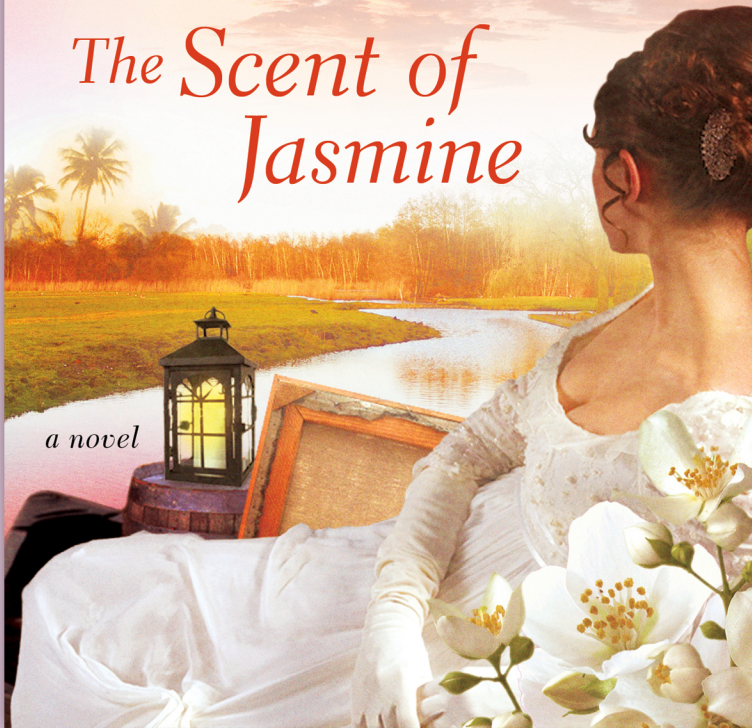


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Jude Deveraux

The Scent of Jasmine

a novel



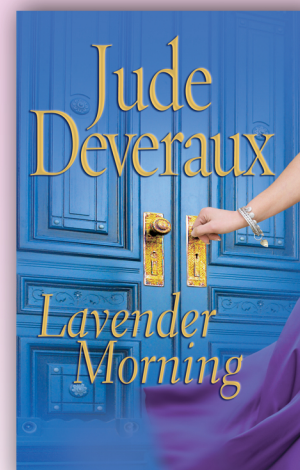
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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Jude Deveraux

a novel

*Days of
Gold*

1

HAVE YOU SEEN her yet?”
“Nay, I have not,” Angus McTern said for what seemed like the hundredth time. He had just come in from the hills, and he was wet, tired, hungry, and cold, but all anyone could talk about was Neville Lawler’s fancy English niece, come to the old castle to look down her nose at the poor Scots.

“You should see her,” young Tam said as he tried to keep pace with his cousin’s long stride. Angus was usually glad to see Tam, but not if all he could talk about was Lawler’s niece. “She has hair like gold,” the boy said, his voice cracking. He was just coming into manhood, and what the girls said, did, and looked like was everything to him. “She has eyes as blue as a loch, and her clothes! Never did I see such clothes as she has. They’re spun by the angels and trimmed by honeybees. She—”

“But then you’ve never been anywhere to see much to compare her to, now have you, lad?” Angus said—and everyone stopped to look at him in aston-

ishment. They were in the big stone courtyard that had once belonged to the McTern family. Angus and Tam's grandfather had been the laird, but he was a lazy old reprobate who'd gambled and lost everything to a young Englishman, Neville Lawler. Angus had been just nine at the time, living with his widowed mother, and it had been Angus who the clan turned to. In the sixteen years since, he'd done his best to look out for the few remaining McTerns.

But sometimes, like today, it seemed like a losing battle to try to make people remember that they were part of the once-great McTerns. For the last weeks, all they'd wanted to talk about was the Englishwoman. Her hair, her clothes, each word she spoke, the way she said it.

"'Fraid she won't like you?" old Duncan asked as he looked up at Angus from the scythe he was sharpening. "'Fraid that great, hairy face of yours will scare her?"

The tension that had been caused by Angus snapping at his young cousin was broken and he gave the boy a rough shove on his shoulder to apologize. It wasn't Tam's fault that he'd never been anywhere or done anything. All he knew were the hills of Scotland, the sheep and the cattle, and the raids where he sometimes had to fight for his life.

"A fancy lady like her would be scared to death of a *real* Scotsman," Angus said, then raised his hands like claws and made a face at his young cousin.

Everyone in the courtyard relaxed and returned

to his or her work. What Angus thought was important to them.

He strode past the old stone keep that had once been his family home and went to the stables. Since Neville Lawler thought more of his horses than he did of humans, they were clean, well kept, and the building was warmer than the house.

Without asking, Angus's uncle, Malcolm McTern, handed Angus a round of rough, thick bread and a mug of ale. "Did we lose many, lad?" he asked as he went back to brushing down one of Lawler's hunting horses.

"Three," Angus said as he sat down on a stool that was against the wall. "I followed them but I couldn't catch them." Saving the sheep and the cattle from the raids took most of Angus's time. As he ate, he leaned back against the stone wall of the stables and for a moment closed his eyes. He hadn't slept in two days and all he wanted to do was wrap his plaid about him and sleep until the sun came up.

When one of the horses kicked the wall, Angus had his dirk out before his eyes were open.

Malcolm gave a snort of laughter. "Never safe, are you, boy?"

"Nor are any of us," he said good-humoredly. As he ate, the warmth crept into him. He was the only one of the clan who still wore the plaid in the old way. It was two long pieces of handwoven cloth, draped about his body, held at the waist with a thick leather belt, and leaving the lower half of his legs bare. His white shirt had big sleeves and was gathered at the neck. The kilt

had been outlawed by the English many years before, and those who wore it risked prison time and whippings, but old Lawler turned a blind eye to what Angus did. For all that the man was lazy, and greedy beyond all reckoning, he understood about a man's pride.

"Let him wear the blasted thing," he said when an English visitor said Angus should be beaten.

"Wearing their own clothes makes them think they have their own country. He'll cause you trouble if you don't take him down a notch or two now."

"If I take away his pride, I take away his desire to look after the place," Neville said and smiled at Angus behind the man's back.

If Neville Lawler had nothing else good about him, he knew a lot about self-preservation. He knew that Angus McTern took care of the castle, the grounds, and the people, so Lawler wasn't about to anger the tall young man.

"Go home, lad," Malcolm said. "I'll look after the horses. Get some sleep."

"At my house?" Angus said. "And how can I do that? I lie down there and I have brats crawling all over me. That oldest one ought to have a hand put to his backside. Last time I slept there, he wove sticks into my beard. He said the chickens could use it for a nest."

Malcolm had to cough to cover his laugh. Angus lived with his sister and her husband and their ever-growing family. By rights, it was Angus's house, but he couldn't throw his sister out.

“Go, then,” Malcolm said, “and have a rest in my bed. I won’t need it for hours yet.”

Angus gave him such a look of thanks that Malcolm almost blushed. Since Angus’s father had died when he was just a boy, Malcolm had been the closest he’d had to one. Malcolm was the youngest son of the laird who’d lost the lands to the English Lawler, and Angus and Tam were the sons of Malcolm’s older brothers. He’d never married, saying he had too much to do in taking care of his deceased brothers’ boys to make any of his own.

“Shall I wake you when she goes out for her ride?” Malcolm asked.

“Who?”

“Come now, boy,” Malcolm said, “surely you’ve heard of the niece.”

“I’ve heard about nothing else but her! Last night I almost expected the raiders to turn back and return the cattle they’d stolen just to have word of her. I thought they’d ask me if she wore a blue dress or a pink one.”

“You laugh, but that’s because you haven’t seen her.”

Angus gave a jaw-cracking yawn. “Nor do I want to. I’m sure she’s a bonnie lass, but what does that matter to me? She’ll soon go back south and live in a splendid house in London. I don’t know why she wanted to come up here to this great pile of stone anyway. To have a laugh at us?”

“Maybe,” Malcolm said, “but she’s done nothing but smile at people so far.”

“Oh, that’s good of her,” Angus said as he stood, stretching. “And do her smiles get everyone to do her bidding? ‘Yes, my lady. No, my lady,’ they all say to her. ‘Let me carry your fan for you, my lady.’ ‘Please let me empty your chamber pot.’”

Malcolm smiled at Angus’s impersonation, but he didn’t give up. “I feel sorry for the girl. There’s a sadness in her eyes that you can’t help but see. Morag said the girl has no family left except for old Neville.”

“But she has money, does she not? That’ll buy her a rich husband who’ll give her a passel of brats and she’ll be happy enough. No! I want to hear no more of her. I’ll see her soon enough—or mayhap I’ll be lucky and she’ll go back to London before I have to see her angelic . . .” He waved his hand in dismissal. “Too much of the angels for me. I’m going to sleep. If I’m not awake by this time tomorrow, check if I’m dead or not.”

Malcolm snorted. Angus would no doubt be up in a few hours and wanting something to do. He wasn’t one for lying about.

As Angus went into the room at the end of the stables, he glanced at the riding horse the niece had brought with her from London. It was gray, with great dapples of a darker gray, and now it raised its legs impatiently, wanting to get out and go. He’d been told that the niece took a long ride every day, always accompanied by an escort, a man who rode far behind her. Over and over, Angus had been told what a fine horsewoman the girl was.

Malcolm's bed with its rough sheets and big tartan was a welcome sight, and as Angus lay down, he thought that he'd like to see the girl ride as he'd had to these last two nights. The poor pony was tearing across rocks and shrubs as Angus pursued the raiders stealing the cattle. But the thieves had had too much of a head start, and their mounts were fresh so he'd lost them in the hills.

