

1.

The first sign that there was something amiss came in the form of a phone call from someone suggesting he was ready to install fire detection equipment in my home. I said there must be some mistake, even though he had quite correctly asked for Lara McClintoch. He disagreed. He had my name, address and phone number. I said I already had smoke detectors, thank you very much. The next day, another man called to say he wanted to book a time to pour the new concrete in my basement. I have rather lovely Mexican tiles, all in good repair in my basement. Both men spoke with a foreign accent I couldn't pinpoint, and sounded as if they had socks in their mouths. Within a few hours of casually, or perhaps not so casually, mentioning these calls to my partner, Rob Luczka, a sergeant in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, I found myself living in a hotel.

It seems that Rob, of whom I am inordinately fond, had seriously annoyed members of a gang that was terrorizing the merchants of downtown Chinatown. These thugs called themselves Golden Lotus, which just goes to prove you should never judge an organization by its name. I suppose that is his job, annoying bad guys. Still, I had never thought it would have much to do with me, other than the fact that I occasionally worry myself sick about him when he's off on some assignment.

“Why exactly am I here?” I said in a tone I seem to acquire when I’m unnerved. I was finding this a tad stressful, all that slapping stuff into a suitcase, and running around the house to see that everything was turned off so that my smoke detectors would not have to be put to good use through some fault of my own, as opposed to malfeasance on the part of men with socks in their mouths.

“You are here because some very nasty people have figured out that you are a person of some importance to me,” he said. “They probably know that because I live right next door, and spend a lot of time going out my gate and in yours for sleepovers. Now if you’d let me knock down the wall between our two houses so I would not have to brave rain, snow, sleet and hostile neighborhood dogs to pay a visit, they might not have known that.”

“If this is a ploy to get me to move in with you, it isn’t exactly working.”

“No? They were trying to tell you they are going to burn your house down with you in it. Either that or kill you by some other means and bury you in your own basement.”

“Burn my house down!” I said. “They can’t do that. Our cottages were built in 1887 and are protected under the Ontario Heritage Act!”

“The Heritage Act! I wonder why the brains at Headquarters didn’t think of that. These lowlifes extort, rob and kill at a whim, and so far we haven’t been able to stop them. But then, just like that, you come up with the Heritage Act.”

I looked at him for a moment. Rob, unlike me, is hardly ever sarcastic. “You’re really worried about this, aren’t you?” I said.

“I wouldn’t want you to think I cared,” he said, looking away.

“I’d never think that. Jennifer is safe, isn’t she?”

“I don’t think these guys from Golden Lotus would go to Taiwan to find her, no. That at least is working in our favor.” Jennifer, Rob’s daughter, was teaching English in Taiwan for a year. We worried about her, of course, but right now Taiwan sounded better than Toronto where her personal safety was concerned.

“Good. Everything will be fine. Now, what’s my name again?”

“Charlyn Krahn,” he said. “We’re Herb and Charlyn Krahn. Please try to remember to sign all chits that way.”

“Are the Krahns paying for this?” I said.

“They are, indeed. Nice of them. I even have a credit card with Herb’s name on it, compliments of my employer.”

“So what happens now? This is a short version of the witness protection program, right? Which is to say, how long do we get to lounge about in this hotel? I can go to work, even if you can’t?”

“It is the considered opinion of my superiors that, no, as an undercover officer I am to stay out of sight, and yes, you can go into the shop. Someone will be keeping an eye on the place and if there’s any sign of trouble, then we’ll reassess. I know you don’t want to leave the redoubtable Clive in charge for too long.”

Clive Swain is my ex-husband, and my partner in an antiques business called McClintoch & Swain. And no, I don’t like to leave Clive alone in the shop for too long. I usually return from my buying trips to find the store completely rearranged, and not always, which is to say almost never, to my liking. “As for how long, it shouldn’t take long. My brothers in the force will take care of these people,” Rob said.

“What does take care of these people mean?”

“Whatever it takes,” he said. “In the meantime, we’re having an all expenses paid holiday. Now let’s see what’s on the room service menu.”

