the car from the street.

Even better, there was a proper restaurant in the hotel. The croissants had been good, if not world-class as she'd been promised, but they had only temporarily sated her. She needed a real, sit-down meal.

Once their room was sorted out – two beds this time, to Tom's great relief – and the box safely locked away in the closet, they went down to dinner. Jane still didn't know what had caused his sudden change in mood on the drive; he'd given her no further clues. She suspected her initial theory, that she'd scared him with her unintentional forwardness, might be correct.

Despite that, she asked him all the usual get-to-know-you questions over their meal, as though they actually were on a first date. That thought occurred to her just as he was telling her about his siblings, specifically his younger sister. "So that's Maureen. Don't get me wrong, I love her, but she can be a right idiot sometimes. Most of the time, truth be told."

She began to say something about this feeling like a date when she realized what might be the matter. His sister was twenty-four, only two years older than Jane. And heaven knew she'd made more than her share of idiotic decisions the last two days. Maybe he saw some of his sister in her? If that was true, his weird mood swing made perfect sense. He was thinking of her as a little sister, someone to be protected, and at the same time he was attracted to her, and he was having trouble reconciling those conflicting thoughts. And here she was making them conflict even more.

If she was right, pointing it out would likely not help matters. All she could do was try not to send him any further mixed signals, which was much easier said than done. It had never been difficult back in college, with Mark. She never felt as though she were tip-toeing across a minefield when she was with him. Not even when she flirted with him, or he with her. Things were easy with him. Even after they slept together, it wasn't weird or strained. But here, with Tom, and with every conversation she had with Alex as well, she was measuring every word, watching out for the misstep that would detonate a mine and blow her legs off.

What could she do but keep going? She had to get to the other side of the minefield, and that was several hundred miles and two more days away. So she did her best to keep her tone casual and stay away from the most embarrassing stories when the conversation turned to her life.

She couldn't help herself, though, once she got onto the topic of her college friends. She went on and on, straight through dessert and coffee and then a second dessert. When she finally stopped, after the bill was paid and they were headed up to the room, he whistled and patted her shoulder. "You and my sister. I've never known anyone who could talk like her, but I think you have her beaten. I must say, I'm impressed."

"You really miss her, don't you?" She hadn't meant to say that; the words just slipped out, and there was no recalling them.

He answered back with barely controlled anger, "What do you think?" and then went silent while they waited for the elevator and then rode it up to the fourth floor. But when she opened the door and gestured for him to go in first, he met her eyes and said, "Too right I do." Then he gave her a sad smile. "You should meet her. You'd get along like a house on fire." She'd heard that phrase before, and nobody had ever been able to explain to Jane's satisfaction why that should be a good thing. But he obviously meant it that way.

"Maybe someday I will. I'll be at Oxford for at least another year, and she's got to come to her senses sooner or later, right?"

He was still holding her eyes, and she thought there might be the very beginning of a tear starting to think about forming there. If he began crying, she would have to comfort him, and that couldn't lead anywhere good. That would put her firmly in "potential conquest" territory rather than the "surrogate little sister" camp, and she needed to avoid that at all costs.



If he were being honest with himself, Tom would have to admit that he was not

the most self-aware person in the world. Or even in whatever room he happened to be standing in at the moment. But sometimes he would come across an insight so blindingly obvious that he could not miss or misinterpret it.

The reason he didn't feel right about the possibility of shagging, or even snogging, Jane was that he saw quite a bit of his sister in her. She'd gotten him to talk about Maureen, and once he did, there was no mistaking it. Not that the two girls looked anything alike, but they had the same spirit, and the same willingness to make bad decisions and carry them straight to their illogical conclusion.

Fine. He saw her as a little sister, maybe even one he could protect the way that he hadn't been able to with Maureen. But that didn't mean she saw him as an older brother.

There were moments when he thought she might view him that way. Her exasperation in the car, her efforts to get him to play childish games – Maureen had been the same. But then she'd look at him the way she did when they came up to the room, staring into his eyes, as though she was trying to see straight through to his heart, and that was not something a sister did.

Or maybe he'd been right all along, and she was simply a madwoman.

A madwoman who fell asleep the moment her head hit the pillow, apparently, if the snoring from her bed was any indication. It was going to be another very long night.

twenty-three

(the game's afoot!)

Tom had been weird at breakfast. Jane didn't think too much of that, because he'd mostly been weird the whole time they'd been together. After her realization last night, she'd begun a conscious effort not to send him any mixed signals, but that went out the window the moment she woke up this morning.

For one thing, she didn't drag the box into the bathroom with her when she showered. She meant it as a display of good faith, but he could have taken it very differently. Then, after she was out of the bathroom and sitting there on her bed in her pajamas, going through her luggage, she narrowed her choice of sweater for the day down to two, and she asked his opinion. It didn't occur to her until after the words had escaped her mouth that he might think she was asking something more profound than whether he personally preferred light green or dark green.

So it went through breakfast, and for the first few minutes of the long drive to the Spanish border. They had two hundred and eighty miles to go and watching every word was going to make this the longest day of her life. But then Tom raised a topic that was guaranteed to dampen any flirting, intentional or not. "Even if the Irish," he caught himself, took a deep breath, "if Alex, told you the truth yesterday, not that I believe it for a moment, how do we know the pottery is still in Barcelona anyway?"

"We don't." There was no point in pretending otherwise. "But it's not as if we have any other leads. If it's not there, we go to Plan – I don't know, we're probably up to Plan Q by now. We bring the box to Professor Welldon, we tell him the whole story, and we let him call your bosses and the British Museum

and sort it all out.”

Tom didn't like Plan Q, and spent the next hour trying to talk her out of it. Jane refused to listen to his arguments. “I'm not thrilled about it, either. As it is, I've gotten his car wrecked when it hasn't been off the lot two days yet, and I don't have the pottery he's been collecting for more than a decade. I don't think he's going to be very happy with me. But he's – look, he's a professor at Oxford, and everyone respects him. Everyone loves him. We have to trust that he'll smooth everything over. I don't see what other choice we have.”

She was lying; Tom had laid out the other choice very clearly, and repeatedly. Turn around right now, drive back to England, return the box to the Bodleian Library, call home and have her father wire her enough money to get the car fixed and then figure out how to explain it all to Professor Welldon.

Another hour was occupied with Tom, having given up on a frontal assault, raising various practical objections to the plan. “Fine. Let's assume the thieves are really in Barcelona, and they really do have the pottery there. And let's even assume that Alex,” he spat out the name, “is really going to help you. These are thieves, and they are professionals. How do we know they aren't lying to him? Do you think he really knows how many men they have, if any of them are armed, or anything else we need to know?”

Jane had thought about the possibility that the thieves would have guns, but only in a remote way, a theoretical possibility that was interesting but not particularly relevant to her. Tom was right, though. It was very relevant. She had no idea what she might be walking into.

She was a New York City girl, a Bronx girl, and she took pride in knowing how to handle herself. But for the most part, that involved knowing where not to go and how not to get herself into situations she *couldn't* handle. That wasn't the case here. She didn't know the territory, she didn't know the people or the rules, and Tom didn't, either.

And yet she still didn't change her mind. She thought back to her last conversation with Alex, at the café in Orleans. She wanted to believe she'd so charmed him in their first meeting, aboard the ferry, that he'd turned his back on his allies and given up on stealing the artifacts. The idea was seductive, even more so than his strong chin and melodious voice. She didn't dare say a word about that to Tom. She wasn't particularly happy she was thinking it herself.

He must have had an idea what she was thinking, though, because he changed the subject shortly, starting up a game of eye-spy. “I'll go first,” he said, as they passed an old, weatherbeaten farmhouse. “I spy with my little eye something

starting with O.”

The traffic was light, so Jane could cast her eyes about safely. There were no oil trucks on the road with them. She couldn't see any birds in the sky, so it probably wasn't an owl. They were in rural country, so office building was out. “An orange car?” She couldn't see one now, but maybe there had been one a moment ago, turning off the road.

“No,” Tom answered.

“An ox?” She hadn't seen one, but it was possible, with all the farms. She glanced over to see him shake his head. “I give up. What is it?”

“I spy with my little eye an old Frog who still goes around talking about how he was in the Resistance in the war even though it was almost fifty years ago and he was probably really collaborating with the Nazis anyway.”

That seemed overly harsh, even considering the stereotypical British disdain for their French neighbors. But on the other hand, he was trying, and she did appreciate the effort. “I don't think I would ever have guessed that,” she said with a little sigh. “But I'm not sure that's quite the spirit of the game. How about I do the next one?” As she scanned the road ahead for a likely object, something in the rearview mirror caught her attention.

It was growing rapidly larger, coming up very fast. At a guess, considering she was doing seventy miles an hour, the approaching car had to be going ninety. It was black, and her first thought was that it must be Alex. They'd agreed to meet before the crossing into Spain, in a tiny village Professor Welldon had noted in his directions. That was still four hours away, though.

“He's in quite the hurry,” Tom said, finally noticing the pursuing car. It was close enough now for Jane to begin to make out details. It was a BMW, so it wasn't Alex. But it was odd; there'd barely been any traffic for the last fifty miles, so why was someone hell-bent on passing them now?

She caught a flash of blue in the car as it continued to close the distance, probably only three or four car-lengths behind now. Jane squinted into the rearview mirror, and she saw it again. It was the driver of the BMW. Or at least his hat.

His beret.

She'd seen him before, back in Paris, behind the wheel of *her* car. Tom must have realized the same thing, because they blurted out curses in chorus.

It was only a couple of seconds more, and the BMW was even with them, pulling alongside on Jane's left, not more than six inches away from her. And then it was past, and for one instant she had no idea what the other driver was

trying to do. And then she did.