As he fell asleep, he smiled at the thought of the delicate little English girl holding on for her life.

When he awoke, every nerve in his body was alert. An unusual sound had awakened him, and he didn't know what it was. He'd spent half his life in the stables and he knew every sound, but this one didn't belong. The rustlers wouldn't have dared come this close to the house, would they?

Angus lay still, not moving, not even opening his eyes in case there was someone standing at the open door, and listened hard. It was coming from the stall next to Malcolm's room, the stall the niece's beautiful mare was in. Was this animal that he didn't know doing something? No. He heard breathing, then there was a little intake of breath that made Angus shake his head. Shamus. Whatever the sound was, Shamus was the one making it.

Tiredly, cursing in his mind, Angus hauled himself off the bed, went to the rack of pegs on the wall, and moved one of them aside. Only he and Malcolm knew about the ingenious device his uncle had made so he could look at most of the stables without being

seen. "Lazy brats!" he'd said to Angus. "When they think I canna see them, I catch them doing all manner of things that are not work."

Angus looked through the hole and saw Shamus—huge, stupid, mean-spirited Shamus—doing something to the cinch of the girl's saddle, and Angus wanted to groan. Had the man no sense at all? Was he playing one of his cruel tricks on Lawler's niece? While it was true that Shamus was a bully and loved to torment anything smaller than he was, he usually had the sense not to go after anyone who had a protector—as he'd learned as soon as Angus grew to be taller and nearly as strong as the older Shamus was.

But here he was, loosening the girl's saddle. What was his intent? If Angus knew Shamus, it was to embarrass and humiliate her, to make people laugh at her. "That's all we need," Angus said as he closed the peg and leaned his head against the wall. For the most part, Lawler was an easygoing master. But he was unpredictable. A man could accidentally set fire to a wagon and Lawler would laugh it off, but another day a man could break a rein and Lawler would have him flogged. Sometimes it seemed to Angus that he'd spent half his life arguing with Lawler to save the skin of somebody. As for Angus himself, Lawler had never dared touch him.

Angus, still tired—he figured he'd been asleep only a few minutes—looked at the bed and wanted to go back to it. Why was it any of his business if the girl was laughed at? It might be good for everyone if

she were seen as human. On the other side of the wall, he heard Shamus lead the mare out of the stall, and he heard that awful little self-satisfied grunt the man made when he anticipated what was going to happen because of his prank.

“None of my business,” Angus said to himself and went back to the bed. He closed his eyes and let his body relax. Like all Scotsmen, he prided himself on being able to fall asleep anywhere and at any time. Whereas others had to carry blankets with them, Angus just loosened his belt, rolled himself in his plaid, and went to sleep—which was yet another reason the English had outlawed the garment. “They don’t even have to pack their bags when they run,” the English said. “They wear their beds on their backs.”

“Aye,” Angus whispered, and it was a good feeling to cover himself with his own plaid and drift off.

Ten minutes later, he was still awake. If Shamus humiliated, or worse, hurt Lawler’s niece, there would be hell to pay—for everyone. Shamus should know this, but he’d never been known for his brains, just his muscle.

Groaning, Angus got off the bed. Would he never have peace? Would there never come a time when he didn’t have to take care of every problem on what used to be McTern land? By ancestry, Angus was the laird, but since the land no longer belonged to his family, of what use was the title?

Feeling as though he ached in every joint, he made his way out toward the courtyard.

"You've come to see her, have you?" asked one man after another.

"No, I have not come to see her," Angus said half a dozen times. "I want to see her horse."

"And so do I," a man called.

Angus rolled his eyes and wished he had more hair and more beard to cover his face. If they kept pushing him, he was going to let them know what he thought of their obsession with this English girl. They'd not been treated to Angus's temper for months now, so maybe it was time.

Young Tam was holding the girl's horse, looking as though it was the proudest moment of his life. Holding a girl's horse! Angus thought. Where was all the training he'd given the boy? Where were all the stories he'd heard about the pride of the Scotsmen? All of it forgotten in a moment at the sight of a pretty girl.

"I will help her on her horse," Tam said when he saw Angus approach, looking as though he was ready to fight for the right.

"And you may help her," Angus said patiently. "I just want to check the girth. I saw—"

He broke off because an unnatural hush had come over the place. Usually, the area around the decaying old castle was filled with noises of people and animals at work. Steel beat on iron, wood was chiseled and cut, leather buckets hit the stones. There was always a cacophony of sound. Even at night there were so many people in the courtyard that the noise was

sometimes too much for Angus. He liked the open places and the quiet of the hills.

He looked up and she was there, standing just a few feet from him, and he drew in his breath. She was more than pretty. She was beautiful in a way that he could never have dreamed a person could be. She was small, the top of her head reaching only to his shoulder, and she was wearing a black dress with a tight bodice, with a little red jacket over it. Her face was oval, with deep blue eyes, a small, straight nose, and a perfect little mouth with lips the color of raspberries in the summer. Her skin was as fine as the best cow's cream, and her hair was thick and dark blonde. It was pulled high on her head, but with long ringlets hanging over her shoulders, entwined with red ribbons tied in a bow at the end. Tipped over the front of her head was a little black hat with a tiny veil that almost reached her eyes.

Angus stared at her, unable to speak. He'd never seen or imagined anything like her.

"Excuse me," she said, and her voice was soft and pretty. "I need to get to my horse."

All he could do was nod and step back to let her pass. As she came closer to him, he could smell her. Was she wearing a scent or was it her own fragrance? For a second he closed his eyes and inhaled. They were right to mention angels and her in the same breath.

Using his shoulder to push Angus aside, Tam clasped his hands and let the girl put her tiny foot

in them as she vaulted onto the horse. The minute she was in the saddle, the horse began to lift its front hooves off the ground, but the girl seemed to be used to that and easily got it under control.

“Quiet, Marmy,” she said to the mare. “Calm down. We’re going. Don’t rush me.” As she lifted the reins, Tam stepped away, but Angus just stared up at her. “If you don’t get out of the way, you’re going to get hurt,” she said to him, and there was amusement in her voice.

But Angus still stood there, gaping, unable to move.

In the next second, the girth on the horse slipped and with it the saddle. It slid around the horse, sending the girl to the left, toward Angus. She gave a little cry and tried to hold on, but with the saddle falling to one side, there was nothing to hold on to.

Emergencies were something that Angus was used to and was good at. The girl’s sound of panic brought him out of his stupor and he reacted instantly. He grabbed the reins and pulled them tight to get the horse under control. Still holding the reins, he tried to catch the girl, but she slid to the other side and fell onto the stones.

By the time she landed, Tam had run forward to help with the prancing horse, moving it forward so that Angus and the girl were no longer separated. He reached down to help her up.

“Don’t you touch me!” she said as she got up by herself and dusted at her clothes. She glared at him.

“*You* did this! I don’t know who you are, but I know you did it.”

Angus wanted to defend himself, but his pride wouldn’t let him. What could he say, that he’d seen a clansman sabotaging her saddle and that he, Angus, had tried to save her? Or would he say he should have checked the girth before she mounted but that he’d been so blinded by her beauty he’d completely forgotten about the saddle? He’d rather be flogged than say such things.

“I am the McTern of McTern,” he said at last, with his shoulders back and looking down at her.

“Oh, I see,” she said, her face pinkened prettily with anger. “My uncle stole your property so now you take it out on me.” She looked him up and down, sneering at his wild-looking hair and his full beard, then her eyes traveled down to his kilt. “Is your protest of my uncle why you wear a dress? Tell me if you want to borrow one of mine. They’re much cleaner than yours.” With that, she turned and went back into the old castle.

For a moment there was no sound in the courtyard. It was as though even the birds had stopped singing, then, in one huge, loud shout, everyone started laughing. Men, women, children, even a couple of goats tied along the wall started a high-pitched laugh.

Angus stood in the middle of it all, and what little of his face could be seen was dark red with embarrassment. Turning, he went back to the stables, and all along the way, he heard the comments that renewed

their howls of laughter. "He didn't want to see her." "No one could tell him anything." "Did you see the way he stared at her? You could have cut off his foot and he wouldn't have felt it." Angus even heard the women laughing at him. "He's not so uppity now. He wouldn't dance with me, but she won't dance with him. Oh, he deserves this, he does."

It was as though in a single minute he'd gone from being the lord of his kingdom to the jester.

Passing by the stables, he went out through the gate in the tall wall that surrounded the castle and headed toward his own cottage. He wanted to explain himself to someone, to tell his side of what had happened. It was Shamus who had loosened the girth on her horse and Angus had been about to tighten it, but the girl had startled him so that he hadn't done it. Yes, that was a good word. She'd startled him. She'd shown up wearing her silly little hat and her bright jacket with the big buttons and he'd been so startled by the sight of such ridiculousness that he'd been speechless. And the ribbons in her hair! Had anyone ever seen anything so foolish? Her clothes were so absurd that she'd not last ten minutes in the hills. Yes, that's what he'd say he'd been thinking. He was looking so hard at the uselessness of her garb that he'd been speechless.

By the time he reached his cottage he was feeling a bit better. Now he had a story to counteract what everyone seemed to think had actually happened.

But when he got within a few feet of the door, his sister came out and she was grinning. She had a

dirty-faced child holding on to her skirt, another one on her hip, and a third one in her belly, and she was smiling broadly.

