

LOST: The Time Travel Romance That Started It All

Chapter 8: The Honeymoon Sea Cruise

One week later, at sea

“We can’t do that!” Sarah squeaked. “The men will hear us.”

“Ah, so they’ll ken I’m servin’ ye well. Dinna fash, they’re decent lads. They have no desire to watch. Ye did say that in yer time, people did that, aye? Watched each other copulating?”

“Yes, I mean no, I mean. It was in movies. Moving pictures, like portraits that moved and talked, but the screens – the canvases – were bigger. Well, some of them were smaller. I mean, can’t we just wait until we’re at an inn?”

Jody leaned in and rubbed his nose under her ear, tickling her on purpose. “The folks would be a lot closer to us at an inn than out here in the rough. Plus, the mattress is softer here.” He patted the plaid-covered leaf pile he’d put together for her. “And probably a lot less buggy.”

Sarah squealed as a garter snake slithered across the edge of the covering and into the golden leaves. “Weel, probably fewer snakes at the inn,” Jody said. “But the ones out here are naught but the wee fellows that feed on the crawlies and vermin. They willna bother ye.” He tickled her in the ribs, making her squirm, then grabbed her round bottom, firm from working the fields alongside him. “Yer too big to swallow.”

“What drivel,” Clotilde said, shutting the purloined paperback. “The least old Marty could have done was dog-ear the good stuff. Why for God’s name can’t they figure out how to provide Wi-Fi at sea? Two weeks without porn, watching André...”

Knock. Knock.

“Grrr,” she mumbled, then spoke up in a thin, whiny voice, “Yes, dear?”

“Are you okay? Is there anything I can do for you?” James asked.

“Oh, no. There’s nothing anyone can do about a nasty case of food poisoning. That is unless you want to sue the ship lines for putting out spoiled lobster.” Cough. Cough. “Oh, no. I think I’m going to be sick again,” Clotilde said, then rolled over and screamed into her pillow.

“I’m going on deck to get some fresh air. Tell the steward to find me if you need anything. I’ll be back in an hour to check on you.”

“Th...thank you,” she stammered, using her self-taught acting skills. “You’re so sweet.”
And gullible!

James walked away. Again. Still frustrated. What was he supposed to do? He'd been married for one full week and hadn't had so much as a passionate kiss. Five days of delays for 'female issues' he could understand, but supposedly she was sick from the buffet. No one else on board had so much as indigestion the ship's doctor assured him. Time for another consultation.

James stepped into the tiny anteroom of the doctor's clinic and saw he was the only patient. The nurse told him she'd let her know he was here.

"Dr. Waymire, I hate to disturb you." James looked around the small room. The only place to sit other than the doctor's stool, was on the exam table.

"Please, get comfortable,," the dark-haired beauty said, nodding to the table. Once he was seated, she put her hand on his wrist to check his pulse. "Now, what can I do for you?"

"It's not me. I'm not sick," he protested, trying to pull his hand away.

"I'll check it since you're here. Oh, by the way, how's your wife?"

"That's why I came by. She's been locked in our room, sick for nearly three days. Can you make a house call? Or is that a stateroom call? Either way, I'm getting tired of sleeping on a cot in the gymnasium. I guess that's better than being on deck. I think there's such a thing as too much sea air."

The doctor chuckled at his remark as she felt under his jawline for swollen glands, his forehead for any sign of fever. Suddenly, it registered what he'd said. "Wait. You mean you haven't slept with your wife – I mean, in your own room – for two days?"

James shrugged then winced, brought up short by the kink in his neck.

"Let me check that out." She stood in front of him. "Here, let me get closer." James put his knees apart and she moved right next to the exam table, her cool hands on either side of his neck.

"Your neck muscles are as tight as steel cables. What have you been doing?"

"As I said, finding odd places to sleep the last two nights. For five days before that, I was making do on the floor with a blanket and pillow."

The doctor picked up her clipboard and scanned down the passenger list. Melbourne, James, stateroom. In parentheses was noted British lord – honeymoon. She set it down and said, "Lie down on your belly, please."

"I'm not here for me. I'm fine. I'm worried about my wife." He saw the doctor's scowl and did as he was told. "How's this going to help her?"