If she'd waited even another quarter of a second to react, it would have been too late. She swerved left, as hard as she could, slamming her foot on the gas at the same time. She cleared the BMW with millimeters to spare. Or maybe not even that; she thought she heard the scrape of metal against metal as she passed by the black car.

She laughed manically – there was no other description – when she saw the driver's expression and watched his lips moving, no doubt cursing her. She turned her attention back to the road ahead of her just in time to see the truck coming straight at her, and she swerved back to the right, barely keeping control of the Land Rover. The engine protested, but she ignored it, keeping her foot firmly pressed on the gas.

“He's still coming!”

Tom sounded completely rattled. That was no surprise; he probably hadn't ever been in a car chase before. Of course, she hadn't, either, but she didn't have the luxury of panicking. “I see him.” Jean-Louis, that was the man's name. At least, that's what Alex had called him. “I guess we'll find out what this baby can really do.” She was doing ninety-five now, and the car was definitely unhappy about it. Between the speed, the violent maneuvers and the not-so-slowly increasing altitude, the Land Rover was starting to rattle alarmingly. Jane didn't know where, exactly, the sound was coming from, but she did know that, no matter where it was, it couldn't be good. If “the baby” couldn't do what she needed it to, she was about to be in a lot of trouble.



When they'd pursued the stolen Land Rover back in Paris, the brief chase around the hotel had been harrowing enough. Tom hadn't reckoned on getting caught in another chase, but here he was. And this one was flat-out terrifying. They were going much too fast, and Jane clearly was out of her depth. It seemed that her entire plan consisted of trusting to divine intervention to keep them safe.

So far, God was doing His part. They were still in one piece, still on the road, still headed in the right direction, towards Spain, with the Pyrenees mountains looming ahead of them.

Unfortunately, the BMW was still on the road, too, and not far behind them. Jane was maintaining the distance, maybe a hundred feet or so, but she couldn't get any farther ahead than that. And sooner or later, she had to falter. She'd been driving for close to three hours now. What would happen when she lost focus for a moment or two? Not even divine intervention would be enough to keep them

safe then.



twenty-four

(what are you, crazy or something?)

“How did Burt Reynolds do it?” Jane didn’t realize she’d said the words aloud until she heard a confused “huh?” from the passenger seat.

“In the movie. ‘Smokey and the Bandit.’ And ‘Cannonball Run,’ too, I guess. He was driving like a lunatic for hours and hours at a time and he never got tired. This guy’s been chasing us for fifteen minutes and I’m barely hanging on.”

She didn’t need to look over to know Tom was rolling his eyes. “You do realize Burt Reynolds wasn’t actually driving at all, don’t you? He wasn’t a real person.” Behind the sarcasm, Jane heard a bit of concern, as though he wondered if maybe she really didn’t know that.

“But it looked so realistic! You’re telling me it was all fake?” She couldn’t keep up the pretense, though; she began giggling before she finished the sentence. She went on laughing, barely keeping control of the car, for almost a minute before she calmed down. “Sorry. I guess I’m getting a little punchy. We have to do something to lose this guy.”

Now she did glance over to Tom, and it was clear he had no more idea than she did how that might be accomplished. When Burt Reynolds was in a tight spot, he had Sally Field take off her shirt and flash the sheriff who was pursuing them. She wasn’t doing *that*. She doubted it would work, anyway; this was France, after all.

Maybe she was looking in the wrong place for ideas. She was an archaeologist, not a – whatever it was that Burt Reynolds’ character was. She needed a different role model, and the choice was obvious. If he were in the car right now, what would Indiana Jones do?

The answer came to her immediately. He'd shoot Jean-Louis, and the man's car would spin out of control, roll over several times and then burst into a fireball. Even if she had a gun, she doubted she could do that. She just wanted the man to leave her alone, she didn't want him burned to a crisp in an horrific wreck.

A minor wreck would be just fine, though. She just had to maneuver him into one. She could manage that, given the right circumstances. "Check those directions. I remember something about a tunnel right after a bridge."

She heard paper rustling, and Tom muttering under his breath. Then, "There! Right after the Aude River. Five miles, it says. It's underlined in red with an asterisk next to it."

Jane remembered Professor Welldon's warning. "It's a beautiful drive, except for this bit here," he'd told her, pointing out the area on the map. She could picture it, the thick black line of the highway skirting along the edge of a huge national park. "There's a tunnel there, the road goes from six lanes to two." He'd laughed then. "And two is putting it generously. It can get hairy, you won't see anyone on the road for a hundred miles, but you get to the tunnel and suddenly it's rush hour."

The bridge was coming up very quickly, only another two miles. Then five more to the tunnel. If she kept up her speed, it wouldn't even be five minutes. Once she was in the tunnel, with any luck an opportunity would present itself and she could rid herself of the black BMW once and for all. Not that she knew exactly how she'd manage it, but she assumed and hoped it would be clear to her when the moment arrived.

The five minutes became four, then three before she began to see taillights way up ahead of her. A car passed her coming the opposite direction, the first one in probably twenty miles, and then a second and a third. As usual, Professor Welldon was right; this wasn't exactly a Manhattan rush hour, but compared to the nearly empty road of the last hour, it felt like one.

Another minute passed, and the road was down to two lanes as the tunnel loomed ahead. Any second now, she was going to have to slow down and allow the BMW to close the gap. If the traffic was going to give her an opening to lose Jean-Louis, it needed to do so soon. Or, maybe, she had to make her own opening. She could hit the brakes and let him rear-end her. With luck it would do more damage to him than her, but there was no guarantee of that.

Jane hadn't begun to brake yet, and the car in front of her, a gray Audi, was coming up fast. There was, for the moment, no one in the other lane coming

towards her, and what happened next wasn't a conscious decision as much as pure instinct, or maybe the spirit of Burt Reynolds taking hold of her for an instant.

Without warning, she shifted straight into reverse, turning the wheel hard to the left. She heard screaming, she couldn't tell if it was hers or Tom's, and she saw a black blur as the BMW blew past her on the right, clearing her with an inch or two to spare.

Despite the screaming still echoing inside the Land Rover, and the terrifying sounds coming from the engine, Jane could still hear the crunch of metal on metal as the BMW, unable to stop in time, plowed into the Audi. That was her cue to go straight back into first gear and floor it. She risked a glance to her right and saw exactly what she hoped: the whole front end of the BMW was smashed, with smoke pouring out from under the hood. An obviously dazed Jean-Louis was sitting upright, alive but in no shape to continue his pursuit even if his car hadn't just been wrecked.

She focused back on the road to see a truck in her lane, coming towards her much too fast. She swerved right, slammed on the brakes and then her eyes shut themselves in anticipation of her life flashing before them. But it didn't happen.

She heard the scraping, and then what sounded like something metal bouncing alongside the car, and then it was over. Jane forced her eyes open and saw she was in the tunnel. It took her a moment to adjust to the near darkness; she could see taillights up ahead, but pulling away from her, becoming fainter.

Jane started breathing again – she wasn't sure when she'd stopped – and cautiously hit the gas. She hoped she hadn't done irreparable harm to the engine, and for the moment her good luck continued to hold; the car began to accelerate. Everything seemed to be working.

It wasn't until she emerged from the tunnel into daylight three miles later that she noticed the passenger-side mirror was gone, torn clean off by the truck she'd nearly hit. She also saw that Tom was staring straight ahead, not moving, not speaking. If not for the bobbing of his Adam's Apple as he breathed in and out, she could have taken him to be a mannequin, or a well-preserved corpse. Jane reached over and squeezed his shoulder. "We made it! It's all good, Tom. Jean-Louis crashed back there. He's not going to be following us. It's clear sailing all the way to Spain now."



He wasn't literally in shock. At least, he didn't think so. Tom didn't know what that felt like. On the other hand, how would he know? Probably that was one of

the symptoms of suffering from clinical shock, not realizing you were.

He was scared out of his wits, though, that was certain. He hadn't pissed his pants, but after what had just happened, he honestly wouldn't have felt embarrassed if he had. The last few minutes had been, without question, the most terrifying of his life. Before today, he had never come face to face with death, and now he'd done so twice within less than a minute.

He was going to have nightmares about this for weeks, if not months. He was pretty sure he'd never be able to watch a movie with a car chase in it again. And what made it all worse – much worse – was how much Jane seemed to be enjoying the whole thing. She'd nearly killed herself, and him, and several other random Frogs who were unlucky enough to be on the road with her, and here she was, smiling and laughing as though it was something to be proud of.

He hoped, for her sake as well as his own, that it was a reaction born of hysteria. He hoped she was every bit as traumatized by what had just happened as he was, and she just expressed it differently than him. Because if she really did think that had been something to laugh about, something fun, he was done with her. He'd get out of the car at the next stop, and begin walking back home.

So what if it was several hundred miles? It might take a month to walk it, but, right now, that seemed like a perfectly rational option.

twenty-five

(are we ready?)

Jane pulled off the road and parked in the shadow of a church. She figured it couldn't hurt to meet Alex for the last time before Barcelona on – or at least near – holy ground.

She got out of the car and just walked around, waiting for the black Mercedes to appear. She hoped it would be that car and not another pursuer. What if Jean-Louis wasn't the only one of the warehouse crew following her?

There was nothing to be done about it now. She needed some air, and if Alex didn't show up, she had no hope of finding the other thieves, or her pottery, anyway.

She didn't look at the Land Rover; she didn't have the heart to see how much damage she'd done to it. Instead, she paced aimlessly, occasionally casting an eye towards the road to see if anyone was approaching.

Tom was doing much the same. He hadn't spoken since the tunnel, almost three hours ago. She wasn't sure if he was deliberately giving her the cold shoulder, or if her actions had frightened him so badly that he had temporarily lost the power of speech.

He was not completely insensate, though. He saw the car before she did, and muttered just loud enough for Jane to hear, "Bloody Irishman, of course he turns up."