Behind her, her husband stuck his head out the door. He was still red-faced from how fast he must have run to beat Angus back to the cottage. "Did you do it?" he asked. "Did you loosen her stirrup so she'd fall?"

That was more than Angus could bear. "Never would I hurt a woman," he said, his voice showing his shock. "How could you think such of me?"

His sister said nothing, but she was laughing.

Angus could only stare at the two of them. What had he ever done to make them think he was capable of something this low? He wasn't about to honor his brother-in-law's accusation with an answer. Turning, he started walking away.

He only slowed when he heard his sister call out to him, "Have mercy on me, Angus. My belly slows me down."

He halted and looked back at her. "I have nothing to say to you."

When she caught up with him, she put her hand on his shoulder. "Either we sit and rest or you're going to be delivering this baby by yourself here and now."

That made him sit on a rock, and Kenna sat by him, working to get her breath while stroking her big belly to calm it. "He dinna mean anything bad," she said.

"Your husband or Shamus?"

“So it was Shamus who loosened the girth. I figured so.”

“You’re the only one. The rest of them think I did it.”

“Nay, they do not,” she said.

“Your husband—”

“Is sick with jealousy over you,” Kenna said. “You know that.”

“What does he have to be jealous of me about? He has a home, a family, the best wife there is.”

“The home doesn’t belong to him and all he seems good at is producing babies. You run everything.”

“Yet *I* am the one being laughed at.”

“Oh, Angus,” she said, leaning against him, “look at you. You’ve been a man since you were a boy and our father was killed. By twelve you’d taken on everything that our grandfather had gambled away. People have always looked up to you. There isn’t a girl within a hundred miles who wouldn’t have you, beg for you.”

“I doubt that,” Angus said, but his voice softened.

“Don’t be so small spirited that you begrudge the people a chance to laugh at you. Why canna you laugh with them?”

“They think—”

“That *you* made the girl fall off her horse? Do you truly believe anyone thinks that of you?”

“Your husband . . .” Angus trailed off because he well knew that his brother-in-law didn’t really believe he’d loosen the cinch on anyone’s horse. If Angus wanted to hurt someone, he’d do it face-to-face.

“Gavin and everyone else either knows or can guess who did that to the poor girl. And as for what she said to you . . .” Kenna smiled. “If she’d said it to someone else, you would have fallen over with laughter. I wish you’d told her that you have a sister who’d like to borrow her clothes.”

“Would you like to have a silk dress?” he asked softly. His sister was five years older than he was and the person he loved the most. If the truth were told, there was more than a little jealousy coming from him toward her husband. Since Kenna had married, Angus felt as though he’d been alone.

“Would I like a silk dress? Trade you a bairn for one.”

Angus laughed. “If all of them you produce are as bad as your eldest, you’d have to trade six of them for a length of silk.”

“He’s just like you were at that age.”

“I never was!”

“Worse,” she said, laughing. “And he’s the spitting image of you. Or I think he is, but it’s been too long since I’ve seen your face.” Reaching up, she touched his big beard. “Why don’t you let me cut that?”

He pulled her hand away and kissed the palm. “It keeps me warm, and that’s what I need.”

“If you married, you—”

“I beg you not to start on me again,” he said with so much agony in his voice that she relented.

“All right,” she said as she got up, with Angus pushing on her back to help her. “I’ll leave you be if

you promise not to take a girl's laughter in anger. She bested you with the only weapon a woman has, her tongue."

"There are other uses for a woman's tongue," Angus said, his eyes twinkling.

Kenna stuck out her big belly. "Do you think I do not know all about the uses of a woman's tongue—and a man's?"

Angus put his hands over his ears. "Do not tell me such! You're my sister."

"All right," she said, smiling. "Keep your belief that your sister is still a virgin, but please do not let anger rule you over this girl."

"I will not," he said. "Now, go back to your husband."

"And what will you do?"

"I'm going to crawl under a rock and sleep for a day or two."

"Good, mayhap the heather will sweeten your temper so that when a girl makes a remark to you, you can reply in kind."

"In kind," he said. "I will remember that. Now go before I have to play midwife to you."

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Jude Deveraux

a novel

Scarlet Nights

1

FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA

ITHINK WE'VE FOUND her," Captain Erickson said. His voice was forced, showing that he was working hard to control his jubilation.

They were sitting at a picnic table at the Hugh Taylor Birch State Park, just off A1A in Fort Lauderdale. It was a September morning, and South Florida was beginning to cool off. By next month the weather would be divine.

"I guess you mean Mitzi," Mike Newland said, for just yesterday the captain had given him a thick file on the family. Mizelli Vandlo was a woman several police departments, including the fraud squad of Fort Lauderdale, plus the Secret Service—for financial crimes—and the FBI—for violence—had been searching for for years. As far as anyone knew, the only photo of her had been taken in 1973, when she was sixteen and about to marry a fifty-one-year-old man. Even then, she was no beauty and her face was easily remembered for its large nose and lipless mouth.

When the captain didn't answer, Mike knew that a Big Job

was coming, and he worked to keep his temper from rising to the surface. He'd just finished an undercover case that had taken three years, and for a while there had been contracts out on his life.

Although Mike had never worked on the Vandlo case, he'd heard that a few years ago there had been major arrests in the family, all of it happening on one day, but in several cities. But Mitzi, her son Stefan, and some other family members—all of whom they had many photos of—had somehow been tipped off and had quietly slipped away. Until recently, no one had known where they'd gone.

Mike poured green tea from a thermos into a cup and offered it to the captain.

"No thanks," the captain said, shaking his head. "I'll stick with this." He held up a can of something that was full of additives and caffeine.

"So where is she?" Mike asked, his voice even more raspy than usual. He often had to answer questions about his voice, and his standard half-lie was that it was caused by a childhood accident. Sometimes he even elaborated and made up stories about tricycles or car wrecks, whatever appealed to him that day. No matter what the story, Mike's voice was as intimidating as his body was when he went into action.

"Ever hear of . . .?" As the captain fumbled in his shirt pocket for a piece of paper, Mike could tell that he was excited about something other than finding Mitzi. After all, this was at least the sixth time they'd heard she'd been found. "Ah, here it is." The captain's eyes were dancing about. "Let's see if I can pronounce the name of this place."

"Czechoslovakia no longer exists," Mike said, deadpan.

"No, no, this town is in the U.S. Somewhere up north."

"Jacksonville is 'up north.'"

"Found it," the captain said. "Eddy something. Eddy . . . Lean."

“Eddy Lean is a person’s name, not a place.”

“Maybe I’m saying it wrong. Say it faster.”

A muscle worked in Mike’s jaw. He didn’t like whatever game the captain was trying to play. “Eddylean. Never heard of it. So where—?” Halting, Mike took in a breath. “Ed-uh-lean,” he said softly, his voice so low the captain could hardly hear him. “Edilean.”

“That’s it.” The captain put the paper back into his pocket. “Ever hear of the place?”

Mike’s hands began to shake so much he couldn’t lift his cup. He willed them to be still—while he tried to relax his face so his panic wouldn’t show. He’d told only one man about Edilean, and that had been a long time ago. If that man was involved, there was danger. “I’m sure you’ve found out that my sister lives there,” Mike said quietly.

The captain’s face lost its smile. He’d meant to tease Mike, but he didn’t like seeing such raw emotion in one of the men under his command. “So I was told, but this case has nothing to do with her. And before you ask, no one but me and the attorney general know about her being there.”

Mike worked on controlling his heart rate. Many times before he’d been in situations where he’d had to make people believe he was who he wasn’t, so he’d learned to keep calm at all costs. But in those times, it had been his own life in danger. If there was something going on in tiny Edilean, Virginia, then the life of the only person who mattered to him, his sister Tess, was in jeopardy.

“Mike!” the captain said loudly, then lowered his voice. “Come back to earth. No one knows about you or your hometown or your sister, and she’s perfectly safe.” He hesitated. “I take it you two are close?”

Mike gave a one-shoulder shrug. Experience had taught him to reveal as little about himself as possible.

“Okay, so don’t tell me anything. But you do know the place, right?”

“Never been there in my life.” Mike forced a grin. He was back to being himself and was glad to see the frown that ran across the captain’s face. Mike liked to be the one in charge of a situation. “You want to tell me what this is about? I can’t imagine that anything bad has happened in little Edilean.” Not since 1941, he thought as about a hundred images ran through his mind—and not one of them was good. While it was true that he’d never actually been to Edilean, the town and its inhabitants had ruled his childhood. He couldn’t help it as he put his hand to his throat and remembered *that* day and his angry, hate-filled grandmother.

“Nothing has happened, at least not yet,” the captain said, “but we do know that Stefan is there.”

“In Edilean? What’s he after?”

“We don’t know, but he’s about to marry some hometown girl.” The captain took a drink of his cola. “Poor thing. She grew up in a place that sells tractors, then Stefan comes along with his big-city razzle-dazzle and sweeps her off her feet. She never had a chance.”

Mike bent his head to hide a smile. The captain was a native of South Florida where there were stores on every corner. He felt sorry for anyone who’d ever had to shovel snow. “Her name’s Susie. Or something with an S.” He picked up a file folder from beside him on the bench. “It’s Sara—”

“Shaw,” Mike said. “She’s to marry Greg Anders. Although I take it Greg Anders is actually Mitzi’s son, Stefan?”

“You sure know a lot about the place for someone who’s never been there.” The captain paused, giving Mike room to explain himself, but he said nothing. “Yeah, he’s Stefan and we have reason to believe that Mitzi is also living in that town.”