As pleasant as an all expenses paid stay in a pretty nice hotel, with someone cooking and cleaning and even making the bed every day, sounds, I can tell you it is amusing for about forty-eight hours. After that it gets a little claustrophobic, the room service fare starts to taste like prison food, assuming prison food tastes the way I think it does, and generally your room-mate begins to get tiresome. I believe the feeling was mutual. If we ever move in together, the place will have to be very large, something on the scale of, say, Versailles.

So it was that what I consider to be my acutely sensitive nose for dissimilitude was not working as it should, so eager was I to get out of the place. What I saw as a god-send, but was really a trap, which if not set for me, certainly caught me in its snare, came in the form of a call to the shop on a fine autumn day from one Dorothy Matthews, known to her friends as Dory.

“I have a favor to ask,” she began.

“Ask away,” I said.

“It’s more of a proposal than a favor, although I would be exceedingly grateful if you would undertake it for me. I suppose I’m actually asking two favors. Would you consider having lunch with me at my home? I need to show you something, and my arthritis is acting up today. Taking it to you at McClintoch and Swain, no matter how

much I might enjoy it once I got there, would be difficult. Would one o'clock work for you?"

"I'll be there," I said.

The maid was setting out a plate of sandwiches and some fruit when I arrived shortly after one. Dory was in an armchair, a cane at her side, and she greeted me warmly. I first met Dory when I was researching Chinese bronzes for a client of McClintoch & Swain. At that time, Dory was the curator of the Cottingham Museum's Asian galleries, having been lured there from her position at one of Canada's most prestigious galleries by Major Cottingham when he first opened a museum to house his private collection. Within five years, the Cottingham's Asian galleries had not only expanded, but had earned an international reputation, all thanks to Dory. Everything I know about Chinese art and antiquities, I learned from Dory Matthews.

People who knew Dory by reputation only, as a preeminent scholar of Chinese history and art, were surprised to meet her in person, not expecting the Asian woman in front of them. She got Dory from her English mother, and Matthews from her husband, the industrialist George Norfolk Matthews. Born Dorothy Zhang, or more accurately Zhang Dorothy in 1944 in Beijing, she was taken to England by her mother in 1949 as the Communists took power, eventually settling in Canada. It was a harrowing experience she told me, getting out of China. In the chaos of the times, as many people tried to leave the country before the Communist forces of Mao Zedong took over, she and her mother

became separated from her father. She never saw him again. She was led to believe that her father had survived, but had never joined them, choosing instead to become a part of the People's Republic of China. She believed that at one time, at least, he held a senior position in the Mao's Communist China, having been a loyal supporter of Mao, most notably having accompanied Mao on the Long March in 1934. This was one of the most famous strategic retreats in history, a five thousand mile march that took just over a year, but which enabled Mao to break through the Koumintang lines and eventually push the Koumintang, and their leader Chiang Kai Shek off the Chinese Mainland to Taiwan, then called Formosa. Dory thought she might even have had other siblings in China, a half-brother or sister, although she never tried to find them. Dory's mother remarried, whether or not exactly legally, neither I nor perhaps Dory was ever entirely sure. I think she probably just said her Chinese union wasn't legal, and carried on.

When we were alone, and I was tucking into my lunch – I noticed she wasn't eating – she began to talk. “You are aware, I'm sure, that it is not really ethical for a curator to personally collect in the area in which he or she works. My husband has collected for some years, and I gave him advice as often as I could, but never when the object he wanted could be considered Asian art. But now that I am under no such restriction, I feel that I can get into the market, if I wish to do so. Would you agree?”

“Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

“Good,” she said. “I was worried what you would think about that.”

“Why would you? I’m assuming you’re not trying to smuggle antiquities out of some country, or buy on the black market.”

She was silent for a moment. “Do you know how my stepfather made his fortune?” she said at last.

I decided I’d better stop stuffing my face with the lovely homemade sandwiches, such a nice change from hotel fare, and pay attention, as this conversation did not seem to be following a nicely logical path, and there were some undercurrents, possibly disturbing ones. “Didn’t you tell me he imported china and porcelain, some of it from Occupied Japan, after the war, or was it Hong Kong?”