"So there is something going on up there," Jane answered. "I was beginning to wonder." To be fair, she supposed he did have a right to be annoyed with her. On the other hand, she hadn't known what she was going to do in the tunnel until the instant she did it; she would have warned him if she'd had the chance. "Are we

back on speaking terms now?”

“Are you going to try to kill me again?” She could tell his heart wasn’t in the insult. She heard it in his voice, he was trying too hard to sound tough and angry.

“Not if I can help it,” she said, smiling brightly. “But we can talk about that later. We’ve got business to take care of now.”

The business in question pulled up a few feet away from the Land Rover. Alex got out and went straight over to it, walked all around it and whistled. “That’s some job you did, Jane.” He shook his head. “But nothing that a week in the shop and a couple of thousand pounds won’t put right.”

“Two weeks, I’d say,” Tom chimed in, and Alex approached the Land Rover more closely, ran a hand from the front of the car all the way down the driver’s side to the back.

“I think you’re right. Two weeks is more like it.” It was the first time the two men had agreed on any topic since they’d all met. Jane could live with anything that kept them from going for each other’s throat. She needed both of them if she was going to pull this off. Besides, now that she looked at the damage herself, she had to agree with their assessment.

“If we get the pottery back, I doubt Professor Welldon will be worried about that,” she said. She hoped that was true. “And you’re still on board with helping me, right, Alex?”

He looked her in the eye and gave the right answer. “Yes, Jane. Nothing has changed.” As before, in Orleans, he didn’t show any of the supposedly tell-tale signs of a lie. He wasn’t fidgeting or looking away. He didn’t appear to be sweating. But on the other hand, she was sure he was a skilled liar when he wanted to be, so none of that proved anything.

She tested him. “Not even our little encounter with Jean-Louis on the way here?”

He appeared to be genuinely surprised, but, again, that wasn’t proof. “What encounter?”

“Jane here only went and caused a major accident,” Tom said. “All cleaned up by the time you came by, I expect.”

More surprise. “That was him? That was you?” If he was putting on a show, he deserved an award.

Jane asked, “What did you see?”

“A tow truck carting away what was left of a BMW. That was Jean-Louis? He must have traded up. He had a little blue Peugeot the last I recall.”

“Borrowed the BMW, I’m sure,” Tom sneered. “Your friends seem to like

borrowing things.”

Jane sighed. She didn't need this. “Boys, behave. Please!” For the moment, her words shamed them into silence. It probably wouldn't last, though. She had to keep control of the conversation. “Much better. Now we just need to work out the details of the plan. We can all work together a little longer, can't we?” Alex nodded his agreement, while Tom stood there, stone-faced. She was not surprised. “You first, Alex,” she said, putting all the enthusiasm she could muster into her words. “The thieves – the ones who have my pottery – do you know if they're still in Barcelona?”

Another nod. “I spoke to them two hours ago. They're waiting, they've got a little office not far from the cathedral, it's just off the *Placa de Sant Miguel*. That didn't mean anything to her, but she had a map of Barcelona and its environs in the car.

“And they're still willing to trade?” Both men gasped, and Tom took a step towards Jane. She put up a hand to stop him. “Just hear the whole thing out.” She'd only come up with the idea in the last couple of hours. “Are they, Alex?”

Alex didn't quite smile. Jane couldn't interpret his expression, or his tone. “They are.” She assumed that, if he really was in touch with the thieves, he probably told them he would be able to take the artifacts away from her and hand them over. He probably hadn't figured on her volunteering to do just that.

“Good. I need you to call them again, before we get to Barcelona, and set up a meeting. Somewhere outdoors. Nice and public. Tell them I'm ready to give them the artifacts in return for my pottery.”

Tom was seething now. It looked as though the effort of keeping quiet was causing him great pain.

“They'll suspect a trick,” Alex said. He looked as though he did, too.

“Of course they will. Your job is to convince them it isn't one.”

Tom finally spoke, in a low, tightly controlled voice. “It had better be one.”

He was not relieved when Jane described her plan. It was madness.

No, madness on stilts. It had no hope of succeeding. It was a plan born of wishful thinking and naiveté. It was exactly what he would have expected from a young woman with romantic notions of life and no experience of the real world.

And yet, she *had* made it this far. She had not fallen prey to the Irishman's dubious charms, however much she might have been tempted. She'd run the Frog in the BMW right off the road and lived to tell the tale. It was possible, Tom supposed, that she was capable of more than he gave her credit for.

He still had options of his own. He could go to the Spanish police, once they arrived in Barcelona. That was not an ideal solution, but it would get the artifacts into official, and safe, hands. The Library and the Museum could sort things out with the Spanish government. They had people to do that, people whose only job was sorting things out with foreign governments.

But he wasn't going to do that. There was no point in considering any other possibilities; he'd come this far with Jane, and he would see things through to the end.

twenty-six

(I've got a secret)

Everything was proceeding according to plan. Not the plan she'd laid out to Alex, but the real plan, the one she only shared with Tom once they were back in the car and underway.

Luck had played a part. She'd told Alex that she would let him lead the way into Spain and all the way to Barcelona, where they'd make one final stop to contact the thieves and confirm the meeting, and arrange the last details of their scheme.

But while he'd breezed through the border crossing, she'd been pulled over. The appalling condition of the Land Rover had drawn attention, which was fine with Jane. By the time she'd talked her way past the Spanish highway patrol, Alex was long gone. They'd discussed that possibility, and agreed if it happened, to meet at six o'clock in the parking lot of the *Alcampo* hypermarket in Barcelona itself, not far from the port. Alex had described it as a combination supermarket and department store, perfect for their needs.

If it was a chain of stores, which seemed likely, there would be another *Alcampo* somewhere between the border and Barcelona. A quick stop at a gas station outside the little town of Girona, about halfway between the border and their destination, provided confirmation. While Jane filled up the gas tank, Tom found a local phone book and discovered that there was indeed another *Alcampo* more-or-less directly on their route, just northeast of Barcelona.

An hour later, they had arrived. "You know what to get," she said. They'd agreed that he would go into the store and purchase what was required, while she waited in the car. Neither of them felt safe leaving the box unattended in the

parking lot.

“I shall return,” he said, giving her his best imitation of an American accent. It wasn’t bad, really, and she appreciated the effort. She doubted he would appreciate what she was about to do, though.

“I’ll be waiting,” she lied, watching him close the door and head towards the store entrance. She waited until he was out of sight, then she started the car and pulled out of her space. She felt guilty about this, about the last part of her plan, the part she hadn’t discussed with him. But it made sense. It was the only way she could ensure the safety of the artifacts, and in the end, Tom would appreciate that. At least, she hoped so.

Besides, it always worked in the movies.

Jane emerged onto the street and followed the signs she’d seen when they were approaching the store. She was grateful for her three years of Spanish in high school, or else she probably wouldn’t be able to pull this off. She figured, considering how big the store was, that it would take Tom half an hour to accomplish his mission, which meant she had half an hour to accomplish hers. And here she was already, parking at the *oficina de correos*.

Luckily, the post office was open. She got out of the car, crossed her fingers, and went inside, hoping her luck would continue to hold. There was no guarantee they’d have what she needed, or even anyone who knew enough English to understand her when she asked for it. She had to trust that God, or fate, or someone, anyway, was looking out for her.

He, or it or they apparently were. The clerk on duty did speak her English. She spoke it with better grammar than Jane herself, as it turned out. “I lost the key to the lock on my trunk, and I have to get something in the mail today,” Jane explained.

“Of course, *senorita*,” the woman, Juanita according to her nametag, answered. Juanita disappeared into a back office and returned a moment later with a huge, dangerous-looking implement. Right behind her was an even more dangerous-looking man, whom Jane assumed would be wielding the cutter. That was for the best; seeing the bolt-cutter up close, she wasn’t sure she had enough strength to even move the handles, let alone cut open a padlock.

Juanita spoke to the man in Spanish much too rapidly for Jane to even pick out distinct words, and he grunted in what she hoped was approval. Then the man trooped past her, gesturing for her to follow him. She did, pointing to her car once they were outside. He went to it, and waited patiently while she fumbled for her keys and unlocked the rear door.

He looked down at the box. “*Esta?*”

“*Esta,*” she agreed. He nodded, and went to work. It took all of five seconds for the padlock to fall away. She could open it now, but she hesitated. What if it was empty? What if, as unlikely as it seemed, the thieves had somehow managed to switch it out with another box back in Paris, just as she and Tom planned to do?

She shook her head, trying to clear her fears away. She had to do it now. She had to know. She reached down, lifted the lid and, at the last instant, allowed her fears to take hold again and closed her eyes.

She’d opened the box, but she didn’t dare look inside. She wasn’t sure how long she stood there, eyes clamped shut, before the man spoke. It was barely a whisper. “*Madre de Dios!*”

She opened her eyes, saw what he had seen, and gasped. *Madre de Dios* didn’t even begin to describe what she saw. It all made sense now. She understood why everyone wanted this box so badly, why it had to be returned to its rightful owners. And she knew she was the only one who could ensure it would get there.

She closed the box carefully, reverently, and whispered to her helper, “*Gracias.*” Then she picked it up and carried it back into the *oficina de correos*. She had a lot of work still to do, and very little time to do it in.



He was sure the Land Rover had been here. Tom remembered that it had been parked right next to a light pole, near the back of the lot. He didn’t recall crossing an aisle to get to the store entrance, but it had been a long day, and he couldn’t dismiss the possibility that his mind was playing tricks on him.

It was worth a look. Jane was probably wondering why he’d been so long in the store. He’d thought it would be quick; find a box that looked close enough to the one in the car, find a padlock, pay for them and Bob’s your uncle.