“And no one would pay attention to a middle-aged woman.”

“Right.” The captain slid the folder across the table to Mike. “We don’t know what’s going on or why two major criminals are there, so we need someone to find out. Since you have a connection to the place, you’re the winner.”

“And here I’d never considered myself a lucky man.” When Mike opened the folder, he saw that the first page was from the Decatur, Illinois, police department. He looked at the captain in question.

“It’s all in there about how Stefan was found. An off-duty cop was on vacation in Richmond, Virginia, with his wife and he saw Stefan and the girl in a dress shop. The cop found out where they lived. As for you, a guy you worked with a long time ago knew about Edilean and your sister.” When Mike frowned at that, the captain couldn’t help grinning. Mike’s secrecy—or “privacy” as he called it—could be maddening. Everybody in the fraud squad would go out for a few beers and afterward the captain would know whose wife had walked out, who was getting it on with a “badge bunny,” and who was having trouble with a case. But not Mike. He’d talk as much as the other guys as he told about his training sessions, his food, and even about his car. It seemed like he’d told a lot about himself, but the next day the captain would realize that he’d learned absolutely nothing personal about Mike.

When the Assistant U.S. Attorney General for the Southern District of Florida called and said they thought one of the most notorious criminals in the United States might be in Edilean, Virginia, and that Mike Newland’s sister lived there, the captain nearly choked on his coffee. He would have put money on it that Mike didn’t have a relative in the world. In fact, the captain wasn’t sure Mike had ever had a girlfriend outside a case. He never brought one to the squad functions, and as far as the captain knew, Mike had never invited anyone to his apartment—which changed every six months. But then, Mike was the best undercover cop they’d ever

had. After every assignment, he'd had to hide until all of the people he'd exposed were in prison.

Mike closed the folder. "When do I go and what do I do?"

"We want you to save her."

"Mitzi?" Mike asked in genuine horror. "So she can stand trial?"

"No, not her. The girl. Of course we want you to find Mitzi, but we also want you to save this Sara Shaw. Once the Vandlos get whatever it is they want from her, no one will ever see her again." He paused. "Mike?"

He looked at the captain.

"If your sister really is there and if they find out about you . . ."

"Don't worry," Mike said. "Right now Tess is in Europe on her honeymoon. I'll tell her to keep her new husband out of town until this is solved one way or the other."

The captain opened another folder and withdrew an eight-by-ten glossy of a woman with dark hair and eyes. She was stunningly beautiful. She was standing on a street corner, waiting for the light to change, and a slight wind had blown her clothes close to her body. She had a figure that made a man draw in his breath. "Does your sister really look like this?"

Mike barely glanced at the photo. "Only on her worst days."

The captain blinked a few times. "Okay." He put a picture of Sara Shaw on the table. The young woman had an oval face, light hair, and was wearing a white dress that made her look as sweet as Mike's sister looked, well, tempting. "She's not Vandlo's usual type."

Mike picked up the photo and studied it. He wasn't about to tell the captain that he knew quite a bit about Sara Shaw. She was one of his sister's two best friends, which said a lot, since Tess's sharp tongue didn't win over many people. But from their first meeting Sara had seen past Tess's biting words and extraordinary looks to the person beneath.

“Do you know her?”

“Never met Miss Shaw, but I’ve heard some about her.” He put the picture down. “So no one has any idea what the Vandlos want in Edilean?”

“There’s been a lot of research both from a distance and locally, but everybody who tried drew a blank. Whatever it is, Miss Shaw seems to be at the center of it. Is she rich but no one knows about it? Is she about to inherit millions?”

“Not that I’ve heard. She just opened a shop with . . .” His sister kept him up-to-date on the gossip in Edilean, but it wasn’t easy to remember it all. Now it seemed that every word she’d told him was of vital importance. “With her fiancé, Greg Anders. Tess hates the man, says he snubs everyone who isn’t buying something from him. But Tess does all of Sara’s accounting, so she’s made sure Sara hasn’t been put into debt by him.”

“That sounds like a Vandlo.” The captain hesitated. “Your sister manages people’s finances?” His tone said that he couldn’t believe a woman who looked like Tess could also have a brain.

Mike had no intention of answering that. He well knew the captain’s curiosity about his private life and he wasn’t going to reveal anything. “So you want me to catch these criminals, but I’m also to get the lovely Miss Shaw away from Stefan Vandlo? Is my assignment to follow and watch? Or am I to do more than that?”

“You have to do whatever you must to keep her alive. We think Stefan will murder Sara the minute he gets what he wants from her—and what he seems to want most is marriage.”

“My hunch is that since the dresses in the shop are expensive, Sara must get into a lot of rich houses. Maybe the Vandlos want to see what’s in them.”

“That’s what we thought too, but as her boyfriend, Vandlo already has access to the houses and no robberies have been re-

ported. It's bigger than that and no one has a clue what it is." The captain tapped the folder. "After you read what's in here, I think you'll see that this scam of theirs is much more than just stealing a few necklaces. It's got to be, if both mother and son are there." He lowered his voice. "We think Stefan divorced his wife of nineteen years just so his marriage to Miss Shaw will be legal—which means he'll inherit whatever she owns after she dies in some so-called accident." He looked at Mike expectantly. "You're sure you have no idea what's connected to Miss Shaw that's so valuable that two of the most evil conners in the world have prepared so well for this?"

"None whatever," Mike said honestly. "The McDowells are rich, and Luke Connor lives there, but—"

"The author of the Thomas Canon books? I've read every one of them! Hey! Maybe you can get me an autographed copy."

"Sure. I'll be a tourist who's lost his way."

The captain became serious again. "Too distant. You're going to have to use your connections to your sister, to the town, anything you can find, to get close enough to this girl to talk her out of marrying Stefan. We do *not* want it set up that he can inherit what is hers. And you have to do this right away because the wedding is in three weeks."

Mike looked at him in disbelief. "What am I supposed to do? Seduce her?"

"No one would ask you to do this if we didn't think you could. And, besides, I seem to remember that you've succeeded with several women. There was that girl in Lake Worth. What was her name?"

"Tracy, and she got ten to twenty. This one is a *good* girl. How do I deal with her?"

"I don't know. Treat her like a lady. Cook for her. Pull out her chair. Girls like her fall for gentlemen. I'm sure that's how Vandlo

got her. And before you ask, no, you can't kidnap her and you can't shoot Stefan. This young woman, Sara Shaw, has to stay there to help you find out what those two want." The captain grinned in a malicious way. "We've arranged for Stefan to be away for the whole time before the wedding. We gave him some family troubles that he can't ignore."

"Such as?"

"Even though he divorced his wife, we know he's still attached to her, so we arrested her on a DUI charge—which was easy. She's done a lot of drinking since Stefan left her, so we just picked her up one night, and now she's facing jail. We let her call him in the wee hours, and just as we'd hoped, he came immediately. If he gives us any trouble, we'll lock him up until he cools off." The captain smiled. "I wonder what he told his fiancée to explain why he went running off to his ex-wife?"

Mike was closing his thermos, his mind still on how to accomplish this mission. "I doubt if a liar like Vandlo had told her about his ex-wife."

"Eventually, you'll have to tell Miss Shaw the truth, so that should be a point in your favor. Whatever you do, you just have to do it *fast*," the captain said. "And never forget that this young woman would be the fourth one to disappear after she got attached to Stefan Vandlo. He used a fake name and took those girls for everything they had. Then the girls 'disappeared' and the boyfriend, Vandlo, couldn't be found."

"Yeah, I read that," Mike said. "And if it weren't for some vague eyewitness reports, we wouldn't know who he was."

"Right, because Stefan left nothing behind, not so much as a fingerprint. And you know the rule: no evidence, no conviction. Personally, I'd like to arrest the man right now, but the higher-ups want an undercover operation so we can get the mother.

We take away her son, and she'd just start using her nieces and nephews. She's the brains, so we have to get *her* out of action. Permanently."

Mike looked at his watch. "I just need to stop by my apartment to get some things, then I can leave—"

"Uh, Mike," the captain said in a tone of apology, "it looks like you haven't seen the local news in the last couple of hours. There's something else you need to know."

"What happened?"

The captain took the last documents from the bench and handed them to him. "I'm really sorry about this."

When Mike opened the folder, he saw a computer printout of a news story. APARTMENT BURNED, the headline read. CIGARETTES TO BLAME, SAY THE AUTHORITIES.

Mike's anger flared as he looked at the photo. It was his six-story apartment building, and flames were coming out of the corner of the fourth floor—his apartment.

He put the papers with the others before he looked up at the captain. "Who did it?"

"The Feds say it must have been . . . Let me check. I don't want to misquote anyone." His voice was sarcastic as he flipped a paper over. "A fortuitous accident' is what they called it. Lucky for them, that is." The captain's eyes were sympathetic. "I'm sorry about this, Mike, but they want you to go there clean. Your story is that your apartment burned down, so you decided to take a much-needed vacation from police work. It makes sense that you'd stay at your sister's apartment since it's empty. It's supposed to be a coincidence that her place is on the same property as Miss Shaw's. We—they—want you to lie as little as possible. Oh, yeah, I nearly forgot." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a new BlackBerry, and handed it to Mike. "Stefan cut his teeth on pickpocketing, so when you do

meet with him he'll take your phone. We don't want him to find any numbers on it that would give you away. While you're in Edilean you're to contact us *only* through your sister. Will that be all right with her?"