“Both,” she said. “That’s how he made his living. He made his fortune by importing very high end Chinese antiquities, by which I mean very old Imperial treasures, sometimes even older than that, a lot of them smuggled out of China and into Hong Kong, where it joined his regular shipments. He used contacts of my mother’s to do so, a high party cadre in Mao’s regime, someone I have come to believe was my father. If so, my father had no compunction feathering his nest by selling whatever he could get his hands on, and in his position that was quite a bit, and my stepfather had no compunction expediting its passage out of the country, and making a good deal of money for himself as well.”

“I can understand why this would bother you for any number of reasons,” I said carefully. “I’m not sure, though, what you mean by smuggled. It really depends when the objects came out of China, as you know only too well. There was a period when a lot of antiques and antiquities were considered decadent Imperialist trappings by the Communist Party, and nobody cared if they were taken out of the country or even destroyed.”

“It may have been legally acceptable, but it was never morally acceptable,” Dory said. “So is what I am about to ask you to do legal? Of course it is. Ethical? I suppose that depends on what I propose to do with what you get for me, if, that is, you agree to do it. I promised to show you something. Would you mind going over to the walnut cabinet? On the lower left side there is something wrapped in cloth. I want you to bring it here so that we can look at it together.”

‘It’ was an exquisite rectangular silver box with a hinged and rounded lid, of a shape sometimes referred to as a casket. Incised on the top was a bird, and a scene showing a number of women together in a garden wrapped around the four sides. “May I open it?” I asked. I believe I was whispering.

Dory nodded. Inside, along the sides and bottom were Chinese characters. I couldn’t read them, but I thought perhaps Dory could. I closed it carefully.

“Beautiful,” I said. “Very old.” I waited for her to say something.

“T’ang Dynasty,” she said. “You know when that was, of course.”

“Don’t tell me,” I said. “I’ll remember. T’ang Dynasty is, just a minute, 618 to 907. Capital was Chang’an, essentially where the city of Xi’an is now. It was preceded by the Sui Dynasty, and followed by the Five Dynasties Era and then the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties in that order. How am I doing?”

Dory smiled. “For a time I thought you would never learn! I know you regarded me as a stubborn old bat for making you memorize all the dynasties, but really if you don’t know your dynasties, you don’t know your Chinese history, and for sure you don’t know your Chinese antiques.”

“Not so. I never thought you were a stubborn old bat, and furthermore, I like to think I’m your most accomplished student,” I said, and she actually laughed, something I hadn’t heard her do much lately.

“I think you may well be,” she said.

I looked at it a little longer. “Beautiful workmanship,” I said. “I’ve never seen anything remotely like it. But what is it exactly you want me to do, Dory?”

Rather than answering me directly, she slowly and painfully reached for something in a magazine rack to one side of her chair, and set in front of me the catalogue for the annual

oriental auction at Molesworth & Cox in New York. A yellow sticky marked a page on which was shown another silver box.

“You’re selling it,” I said. “No, just a minute.” I eyed the box in front of me. It was about six inches long, four inches wide, and maybe six or seven inches high measured to the top of the domed lid. “The one for sale looks very similar but I think it’s slightly smaller all ‘round.”

“Very observant,” Dory said. “And you are quite right. They are almost identical, although I believe the text inside is different, the scene depicted on the outside is as well, and mine is larger. I think there is a series of boxes designed to fit inside each other, like those Russian dolls. There will be a third in silver even bigger than this one, and possibly a fourth box in wood rather than silver, the largest, at least that is what my stepfather said, but of course the wood is unlikely to have survived. The silver, in the proper circumstances, would.”

“You want me to go to New York next week to bid on this box for you,” I said. My heart soared. I’d still be staying in a hotel, of course, but it would be a different hotel. Even better, I wouldn’t have to be looking over my shoulder for gangsters every time I left it, nor would I be tripping over Rob’s feet every time I turned around.

