

Chapter 1: Lizard

"Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you," the man thundered, arms uplifted, eyes fixed on some distant vision.

"Revelation XII: 12," I muttered to myself. I should know: I'd heard it many times in the three days since the neighborhood's resident lunatic had staked out a small square of pavement right in front of my store, Greenhalgh and McClintoch by name, to proclaim the end of the world.

"Revelation XII:12," he boomed, and I had the satisfaction of knowing that my education in the apocalyptic texts was proceeding apace.

"First, a terrible fire," he said his voice dropping to a conversational tone as he tried to draw a small group of tourists into his circle. The besieged foursome edged their way cautiously past him. "And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire."

"Revelation again," I thought.

"Revelation XV, verse 2," he intoned. "Then men will die. The wages of sin is death," he added.

"Romans VI: 23," I thought. I couldn't stop myself. The man was getting to me. And not only me, my customers, I fretted. Tourist season, and people were avoiding that section of the street like the plague. I couldn't blame them. Here I was hovering across the road, hoping for a distraction so that I could dash across the street and into the shop before he caught sight of me. If he did, I knew what would follow: Ecclesiasticus.

"All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman," he yelled, spotting me at last. "Ecclesiasticus XXV: 19."

I winced and quickly rushed past him, beginning to mount the steps to the shop door.

"The fault is yours," he screamed, his finger pointing directly at me, his eyes fixed on mine as I backed up the last two steps and hurled myself through the door.

"Are you all right, Lara? What is the matter with that dreadful man?" Sarah Greenhalgh sighed, as I hurtled through the door.

"Off his meds, I'd say," opined Alex Stewart, a retired sailor who is my neighbor, and our indispensable help in the shop. "Or maybe it's just the millennium," he added. "Brings out some kind of primitive fear in us, I think. You've seen the papers. People all over the world worrying about signs in the heavens and everything. All the portents for a cataclysmic finale to life as we know it are there, apparently."

"I just wish he'd find another piece of pavement to harangue everyone from," I sighed. "He is so bad for business! I hate to call the police, though. He is kind of pathetic."

In a way though, as I think back on it, the man, although undoubtedly deranged, was right. Not in the strict chronological sense, perhaps. The man in our storage room was dead, murdered, before, not after, the fire. But for a time, the devil, or at least his earthly henchman, did walk among us, and, while it still hurts to admit it, I do have to assume some responsibility, some guilt, because in a way everything that happened stemmed from my inability to deal with a touchy personal situation.

The messy saga begins, in the police files at least, with the incident in which my shop got trashed and almost burned to the ground. But in my mind the story begins a few months earlier than that, when Maud McKenzie up and died.

Maud was the resident eccentric in Yorkville, where Greenhalgh and McClintoch is located. She and her husband Franklin were proprietors of a strange little place from which they sold bits of everything, some antiques, some junk, called, -- God bless them -- The Old Curiosity Shop. They lived above the store. Maud and Frank had been there forever, as far as I was concerned. The house in which the store was located had originally belonged to Maud's family, and long after her family had sold and moved away, Maud and Frank were able to buy the old building back. They'd been there when Yorkville was a rundown city neighborhood, had watched it become the focus of the sixties culture when all the best coffee houses and folk singers were there, and had weathered the times when the sixties turned ugly and the drug scene moved in. Then when Yorkville had its renaissance as a posh shopping area, they carried on much as before.

They were founders of a rather informal merchant's association, more social club than anything, that several of us shopkeepers belonged to, getting together once a week at the Coffee Mill for what we called a street meeting. We coordinated our Christmas decorations, put together a fund for advertising the area, dealt with vandalism, the usual thing. But mainly we liked to gossip: Who was renovating, who was going out of business, who was moving in. At one time, a few years earlier, when my husband Clive and I were splitting up and I had to sell the shop to pay him off, I'm sure I too was much the subject of discussion in that little group. We monitored the street as if our livelihood depended on it, which of course it did.