“You’re my patient, not her. I can make a house call after I try to untangle the knots in your neck and shoulders. I’m surprised you don’t have headaches.”

James relaxed into her strong fingers, tensing slightly as she pressed on a tight muscle. If only his wife would do this for him. Do anything for him...

“You’ve made a huge mistake, James. It’s not too late to back out. I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you,” Grandpa said. “But even if I had been, I suspect you wouldn’t have listened to me. You always did have to try it your way first. It’s not too late. You can undo this marriage.”

The doctor felt him relax completely. Sound asleep.

What kind of woman would kick *him* out of bed? Even a lesbian would give this one a try. Well, maybe not every lady lover, but she sure would. Compassionate, well built from all she could see, probably rich since he was staying in a stateroom, and a member of the House of Lords, to boot? Was that wife of his crazy or mean or both?

She threw a sheet over Lord James Melbourne’s dozing form and patted his back in dismissal. It was a slow day. She’d let him rest until she needed the room. Maybe if he slept his head would clear and he’d see he was married to a gold digger. His marital situation wasn’t her concern, only the health of his body. It would be best to stay out of it and hope he figured it out himself.

She shut the door behind her and went into the lobby. Still, a waste of a good man.

Ding-ding. Ding-ding.

James awoke with a start. It was the lunch – or was that dinner? – bell. He lifted his head and wiped his mouth. He’d been sleeping soundly but for how long and where? He sat up and looked at the wall. The skinless face of a human skull, complete with bug eyes and sinuses, looked out at him, the illustration stark and scary after his vivid dream of his grandfather scolding him. Was the old man in danger? He thought of the message he’d received via the dreamland wire. Hmph. Was *he* in danger?

He appeared to be in a doctor’s office. Oh, yeah. He’d come to see the doctor about Clotilde. He must have fallen asleep when she was releasing the tension...

“Oh, shit! I told Clotilde I’d check on her in an hour. She’s probably wondering where I am, worried that I’m okay.” He rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “Or not.”

James walked slowly down the deck, a condemned man to sentencing, in no hurry to find out his fate. She'd put him off on consummating the wedding for a week now. Her first lie – we aren't fully married until we're in international waters – so blatant, he thought he'd lose his cool. Still, he let her think she was right. After all, she did have her 'monthly' to contend with. Maybe that was the real reason, and she didn't want to admit it.

Could she possibly be suffering from morning sickness? That was the doctor's first question on his initial visit to her. "No, we haven't had relations," he told her, a blush rising at the admission. He could see her bite off the remark that it could be someone else's child. At least, Dr. Waymire had a robust sense of decency. He'd thought of it, too. But when? With whom?

Waves of mucky mind garbage weighed him down, disgusting thoughts of all the opportunities she'd had to cheat on him – deceive him, misdirect him, steal from him – since they'd been together. Had he been the biggest sucker in the candy store? Apparently, his subconscious knew it. He'd been so focused on her comfort and happiness, he'd neglected his own self-care. Even a small portion – a decent bed to sleep in – should have been a concern for her. If she truly loved him. Or even had a sliver of respect for him as a human being.

James looked up. He was at their cabin. Did he even want to go in – to confront her with his observations? A seagull flying overhead, calling out its announcement that land was nearby, brought him back to the present. He put his hand on the doorknob and turned. The moment of reckoning.

It was unlocked.

"Oh, there you are, darling," Clotilde called out, all dressed and coifed, ready for dinner at the Captain's table. "Do hurry up and change. You look like you've slept in those clothes. I'm sure Charles packed a suit for you. I do hope you hung it up when we got here. It doesn't seem like we've been on this boat – excuse me, this ship – for a week, does it?"

Clotilde's blathering went on and on; dozens of words spoken but nothing said. Was this better than her quick quips that essentially said, 'Be quiet and leave me alone?' He unbuttoned his shirt, sniffed his armpit, decided a quick deodorant cover-up would have to do, then finished getting dressed. Concentrating on the steps of changing clothes tuned her out and channeled away the negativity of his earlier thoughts. Diverted, but not forgotten.