“Would you consider doing just that? I would pay your expenses of course, plus something for your time, and I would pay you a commission if we get it.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll see if Alex will come in to the shop to help Clive out for a few days. I’d like to go early and get a good look at this at the preview to make sure it’s authentic before we buy it.”

“You should go right away,” Dory said. “But is it authentic? Almost certainly. You see this silver box in front of us is one of three that my stepfather smuggled to Hong Kong, and thence to North America where they were auctioned off one at a time in the mid nineteen seventies. I expect my stepfather believed that he could get a better price if he sold them separately, although I’m not so sure he was right. George, my husband, bought it at auction about ten years ago. Have I ever showed you his collection? Please, have a look in the next room.”

The room was lined with built-in shelving divided into twelve-inch squares, and fronted by glass doors. In each of the squares was a single object, lit from above. On one wall, which was dark though, the objects were in sealed display cases, and the humidity and temperature in each was being monitored. “May I turn on the light on the end wall?” I called out to Dory, and did so when she agreed. These objects were really, really old, some old silver bowls, a couple of gold boxes, and a number of puzzling objects I couldn’t identify. It took me several minutes to figure out what this collection was all about. “Medical equipment of some kind,” I said finally.

“Correct,” Dory said from the next room. “My husband, as you know is head of an international pharmaceutical company, and he collects objects related to that business. There are molds for pills, very old syringes, beakers, and boxes that would have been used for medicinal herbs. It is quite an extensive and unusual collection. Some of the objects there are over two thousand years old.”

“Maybe these should be in a museum,” I said.

“George has finally agreed that when he dies they will, indeed, go to a museum.”

“I hope you have a good security system.”

“Oh, yes. I turned it off just for you to see the collection. The door here is usually closed and locked.”

“So does this box have something to do with medicine, or did it just come in a lot with something your husband wanted?”

“Inside the box is a process for making something,” Dory said. “It tells you to heat the ingredients, unspecified, in a sealed container for thirty-six hours, and then to partake of the resulting substance for seven days. George interpreted it a process for making drugs, and that is why he acquired it. It’s Chinese, so he didn’t discuss it with me for reasons I have already explained. I recognized it as soon as I set eyes on it, however. I saw the

three boxes when my stepfather got them. I fell in love with them, but he sold them, over my protests. George found this one, a second has turned up in New York that I plan through you to purchase, and I hope to find the third before I die. George and I may be the only people, along with you now, that know that this is part of a nesting set. When I find all three of them, I plan to give them to the Shaanxi History Museum in Xi'an, China. I want them to go home."

"That is very generous of you. This will not come cheap. You have to think about how much you'll pay for it. We'll get you registered as an absentee bidder and establish your credit worthiness through Molesworth and Cox here, and I'll also arrange to be on the telephone with you for the bidding. I'll book my flight as soon as I get back to the shop."

She nodded. "Thank you, but I don't want to register as a bidder, absentee or otherwise. I am going to transfer a great deal of money to your account, and you are going to be the bidder. I don't want anyone to know I am attempting to purchase this."

"I could head for Brazil with your money," I said.

"You could, but I know that you won't. It is possible, by the way, that Burton Haldimand, representing the Cottingham Museum, may be after this as well. I hope to outbid them. I would most particularly not want Dr. Haldimand to know of my involvement in this."

I opened my mouth to say something, but then decided against it. What I wanted to ask was if this last stipulation was what her request was really about. You see, when Major Cottingham, the museum's founder died, and control of the Board of Directors went to his trophy wife Courtney, a decision was made that new blood was required at the museum. In the case of Dory's job as curator of the Asian galleries, that new blood came in the form of Burton Haldimand. It was all done rather lavishly, of course, in true Cottingham style, with an elaborate farewell dinner for Dory, and the gift of a watercolor by one of China's leading nineteenth century artists. There were hosts of speeches, including a very gracious one by Dory welcoming Burton to the position she was leaving. Only those of us who knew her well were aware that Dory was devastated. To her credit, none of us had ever heard her criticize the museum, or for that matter, Burton Haldimand for getting her job.