We were a tight little group, all friends, partly because none of us were in exactly the same business, and therefore not direct competitors. We had a fashion designer, a bookseller, a hairdresser, a craft shop owner, my antique furniture and design shop, and a linens shop. Newcomers were not excluded exactly. It just took a unanimous vote to get someone new in, and we didn't choose to vote that often.

When Frank died, Maud carried right on. We could never figure out how she managed. Perhaps the shop did better than any of us guessed. There's no question if you rooted around enough, there were treasures to be found there. But there didn't seem to be much in the way of new merchandise moving into the shop after Frank died.

When Maud became a little, as she put it, unsteady on her pins, the coffee meeting moved to her place, each of us taking a turn bringing a carafe of coffee and some cookies. But then one day, my friend Moira and I went over to check on her because the shop didn't open on time. Maud, who'd been prone to what she referred to as 'spells', was lying at the bottom of the stairs leading to her apartment on the second floor. A bad fall, the coroner concluded. A broken neck and fractured skull.

I think Moira and I both thought, as we discovered Maud lying there, that the neighborhood would not be the same again, ever.

Much to our surprise, Maud and Frank had had rather more money than we would have guessed. A very tidy sum, actually, just over a million dollars, not including the sale of the building and contents. The bulk of the money went to a couple of charities, the old building and its contents to a nephew in Australia we never knew they had, and there was a nice little fund set up with the stipulation that our coffee group - we were all individually named -- should get together once a year for dinner in the restaurant of our choice for as long as we were able.

Conversation for the next little while focussed almost exclusively on Frank and Maud.

"Where do you think all the money came from?" I wondered out loud, Moira having dropped in for a coffee before our respective enterprises opened for the day.

"Investments," Moira, owner of the local beauty salon ventured. "Once when I went over," she went on, tapping the table lightly with her perfectly manicured nails, "Maud was working at her desk upstairs. Looked like bonds to me."

"But you have to have money to invest!" I replied. "If personal experience is anything to go by, these places don't make anyone rich."

"Maybe they were just better at it than we are," Moira said, including herself in this rather generously, since she was a very successful businesswoman.

I remember that day very clearly for some reason, looking around my shop, which was looking particularly nice, in my estimation, and thinking how content I was with my life for the first time in awhile, how my universe was unfolding entirely satisfactorily. Business, if not brisk exactly, was steady. Sarah and I worked well together. She left the buying decisions up to me and so I got to take four extended buying trips a year to parts of the world I loved, while she, the born accountant, managed the shop very efficiently. We'd built up a nice roster of repeat customers who kept us going through the lean times.

On the personal side I had, I thought, a pleasant life. Partnerless for a year or so, I found that, despite the occasional urge to call the former love of my life, a Mexican archaeologist by the name of Lucas May, to beg him to come back to me, I enjoyed being single.

I got together with friends like Moira as often as I could, and one evening a week, I took a course at the University of Toronto, usually about some aspect of ancient history or languages, partly because it was related to my business, but mainly because I was interested in it. I'd long since realized I'd never be a scholar, but I enjoyed knowing a little about a lot of things, and in particular, learning about the history of the places where I went to do my buying.

I had some not very onerous surrogate parenting responsibilities for a young Maltese couple who were living in Canada while the young man, Anthony Farrugia, studied architecture. These duties I shared with a friend of mine, Rob Luczka, a sergeant in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, whom I'd met in Malta a year or two earlier and with whom I'd stayed in touch. The young Farrugias lived in a basement apartment in the house Rob shared with his daughter Jennifer, and his partner Barbara. I looked in on the Farrugias from time to time, called Anthony's mother about once a month to report, and, when I was in town, had Sunday dinner at the house with Anthony, his wife Sophia, and Rob and his clan. Life, if not overly exciting, was extremely comfortable.

"So what's going to happen to Maud's junk, do you think?" Moira said, interrupting my thoughts.

"The nephew in Australia has no interest in any of it," Alex interjected, "The house is to be sold, and the contents auctioned off. Molesworth and Cox," he added, naming a swank auction house.