The next day

Piraeus, Greece

“I can only talk a moment, dear Randy. We just got into Port Something-or-other. I can’t pronounce these names. No, there was no cell service at sea. Would you believe, I couldn’t even get wi-fi? Yes, that’s why I didn’t send an email. No, darling. I’ve remained true to you. I didn’t sleep with him.”

Clotilde giggled. “Not even the innocent kind. The whole time, I had him sleep on the floor or wherever he could find a place. I didn’t care. As long as he wasn’t in the same bed with me. What? You want me to sleep with him? You mean, have sex with my husband? Oh, no...no...no. Oh, I suppose you’re right. It isn’t legal if it isn’t consummated. Well, there is a big celebration tonight because we made it to Greece. I guess I’ll get stinking drunk and let him do it.” She paused, imagining André was on board, too, and he wanted her. *Ahem*. “And I’ll be thinking of you the whole time.”

Clotilde looked up and saw James coming her way. “I have to go, Mumsy. I’m glad you’re feeling better. Ta ta. Love and kisses.”

Click.

She closed the phone quickly and put it in her purse. “Just checking in with family,” she said and kissed him on the cheek.

James saw her flush and knew she was lying. She was uncomfortable and it wasn’t the heat.

Clotilde immediately noticed something different about him. He hadn’t touched her or kissed her cheek. He didn’t seem all needy and clingy, either. He was confident. He had a backbone. A chill went up her spine. Was he on to her? She remembered what Randy just said about sleeping with him. She’d have to do it fast and cement the legal and financial bond or lose it all.

She leaned into James, rubbing her breasts on his arm just below the sleeve of his cotton polo shirt. “How come we haven’t consummated our marriage,” she whispered. “Don’t you want me?”

He pulled back, nearly dumping her as she lost her balance. “What?” he hissed sharply.

Hiding her disgust at him for causing the false step in public, she remembered the six packets of cash she had seen in the safe, the new combination written on a scrap of paper in the medicine cabinet. She wouldn’t be able to access the funds if he got mad at her and changed the

locks and combination. Plus, she still had to be added as a signer on his bank accounts. Her eyes lit up in anticipation of access to more funds.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she said and brought back her sure-fire pout. Her fingertips skimmed across his chest, his nipples hardening beneath her touch. “I was feeling under the weather. You can’t fault me for that, can you?”

James noticed faces in the crowd, half the tourists staring, the other half pretending to be disinterested, little smirks hidden behind bowed heads as they fussed with hats, hairdos, or the price tags on the locally produced handbags.

“Come with me, Clotilde,” he said, the pronunciation of her name harsh with disgust, a firm hand on her upper arm as he led an exodus away from their fellow shipmates. “Let’s go back to our cabin. Whatever you had must be contagious. Now I’m not feeling well.”

Out of the corner of his eye, James watched her face transition between shock, rage, and forced humility. A smattering of self-loathing at obeying his direction and allowing herself to be led like a dog was also there. He grinned in satisfaction. Maybe that’s all she needed: a man to take charge. Well, he could do that. His smile grew. It might be the most fun he’d had in weeks.

Once they neared their stateroom, Clotilde tensed. That ‘moment’ was approaching fast. James opened the door and saw housekeeping had already come in. The queen-sized bed was freshly made, a decorative *paquette* of tulle and white ribbon containing pastel butter mints on each pillow.

“Here, dear,” Clotilde said, slipping around him to get to the bed. “Let me fix this up for you proper, so you’ll be comfortable. I know how queasy my stomach was.” She snatched the little parcels of candy and tossed them on the dresser, then quickly rearranged all the pillows into a comfortable nest for one person. “Lie down here and I’ll get you a seltzer from the bar – a little spritz of something to settle the stomach. Ginger maybe? I’ll ask the bartender. He’ll know. You just cozy in and I’ll be right back.”

And then she was gone.

“She did it to me again,” James huffed. “I had control of the situation for a couple minutes and the few hundred yards to get here, then she snatched it right back.” He kicked off his shoes and lay back on the pillows, fuming. “Bellyache or not, this is not how a honeymoon is supposed to be.”

“Give me something to drink,” Clotilde grumbled.

“What does your heart desire?” the youthful bartender asked, giving her a flirtatious wink.