It took her awhile to get her equilibrium back, if she really ever did. At first, she would come and just sit in a chair at McClintoch & Swain, chatting away to my neighbor and sometimes employee Alex Stewart, who is getting along in years himself. Clive and I were glad to have their company, and it certainly didn't bother the customers. In fact, the only member of the McClintoch & Swain team who seemed less than enthusiastic about Dory was Diesel, the orange cat that guards the store for us. That was undoubtedly because Dory insisted upon making a fuss over Diesel and kept trying to pet him, something this particular cat abhors. The minute Dory came through the door, Diesel would turn his full attention and his considerable talent for spotting shoplifters to the back room.

I don't know whether the shock of being fired had anything to do with it, but Dory's arthritis, well under control while she worked, had been steadily getting worse through her forced retirement, and soon she had to abandon even those outings. It was a shame, really, not the least because I didn't think Burton could hold a candle to Dory. It would be my pleasure to help outbid him.

It was unseasonably warm in New York when I got there. The Molesworth & Cox oriental auction was the first of the season and had attracted a lot of attention. There were some wonderful objects in the show, and the people at the auction house were justifiably proud, managing to get some play in the New York Times. Unhappily, the silver box was one of the objects featured, almost certainly ensuring I would have more competition for it.

Consequently, there were a lot of people interested in the sale, some of them with major museums, and the usual suspects in terms of collectors. At the preview, the first person I saw was a curator from the Smithsonian. The second person I saw was Dr. Burton Haldimand.

Mention the name Burton Haldimand in certain circles, and you're almost certain to be subjected to a wide range of opinion. To wit: Haldimand is exceptionally talented, perhaps even a genius, and he should be forgiven a few eccentricities. Two: Haldimand may be talented, but he is also the most ruthlessly ambitious person in the whole field of

museology, and woe betide anyone who gets in his way. And finally: Haldimand is not so much eccentric as seriously disturbed.

All of these things were true. Haldimand came to the Cottingham with a reputation as an expert in Chinese antiquities, and I'd never heard anyone say he wasn't as represented. I'd had few dealings with him, but I was certainly prepared to acknowledge that he was good at his job. There was no question he was ambitious. No sooner had he taken over responsibility for the Chinese galleries than he set his sights on the furniture galleries as well. So far the targeted curator had managed to fend him off, but I wasn't sure for how long. Burton seemed to have a way of insinuating himself into good standing with the powers that be anywhere he worked, and generally got what he wanted.

More than anything else, though, few could deny that Haldimand was very odd.

Haldimand, you see, had a thing about germs. Even in the warmest weather, and that day in New York was no exception, he wore a scarf, almost always an azure color, and gloves. True, museologists often wear gloves to protect the objects they are handling. This is not what I am talking about here. Haldimand wore gloves all the time, those plastic surgical gloves that he removed the way surgeons do, wiggling their way out of them so that they never actually touch the outside of them with their bare fingers. He wore them under winter mittens. He also, if Cottingham Museum staff were to be believed, sprayed his desk and all objects on it, including the phone, with disinfectant every evening when he left, and then again in the morning when he arrived. I have no

idea why, other than he thought the cleaning staff must be running a business out of his office at night.

If you went to a meeting in his office, which wasn't often given you could hardly hear yourself think over the drone of the huge air filter he had there, he probably sprayed your chair after you left. He was always dosing himself with some remedy or prophylactic. His assistant, one Marla Chappell, said he had a cupboard full of medicines of all sorts, homeopathic and otherwise. She also maintained he never used the toilets, either staff or public, at the Cottingham. Fortunately he lived close enough, and apparently had a strong enough bladder to wait until he went home at lunch time, and then again after work. It probably explained why he was never seen with a cup of coffee in his hand.

In flu season, he augmented his scarf with a surgical mask. When Toronto was hit with the horrible SARS outbreak, he called in sick, holed himself up in his Victorian townhouse in the Annex neighborhood, and didn't come out until the all clear had been sounded. Mind you, the all clear was sounded a little prematurely, which probably brought Burton to the brink of mental collapse, given he'd ventured abroad too soon. Somehow he survived. We all speculated that he must have had quite the supply of food stashed away to outlast the germs. He most certainly wouldn't have been calling for pizza delivery.