"Well if you say so, Alex, then it must be true," Moira laughed. "I don't know how you do it, but you seem to know everything."

Not quite everything, as it turned out. A For Sale sign went up on the property soon enough, and the building was snapped up almost immediately by a man who was one of the larger property owners and landlords in the area. Shortly after that it was being renovated for a new tenant. For whom, exactly, the landlord wasn't saying. He would only allow as how this tenant was upscale, exclusive and exciting, which didn't tell us much. We all liked to think we were all of those things. Large hoardings hid the renovations from our view, try as much as we might to peer in. Even Alex Stewart couldn't find out who the new tenant would be.

Then with great fanfare, the hoardings came down and the shop was shown in all its glory. Clive Swain, Designer, Antiquarian, the sign said. My ex-husband, the rat, right across the street in competition with me!

From that moment on, my comfortable little world began to unravel.

"My goodness, some men are hard to get rid of! Hang around like dirty shirts!" Moira exclaimed.

"This is so awful," I moaned. "I started the business in the first place," I said, quite unnecessarily, since Moira knew this only too well. But I had to say it anyway. "The only reason he got into this business is because I was dumb enough to give him half when I married him. And he was such a jerk insisting I sell the

store to give him half the money when we split. It was sheer luck I was able to buy back in again with Sarah. Now what does he up and do? Right across the street!"

Moira made sympathetic noises. "He certainly seems to be able to get women to take care of him, doesn't he? First you, who figured him out and booted him out the door. So he takes up with this new woman, what's her name, Celeste, who, let's face it, buys him a store.

"I don't think he'll be much of a threat to you, darling," she went on. Moira called everybody darling. "After all, he never did an honest day's work in his life, now did he?"

That much, I thought, was true. Clive was a brilliant designer, and we'd been a good combination for awhile. However, it didn't take a genius to notice that soon after we were married and I'd given him a half interest in the shop as a wedding present, he'd taken to lying about hotel pools ogling young women in bikinis while I pressed a rented Jeep up steep mountain roads to get to the perfect wood carvers, or argued with customs agents in some hot, sweaty warehouse.

Technically Moira was right. Clive didn't like to work. But he'd remarried, a wealthy woman by the name of Celeste, and she had more than enough money to hire people to do the work for him. I tried to make light of it, assuring Sarah, who must have wondered what she'd done in a previous life to deserve finding herself involved in this battle, that Clive would not be a problem.

The truth was, however, he could work hard when he chose to, and he'd been a ferocious adversary in our divorce proceedings, I considered him very much a threat, but more than that. I'd loved him once, we'd been married for twelve years, and seeing his name in elegant gold letters on the sign across the street was a constant reminder of something I considered a personal shortcoming, as if the failure of the marriage, and Clive's behavior, was somehow due entirely to inadequacy on my part. I dreaded the inevitable first meeting, and my anxiety made me furious, both at Clive and at myself.

I tried to put as good a face on it as I could, and made a point of carrying on much as usual, concentrating on the details and the routine of my life. There were the plans for my next trip to Indonesia and Thailand, and the handling of the latest shipment from Mexico. On the more social side, there was dinner at Rob's house on Sundays, where as usual this time of year, Sophia, Jennifer and I would sit on the back deck and watch Rob and Anthony barbecue, while Barbara, a perky blond with a ponytail and gorgeous physique, and a shoo-in for the Martha Stewart award for perfect housekeeping should there ever be such a thing, passed exquisite little hors d'oeuvres and tossed salads of leaves and other ingredients I couldn't even identify.

There was also the auction of Maud's possessions at Molesworth & Cox. I thought I'd attend to see if I could purchase some of Maud's things, some stuff I could sell in the store, and a personal memento or two of Maud and Frank. I'd asked Alex to watch out for the auction notice for me.

Alex did one better and got me a copy of the catalogue which he was perusing one day while I arranged a new window display, assiduously avoiding glancing across the street at Clive's shop.