"Sure," Mike said and renewed his vow to tell Tess to stay away. The case must be really serious if they'd burned his apartment. He'd never tell anyone, but Tess had been sending him baked goods from her friend Sara Shaw for years now, and it was Mike's opinion that anyone who could bake like she could deserved to be saved.

When Mike was silent, the captain said, "Sorry about your clothes." They all knew Mike was a "dresser." "What did you lose?"

"Nothing important. Tess keeps whatever means anything to me in a storage bin in—" He hesitated. "In Edilean."

"My advice is that you don't visit it." The captain wanted to lighten the mood. "Again, too bad about the apartment. I was going to volunteer to look after your goldfish."

Mike snorted as he stood up. He didn't have goldfish or a dog or even a permanent home. He'd lived in furnished, rented apartments since he left his grandparents' home at seventeen.

Mike glanced at the roadway that wound through the park. He'd take a run—he needed it—then go. "I'll leave in two hours," he said. "I should be in Edilean about ten hours after that—if I use the siren now and then, that is."

The captain smiled. "I knew you'd do it."

"Want to go for a run with me?"

The captain grimaced. "I leave that torture to you. Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful, will you? Stefan has a bit of a conscience—or at least a fear of reprisals—but his mother . . ."

"Yeah, I know. Could you put together more info for me on mother and son?"

“How about if you jog over to my car right now and I give you three boxes full of material?”

Mike gave one of his rare laughs, making the captain look at him in question.

“You have something in mind, don’t you?”

“I was thinking of how to introduce myself to Miss Shaw and I remembered a story my sister told me about a very old tunnel. It just happens to open right into the floor of my sister’s bedroom. All I have to do is move Miss Shaw in there.”

The captain waited, but Mike didn’t elaborate. “You’ve only got three weeks. Think you can entice Miss Shaw away from a big city charmer like Stefan in that time?”

Mike gave a sigh. “Usually, I’d say yes, but now . . .” He shrugged. “In my experience, the only way to get a woman is to find out what she wants, then give it to her. It’s just that I have no idea what a woman like Sara Shaw could possibly want.” He looked at the captain. “So where are these boxes of info? I need to get out of here.” Mike followed him to his car.



Ramsey McDowell was sound asleep when he heard Bonnie Tyler’s “Holding Out for a Hero” blasting from his wife’s cell phone. Groaning, he put the pillow over his head and tried to shut out the noise—and shut out his feelings. It was her brother calling her, a man Rams had never met, a man more elusive than a ghost, more secretive than a spy. But even though he’d never *seen* the man, Rams had heard more about him than he cared to. According to his bride, her brother was the smartest, most industrious, most heroic and, of course, the best-looking man on the planet.

“She’s succeeded in making you jealous, hasn’t she?” his cousin Luke had said, laughing. “Don’t worry, old man, a few days—or years—in a gym and you might live up to his reputation.”

Jealous or not, Ramsey knew that his wife halted everything—meals, arguments, even sex—if her phone emitted that outrageous song.

“He is *not* a hero,” Ramsey said the first time Tess had jumped off of him to run to her phone. “He’s just a policeman.”

“Detective,” Tess said over her shoulder. She was nude, and the sight of her beautiful body running was enough to make him forgive her. But that had been weeks ago and he was tired of the daily calls.

Tess said, “He usually only calls me once a week, but he’s off now so we can talk all we want.”

“All we want” turned out to be *every day*, and with the way the man caught them in the midst of every “activity,” Rams thought a camera had been set on them. Even now, on their honeymoon, he still called her.

“Mike!” Tess said as she picked up her phone. Her voice was breathless and a bit frightened. “Is something wrong?”

Rams looked at the clock. On European time, it was the wee hours of the morning. Why couldn’t the man get a girlfriend like normal people did?

“All right,” Tess said softly into the phone as she sat back down on the bed. “Of course I’ll do it.”

Rams moved the pillow off his head and looked at her with curiosity. He’d never heard her use that tone before.

“Mike, you’ll be careful, won’t you? No, I mean it. *Really* careful.”

Rams sat up in bed and watched her more closely. There was enough light in the room that he could see tears in her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

She held up her hand for him to stop talking. “I understand completely. Luke will do whatever I ask him to.”

“Luke will do what?” Ramsey asked.

Tess looked at her husband. “Would you please be quiet? This is important.”

Angrily, Rams flung back the covers, pulled on his trousers that were hanging over a chair, and opened the curtain to look at the mountains outside. Behind him, Tess kept talking.

“Yes, I think it’s in good condition, and besides me, only Luke knows about it. I’m sure he didn’t tell Joce. He was afraid she’d want to explore it, and he’s always thought it was too dangerous.” Pausing, Tess smiled. “Not yet, but Rams is working on it with enthusiasm and endurance. Yeah, the first one will be named Michael.”

In an instant, Ramsey’s anger left him and he stretched out on the bed beside his wife. He didn’t like the way she’d told intimacies about them to her brother, but he did like that she’d said she planned to have children. They’d not talked about having kids, but he now realized he hadn’t done so in fear that she’d say she didn’t want any. Tess was a woman of very strong opinions. But once he was over his first pleasure at hearing that she did want children, Ramsey began to imagine a dozen of them, all with a name in some form of Michael: Michaela, Michalia, Mickey, Michelle—

“What an extraordinary call,” Tess said as she clicked off her phone.

“I draw the line at Mickey. No mice.”

Tess gave him a look of disgust. “Are you going to start on your jealousy again?”

“I’m not—” Rams began but stopped himself. “So why did your brother feel he had to call you in the middle of the night? Or is he playing James Bond in a country where it’s now teatime?”

“He just arrived in Edilean.”

Rams looked at her. “Your brother is in *our* hometown and you aren’t packed yet?”

“No, and I’m not going to. He wants us to go on an extended honeymoon—and stay away from home.”

“Not that I object, but why does he want us to do that?”

“It seems that my big brother has been sent to Edilean on a case.”

“But he—” Ramsey swallowed. Tess’s brother went undercover for big cases. Huge cases. He dealt in crimes that had international repercussions. He infiltrated gangs that were at war with each other—he’d been shot repeatedly.

Rams got off the bed and went to the closet.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going home; you’re staying here. If your brother’s been sent to Edilean, then something is very wrong.”

“If you go, I’ll follow you, and that will put my brother in danger. And Mike said that if I’m there *I* might become a target. Is that what you want?”

Turning, Ramsey looked at her. She wore no makeup or clothing, and she was so beautiful he could hardly stand upright. He still couldn’t believe that when he’d asked her to marry him just four weeks ago, she’d said yes. Three weeks later they’d been married in a private ceremony with only a dozen guests. And except that her brother hadn’t been able to be there, it was how they’d both wanted it. In fact, Tess had said, “If you think I’m going to make a fool of myself by wearing a hundred yards of white silk and having a bunch of women around me in pink dresses, then you’ve asked the wrong woman to marry you. Spend the money on a rock. I want a ring big enough to dance on.” He’d happily done just what she asked. And he’d added a pair of diamond earrings—all of which she was wearing now. Just the diamonds, her skin and hair.

“What’s going on in Edilean?” Rams asked. “Who is in danger?”

“You know Mike can’t tell me anything. His cases are top secret. If anyone found out, lives could be lost.”

Ramsey gave her a piercing look. As far as he could tell, her brother didn’t keep secrets from her.

Tess sighed. “Sara.”

Ramsey took a deep breath. “My cousin Sara? Sweet, dear Sara? It’s that bastard she wants to marry, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Tess said simply. “He’s not who he says he is.”

“Now there’s news! I’ve disliked him from the moment I first saw him.”

“All of us have felt the same way, but he’s helped Sara to recover, and their customers love him. Mike wants us to do some things.”

“Mike wants *us* . . . ?” Ramsey grimaced. “If he asked *us* for help then he meant for you to tell me about Sara, didn’t he?”

Tess smiled. “Do you think I’d tell you anything Mike didn’t want me to?”

Ramsey started to, yet again, tell her what he thought of her elusive, secretive brother, but he didn’t. “Okay. I’ll bite. What does he want us to do?”

“First,” Tess said as she lowered her voice and slid down in the bed, “he wants nieces and nephews. He says he’s sick of having no kids to buy Christmas presents for.”

“Did he now?” Rams said as he slipped off his trousers and slid under the covers. “And what else did your very intelligent brother ask for?”

“To figure out what Sara owns that a thief would want. It seems that Greg is a big-time crook and Sara has something he’s gone to a lot of trouble to get.” When Rams started to move away, Tess pulled his face down to hers. “And you’re to take me to Venice.”

“For how long?” he murmured.

“Until Mike says we can return.”

Ramsey didn't like the autocratic way his brother-in-law was making decrees, but he would do whatever he must to keep his beloved wife safe. Abruptly, he pulled away from kissing her neck. "What kind of gifts does your brother give to kids?"

"C-4." When Ramsey gave her a look of horror, she laughed. "I don't know. Why don't we wait and see?"

The next morning, while Ramsey was in the shower, Tess called her friend and Ramsey's cousin, Luke Connor, to talk about what Mike needed. He and his wife, Jocelyn, lived in Edilean Manor, a rambling mansion built in 1770. They resided in the two-story main part, while Sara had an apartment in one of the flanking wings on one side. Until her marriage, Tess had had the apartment on the other side.

A few years ago, Luke, a famous best-selling author, had returned to Edilean to recover from a disastrous marriage. As a way of healing, he'd taken over the maintenance of the old house and grounds. After days of heavy rain that nearly flooded the town, he'd discovered an old tunnel. It had been shored up with heavy timbers, and the floors had been laid with handmade brick—and it opened into the floor of Tess's apartment.