But, like everything else that had happened since he left London, it was not that simple. He’d trooped through half the store before he found a box that would suit. Then he had to search through the other half of the *Alcampo* to find a padlock to go with it. That wasn’t the end of it, of course. He couldn’t use the traveler’s check Jane had given him at the checkstand. The distasteful little man with the absurd mustache would not accept it. So he had to find someone who would cash it, which had been an adventure in itself.

All in all, it had taken him close to an hour. He imagined Jane was going out of her mind with worry. Or annoyance. Or something else; if he’d learned nothing

else from two days with her, it was that guessing what was going on in her head was a mug's game.

He'd find out momentarily; there she was, sitting in the driver's seat, her head turning back and forth. Then she caught sight of him and – he thought, it was hard to be sure from this distance – she smiled. That had to be a good sign.



twenty-seven

(truly, you have a dizzying intellect)

Jane had to circle the parking lot three times before she spotted Alex's Mercedes. She caught a brief glimpse of him as she drove by, and he did not look happy. Even seeing it for only a second or two, his body language was clear. She was fifteen minutes late, which really wasn't late at all, but it clearly was enough to upset him.

She wasn't sure if his mood would improve or worsen when he saw that she was alone. If he believed her story, she had to think he'd be thrilled. Of course, that was the trick, convincing him.

She wondered if tears would help her cause, and whether she could produce them on demand. Crying wasn't something Jane did often. She'd punched two people out and nearly killed herself several times on the road since Monday morning, but she hadn't once been close to real tears. Probably best not to try and screw it up; he'd be more likely to believe her if she were angry anyway.

As she parked the Land Rover one row away from Alex, she thought back to the moment she saw Tom standing there outside the hotel north of Paris. She brought the picture to mind – him with a screwdriver in hand, the shattered glass of the rear window all around him on the ground. She could feel the rage building up, and she held on to it as she walked over to Alex.

She was trembling when he opened his door and stepped out to greet her. "Where is your..." is as far as he got before she let loose with a string of curses that made his eyes go wide.

"That – that – he – I could kill him!" She spat the words at Alex, and he actually backed up a step or two from the force of them. "He's gone! Don't ask

me where – back to England, off to the police, God knows. And he tried to steal the box! I – God, I had my keys in my hand and I,” she started laughing now, hoping it sounded appropriately hysterical, “I almost put his eyes out.”

Jane let Alex put a calming hand on her arm. She let him walk her around to the passenger side and maneuver her into his car. She let him sidle up to her, much too close for comfort. At the same time, she could feel the rebellious parts of her mind – and elsewhere – stirring themselves, and she could hear them shouting that he wasn’t nearly close enough.

That might, she realized, be helpful. As long as she could keep some control over herself, anyway. She let herself lean into him, and there was no denying that her anger was fading away.

She told him the story of her and Tom’s “fight,” describing how the Englishman’s distrust of Alex had reared its head over the last hour of the drive. She explained that nothing she said would calm him, and she occasionally punctuated the tale with a shouted curse or a punch to the dashboard. Every time she did that, Alex held her a little tighter. Jane didn’t know if, should the occasion call for it, she’d be able to summon up the will to pull away from him. Or even whether she’d recognize that such an occasion had arrived.

When she got to the end of the tale, she said, in as close to an even tone as she could manage, “You know what? I’m glad he’s gone. He really is a – a...”

Alex grinned, and more of Jane’s willpower melted away. “A wanker?”

She was silent for a moment, gathering what few shreds of self-control she still possessed. Then she called Tom something that shocked Alex, not to mention herself. “That’s what I was going to say, but ‘wanker’ is probably better.”

Alex laughed nervously. “No, I think you’ve got it right. But whatever he is, the man is gone, and all the better. Although,” he paused, closed his eyes for a moment, “it does throw a spanner into the works.”

He inched away from Jane, which left her both relieved and distressed. And even more distressed to find that she was distressed about it. She couldn’t afford to fall under his spell now; this was the critical moment. She had to play things perfectly or he’d suspect that she was up to something. “I see what you mean,” she said, scooting over towards him, covering about half the distance he’d created. He didn’t seem to notice. “I was so angry, I didn’t think about it. With him not here, there won’t be anyone to stay with the Land Rover and watch the real box.”

It was only now that she turned around to see if Alex had done his part, and he had. Yet another box sat there. It looked exactly the same as the one Tom had

purchased from the other Alcampo store a little while ago. Alex saw what she was looking at. That was her cue. She cursed under her breath, and then again, much louder. “I left the box in the car! Nobody’s watching it!”

She leapt away from Alex, threw open the door and she was sprinting back to the Land Rover the moment her feet touched the pavement. She could feel Alex right behind her. She didn’t stop to wait for him, and by the time she got to her car, she didn’t have to fake her panting. “It’s here! Thank God!” The empty box Tom had bought sat there in the back, with its brand new padlock holding it securely closed.

Jane felt an arm around her. “No harm done, I see.” She let Alex pull her closer, put her arm around him. “We don’t have to go through with this. We can go to the police, or to your professor. I believe your ferry sails at eleven o’clock?” He glanced at his watch, and then turned to her, giving her the full hundred megawatt smile. “I’m sure I could find some way to help you pass the time.”

The words “Yes, please” almost escaped her lips, and it was only a Herculean effort of will that held them back. But did he even mean it anyway? Or was he playing her? She thought she was fooling him – or hoped she was, anyway – but maybe it was the other way around? Did he see through her whole act? Did he know the box in the back of the car wasn’t the real one?

It didn’t matter. She had to proceed under the assumption that he bought the whole thing. She still needed him. Without Alex, all she had was a ferry ticket, a fake box and a ruined car to deliver to Professor Welldon tomorrow. With him, however much of a longshot it might be, there was at least a chance she could get her pottery back.

Some chance was better than none. Wasn’t it?



Tom sat at a window table, looking out at the plaza. He was on his third glass of beer, if you could even call it a glass. It was no larger than the glass he kept in the loo for brushing his teeth. He had never had a terribly strong opinion about Spaniards one way or the other, but their serving sizes were a serious black mark against them. He’d have to have four or five glasses, at least, to make up a proper pint back home.

He looked out at what he thought might be the thieves’ hideout. It was an older building across the plaza that had an air of disuse about it. Yet there was some activity, a few lights on here and there, and some windows that looked to have been cleaned recently among the many that were covered in dirt and dust, or

boarded up entirely. One of those lighted rooms must belong to the people Jane and Alex were about to meet.

On the floor beneath his chair, with his feet resting on it, was the box he'd spent all this time chasing. He wondered if anyone else in this restaurant had the slightest idea that they were sitting only a few feet from a treasure worth several million pounds, or what they would do if they did know it.

If everything went to plan, he would never have to find out.

twenty-eight

(Barcelona!)

The rendezvous was set. Seven-thirty, in the lobby of the *Hotel Gran Barcino*. According to Alex, it was within walking distance of both the cathedral and the office the thieves were working out of.

Her watch read 7:14 PM, and there was still the matter of navigating Barcelona's tight, winding streets. Jane followed Alex, who seemed to know where he was going. She nearly ran over a pedestrian to keep from falling behind him at a traffic light, and almost rammed a van broadside coming around a corner. But after those incidents, it was a smooth ride to the hotel. She followed him into the garage, fumbling for the ticket from the automatic dispenser. That was fine; he'd gotten her here, but he didn't need to know exactly where she parked.

She went down two levels, bypassing several available spaces. With luck, he – and anyone else who might be interested in her – wouldn't think to go down this far. If Alex really had bought her story, he would hopefully chalk it up to totally understandable last-minute nerves.

It was difficult to read him, but she thought he believed her in the end. If he didn't, she'd still be in a public place, and the artifacts were out of everyone's reach. Worst case, she could jump up on a table in the lobby and scream her lungs out until hotel security, or the police, came. That would be embarrassing, but she'd done worse on occasion back in college, and that wasn't even counting a couple of parties she couldn't properly remember the morning after.

She parked and locked the car, not that there was much point with the rear window covered in thin plastic. If anyone did figure out the Land Rover was

here, they could steal the empty box out of the back in a heartbeat.

Alex had the other empty box, the one he'd bought, with him. He was probably in the lobby already. Except, when she stepped out of the elevator, she didn't see him. She looked around; he wasn't at the bar, or in any of the plush but still uncomfortable-looking chairs or by the reception desk.

She wondered if the thieves were here yet. She picked out a seat with a good view of the whole lobby and scanned the crowd. The problem was, she had no idea what an international art thief was supposed to look like. She was assuming they were all men; not that she had any reason for that, but she had to start somewhere. That didn't help, unfortunately; there were probably thirty men in view at the moment. She couldn't narrow it down by dress, either. Most of the men she could see wore suits, and most of those appeared to be well-tailored, at least from a distance.

Would the thieves be younger, or older? Jane had no idea. Alex was in his late twenties, but Jean-Louis had looked to be five or ten years older than him. And in "The Pink Panther," the guy who played the real thief was ancient. He must have been at least sixty years old.

It was hopeless. Anyone here could be one of them, there was no possible way to even guess. All she could do was wait for Alex, and in the meantime admire the holiday decorations. Jane had been so preoccupied with all the craziness of the last three days that she'd almost forgotten next week was Christmas.

She quickly found herself mesmerized by the Christmas lights, so much so that she jumped out of her seat when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She took a deep breath and forced herself to relax before turning to look up at Alex. He was, of course, smiling that nearly irresistible smile.

She had to forcefully remind herself about the "nearly" part before she dared open her mouth. The fact that he was carrying the box helped to keep her focused on the task at hand. "Are your friends here yet?"

"I'd call them acquaintances. And there they are." He pointed to two men just now walking into the lobby from outside. They both wore long overcoats and scarves even though it wasn't actually that cold outside. One of them appeared to have taken the villain from "Die Hard" as a role model; he had a neatly trimmed beard and a smile that stopped dead before it got to his cheekbones. The other was clean-shaven, half a head shorter than his partner, and his eyes darted around like a rabbit who'd just eaten a week's worth of sugar in one sitting.