“Whatever will get me drunk the fastest.” She looked up and saw her reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Scowling, angry, two parallel lines between her eyebrows, wrinkles forming. She forced her face to relax and the ‘elevens’ faded into oblivion. “Rough day,” she said and pouted. “Oh, and my friend has a tummy ache. Just in case I forget, would you give me a takeaway cup of something to soothe it? She’ll last until I get back. You wouldn’t believe what I’ve had to put up with – her puking all night. I couldn’t get a moment’s rest.”

The bartender knew who she was. The whole crew was talking about the beauty who was a beast, forcing her newlywed husband to sleep wherever he could find a spot. He set a glass in front of her and poured a double brandy, then held a large, perfect ice cube above it. “On the rocks? It might help it go down a little easier.”

Her pout slipped into a grin. He was flirting with her. She still had it. “If you say so...”

Three doubles later, Clotilde looked up, ready to ask for a fourth. “Where’d he go?” she asked the blurry visage of an oversized penguin in front of her.

“His shift was over,” the middle-aged woman in a white shirt and black vest said. “Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“Irish coffee?” Clotilde asked. “Nah, I hate whiskey. Slip some of that fancy brandy in it. That’s good shtuff,” she slurred, then lay her head on the bar.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” the shift relief bartender said, “I can’t serve you any more alcohol. Would you like help getting back to your cabin?”

“I’m not no stinkin’ ma’am,” Clotilde raged. “And I’m not in a cabin. I’m Lady Clotilde and my husband and I are in a stateroom, the biggest one they had available. I should know...”

Her head flopped onto the bar again, slobber slipping out of her mouth. The coolness of the drool awakened her with a start. “What time is it?” she asked, pushing her hair out of her eyes. “Isn’t there a party tonight or something?”

“Yes, ma’am...I mean, Lady Clotilde, there is.” The server looked behind her at the clock. “You have about one hour until it starts.”

Clotilde grabbed a bar napkin and wiped her mouth. “Which way to the staterooms?”

“Out the door and to your left. Oh, and Jason said you asked for a ginger ale in a to-go cup,” she smirked and added, “for your lady friend.” She grabbed a paper cup and started to fill it from the well, then stepped back in shock, startled as a hand knocked it away.

“He doesn’t need no stinking bellyache cure. He’s probably lying about feelin’ sick, anyhow. Damn hoity-toity millionaire snob.”

Clotilde stumbled out the doorway, wincing at the bright daylight. She grabbed the rail to steady herself and sashayed toward her stateroom, her chin high in pride until her hand hit fresh bird droppings. Babbling and waving her arm with disgust, the drunk and disoriented newlywed blonde wavered to the other side of the promenade and wiped the seagull excrement on a deck chair cushion. She took a moment to compose herself, then proceeded to her destination as if nothing had happened.

Clunk! Clatter!

“Son of female dog!” she screeched as she tried to open the stateroom door. “Damned key.”

James awoke with a start at the disturbance. He hadn’t meant to fall asleep, but the bed beneath him was the most comfortable place he’d laid in a week.

Clotilde tumbled into the room, arms outstretched, room key in one hand, the other grasping for something to steady herself.

James jumped out of bed and grabbed her around the waist, pulling her backside to him to avoid the key she was now holding like a small sword.

“Oh, are you still here?” she asked with a half grin.

“It’s my room, too.” James stood her up next to the bed, facing him. One slight push on her shoulder and she was down, feet kicking up, eyes to the ceiling. “You can have the room for the rest of the trip. I’m getting an annulment as soon as I get back. I’m sure I can catch a flight out of Athens. You can finish the cruise by yourself.”

“But...but it’s our honeymoon!”

“Clotilde, I knew you were dim when we first got together, but I thought there was some good in you. I guess I was the dumb one. You care for you and only you.”

“Wait, wait... Please don’t throw all this away. I’m...I’m just scared, that’s all. You know, about the wedding night part. I’m still a virgin, you know.” Clotilde reached out for his hand, her head bowed, hiding her grin of deception, hoping the smell of brandy wasn’t as strong to him as it was to her.

Nothing. James didn't say a word and it scared her. Crap. Now she'd have to beg. "Please, give me another chance. Stay with me at least until the end of the cruise. Just one more week. You can have the bed, even if I get as sick as I was again..."