Under normal circumstances, he would have told the people of Edilean what he'd found, but at the time he was so miserable he wasn't talking to anyone. In private, with only the help of his grandfather, he'd restored the tunnel—which he figured had been used during the Civil War as part of the Underground Railroad to help slaves escape.

After his grandfather died, no one but Luke knew about the tunnel—until Tess discovered it. She was curious about the big square cut in the boards in the middle of her bedroom floor. Luke had made sure there were no handles on top and that it was locked from the inside, but that didn't stop Tess from using a crowbar to

pry up the boards. She went down the ladder Luke had put there and used a flashlight to make her way along the dark, dank corridor. When she tripped over Luke's sleeping body—and found out where he disappeared to when no one could find him—for several long moments they'd both been in a state of panic. After they'd calmed down, they went to Tess's apartment, and Luke ended up telling her his personal problems. And Tess told Luke about her brother and a little of why she'd come to Edilean. She didn't have to tell him that she was madly in love with her boss, Luke's cousin, Ramsey. He said the whole town knew that. But Tess had had to wait a long time before Rams figured that out for himself.

After that first nearly hysterical encounter, Luke and Tess had formed a bond between them, and unknown to the gossipy little town, Luke often entered her apartment through the tunnel and spent the night in her second bedroom. So now she called and told him what her brother needed.

"Let me get this straight," Luke said. "You want me to sabotage Sara's apartment so she has to move into yours because your brother—who I've never met—wants to sneak into your bedroom where Sara will be staying? And this is in the dead of night?"

"That's exactly right. Is the tunnel in good shape?"

"Bugs and cobwebs, but the structure is sound."

"So will you do it?"

"I have one question."

"And that is?"

"Is your brother married?"

"No. Why?"

"Think he could seduce Sara away from Anders?"

"My brother could seduce Jolie away from Pitt."

Luke groaned. "Sometimes I almost feel sorry for my cousin."

"Rams needs competition," Tess said. "How's Joce?"

“Not so good. We just found out that she has to stay in bed for the rest of her pregnancy or risk losing the twins. But I got her started on doing the family genealogy, and she’s liking that.”

“Tell her that my heart is with her and I’ll call her tomorrow. Anything I can do for her?” Tess asked.

“Come home as soon as you can. She misses you. About Sara, if I tell her I have to fumigate her apartment, she’ll be out in seconds. Leave it all to me.”

“Thank you very much,” Tess said and hung up. When Rams got out of the shower, she was sitting on the little sofa in the hotel room, reading a magazine. “So what do they wear in Venice?”

“Exactly what you have on.” She was completely naked. “Except they add a mask.”

“And where do they put it?”

Ramsey laughed as he walked toward her, his towel dropping to the floor.

Jude Deveraux

*Lavender
Morning*

A close-up photograph of a person's hand, adorned with a silver bracelet, turning a golden, textured handle on a blue door. The door features intricate paneling and a keyhole. A purple fabric is visible in the bottom right corner.

1

JOCelyn glanced at herself in the hotel mirror for the last time. This is it, she thought. This is the moment. Her instinct was to put her nightgown back on and climb back into bed. Wonder what was on HBO during the day? Did this hotel have HBO? Maybe she should look for a hotel that did.

She took a deep breath, looked back at the mirror, and straightened her shoulders. What would Miss Edi say if she saw her slumping like this? At the thought of Miss Edi, tears again came to her eyes, but she blinked them away. It had been four months since the funeral, but she still missed her friend so much she sometimes didn't know how to function. Every day she wanted to call Miss Edi and tell her something that had happened, but each day she discovered afresh that she was gone.

“I can do this,” Joice said as she looked in the mirror. “I really and truly can do this.” She was dressed conservatively, in a skirt and an ironed, white cotton blouse, just the way Miss Edi had taught her. Her shoulder-length, dark blonde hair was pulled back with a headband, and she had on very little makeup. All she knew about the town of Edilean, Virginia, was that Miss Edi had grown up there, so Jocelyn didn’t want to arrive in jeans and a tube top and shock the locals.

She picked up her car keys, grabbed the handle of her big black suitcase, and rolled it to the door. Tonight she’d be sleeping in her own house. It was a house she’d never seen, never even heard about until a lawyer told Joice she’d inherited it, but it was still hers.

Just days ago, she’d sat in the lawyer’s office in Boca Raton, Florida, dressed all in black and wearing the pearls Miss Edi had given her. It was months after Miss Edi’s funeral, but her will stated that it was to be read on the first day of May after she died. If she’d died on June the first, that would have meant waiting eleven months. But she’d died in her sleep just into the new year, so Jocelyn had had time to grieve before facing the ordeal of hearing what was in the will.

Beside her sat her father, his wife beside him, and next to her were the Steps, Belinda and Ashley. But now they were better known as Bell and Ash. Due to their mother’s indefatigable efforts, they’d become

models—and the media had loved the idea of there being two of them. In the last ten years they'd been on the covers of all the top magazines. They'd traveled all over the world and modeled the clothes of every designer. When they walked through a mall, teenage girls followed them, their mouths open in awe. And males of every age looked at them with lust.

But for all their fame, to Jocelyn's mind, the Steps hadn't changed since they were all kids together. As children, the twins loved to make up things they said Joce had done to them, then tell their mother. Louisa used to glare at her stepdaughter and say, "Wait 'til your father gets home." But when Gary Minton returned, he'd just shake his head and do whatever he could to stay out of the turmoil. His objective in life was to have a good time, not to referee his three children. He'd retreat to his garage workshop, his wife and his tall stepdaughters trailing behind him. Jocelyn would leave and go to Miss Edi.

"So what did the old witch leave you?" Bell asked as she stretched her long neck to see Jocelyn at the far end of the row of chairs.

For Joce, it had never been difficult to tell the twins apart. Bell was the smarter of the two, the leader, while Ash was quieter and did whatever her sister wanted her to. Since that usually meant saying something nasty to gain a laugh, Ash was often the one to stay away from.

“Her love,” Jocelyn said, refusing to look at her stepsister. Bell was on her third husband now, and her mother was hinting that that marriage was about to fail. “Poor thing,” her mother said. “Those men just don’t understand my darling baby.”

“They don’t understand her belief that she can have affairs even if she’s married,” Joce muttered under her breath.

“What was that?” Louisa asked sharply, sounding as though she were about to say “Wait ’til your father gets home.” The woman couldn’t seem to understand that her “babies” would turn thirty this year and that their fifteen minutes of fame was already on the downward spiral. Just last week Joce had read that two eighteen-year-old girls were “the new Bell and Ash.”

Jocelyn didn’t begrudge the Steps their fame—or the fortune that they seemed to have spent. To her, they were just the same: always bad tempered, jealous of everyone, and disdainful of anyone who wasn’t in the gossip rags every week. When they were kids, they’d been extremely envious of Jocelyn because she spent so much time at “that rich old bat’s house.” They refused to believe that Miss Edi didn’t give Joce bags full of money every week. “If she doesn’t give you things, then why do you go over there?”

“Because I *like* her!” Joce said again and again. “No. I love her.”

“Ahhhh,” they would say in that tone that was meant to say they knew everything.

Joce would just shut the door to her bedroom in their faces, or, better yet, she'd go to Miss Edi's house.

But now Miss Edi was gone forever, and Jocelyn was requested to be at the reading of the will. The lawyer, a man who looked to be older than Miss Edi, came in a side door and seemed startled at the sight of the five of them. "I was told it would just be Miss Jocelyn," he said, glancing at her, then looking at her father as though demanding an explanation.

"I, uh . . . ," Gary Minton started. The years had been kind to him, and he was still a handsome man. With his dark hair with just a touch of gray at the temples, and his dark brows, he looked much younger than he was.

"We take care of our own," said his wife from beside him. It was as though the years Gary's face didn't carry were etched on his wife's. Sun, cigarettes, and wind had weathered her skin so she looked like a dried-up mummy.

"You don't mind if we're here, do you?" Bell said in a purring voice to the lawyer. Both twins were wearing micro-miniskirts, their famous long legs stretched out until they nearly touched his desk. The little tops they wore were open almost to the waist.

Mr. Johnson glanced at them over his half glasses and gave a bit of a frown. He seemed to want to tell them to put their clothes on. He looked back at Jocelyn, noted her plain black suit with the crisp white blouse under it, the pearls around her neck,

and gave a little smile. "If Miss Jocelyn approves, you may remain."

"Oh, la tee da," Ash said. "*Miss* Jocelyn. Miss college-educated Jocelyn. Will you read a book to us?"

"I'm sure someone will have to," Jocelyn said without taking her eyes off the lawyer. "They can stay. They'll find out everything anyway."

"All right then." He looked down at the papers. "Basically, Edilean Harcourt left you, Jocelyn Min-ton, everything."

"And how much is that?" Bell asked quickly.

Mr. Johnson turned to her. "It's not my business to tell anything more. Whatever Miss Jocelyn tells you is her concern, but I will say nothing. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do." He picked up a brown paper, string-tied folder and handed it across the desk to Jocelyn. "All the information is in there, and you may look through the documents in your own time."

When he remained standing, Joce also stood. "Thank you," she said as she took the portfolio. "I'll read it later."

"I would suggest that you read it when you're alone. In privacy. Edilean wrote some things that I think she meant only for you to see."

"Everything to her?" Ash asked, at last understanding what had been said. "But what about us? We used to visit the old woman all the time."

Mr. Johnson's old face moved into a bit of a smile. "How could I have forgotten?" He took a key out of

his pocket, and unlocked a drawer in his desk. "She left these for you."