Despite this, or possibly because of it, Burton seemed to be sick more often than average. He always seemed to have a cough, or the sniffles, a headache or some tummy upset.

Sick or well, though, Burton knew his stuff. He was intent upon building up the T'ang Dynasty collection at the Cottingham, and while Dory had had to tell me the silver box was T'ang, Burton headed straight for it. There was none of the pretend-I'm-not-interested approach of many buyers at auction previews. Under the watchful eye of a Molesworth & Cox staff person, Burton picked it up – he was allowed to do that given he was wearing gloves – and scarcely conceal his glee. It was not until he had examined it in minute detail through a magnifying glass, as I had done a few minutes earlier, that he noticed me.

“Lara!” he said. “What a pleasure.” For once, Burton looked to be in better shape than I was, the picture of health, in fact, just the right amount of tan for the fall that said he got enough sun, but not too much, and a general spring in his step. I, on the other hand, was nursing a cold, and had been for a couple of weeks. It was more nuisance than anything else at this stage, and something I attributed to stale hotel air, but I couldn't shake it, and continued to blow my nose at regular intervals. Feeling this way also made me grumpy, and seeing someone I was not fond of in such glowing health was something of an annoyance.

Needless to say Burton did not extend his hand for a polite handshake, my having managed to sneeze twice since I entered the room. He may have had gloves on, but I didn't. He spoke a bit loudly, as he had the habit of standing well away from those to whom he spoke. Someone must have told him that germs could travel no more than six

feet because that was about away from me that he'd placed himself. He would have had a rather trying time at those cocktail receptions the Cottingham threw for high end donors.

"Something special you're looking at?" he went on.

"The same thing you are, I expect," I said.

"The cloisonné vase, you mean?" he said, coyly.

"Exactly," I said.

"Oh, ho," he said in a jovial tone. "McClintoch and Swain must be aiming for a wealthier clientele, is it? I hate to tell you, but this one starts well into six figures."

"The cloisonné vase?" I said. "That would be little high, wouldn't it?" I had him there. He was tripping over his own lies.

"I know you're after the silver *coffret à bijoux*," he said. If there is a fancy term for anything, in this case French for jewelry case, Burton was almost certain to use it. "You can't fool me. And you can't afford it either."

"Quite right, Burton. Under normal circumstances I couldn't, but I'm buying for a client, I'm happy to say. It's somebody else's money, so it's no problem." In fact I had half a

million dollars of Dory's money in a trust account, although I promised her I'd spend as little of it as I could.

"I see," he said. "Still, I rather suspect that you won't have the resources of the Cottingham estate. I hope you won't be too disappointed if I get it. It's better that way in any event. It's a public institution and way more people will have the opportunity to enjoy it. It will be the anchor piece of our Asian galleries. You know that is what the Cottingham tries to do, to have at least one piece of international importance in each of its galleries. Now we'll have Lingfei."

I knew about anchor pieces all right. I'd nearly been killed over one of the museum's so-called anchor pieces, a twenty-something-thousand year old mammoth ivory carving called The Magyar Venus, although what this Lingfei business was about I had no idea. "My client plans to donate it to a worthy museum," I said. It is possible I put just the slightest emphasis on the word worthy. Haldimand was starting to get up my sore nose.

"I don't suppose you'd tell me the name of your client," he said, seemingly oblivious to my slight.

"No, I don't suppose I would," I said.

"The rules applying to auction houses with regard to revealing that information would not really apply to you, you know," he said.

“How exactly is that relevant here, Burton?” I replied. “My client wishes to remain anonymous, and I’m not going to tell you.”

“Well then, may the best man win,” he said. He sounded supremely confident. In retaliation, I took two germ-ridden steps toward him and stuck out my hand. He blanched, sort of waved in my general direction, flung his azure scarf over his shoulder and hurried away. “See you Thursday evening,” he called out from a safe distance. “I hope you’re feeling better. You should do something about that cold, you know. I’d suggest ginseng tea. You need to bolster your immune system.”