The taller man's head whipped around; he must have caught sight of Alex, and herself. As he and his companion marched towards them, Jane could see just

how cold the man's eyes were. She wondered if he watched "Die Hard" over and over to better copy the expression. Hans, that was the character's name. It was probably too much to hope that this man's name actually was Hans.

"Wilhelm," Alex said once the two thieves were in earshot. He wasn't a "Hans," but of course he was German. It took all of Jane's self-control not to laugh. "And Louis." It made sense, too, that the junior partner would be French. History repeating itself, she supposed.

"You have something for us?" Wilhelm got straight to business, in an impatient voice clearly used to giving orders.

"As you can see," Alex answered, turning his smile on the German at full power. Wilhelm did not appear to be impressed. "But we're all friends here, aren't we? Let's do this over drinks, like civilized people." The smile dimmed. "And I understood you have something for us, but you're empty-handed."

Wilhelm snapped his fingers, and his companion muttered "*Oui, oui*," without meeting his boss' eyes. Then he walked off, headed for a bellhop stationed near the front entrance.

"We had to be sure. One cannot be too careful these days." He turned his attention to Jane, and she felt a chill when his eyes momentarily met hers. "I take it this is the elusive Miss Barnaby?"

She couldn't hold her laughter back any longer. Alex gave her shoulder a hard squeeze, but she didn't stop. "Sorry. I expected you to call me '*fraulein*,' that's all. I've already been called '*senorita*' and '*mademoiselle*' this week, it would have been nice to hit the trifecta. But, yes, I'm Jane Barnaby. Pleased to meet you." There was an instant of confusion in the German's eyes, and Jane considered that a victory. She extended a hand, which he shook after another moment, his face hardening again.

"Likewise, *fraulein*," he said. "It will be a pleasure to conclude this tiresome business. No offense intended, of course."

Obviously there was, but Jane wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of reacting. "Yes, it has been tiresome," she said, trying to match Wilhelm's bored tone, but not quite managing it.

"Well, here comes Louis," Alex chimed in. "Louis, you can give Jane back her box, and, here, Wilhelm, this is yours." A heavy box, much heavier even than the real box with the artifacts had been, was pressed into her hands. At the same time, Alex handed over his empty, fake box to Wilhelm. "We don't have the key. You'll have to sort that out yourself. As for us, we have..."

"A ferry to catch," the German finished for him. "Indeed. I wish you a pleasant

sailing. *Auf wiedersehen.*” Jane wanted to say something in response; she did not appreciate being dismissed like that, especially by a criminal who took fashion advice from a Bruce Willis movie. But she felt Alex’s hand on her arm, pulling her up from her seat, and she let him help her to her feet, then followed him to the elevators.

The doors closed, and Jane said, as much to herself as to Alex, “How did he know...” Then the answer came to her and the only reason she didn’t punch him in the face was that her hands were full carrying the box. “You! You told him! You told everyone where I’m going!”

Her anger was directed at herself as much as Alex. She should have known he would. She should have known a lot of other things, too. She’d managed to convince herself that she could handle all of this, that she was up to the task of outwitting professional criminals on their own turf. But that was madness, it had been madness all along and she hadn’t seen it.

No, she’d refused to see it, even though it had been staring her in the face for three days.

She realized several more things in quick succession; it felt like dominoes in one of those elaborate layouts that take hours to build and seconds to fall down. She knew what she’d find when she got to her car. She knew what she’d hear when Tom caught up with her. And she knew what was – or at least what wasn’t – in the box she was carrying now.



If he had any sense left, Tom would have wanted to strangle that lunatic American girl. Receiving a busted lip and almost certainly a black eye was bad enough. If he’d been able to hold his attackers off, if he’d held on to the box, he would have worn his injuries as marks of honor. But he hadn’t, and they weren’t.

His career was over. He’d be lucky if he wasn’t prosecuted for this disaster. So why wasn’t he angry – completely livid – at Jane? Why was his biggest worry at the moment how she would take his news?

When he picked himself up off the ground, he’d followed the two men who’d robbed him to a nearby hotel. He kept well back, not needing any further demonstrations of his lack of fighting ability. He waited across the street after they entered the hotel, and only went in himself five minutes later.

There was no sign of them in the lobby, or of Jane. It seemed likely that she would have parked in the hotel’s garage, so he headed for the elevators and hit the button for the lowest level. It seemed a reasonable place to start, and the moment he stepped out of the elevator, he heard her voice. “No, I will not calm

down!”

That did not bode well at all.

twenty-nine

(there's something I forgot to tell you)

There was so much to be upset about, Jane didn't know where to start.

The tires were slashed, all four of them. That was bad, obviously.

They'd cut open all the seats. She could only assume they'd thought that she might have stashed the artifacts inside them and then somehow stitched them back up to their original factory perfection. That was insane.

They went through her personal luggage, leaving her clothes scattered all over the remains of the back seat. That felt personal, and it was the thing that brought her to the edge of whatever it was she felt right now. She didn't think there was a word for the toxic combination of rage, self-pity and terror bubbling in her brain.

And then Tom showed up, and she added a double helping of guilt into the mix. He'd been beaten up. And for nothing! "Oh, God! I'm sorry!" She ran to him, threw her arms around him. She didn't know why she wasn't crying yet; if ever an occasion called for tears, it was this one. "It's all my fault!"

He didn't appear angry; if his expression was anything to judge by, he felt even guiltier than she did. "No. I lost it. I tried, but I – they stole it. The artifacts are gone."

Jane shook her head. She owed him the truth. "No, they're not." She felt her laughter coming on, and for a moment tried to suppress it, but she didn't have the strength left. "I mean, yes, they are gone, but not how you think. *You* didn't lose them."

He stepped back from her, and for a moment or two, he stood there blankly, like a robot waiting for new instructions. And then she saw recognition dawn in his eyes. "You bloody lying cow!"

She kept on laughing. She expected worse than “cow” from him, and, honestly, she deserved it. “I’m not arguing,” she said, fighting to control herself. “I thought I was being so clever, and I was an idiot the whole time, and I did lie to you. Both of you.” She raised her voice to include Alex in her confession, not that he needed to hear it. The Irishman already knew he’d been played for a fool.

Alex was talking now, or yelling, really. And Tom was shouting right back. Between the weird echoes of their voices, and all the other thoughts whirling around her head, Jane couldn’t make out what they were saying. It didn’t matter anyway. She knew what had to be done now. What she should have done right from the start, what she’d known she should have done, but convinced herself not to do.

The car was a total loss, at least for the moment. She wouldn’t be driving it onto the ferry tonight. But she couldn’t take the ferry anyway – the German, Wilhelm, expected her to be on it. She had to get to Mallorca, to Professor Welldon’s home, tonight. She needed to tell him everything, and she needed to be there when the mail was delivered tomorrow. Or, better still, she needed to be at the post office that served his home the moment it opened tomorrow morning.

She’d have to tell her advisor that she’d allowed his car to be trashed almost beyond recognition, *and* she’d lost any chance of finding the pottery he’d spent a decade collecting. She’d be done with him, done at Oxford, but she had an obligation to ensure the artifacts got back into safe hands. She was the only one who could do it, and she could only do it alone.

Tom and Alex were busy berating one another; they didn’t notice when she headed for the elevator. She was sure they hadn’t noticed even when she stepped out of the hotel, onto the street and into a waiting taxi.

Five minutes later, the taxi let her out in front of the ticket office at the ferry terminal, and Jane assumed her former companions were still arguing, and wouldn’t realize she’d left until she had finished her business here and she was halfway to the airport.



Tom’s throat was raw from all the shouting, and his head was absolutely throbbing. He needed a glass of water, some aspirin and an ice pack. Or, better still, the ice pack, a comfortable chair and several pints of ale.

But that would have to wait. Jane would surely have some mad new idea, worse than the previous mad ideas that had led him to this garage and this steadily worsening headache. And of course he would go along with it, as he had all along, because what other choice did he have?

But Jane was not there. She was not sitting in the defaced Land Rover. She was not standing a few feet away, watching he and Alex yell at one another. She was not anywhere on this level of the garage.

Alex must have recognized that fact at the same moment, because he spoke in unison with Tom. “Where did she go?”

Alex must have realized what the answer was almost immediately, just as Tom did, because their next words were spoken in unison as well. “Oh, bloody hell!”



It turned out Jane *could* cry on command.

When she saw that it was a man behind the only open ticket window, she decided to play on the stereotypical Spanish machismo. Surely he'd want to rescue a damsel in distress, so that's what she pretended to be. She cooked up a story on the spot, inventing a cheating boyfriend who'd promised her an unforgettable trip to Mallorca but instead stole her heart and her car, leaving her with a ferry ticket she could no longer use. The tears came instantly; Julia Roberts couldn't have done better.

She got what she wanted, a full refund, in cash. Which in turn had paid for the taxi to the airport, a one-way plane ticket to Palma, and three glasses of wine while she waited to board her flight.

The flight was a few minutes behind schedule, which no one in the departure lounge seemed particularly upset by. After the wine, and all the madness of the evening's events, Jane didn't have the energy to be bothered by it either. Fifteen minutes wouldn't make a difference now; so what if she got to Professor Welldon's home at eleven o'clock instead of a quarter to eleven? She'd probably be waking him up either way.

When it finally came time to board, Jane was surprised at the size of the plane. She'd expected one of those small regional jets, or even a propeller-driven plane. But this was a regular-sized jet. She wondered why they were using such a large plane when there were probably only fifty passengers on the flight, but as soon as she collapsed into her seat, her curiosity was gone and she began to drift off to sleep.