He held out two small, blue satin bags, and the contents looked to be bumpy, as though they contained jewels.

"Ooooooh," Bell and Ash said in unison. "For us? Why that darling. She shouldn't have. We really didn't expect anything."

With their much-photographed faces alight, they opened the bags, then looked up at the lawyer in consternation. "What are these?"

Ash dumped the contents of her bag into the palm of her hand. There were about twenty small black objects, some of which had been emerald cut, some in the round diamond shape. "What are they? I've never seen stones like these before."

"Are they black diamonds?" Bell asked.

"In a way, they are," Mr. Johnson said, then, still smiling, he started for the door, but he paused with his hand on the knob. Turning just a bit, he gave Jocelyn a wink, then he left the room.

Joce had to work to keep a straight face. The "black diamonds" that Miss Edi had left for the stepsisters were actually pieces of coal.

She didn't say a word as they left the offices. She sat in the back of the car on the drive home and listened as Bell and Ash, sitting beside her, held the pieces of coal up to the light and exclaimed over their beauty and discussed how they were going to have them set.

Joce looked out the window to hide her smile. The joke that Miss Edi had left her jealous, greedy step-sisters lumps of coal made her miss her friend with a painful longing. Miss Edi had been mother, grandmother, friend, and mentor all in one.

Joce glanced up and saw her father frowning at her in the rearview mirror. She could see that he knew what the “stones” were and he was dreading the coming fury when the Steps found out. But she didn’t mind. She planned to be gone long before the Steps discovered what the black stones were. Her bags were packed and in the back of her car, and as soon as they got home, she was going back to her job at the university.

Only when Jocelyn was back at school and in her tiny apartment did she open the packet that contained Miss Edi’s will. She’d tried to steel herself for what she’d find, but nothing prepared her to see an envelope with that beloved handwriting on it.

TO MY JOCELYN it said on the envelope.

With trembling hands, she opened it, pulled out the letter, and began to read.

My dear, dear Jocelyn,

I promise I won’t be maudlin. I don’t know if it’s been days or months since my demise, but knowing your soft heart, you’re probably still grieving. I know all too well what it is to lose

people you love. I've had to stand by and watch most of the people I loved die. I was very nearly the last one left.

Now, to business. The house in Boca is not mine, nor is most of the furniture. By now I'm sure the contents have been moved out and put up for auction. But don't worry, my dear, the best of what I owned, meaning everything that I took from Edilean Manor, will go back to where it came from.

Jocelyn put the letter down. "Edilean Manor?" she said aloud. She'd never heard of the place. After her initial confusion, a feeling of betrayal ran through her. She'd spent a great deal of her life with Miss Edi, had traveled with her, met many people from her past, and had heard hundreds of stories about her time with Dr. Brenner. But Miss Edi had never mentioned Edilean Manor. It must have been important, as it was named for Miss Edi—or she was named for it.

Jocelyn looked back at the letter.

I know, dear, you're angry and hurt. I can see that frown of yours. I told you so much about my life, but I never mentioned Edilean, Virginia. As you can guess from the unusual name, the town "belonged" to my family—or at least we thought it did. Centuries ago, my

ancestor came from Scotland with an elegant wife and a wagonload of gold. He bought a thousand acres outside Williamsburg, Virginia, laid out a town square, then named the place after his young wife. The legend in my family is that his wife was of a much higher class than he was, but when her father refused to let his daughter marry the stable lad, he ran off with the girl and a great deal of her father's money. No one ever knew if she was abducted or if she went willingly.

I'm sure the truth is much less romantic than that, but Angus Harcourt did build a big brick house in about 1770, and my family lived in it until I broke the tradition. My father left the house to me alone because my brother, Bertrand, couldn't manage money. If he had a dime, he'd buy something that cost a quarter.

I grew up sure that I'd live in Edilean Manor with David Aldredge, the man I was engaged to, and raise a strong, healthy, handsome family. But, alas, fate has a way of changing our lives. In this case, it was a war that changed everything and everyone. When I left Edilean, I let my brother live in the house, but I kept strict watch over him. Bertrand died a long time ago, and for years now the house has been empty.

Dear Jocelyn, I'm leaving you a house you've

never heard of in a town I carefully never mentioned.

Jocelyn put the letter down and stared into space for a moment. A house built in 1770? And outside beautiful Williamsburg? She looked around her drab little apartment. It had been the best she could afford on her tiny salary. But an entire house! An old one!

She looked back down at the letter.

There's something else I want to tell you. Remember how good I was at knowing who at church would make a good couple and who wouldn't last six months? If you'll remember, I was always right. I'm sure you also remember that I learned from experience not to interfere in your personal life—after you were old enough to have one, that is. But now I can no longer see your wrath, so I'm going to tell you something. The perfect man for you lives in Edilean. He's the grandson of two friends with whom I went to high school, Alex and Lissie McDowell. They're gone now, but their grandson looks so much like Alex that I thought he'd never aged. On one of my trips to Edilean—yes, dear, I went in secret—I told Alex that, and he laughed hard. It was good to see him laugh again, as there were days in

*the past when he found nothing to amuse him.
His wife, Lissie, was a saint for what she did.
I look forward to seeing them both again in a
Better Place.*

Jocelyn looked up. A man for her? The thought made her want to smile and cry at the same time. Twice, Miss Edi had tried to match her up with young men from church, but both times she'd refused to so much as go out to dinner with them. They were boring young men, and she doubted if either of them had ever had a creative thought in his life. She hadn't given her reasons for turning the men down, but Miss Edi had known what was going on. "Beer drinking does not qualify as an Olympic sport," she'd said quietly, then walked away. Jocie's face had turned three shades of red. Two weeks before, Miss Edi had driven by Jocelyn's house when she'd been standing outside with two young men on motorcycles and downing a can of beer. For all that Jocie loved the ballet, she was sometimes drawn to the life her family led.

"Like my mother," she said aloud, then looked back down at the letter.

His name is Ramsey McDowell and he's an attorney. But I can assure you that he's more than that. My last request of you is that you give the young man a chance to show you that

he's right for you. And, remember: I am never wrong about these things.

As for the house, there's some furniture in it, but not much, and there are some tenants in the wings. They are both young women from families I've known for many years. Sara grew up in Edilean, so she can help you find whatever you need. Tess is new to the area, but I knew her grandmother better than I wanted to.

That's all, my dear. I know you'll make the best of all that I leave you. I apologize that my housekeeper won't be there, but the poor dear was older than I am. I have a gardener, so maybe he can help you with whatever else you need.

I wish you all the luck in the world, and please remember that I'll be watching over you every minute of your life.

It took Jocelyn the rest of the evening to recover from the letter. It sounded so much like Miss Edi that it was almost as though she were in the room with her. She slept with the letter curled up in her hands.

The next morning, her mind was so full of all that she'd learned in the last twenty-four hours that she could barely concentrate. Her job as teaching assistant had become uncomfortable because she'd had a year-long affair with one of the other assistants.

When they had to work together, he scowled at her across the table and she found it very unpleasant.

He'd been the third man in a row who had been perfectly suitable for her, but in the end, she'd not wanted to go on with any of them. Jocelyn knew it was all Miss Edi's fault. She'd told Jocelyn about the man she'd been in love with who'd been killed in World War II—a true love, and that's what Joce wanted.

“He was my all to me,” Miss Edi said in the voice that she used only when she spoke of him. She had only one small photo of him in his uniform, which was inside a folding picture frame she kept by her bed. He was an extraordinarily good-looking young man, with dark blond hair, and a strong chin. The frame was oval, and on the other side was a photo of Miss Edi in her army uniform. She was so young, so beautiful. Beneath David's photo was a tiny braid of hair, her dark intertwined with his blond. Miss Edi would hold the frame, say, “David,” then her eyes would glaze over.

Over the years, Joce had pressed her for details, but Miss Edi would just say he was a young man from her war experience—which had been brutal and she had the scars to prove it.

But at last Jocelyn had found out something about him. His name was David Aldredge, and he and Miss Edi had been engaged to be married in Edilean, Virginia. But David's death in the war had ended that.

“No wonder she couldn’t bear to mention Edilean,” Jocelyn whispered.

To Jocelyn, Miss Edi’s love for the man had become a legend. It epitomized the love that she wanted. But so far, Joce hadn’t been able to find it. Miss Edi never knew it, but Joce had twice lived with young men, and she’d been quite happy with the arrangement. It was nice to have someone to go home to, to tell about her day, and to laugh with about what had gone on. But when the men started talking about rings and mortgages and babies, Jocelyn ran. She didn’t know what it was that was missing from her relationships, but it wasn’t there—and she was going to hold out until it was.

And now Miss Edi had given her a way to change everything. That evening, she looked through the legal papers, read them carefully, and held the key that was in the package. All the legal work was being handled by the firm of McDowell, Aldredge, and Welsh in Edilean, Virginia.

The name of “Aldredge” made her pause for a moment before she could go on. Did descendants of Miss Edi’s David still live there?

A letter was included saying that when she got to Edilean, she should stop by the office and she’d be told about the financial arrangements. The letter was signed by Ramsey McDowell.

Jocelyn shook her head at Miss Edi’s letter. “You never give up, do you?” she said, her eyes raised up-

ward. But the truth was that Miss Edi *was* always right about the couples at church. Many times Jocelyn had caught Miss Edi staring at a young couple who were more interested in each other than what the pastor had to say. Afterward, she'd tell Jocelyn—and only her—what she thought of them. “True love,” she'd sometimes say, but not very often. “Pure sex,” she said once and made Joce laugh. She was right both times.