Knock. Knock.

James answered the door. The teen in a crisp white uniform handed him a card. "The captain wanted to make sure you were still eating at his table tonight." The young man looked over at Clotilde, one hand tidying her hair, pretending nothing was amiss. "He heard that someone was ill."

James looked back and saw Clotilde straighten up with excitement, the smile that had first attracted him to her now back in place, the pout gone. "Yes, we'll be there." He pulled a folded bill out of his pocket and slipped it in the young man's hand. "Thanks for checking on us."

Only five minutes late – which was early for Clotilde – they arrived at dinner. James and the captain spoke of the flora in the region and how some of the vineyard grapes on these islands were centuries old. Clotilde nodded and smiled, pretending to eat as she pushed food around on her plate, confining her consumption to alcoholic beverages only.

When the steward started their way offering a second round of after-dinner brandy, James shook his head, heading off the visit. She'd had more than enough. It was apparent to everyone in their section she was plastered. Loud to the point of rudeness, a gutter coarseness and braying laugh had overtaken her former demure manner. Normally, she would only listen to conversations with coy smiles and gentle chuckles, keeping her opinions to herself. Tonight, she had become obnoxious and was embarrassing everyone but herself.

"Excuse me," James said, nodding to the captain and the other couples at his table, "but I think I'd better take my wife back to our room. She seems..." He shrugged one shoulder, letting the reason be tacit. They knew.

"But I don't want to go," Clotilde protested. She held her empty brandy snifter high as a signal, looking around for the steward.

James took the glass out of her hand, set it down, and hoisted her to standing by the elbow. "It's been a pleasure," he said to the guests and turned to leave, his irascible wife trying to squirm out of his hold.

"But I don't want to go," she whined again.

“Too bad,” James said, humiliated yet determined to get her out of the spotlight before she either puked, created more of a scene, or both.

He ushered her toward their room with only moderate resistance. She had calmed down somewhat after she realized he wasn’t going to let her have another drink. At least she had ceased calling out loud remarks to people about their dress or general appearance.

Awkwardly trying to keep her upright while he unlocked the room, they finally made it inside, the spectacle of the British lord and his drunken wife now hidden from others. He set her before the bed, and she sat down hard – the hard part her fault because she’d lost muscle control. He waited for her to recover, then turned to leave.

“Wait!” she called after him.

He turned and glared at her but didn’t speak.

She swiped a hand across her mouth, checked her breath, then stood up. “We have some unfinished business,” she slurred.

“I think not.”

She dropped the sleeve off her shoulder and sauntered toward him. Tripping just before she got to him, she tumbled forward.

“Whoa, there...” By reflex, he caught her. Immediately, the thought occurred to him it would have suited her right to fall and break her nose or chip a tooth. Then again, he’d probably be responsible for plastic surgery or dental work if she did. Or she’d want to sue the cruise company for having wrinkles in their rugs.

Clotilde grimaced at being in his arms but drunk or sober, she knew she had to do it. She’d invested three months in this man. She wanted the money. One roll in the sack, a few fabricated events that would create a scandal, then a high-profile divorce. With the right solicitor, she’d get more than half his worth. *Grin and bear it for one night, woman.*

“I’ll be in the gym,” James said. “Not that you’ll need me for anything.”

“James, please don’t go,” she begged, grabbing his arm as he reached for the door. Sincere for the first time since she spotted him in that restaurant months ago, she added, “I really do need you.”

She moved close, shut her eyes, and reached out and grabbed his crotch. “Show me what it feels like to be a woman. A complete woman. Take me.”

James gulped. No matter what he thought of her, she had him at a disadvantage. Her grip was strong, and she seemed to know what she was doing. Virgin or not, she wasn't letting go.

“Clotilde...”

His protest was cut off as her other hand pulled his face to hers, her mouth covering his, brandy-flavored kisses deep and probing.

Resistance is futile was his last thought.

They fell into a tangle on the bed, rolling over each other, grasping and clutching, pulling off clothes. Like a dream without continuity – a flash of skin, a scrape of nails, yelps and shrieks, a roar of passion – and then it was over. Cold and clammy, disgusting, and unfulfilling for both of them.