“I’ve been taking Echinacea,” I said. Actually, my favorite cold remedy is a warm whiskey with honey and lemon at bedtime, but I didn’t think Burton would be impressed.

He was not impressed by Echinacea either, waving his hand in a disparaging gesture.

“Too late for that, I’m afraid. If you were familiar with the medical classic of the Yellow Emperor, you would know that your illness results from a disharmony of *qi*. You don’t treat a formed illness. Rather you treat the unformed illness. In other words you work to prevent illness, not treat it after you’re sick. You have to say yes to good health.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Burton,” I said. Personally I thought that what I needed was to be the successful bidder for the silver box. I might still have a cold, but I wouldn’t care, and

I would certainly feel better than he did, no matter how harmonious his qi. That and being able to move back home safely would add years to my life.

“Then, farewell my concubine,” he said, blowing a kiss in my general direction.

“In your dreams, Burton,” I replied, and heard his chuckle. It was difficult to think of Burton with a close companion. All those germs!

“Do you have any idea who that Yellow Emperor is?” I said to the representative of Molesworth & Cox, a young man by the name of Justin who was accompanying me while I assessed the merchandise.

“Absolutely no clue,” Justin replied. “But if you’re interested in immortality, perhaps I can help you.”

I gave him a baleful glance. “A little joke, there,” he said. “There’s actually a formula for the elixir of immortality written in this box. You need a magnifying glass to read it, assuming you even know how to read Chinese. Let me go and get you the translation, just for fun.”

He did just that, giving me a copy for my records. It did indeed contain a recipe.

Apparently the elixir of immortality contains potable gold, realgar, cinnabar, salt and powdered oyster shells.

“I’m sorry to say there are no details on the proportions of the ingredients, or instructions as to how take it,” Justin chuckled. I could have told him: You heat it in a sealed container for thirty-six hours and then take it for seven days. That information, according to Dory, was to be found in the box in her husband George’s collection. This was indeed a very interesting collection of boxes. “Don’t know about the potable gold. It seems too bad to drink it when you could wear it instead,” he added, pulling up his shirt cuff to reveal a very impressive gold watch.

“Cinnabar,” I said. “I know what that is. Lovely red color, but when you heat it you get some form of mercury.”

“And realgar is arsenic,” Justin said. “I asked.”

“So I guess if you actually mix this up and take it for any length of time you’re almost assured of immortality, although perhaps not in the form the person who wrote this had in mind.”

“Perhaps not. Let me tell you about this box, though. It dates to T’ang China, specifically, we believe, to the reign of Emperor Xuanzong, known to us as Illustrious August. He’s named in the text inside. He reigned from 712 – 756. Furthermore, apparently we know the box belonged to someone by the name of Lingfei who was probably a person of some importance in the court of Illustrious August.”

This was all very interesting, not the least because you have to love a guy who names himself Illustrious August. It was also considerably more information than Dory had given me, and explained Burton's reference to Lingfei. Regardless of its history, this box was a beauty too. On the top was incised a bird, a magical crane, a symbol of immortality for the T'ang, at least that's what Justin said. On the sides were depicted a woman of high standing, according to the writeup, and her maid servants, some of whom were playing instruments. If anything, it was even more beautiful than the one I'd seen at Dory's, perhaps because it was smaller, and the workmanship therefore more precise. In other words, the box was priceless. Still someone had it, and wanted to sell it. The reserve bid was \$200,000 as Dory and I both already knew, and the pre-sale estimate was \$300,000. And Burton and I were not the only people interested in it.

A young man of maybe thirty, Asian with stylish spiky black hair was showing an inordinate interest, moving steadily closer as Justin talked to me about the box. He was dressed very fashionably, Hugo Boss, I'd say, except I was certain even from a distance of a few yards that it was knockoff Hugo Boss, and not the real deal. Quality does tell, and I can usually spot a fake a mile off. China being the source of so many of the world's knockoffs, from Rolexes to Nikes, fakes are definitely a distinct possibility. But if you can't afford the real thing, then Molesworth & Cox's annual oriental auction is not the place for you, unless, like me, you have a patron of considerable means.