She was jostled awake by the landing. For a moment, Jane was disoriented; she didn't know why she was on a plane, or where that plane even was. She'd been somewhere else, somewhere outdoors.

Addison's Walk, standing at her mother's tree. She'd been talking to Mom. Dreaming, obviously. But she needed her wits about her now, she had no time to dwell on conversations that were only in her head.

She stopped at a little café in the airport for coffee, to try and clear her mind, but it wasn't helping. She couldn't help wondering what Mom would think of her choices this week. Her mother had always been supportive, but she also didn't hesitate to correct Jane when it was called for.

At least Jane had corrected herself in time. Professor Welldon would be angry, but he'd also recognize the importance of retrieving the artifacts. He'd take her to the post office and make sure they got the package before anyone could interfere with it. He'd know what to do with it once it was back in safe hands. He'd never see his own pottery again, but that couldn't be helped.

Or could it? "Oh, God, I really *am* the queen of the idiots!" She shouted it out, startling the other passengers at the café. One of them spilled her coffee all over her white dress, but Jane paid her no attention. She remembered the dream, or at least what it must have been trying to tell her.

She was wrong about the pottery. It was here, on Mallorca. It was probably in Deia, the little town that was home to Professor Welldon and his work, right now. After she and Alex had gotten to her car and seen the damage, he'd fetched a crow-bar from his own car and used it to break open the box they'd received in trade from the thieves. As Jane had suspected, it did not contain pottery. It was filled with plain old rocks, just to give it enough weight to be convincing.

She thought back, trying to recall everything Tom – and Alex – had told her. The thieves had struck on Sunday, and stolen the wrong box from the Institute of Archaeology. They must have followed the same route she had, driving to Dover and taking the ferry to France. When they got to their lair, they discovered they had the wrong box.

They obviously hadn't looked at the label until then. Once they did, though, they would have known who really owned the box and where to find him. So while they cut a deal with Alex to try and steal the real artifacts from her, they had their own Plan B. They drove across France, into Spain and then to Barcelona. They would have gotten here sometime yesterday – Tuesday – evening.

By then they knew she was on the trail, and they couldn't rely on Alex to get

the artifacts, so they took the ferry to Mallorca last night. And right now they were waiting for her to arrive, to make another trade with her, this one for real.

If Alex had managed to steal the box from her, or if she'd handed over the real thing herself in Barcelona, then, she supposed, they would hand over the pottery to Professor Welldon and call it a day. Or, maybe, they'd try to squeeze a little more profit out of the deal and force him to pay for it. He was the only person who'd really want it, so they couldn't expect too much money, but even a few thousand dollars more would make a nice bonus on top of the profits from the artifacts.

All of which meant the pottery was safe. They had no reason to destroy it or even threaten to do so. Which must have been what her mother – really her own unconscious mind, of course – had been trying to tell her in the dream.

Jane finished her coffee and turned to leave. On her way out, she tapped the white dress woman on the shoulder. "I'm sorry I startled you," she said. "I don't know what dry cleaning costs here, but this ought to cover it." She handed over a two thousand peseta note, worth about twenty bucks, give or take. She didn't know if the woman understood her or not, but the money was snatched out of her hand, which was good enough. Her mother would definitely have approved.

Her conscience clear, Jane followed the signs for ground transportation – thankfully in English – out to the taxi stand. She had eight thousand pesetas left, eighty dollars. She hoped that would be enough to pay for the ride to Professor Welldon's home. If not, she could always turn on the tears again and hope for sympathy from the driver.

It was later than she thought, nearly ten-thirty, when she got outside, and it was another few minutes before a taxi drove up. Her greeting of, "isn't it a nice night?" got her a blank stare; clearly he didn't speak English. But, "Oh. OK. *Deia, por favor?*" produced a response.

"*Si, si.*"

Jane got in, and they were off. The number on the meter rose slowly enough that she knew she'd be able to pay the fare. As they headed away from Palma, though, Jane had another concern. They were going up, into the mountains, and the road was twisty and impossibly narrow. There were also no guardrails; nothing between her and a drop of several hundred feet except the reflexes of her driver.

If she had taken the Land Rover, if everything had gone according to the original plan, she would have been driving on this road. It would have been morning instead of night, but Jane suspected that would only have made things

worse. She was terrified enough at what she could barely see. In broad daylight, with a tumble down the mountain ending in a fiery death only inches away, she didn't think she could stand sitting in the back seat, let alone driving this road herself.

She didn't dare close her eyes; she knew her imagination would create a picture even worse than what was really out there. Instead, she busied herself reading the notices on the window and on the back of the seat in front of her, trying to call up memories of eleventh grade Spanish to translate them.

The distraction worked, until she felt the road begin to level off and she thought she could think about the outside world again. There wasn't much to see when she did finally look out the windows. The moon was bright, but even so it didn't cast enough light to let her see much of the countryside. She could make out the stepped terraces she'd seen in pictures, but that was about it.

One other thing she was able to see was the sign indicating "Deia 2 KM," illuminated in the taxi's headlights. As those two kilometers passed, Jane kept her eyes peeled for any of the landmarks Professor Welldon had told her about. One passed on the left, a hotel. Or, *the* hotel, a five-star resort called *La Residencia*. Shortly past that, she ought to be able to see the main street, with most of the town's few businesses, and there it was. Unfortunately, without the directions, which presumably were still in the front seat of the Land Rover back in Barcelona, she couldn't tell the driver where to go from here.

"Stop! Stop here!" He may not have understood English, but the driver got the message, and pulled over across from a restaurant, which of course was closed. She handed over six thousand pesetas, leaving her with one bill in her pocket, and got out of the taxi.

Jane stood there, watching the taxi turn around and head back the way it came, and then she was all alone in the middle of the deserted street. This was a tiny town, she couldn't be more than half a mile from Professor Welldon's home. But in which direction?

She closed her eyes, trying to force a memory to come to the surface, and after a minute or two, one did. It was a rare sunny afternoon, and she'd been in the Middle Common Room with her advisor. He was talking about the town, about his little one-room museum that showcased the years of work he'd done there. "I bought the last good piece of land," he'd said. "Heaven knows what I could sell it for today. Right down from the main street, there's a little footpath and some steps and there you are. Couldn't ask for better."

His voice replaying in her head, Jane oriented herself. She saw that the main

street continued on, curving off to the left, but also rising. The path had to be to her right, and it only took a moment to find it. She stepped carefully; this wasn't the time to trip and break her ankle, or worse. And there were the steps, and then, there it was. Professor Welldon's house, just as it looked in the photos he'd shown her.

There was a big stone terrace, and a garage beneath it, which was closed. Next to the terrace were stone steps, which led to the professor's actual living space. The main house was occupied – when it was at all – by the volunteers who worked with him on his dig. So up the steps she went. Jane was grateful that she had to concentrate on all the details; it helped to keep her mind off of how badly she'd screwed up, and how terrible her advisor's reaction would be.

There was a faded welcome mat in front of a heavy wooden door. Jane doubted that even in daylight she could tell what the mat had once said. There was no doorbell, though, just a stone door knocker. She took hold of it.

This was the moment. Once she started banging on the door, the length of her academic career would be measured in minutes. A man she respected and – there was no other description – had come to love, would look at her with disappointment, maybe even contempt. He'd turn his back on her forever. How could she do it? How could she possibly stand that?

Jane didn't know. But she knocked anyway.



“So what did she bloody do with the real artifacts?” Tom was at a loss. He had no idea what the girl had done. She hadn't had time to do anything!

“Hell if I know,” Alex answered. “But I do know this: it is no longer my problem. I am finished with this business. I am finished with her, and I am finished with you.”

As far as Tom was concerned, that was the first good news all day. Or was it? He was stuck here in Barcelona with no car, barely any cash, a credit card that might or might not be usable and a distressingly short list of people who might help him if he called.

On top of that, he was still worried about Jane. He knew that he ought to put her out of his mind. She'd been nothing but trouble from the start. It was the only sane thing to do. Anyone else in his place would do it in a heartbeat. Leave her to her own devices and never look back.

“No, you're not. Neither of us is finished, not yet.” He heard a hint of iron in his voice, and as surprised as Alex was to hear it, Tom thought he might have been more surprised himself.

thirty-one

(I've got good news and bad news)

Before she opened her eyes, Jane knew she was being stared at. There had been mornings back in college when she'd woken up on someone else's sofa, and she always knew before she opened her eyes when someone was watching her.

She knew where she was, and how she'd ended up there. It was simple exhaustion that had claimed her where she lay last night, on the circular seat, or bench or whatever it was called that surrounded the fireplace.

She had hammered on Professor Welldon's door for five solid minutes, to no avail. She'd actually managed to chip a piece of stone off of the door knocker – something else she'd have to confess to him.

She'd panicked then, but only for a minute or two. Then she recalled that one of his daughters lived on Mallorca, and she'd had a baby last year. She'd decided that the professor and his wife must have been spending the night with their daughter and their grandchild. Maybe the baby was sick. Or maybe everyone had just had too much wine at dinner and didn't want to risk the dangerous roads in the dead of night. Whatever the reason, he wasn't home and probably wasn't coming home until the morning.

So she'd gone back to the main house. She couldn't afford whatever it would cost for a night at *La Residencia*, and the temperature was dropping; she didn't fancy sleeping out on the stone floor of the front terrace. That left the house itself, and, luckily, the lock on the door was flimsy.

And now here she was, sunlight streaming in from the windows, and four people staring down at her. She didn't know two of them, a man and woman who looked to be about her father's age. They must have been volunteers. Then there

was a woman whom she hadn't met, but whose photo she'd seen: the professor's wife, Jackie. And, next to her, a smile trying to form on his face, Professor Welldon.

"Good morning, Jane. You're early. I didn't expect you until ten or so."

How long had she slept? What time did the mail come? "What time is it now?"