Clotilde dashed from the bed into the bathroom and closed the door. He heard her heaving, sick to her stomach, for real this time.

He bit back the question, “Are you all right.” It was plain she wasn't. He lay in bed, the top sheet over his loins, reflecting on what had just happened. *Dummy. She didn't give you anything. Certainly not her virginity. You've consummated a sham marriage. It's legal now. No annulment. No recourse. No love. Dummy. Dummy. Dummy.*

James fell asleep, smothered in self-chastisement, and awoke by himself. He looked around the room and saw her, asleep on the floor in front of the bathroom, wrapped in her thick terrycloth robe, a wadded-up towel as a pillow. He smiled to himself. *Hungover and with a stiff neck from sleeping on the floor. It couldn't happen to a more deserving person.*

A long week of ‘not tonight, dears,’ or ‘maybe later’ and their cruise was finished. Despite the uncomfortable certainty that he'd been duped, James gave up on the idea of an annulment. He'd thought briefly of pretending they'd never consummated the marriage. She was so drunk, it shouldn't take much to convince her nothing transpired between them. Maybe if he gave her a few bucks, she'd go away. Nah. She'd claim abandonment, deception, breach of contract, or something. Even a third-rate solicitor could find a way to get money from him with this debacle. It was best to put on a brave face and hope she'd change.

They made it back to London without any major embarrassments and only minor drunkenness on her part. Clotilde didn't spare a moment moving in completely, announcing to all the changes she would make to the Melbourne Manse. It didn't make a difference to her whether

the property belonged to James or his grandfather. She had claimed it. It was her residence now and hers to redecorate. James wouldn't let her have full rein but did negotiate down to letting her remodel three bathrooms and one dining room. That much should keep her out of his hair.

Clotilde enjoyed entertaining and had guests over at least every two weeks. They were sumptuous affairs, meant to impress others and get her picture on the society page of the papers. Occasionally at these events, she'd show him affection. Her gentle touches and little kisses on the cheek still titillated him whether she truly felt kindly toward him or not. She loved to ramble on about their perfect marriage and led everyone to believe they had a wonderful time behind closed doors.

Even though he knew they were fake, the physicality of her gestures brought out his animal desires. He usually suppressed them, but a couple of times, he chose not to ignore them. He let the yearnings compound until he was fired up too much to cool down, ready to be man and wife again...and not in name only. He could have taken matters into his own hands and relieved himself with a long shower, but – damn it – she was his wife.

She always found the right – or wrong – words to kill his desire, though. Her scathing diatribes and caustic tone could melt a wax taper. Yes, he finally figured out that she got him worked up just so she could put him down. It was her entertainment, her sport.

Other than the one drunken night on the cruise, she only let him become intimate with her once. It was after she had spent a late evening doing research on her new laptop computer. She never would tell him what she was looking up, but he had the sneaky suspicion she had found a porn site. That night, she made the moves on him. Without knocking, she came into his room and climbed into bed with him, quickly shucking her clothes. She grabbed him and rubbed her bony body all over his, murmuring, 'André, take me now, take me hard.'

That night, it felt like another person had taken over Clotilde's body. Then again, that was probably because she was treating him like another man, this man named André. He didn't care what she called him. He had bruises on his hips the next morning, but a smile that lasted until he came downstairs. Maybe she'd become the seductress again...

When he arrived in the dining room for breakfast, she was gone. Not for another shopping trip, but for a much longer period: she had taken her laptop with her. Not bothering to write a note, she had left a short message with Cookie. 'Tell James Mumsy is gravely ill, and I'll be gone until she's better.'

“Have you ever met her mother?” Charles asked James, stepping into the room and the conversation. He nodded hello to Cookie, then looked back at James. “Perhaps there’s a specialist who can heal her malady.”

“I don’t even know the woman’s name,” James replied, fully aware of the nuance of his friend’s question. “She calls her ‘Dear Mum’ or ‘Mumsy.’ Whenever I ask, she gets emotional and does her babble mixed with tears trick.”

Charles spat out his sip of tea at the candid explanation.