Mr. Knockoff was trying to give the impression he was interested in something else, in this case the gorgeous cloisonné vase that Burton had pretended to want, Qing, pronounced Ching, Dynasty, which is to say 1644 – 1912. Dory would be proud of me. He wasn't any better at faking his interest in the vase than he was in faking his suit. He was definitely interested in the T'ang silver box. I didn't think he stood a chance.

Thursday evening I was in my favorite position at the back of the room, waiting for the silver box to come up. I had my paddle, and was ready to raise it as required. I was also calling up my killer instincts, something that was easy enough for me to do. I just thought of those thugs who were planning to fire bomb my heritage cottage with me in it.

Burton was also at the back, but over to one side where perhaps he couldn't see very well, but where there were some empty seats on either side of him, providing a little buffer from the germs. He also had his cell phone out, but I didn't think he had to consult Courtney Cottingham about how much to pay. He would know very well how much he had to spend. Although it pained me to think so, it might even be more than Dory, for all her stepfather's and her husband's resources, could afford.

Mr. Knockoff, the Asian man with spiky hair and fake Hugo Boss was there, and he had a paddle. That would indicate that he was indeed interested in bidding on something, presumably, given his interest, the silver box, even if he didn't look to me as if he could afford it. Perhaps I should have tried to get a closer look at his suit, or perhaps my instinct

for fakes only applied to furniture and not clothing. Or maybe the fake suit was designed to put people like me off their guard.

The T'ang box was to be auctioned relatively late in the evening, but both Burton and I were there right from the opening bid on the first object, a beautiful, and highly collectible, bronze *jia*, a three-legged vessel for heating wine, dating to the Shang period, or, as Dory had made me memorize, the eighteenth to the twelfth century BCE.

I called Dory, at home in her armchair, to tell her the auction was about to begin, being very careful not to call her by name lest Burton was eavesdropping. "Have you ascertained who might be bidding for the silver box?" she asked.

"The Cottingham Museum in Toronto," I said carefully. Burton was no doubt straining to hear, and I didn't want him to think it would be anyone familiar with his name. "There was also a young man at the preview who was interested. He's here but he doesn't look as if he can afford it."

"Young?"

"I don't know. Maybe thirty? And there's a telephone bidder. I was told that when I arrived. I have no idea who that is."

"Telephone," she repeated. "Are there any Asian people there who might be bidding?"

“Only one, the young man I’ve already mentioned who does not look as if he is in the right league,” I said.

“I see,” she said. She then started to cough, almost as if she were choking. “Excuse me, will you? I’m going to have to get myself a glass of water,” she gasped. “Call me when the bidding is about to start.”

“Don’t worry, I will,” I said.

It was after a break in the proceedings, about mid-way through the auction, that the situation changed significantly. The announcement came from the auctioneer, Gerald Cox, the Cox of Molesworth & Cox, who told those us that an object had been withdrawn. Next to me, Burton was shuffling papers nervously, unwrapping something, most likely a cough drop, as he had been making little throat clearing sounds all evening in a most irritating manner. Perhaps he had forgotten to say yes to good health that day. The rustling stopped, however, as Cox spoke.

“I’m afraid the timing of this is highly unusual,” Cox said. “Item eighty-three, a silver coffret dating to the reign of T’ang Emperor Xuanzong has just been withdrawn by its owner.” In the booth next to me, Burton dropped his pen, which rolled in front of me. Mr. Knockoff, who had been leaning against the wall on one side of the room, slammed his paddle against the wall in frustration.

I took a deep breath and phoned the news to Dory, hearing her sharp intake of breath.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I could feel her disappointment coming across the phone line.

“It’s not for you to apologize,” she said quietly. “There’ll be another time.”

There wasn’t another time for Dory, though, because ten days later she was dead.