"Eight o'clock on the dot," her advisor said. That was good. The package was probably still at the post office. Still safe. Wilhelm's men probably couldn't get to it unless they resorted to an armed attack, and that didn't seem to be their style. Hopefully. "I didn't see the Land Rover out front," Professor Welldon went on, but there was no concern in his voice, just amused curiosity.

"No. That's kind of a long story, Professor." One that Jane knew she would not enjoy the ending of. But she had a larger responsibility, and she was going to carry it out. It started with convincing him; if she couldn't manage that, nothing else mattered. "And I'll tell you, but there's something we have to do first."

More than one something. A memory was tugging at her, words from someone. Her mother? Had she dreamed about Mom again? Given herself more advice? It was something about the hotel, *La Residencia*. About checking in, about guests.

Jane sat up, then leapt to her feet. She remembered, and everything was clear to her. "Two things, actually, Professor," she said, the words coming out without a breath. "Do you know the manager at the hotel, the *La Residencia*? We – you know what, I'll tell you on the way. But we need to go *now*."

The professor and Jackie and the two volunteers all stared at her. "I think we ought to sit down and talk about things calmly," Jackie said, in what was probably meant to be a soothing voice. It didn't work.

Jane reached out, took Professor Welldon's hands in hers. "Professor – Bill." It was the use of his first name, more than grabbing him, that got his attention. She hadn't meant to use it, but it was clearly the right thing to say. "I know I sound crazy, and the truth is, by now I probably am. But you have to listen to me, and you have to do what I tell you. If you want to get your pottery back, we have to go right now."

He didn't pull away, but he stared hard at her, and he fixed on one word. "Back?"

"Yes, *back*! I'll explain the best I can on the way. Come on!"

Her advisor stared into her eyes a moment longer, and Jane didn't look away. She knew he could see desperation in them, fear, pleading. But he must have seen truth, too, because he pulled his hands away from her, fished in his pocket

for his car keys and said, “Lead the way, Jane.”

In the five minutes it took to walk down to the garage and drive over to the hotel, Jane shared a small part of the story, the part she had just now remembered. The part she’d figured out while she was dreaming. Wilhelm and Louis and the two goons who’d beaten Tom up were still in Barcelona, or at least they had been as of last night. But there were more of them already here on Mallorca. They’d been one day ahead of her, which meant they would have arrived this time yesterday on the ferry.

The realization her subconscious mind had come to was that they had to be here, in Deia. Palma was too far away, they would want to be close to Professor Welldon, and to her when she arrived. And the *La Residencia* was the only hotel in town; there was nowhere else they *could* be. Which meant the pottery was with them, in their room. And if the professor was on good terms with the manager, it ought to be easy enough to find out where they were and – and then she wasn’t sure exactly what, but surely she’d think of something.

When they arrived at the reception desk, the manager, a goateed man in a well-pressed suit, glowered at Jane. She was still wearing yesterday’s clothes – jeans and a Crewe University sweatshirt, the last thing she’d grabbed from the Land Rover before she’d abandoned it last night. There was nothing for it; the rest of her clothes were abandoned, too, a couple of hundred miles away. She simply smiled at the man and let Professor Welldon do the talking. He asked about any new arrivals yesterday, and there were several, but only one that could be their quarry: a German and a Spaniard, with no luggage except for a single metal box.

“That’s it!” She wanted to laugh, to shout, to celebrate a victory, finally. But she got control of herself. It wasn’t a victory yet. “That must be them. What room are they in?”

The manager told them, but insisted on coming along. He’d known the professor for years, but obviously trust only went so far. She had to admit, she would have felt the same. He didn’t look happy at all when they arrived at the room. He stared at the professor, and the professor stared at her and she stared back at the manager. That went on for a very uncomfortable minute or two, until Jane had enough.

Without warning, she began banging on the door. “Open up! We know you’ve got the box, and if you don’t hand it over, we’re calling the police!”

The manager looked appalled, and her advisor was torn between concern and laughter. But the only reaction Jane cared about was that of the thieves inside the room. She could hear activity in there, and barely audible muttering. And then

Professor Welldon's voice boomed out, "Manuel, call security. They'll sort this out."

That was all it took. The door was cracked open, and Jane shoved her way in. The two men inside definitely looked the part of members of Wilhelm's gang; they wore expensive suits and had dead eyes. And they also had her – well, Professor Welldon's – box of pottery, right there on the floor next to the bed.



He had lost his mind. Tom had never before considered the possibility that insanity was contagious, but it clearly was. He'd caught it from the girl, and – not that he cared at this point – he was probably spreading it around to everyone he came into contact with.

He could think of no other explanation. He had no more money, he'd vomited three times during the ferry ride and now he had to follow a set of barely legible directions while driving an unfamiliar car that was probably ready to fall apart at any moment.

He wouldn't have done this for his sister, or his brother, or his best mate or even his Mum. And he knew there was no possibility of a reward at the end of things, not even a kiss. And yet, here he was, getting ready to drive off the ferry as soon as the green lights went on. No, there was no question at all, he had definitely lost his mind.



The pottery was safe, under lock and key in Professor Welldon's little museum. He'd opened the box to make sure, and there it was – a decade's worth of his best finds, neatly organized just as it should be.

The thieves were being guarded by two security men back at the hotel, until the police could pick them up. Jane had no idea what they might be charged with, or even who had the authority to charge them. All she cared about was that they were out of the way. There was still work to do, and not having to worry about anyone sneaking up behind her was a relief.

"Now we have to get the artifacts," she told Professor Welldon – or maybe she really could think of him as Bill now. She might as well; the odds were, she wouldn't be calling him anything except "my former advisor" once he got a look at his car.

Right on cue, he said, "Now we have to talk about my Land Rover," taking a seat at the big table on the front terrace. He was still smiling, but Jane wasn't encouraged.

She took a deep breath and launched into a very abbreviated version of the story. "It was all a mix-up. Those guys, the ones in the hotel, they thought they were stealing a box with Egyptian artifacts that were supposed to go to the British Museum. But they got your pottery by mistake. Somebody put the box with the artifacts in the room next to the pottery, and they took the wrong one."

"What does that have to do with my Land Rover?" He wasn't annoyed. Not yet, anyway. Jane didn't think that would be the case much longer.

"When I got to the Institute of Archaeology, to pick up your pottery, there was

only the one box there, so that's what I took. And it was locked, so I didn't know what was inside. I just assumed it was yours, but it really had the artifacts inside."

She had expected the anger to come at this point, but when she saw his eyes go wide, and comprehension dawn in them, she realized she should have known better.

He knew exactly what had happened to his Land Rover. Or, if not exactly, at least in general terms. And he was still smiling. "I see. So the two gentlemen we just met, they had friends? And you had some trouble with them along the way?"

She smiled back at him. "Yeah. You could put it that way."



The post office that served Deia was five miles away, in the town of Soller. On the twisting, treacherous mountain roads, it was a drive of twenty minutes, and along the way, Jane filled Bill in on more of the details.

"I'm sorry about the mirror and all the scratches. And God knows what I did to the engine. But I've never been in a high speed car chase before." She gave him a pleading look. "Have you? It's not as easy as it looks in the movies."

He gave her a teasing smile in return. "No, I can't say that I have. But it wasn't for lack of trying, especially when I was your age." He took one hand off the wheel and patted Jane's shoulder. His gesture didn't comfort her, though; she was more alarmed that he was only steering on these terrifying roads with one hand.

"It's not all it's cracked up to be," she said, which had to rank as one of the great understatements of all time. He still hadn't asked where his new car was now; it had taken all this time just to tell the tale up to the French-Spanish border. There was no time to finish the story; they were nearly to the post office. Now it was just a matter of navigating the narrow, mostly one way streets.

Jane was feeling claustrophobic. The stone buildings weren't very tall, most of them only two or three stories, but they were so close to the street that it was almost like driving through a tunnel. "Just around this corner, Jane," Bill said. "By the way, whatever possessed you to put the artifacts in the mail?"

"The truth?" He nodded. "I got the idea from a movie."

He clapped his hands. "'The Maltese Falcon.' You could do worse than follow Humphrey Bogart's advice," he said, laughing.

Jane started to laugh, too, until she saw the car just turning onto the cross street ahead of them. A BMW. A shiny new black BMW. With a driver wearing an overcoat that looked very familiar. Jane knew who he was, who he had to be, and

she didn't think about what she did next.

She didn't hear Bill shouting at her, or the sound of his engine or the screech of his brakes. She didn't smell the skidmarks he was laying down on the street. She didn't feel the pain in her knee as she landed hard on it after she opened the door and jumped out of the car. All her attention and all her senses were focused on the BMW and its driver. She was operating entirely on instinct; she ran straight for it, threw herself in front of it.

She *did* hear the BMW's brakes, and the cursing of the driver even through the closed windows. And then the hollow thump of his head hitting the windshield as he was thrown forward thanks to the sudden stop.

The commotion drew a crowd; doors opened up and down the street and shopkeepers emerged to see what had happened. Bill was behind her, trying to put an arm around her, and she was banging on the windshield at a dazed but still conscious Wilhelm – she'd been right that it was him.

Jane couldn't see a package in the car, but it might be in the trunk. It was ten after nine, and maybe he'd beaten them to the post office. She heard herself shouting, and she couldn't even tell what she was saying, but it must have gotten Wilhelm's attention. He peered at her, his eyes coming slowly into focus, and she saw the recognition there.

He must not have realized it was her when he slammed on the brakes. It had been instinct, the same as her actions. You see a pedestrian, and you try not to hit them. She wondered, if he had known who she was, whether he would still have stopped or not. But it didn't matter. She kept hitting the windshield, and now the onlookers were crowding around. He couldn't drive away without running over several people, not just her.