Cookie handed him a napkin and said, “James knows what he’s doing. He can see right through her, can’t you, deary.”

“Seeing and knowing what to do are two different things,” James said. “Although it does seem to flare up whenever she thinks she deserves a holiday.”

“Well,” Charles said. “I know it isn’t my business, but I have a friend who specializes in getting to the bottom of lost, missing, or mysterious people. Silas Priest. I can ring him up or send him an email and maybe he can find out more about Dear Mumsy.”

“That’s Dear Mum or Mumsy,” Cookie said.

James and Charles laughed at her correction.

“Hey, I’m part Sherlock, too,” she said. “My mother always did say I should have been a detective.”

“I disagree,” James said. “Or maybe you would have been great at that, but then I wouldn’t have had the best cook in the Western Hemisphere spoiling me for the past twenty-six years.”

October 30, 2011

“Hello?” Clotilde pulled the phone away from her ear and looked again to make sure she had dialed correctly.

“Hello? Hello?” she repeated.

“Oh, there it is. Damned mute button was on,” Sept said. “Hey, it’s yer nickel. Whatcha want?”

“This is your, ahem, friend, Lady C. Remember me?”

“Are you that broad with the funny name that sent me two hundred bucks a couple months ago? ‘Cause if you are, I need more money. That ran out three weeks past.” Sept held the phone

away from his ear, then hit another button. “Can you hear me now? I think it’s supposed to be on speakerphone.”

“Yes, yes, I can hear you. I’ll send you more money but first, you must go to the Gillis Courthouse – or whatever it’s called – and see if you can find that little man with a map. Take it from him and call me back at this number. This is a new phone number, so don’t call the other one.”

“Hello? Hello?” Sept said. “Oh, yeah. I remember now. You have that thing goin’ on with the treasure map what’s needs the key. You say it’s gonna be around on Halloween, but you don’t know what year, right? See, I got a good memory.”

“That’s memory, Pa,” Eight said.

“Shut yer piehole or I’ll shut it fer you,” Sept said. “No, not you, Lady. It’s my idiot son. Well, actually, he’s the smart one. The other one’s the idiot. Yeah, I know it’s none of yer business. We’ll cut ye a good deal. Ye send the money today and we’ll look both today and tomorrow. Sound good to ye? Okay. Now, tell me that secret name again. I couldn’t remember it last time. Okay. I’ll say it out loud and you boys try and remember it, too. Cloe Til Duh. Got it, boys?”

Eight and Niner repeated, “Cloe Til Duh, Cloe Til Duh.”

“Yeah, we got it, Lady. Here’s hopin’ we’ll have good news fer ye today or tomorrow. Now, don’t ferget the money like ye did last time. I got bills to pay, ye know. Yeah, bye fer now.”

“Hey, Pa,” Niner said. “We ain’t got no bills ‘cause with fast hands like ours, we don’t buy nuthin’. At least, not much.”

“Dummy, we buy beer and gas. And if we’re goin’ to the Guillyford Courthouse place, we’re gonna need gas. Geez, that lady’s sure dumb, callin’ it the Gillis Courthouse.”

Two days later

“Hey, Pa,” Eight said. “Don’t I look like one of them andy-sister type persons?”

“That’s ancestor,” Niner said, then ducked, expecting another blow for correcting his elder.

“Yeah, that’s what I said. Anyhow, Pa, I walked around lookin’ like one of those other folks workin’ the crowds at the Guilford Courthouse, and I didn’t see no little man, with or without a map. There was lots of little kids, and one really short old lady, but she hit me with her umbrella when I tried checkin’ her out, sayin’ she didn’t have no map.”

Sept tipped back the beer bottle, sucking down the last drop, then tossed it in the back of the van with the other empties. “No problem. We still have a few bucks left. It’s a good thing Lady C sent the money right away this time. Come on. Let’s go see what other excitement we can scare up. You put on your outfit, too, Niner. Maybe the two of you can do some entertainin’ – sing a song or somethin’ – and folks will throw coins or dollars at ye.”

“I’d rather have them throw dollars,” Eight said, “’cause coins can hurt and paper money don’t.”

“’Sides, dollars are worth more.” Niner paused and asked, “Right?”

“Idiot! Depends on the number.”