“Ramsey McDowell,” Jocelyn said, then looked back at the letter. He'd put his home phone number on there. It was only seven. On impulse, she picked up her cell, called him, and he answered on the third ring.

“Hello?”

His voice was nice, deep and smooth. Like chocolate, she thought. “Is this Mr. McDowell?”

“I think of that as being my father, but I guess I qualify. Is this Miss Minton?”

She hesitated. How had he known that? “Caller ID.”

“Can't live without it,” he said. “You know how we lawyers are. We must fight off the masses because of our underhanded dealings. Are you going to be here soon?”

“I don't know,” Joce said, smiling at his sense of humor. “This is all quite new to me. I'd never heard of Edilean, Virginia, until I saw the will, so I'm still in a bit of shock.”

“Never heard of us? I’ll have you know we’re the biggest small town in Virginia. Or is that the smallest big town? I never can remember what our mayor says we are. Ask me what you need to know and I’ll tell you everything. Oh! Wait! I need to fasten a diaper. There, that’s done. Now, what can I tell you about us?”

“Diaper? You’re married?” Her shocked tone told too much, and when he hesitated before answering, she grimaced.

“Nephew. I have a very fertile sister who pops them out like corn over a grill. She just stuck her tongue out at me, but then the baby kicked. The one inside her, that is. And the one on her hip. Excuse me, Miss Minton, but I have to take the phone to another room before my sister throws something at me.”

Joce was smiling as she waited, hearing footsteps, then a door close and, finally, quiet.

“There now, I’m in what passes for a library in my house and I’m all yours. Figuratively speaking that is. Now tell me what I can do for you.”

“I don’t really know. I didn’t know Miss Edi owned a house, much less a town.”

“Actually, she had to give us our freedom in 1864, and—”

“Three,” Joce said before she thought, then wished she hadn’t. “Sorry, you were saying?”

“I see . . . 1863. Emancipation Proclamation. Can you tell me the day?”

“January the first,” she said cautiously, not sure if this would get her labeled as a know-it-all or worse.

“January the first, 1863. Well, Miss Minton, I can see that you and I are going to get along quite well.” There was a change in his voice as he went from teasing banter to more serious. “What can I tell you?”

“I don’t know where to begin. I want to know about the house, the town, about the people. Everything.”

“It would take much too much time to talk about all of this over the phone,” he said. “My suggestion is that you come here to Edilean and we sit down and talk about everything in person. How about if we have dinner and discuss this at length? Shall we say Saturday next at eight?”

She drew in her breath. That was just eight days away. “I don’t know if I can get there by then.”

“Shall I send a car?”

“I, uh, no, that won’t be necessary. I have a car. How do I keep the roof repaired?” she blurted.

“A practical woman,” Ramsey said. “I like that. I’m not at liberty to say the exact extent of what Miss Edi left you, but I can assure you that you’ll be able to keep the roof in *great* repair.”

She smiled at that. She didn’t relish the idea of having the responsibility of the care of a very old house and no way to support it.

“Miss Minton, what is your hesitation? The beautiful town of Edilean is awaiting you, plus a magnifi-

cent old house, and Colonial Williamsburg is right next door. What more could you want?”

She started to say “Time,” but didn’t. Suddenly, she had one of those moments that rarely happen in a lifetime. In an instant, she knew what she was going to do: She was going to change her life. Since Miss Edi’s death, Jocelyn hadn’t made a single change. She had the same job she no longer liked, the same routine, the same dull, dark apartment. Her friends now looked at her with sadness because Joce was no longer part of a couple. They were already talking about fixing her up with blind dates. The real difference in Jocelyn’s life was that her best friend was gone. Now, if she went “home” it was to her father’s house, to motorcycles outside, NASCAR on the TV inside, and the pitying looks of her stepmother. Poor Jocelyn, she had nothing and no one.

This was Friday, and if she quit her job tomorrow morning, then she’d have days to sort out all the things she needed to do, like turn off the water, and—

“Could I wire you some money?” he asked, seeming to think her silence had to do with expenses. “No, wait, that’s no good. You’d have to give me your bank account numbers and you shouldn’t do that. For all you know I’m a . . .” He hesitated.

“A lawyer?”

“That’s right. Scum of the earth. We spend years in school learning how to rip people off. How about if I overnight you a check?”

“I have enough to do what I need to,” she said. “It’s just that this is a big step.”

“If you know the date of the Emancipation Proclamation, then you love history. So how can you wait to see a house that was built in the eighteenth century? No velvet ropes anywhere. You can explore all you want. Did you know that the stables were recently rebuilt? And there’s a cellar that’s intact. And I believe the attic is full of trunks of old clothes and diaries.”

“Mr. McDowell, I think you missed your calling. You should be traveling around the country on a covered wagon and selling snake oil.”

“No, no snake oil. I sell Miss Edi’s Golden Elixir. It’s made from rainbows and flecked with gold dust from the leprechauns’ pots. Guaranteed to cure anything that ails you. You have a boyfriend?”

“And what will the elixir do to him?” she asked, smiling.

“No,” he said, seriously, “do you have a boyfriend?”

“Not since he asked me to marry him and I ran away screaming.”

“Ah,” he said.

Joce wished she could take back her comment. “I mean, it wasn’t actually like that. He’s very nice and I’m not adverse to marriage, but—”

“No explanation needed. My last girlfriend led me into a jewelry store and they had to take me away in an ambulance.”

“A kindred soul.”

“Sounds like it. Now, what about dinner?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t make reservations yet,” she said cautiously. “In case I don’t make it out of here in time.”

“Who said anything about reservations? I was thinking about wine and pasta served on a tablecloth on the floor of your new eighteenth-century house. By candlelight. With strawberries dipped in warm chocolate for dessert.”

“Oh, my goodness,” she said. “You are going to be a problem, aren’t you?”

“I hope so. I like a girl who knows her history. And I like this photo of you that Miss Edi sent me last year. You still have this red bikini?”

Jocelyn couldn’t contain her laugh. “She passed that thing around to half the men at our church. When I had my twenty-sixth birthday and still wasn’t married, I thought she was going to staple it to the trees and leave a phone number.”

“When was this photo taken?” he asked, and there was a touch of fear in his voice. She could almost hear the unasked question of, How many birthdays ago was that?

“Actually, it was quite a while ago,” she said mischievously. “So, shall I see you at the end of the week?”

“I’ll be there,” he said, but his voice was no longer so buoyant.

Jocelyn hung up and mentally began a list that started with “go to the gym every day this week.” The photo of her in the bikini had been taken just last summer, but who knew what had happened under her clothes during the winter?

So that was Ramsey McDowell, she thought as she got up and began to look through her closet. Tomorrow she’d stop by her professor’s office and resign. She knew he wouldn’t be bothered; there were four applicants for every job on campus.

She paused with her hand on the clothes. Maybe now she could write her own book. Something non-fiction, historical. Maybe she could write the history of the town of Edilean. She’d start with the Scotsman who stole a man’s gold and his beautiful daughter, then ran off to the wild country of America. What was Edilean like in 1770? For that matter, what was it like now?

Ten minutes later, she’d Googled the town. The history of the town was much what Miss Edi had written. It had been started by a Scotsman named Angus Harcourt, who’d built a large house for his beautiful wife, then set about putting in acres of crops. But his wife, Edilean, had been lonely, so she’d designed the streets of a tiny town that had eight small areas of parkland in it. Smack in the middle she’d planted an oak tree from an acorn she’d taken from her father’s estate. Over the centuries, the tree had been replaced three times, but

each time the transplant had been a scion of the original tree.

Jocelyn went on to read that in the 1950s, her Edilean Harcourt had led a four-year-long court battle when the state of Virginia tried to evict the residents, as over five thousand acres of the surrounding land was being turned into a nature preserve. “It was because Miss Edi—as she is called by everyone”—Joce read—“won the battle that the tiny town of Edilean survives today. No new houses are allowed to be built, but the ones that are there are preserved so that it’s almost like stepping back into time.

“The town has several upscale shops that draw tourists from Williamsburg, but the crowning jewel is Edilean Manor, built by Angus Harcourt in 1770, and lived in by the same family since then. Unfortunately, the house and grounds are not open to the public.”

“I’m glad of that,” Jocelyn said, then moved closer to the screen to see the photos and thought she could see a sign in front of one of the pretty white houses. Was that Ramsey’s office? Did he live in the same building where he worked? He’d asked her if she had a boyfriend, but did he have a girlfriend?

She clicked on the button that said **EDILEAN MANOR**, and there it was. Jocelyn stared at it with wide eyes. The façade was perfectly symmetrical: two stories, five windows wide, all brick. On both sides were single-story wings with little porches on

them. “I guess that’s where my tenants live,” she said, marveling at the idea that she now owned this wonderful old house.

Five minutes later, she was tearing through her closet like a leaf blower. She was going to get rid of all the things that she no longer wore, then see what was left. Fifteen minutes later, she looked at her nearly bare closet and said, “I’m going shopping.”

The next few days had been a blur of activity as she hurried to get ready to leave, to go to her brand-new life.

And now, she was in Williamsburg, it was 11 A.M. Saturday morning, hotel checkout time, everything she owned was stuffed into her little Mini Cooper, and she was about to see “her house” for the first time. She didn’t know if she was elated or scared to death. New town, new state even, and all new people—one of whom she had a sort of date with tonight.

“You *can* do this,” she said again and opened the hotel door.