He had no choice, really. The door opened, and he stepped out, striding over towards Bill, who had let her go and was now walking towards him. Wilhelm must have thought if he could convince her advisor, that would calm things down. But Jane didn't give him the chance. She ran past Bill and, when she was just a step from the German thief, she brought her sore knee up, as hard as she could. His high-pitched scream was possibly the most satisfying sound she'd ever heard in her life, and the dull thud as he slumped to the ground was a close second.

After that, with all the onlookers, and her advisor, too shocked to move, she leaned into the car, turned off the engine and pulled the key out of the ignition. There was still no reaction from anyone when she walked around to the trunk and opened it.

Bill finally found his voice. “Jane, have you lost your mind?”

“Maybe,” she answered. “But look what I found instead!” He came around and stood next to her, staring down at what was in the trunk. The large box covered in brown wrapping paper that she’d sent out from Barcelona last night, addressed in large, blocky letters to “Professor William Welldon.”

An hour later, with everything finally explained to the satisfaction of the police, Jane and Bill were on their way back to Deia. He gushed over her, and over the priceless cargo now safely in the trunk, all the way back to his house. “There’s only one thing left,” he said when they made the final turn towards his home. “You never mentioned exactly where my Land Rover is.”

Jane sighed deeply. “If they didn’t have it towed, it should still be in the garage at the *Hotel Gran Barcino*. You know, right by the cathedral?”

He didn’t answer her, and for an instant, Jane wondered if, despite his acceptance of everything she’d told him and everything he’d seen, he was going to blow up over the car anyway. She couldn’t really blame him if he did. But when she turned her attention to the view in front of her, she understood why he hadn’t responded.

The Land Rover, scratches, dents, missing mirror and all, was parked right in front of the house.

Tom had no idea what reaction he was going to receive when Jane and her advisor returned to his house and saw the state of the Land Rover. He would not have bet on the girl throwing herself at him, hugging him tightly enough to dislodge a rib, and kissing his cheek repeatedly.

That’s exactly what happened, though.

“You – how – why – what are you doing here?”

He waited until she’d eased her hold on him to answer. “I couldn’t leave it there in Barcelona, could I? Besides, I figured out what you’d done with the artifacts, and I had to follow you.”

She squeezed him again, kissed his cheek again. He wasn’t sure if he was disappointed or grateful that it wasn’t his lips. He also wasn’t sure what he saw on her face when she backed off again and asked, “Where’s Alex?”

The Irishman had done about as much as anyone could expect from one of his lot, he had to admit. “He wanted no part of the whole mess, after you left. But he did pay for the new tires and the ferry ticket.” He forced the next words out. “I

suppose we can thank him for that much, anyway.”

There was one more thing the Irishman had done, which he would tell Jane, but not until he heard what had happened to her – and the artifacts.

As his last act before disappearing back under whatever rock he'd originally crawled out from, Alex had told Tom the whole story, from the beginning. Who had organized the theft, and why, and how Alex had gotten involved in it. To his great surprise, Tom realized that he actually believed the Irishman.



It really was all over. Bill and Tom had spent two hours on the phone with the Bodleian Library and the British Museum to resolve the matter of returning the artifacts to their rightful home. The Museum was flying people down tomorrow to retrieve them, which absolved Tom of any further responsibility.

He was right now on his way to the airport, for a flight to Paris, a taxi to the hotel northwest of the city, and then a long drive back to Oxfordshire. Bill had paid for it all.

“I cannot wait to be back on British soil,” Tom had said when Jane saw him off. “And I will never leave it again.” They’d exchanged phone numbers; she intended to hold him to his promise of introducing her to his sister.

The last thing he did before the car door slammed shut was to hand her a business card. Alex’s business card, from the Saatchi Gallery. She had no reason to believe it was genuine, but she put it in her pocket all the same.

For his part, Bill insisted he was proud of Jane, and not at all upset about the state of his new car. It probably helped that he’d talked the people from the Bodleian Library into covering the cost of the repairs. It was only fair, really; everything that had happened was, ultimately, their responsibility.

It turned out that Tom’s theory about the plot to steal the artifacts in the first place was almost completely correct. Tom had suspected that Alice, the woman who directed him to deliver the box to the institute of Archaeology a week ago, had been involved, along with her flatmate, Deirdre.

As his last act before disappearing from the hotel garage in Barcelona, Alex had told Tom the whole story. Alice had been Alex’s girlfriend at university, and

they'd kept in touch. So when the artifacts came across her desk, and she saw an opportunity to profit, she called her old boyfriend, who she knew had shady connections. The only thing Tom had been wrong about was Deirdre. Apparently, despite her Irish name and the guilt it obviously implied, Alice's flatmate had not had anything to do with it.

Tom's had ended his retelling with the comment that, "God help me, I think he was telling the truth for once." Jane had to agree. Which meant that Alex was more of an opportunist than a true criminal. A handsome opportunist with a hypnotic voice when he chose to really use it. Maybe she would look at his business card again when she was back in England. Who knew what would happen then?

After Tom's departure, life at Bill's house settled down into a routine. Jane joined the volunteers out at the dig site every day, and ate with them and Bill's family every night. Before she knew it, Christmas Eve had arrived, and everyone was sitting down to a tradition she was very familiar with: the Seven Fishes. It was the same meal she and her father shared with their neighbors every year, and for the first time since she'd left Oxfordshire, Jane felt homesick. At least until the phone rang.

"Jane? It's for you!"

Who could be calling her here? No one from Magdalen College would be calling her, would they? Who else even knew she was here? Her father and Jess, but neither of them knew the number.

She walked over to the phone. "Hello?"

"Hey, Barnaby! Merry Christmas!"

She hadn't heard that voice in months, not since the night before she left for England. Mark Bainbridge. She wondered, for an instant, how he'd tracked her down. But there was no need to wonder. Jess must have told him what she was doing for Christmas. And then Mark did his research and dug up a phone number. Of course he did. She should have expected it.

"Hey yourself! But it isn't Christmas yet."

"You know me," he said, laughing. "I hate waiting until the last minute. And it's been way too long since I heard your voice, Barnaby. I've missed it."

She missed his voice, too. And his laugh. And his – well, his *everything*. How much easier would that whole crazy adventure have been with him at her side? She had to tell him all about it, every word. The fishes, all seven of them, could wait. "I've missed you, too. Just, hang on for one second, OK?"

She called over to the table, "Go ahead and eat without me. This is going to

take a while.” She put the phone down, grabbed a wooden chair from the living room and dragged it into the little kitchen. Then she picked the phone back up and launched into the story.

It was as though no time at all had passed. Mark was as easy to talk to as he had been every day for four years in college. Jane didn’t have to measure her words or try to guess what he was thinking or how he might react, the way she had during her journey here.

When she finally hung up, nearly an hour later, she got up and went to see if anything was left for her to eat. As she did, she felt something in her pocket. Jane pulled out Alex’s business card, and tore it up without even looking at it. Then she tore the pieces into still smaller pieces, and into the trash they went.

She wondered why she’d ever been carrying it around in the first place.




Tom wasn’t sure what he would say when – or if – the door opened. He wasn’t sure why he was even here. He’d never even met Deirdre O’Reilly before.

He did know that her flatmate, and his former co-worker, had departed both her flat and her job with only a few hours warning. She’d left without an explanation, only a forwarding address.

In Wales. Which confirmed her guilt. Why would anyone go to Wales unless they had no other choice?

Tom couldn’t explain, even to himself, why he felt that Deirdre deserved some answers. He didn’t know what made him think that she could probably use a friend right now, or that he was the one best suited to fill that role, at least for an afternoon.

He didn’t know, but he rang the doorbell anyway.



jane writes home
(part five – an abridged story)

December 11, 1990

Dear Daddy,

You'll never believe what happened today. Professor Welldon just now gave me the most amazing opportunity. He's invited me to come out to Mallorca over Christmas, to work with him at his dig sites there.

He's got these volunteer teams that come from all over the world to help him excavate the sites, and he usually brings several students with him when he goes, but this time it's just me. Can you imagine that? I guess I've made an impression on him.

I don't remember how much I've told you about him. Did I mention he's from the Bronx? And from right by your old house, too – he lived on 227th St. and Bronxwood Avenue, right where the funeral home is. So he lived three blocks from you when he was a kid. You'll have to meet him if you ever come out to visit me. You can catch up on the old days, back when they had the ice trucks and the automat and all the other stuff you always talk about.

Anyway, we'll be driving there. There's a ferry across the English Channel, and you can take your car on it – just like the Auto Train down to Florida. I'll be there for Christmas and New Year's, and we'll come back the second week of January. I'm enclosing the address, you can write me there, and if you can think of anything Spanish that you want me to send home to you, just tell me and I'll do my best.

I hope you're doing well back there. You've put up the Christmas tree, right? I'll be checking with Mrs. Parlato to see if you really have, so don't let me down.

I'm leaving next Monday, and we'll be in Spain Wednesday afternoon, so I'll

write you then to let you know I've arrived safely. But there's absolutely nothing to worry about. Bill's car is a Land Rover, and it's got four-wheel drive and all the latest safety features. And it's brand new, so it's in perfect working order. So don't sit up at night thinking about anything bad happening to me. I couldn't be in better hands. OK? Please?

I really will write as soon as I'm in Spain. I swear. Until then, take care, and make sure you get all the decorations up. Remember, I have eyes everywhere!

All my love,


Jane 

*Jane Barnaby will return
in a new adventure,
in the fall of 2016.*

In the meantime, if you enjoyed this story, please let me know. You can drop me a line directly at jamesd@elevendayempire.com or you can leave a review. Or, you could even do both!

If you want to keep up with the latest news about Jane, and all my other books, you can [sign up for my mailing list](#). And you can visit my website anytime at www.writingdreams.net.

Finally, I've got a whole lot of other books out, and you can find them all at my website.



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