"Well, what have we here?" I heard him mutter. "Here, have a look, Lara. Is this what I think it is?"

I glanced at the catalogue and smiled. "Cape Cod," I said. "Good work, Alex. I might not have noticed that."

"Won't Jean Yves be pleased?" he replied. "You'd better get there in lots of time for this one."

'This one' was a group of six pressed glass water goblets, dating to the 1880's, in the Cape Cod pattern, to be auctioned off the same day as Maud's possessions. The Jean Yves in question was Jean Yves Lassonde, a French actor who'd come to Hollywood ten years earlier to make a movie, and had stayed, buying a farm in upper New York state and settling in. I'd met him a number of years earlier, back when Clive and I had been in business together, when Jean Yves had been in town making a movie.

He'd wandered into the shop, called McClintoch and Swain back then, and had loved the place. That first visit, he'd purchased a beautiful old mirror and an antique teak armoire which I'd arranged to have shipped to his farm. After that he dropped in whenever he was in town, and almost always bought something. On one visit, I'd sold him a very large carved oak refectory table from Mexico, complete with 16 matching chairs with beautifully carved backs and nicely worn leather seats.

He'd joked at the time that he didn't know what he'd do with such a large table when he'd only been able to find five antique goblets in a pattern he'd begun to collect: Cape Cod. Even though North American pressed glass was not my specialty, because he was such a good customer, and a really lovely person, I'd done some research on the subject and discovered that the molds for pressed glass were regularly passed across the U.S./Canadian border, and for a period of time, the pattern might have been manufactured at the Burlington Glass Works on the Canadian side.

Armed with this knowledge, I'd been able to find a goblet at an estate sale outside Toronto, and I'd sent it to him with one of his shipments as a little gift from the shop. He'd been thrilled, as I knew he would be. He accepted the goblet as a gift, but insisted that, if I found any more, he wanted to pay for them. I'd come across two more after that, and he'd been able to find one himself, so now he had nine. Seven to go. And here in the Molesworth & Cox catalogue were six of them. Jean Yves would be pleased indeed.

The day of the auction was hot and muggy and I entered the august and cool premises with a sense of both relief and anticipation. I don't buy much at auctions: most of my buying is done direct from the craftsperson, or from my agents and pickers in various parts of the world. But there is nothing like an auction to get the adrenalin flowing and to bring out the competitive spirit in most of us.

Molesworth & Cox brought a veneer of Old World class and sophistication to that competitive flame. An old British company, founded almost 150 years ago, when treasure from the far reaches of the Empire poured into London, it proudly displayed the escutcheons that heralded it as a purveyor of goods to Her Majesty the Queen and one or two of the lesser Royals. The company had expanded to North America several years earlier and had established auction houses in New York and Toronto. The Toronto establishment was located on King Street just a block or two from the towering bank edifices where a considerable amount of Molesworth & Cox merchandise could be found gracing the boardrooms of these modern day cathedrals where Mammon reigns supreme.

The outside of the establishment was so discreet that you'd be inclined to miss it unless given explicit directions, just a subdued bronze plaque beside a quietly elegant door hinting at what was within.

The place still had an air of British Empire, carefully maintained, and it always reminded me of what I imagined a British club in India during the days of the Raj to be: lots of palm fronds, large windows shuttered against the sun and the heat, highly polished brass, dark wood, worn leather chairs, and strong, dark tea -- Assam, perhaps -- served in translucent china cups from an etched brass tray, the quiet smell of expensive cigar lingering in the air.

Visitors rang the door bell to gain entry, and once inside, found themselves in the viewing rooms, two on either side of a centre hall. The rooms were painted in a dark, dark green, and oriental carpets covered the floors. As I always do at an auction, I quickly surveyed the room, checking to see if there was anything of interest beyond the specific objects I was looking for. I found Maud's things right away, and mentally settled on a couple of sterling silver frames for myself, and three pairs of old brass candlesticks for the shop.

The water goblets were in the second room, and as quickly as I could, I checked them out. Pressed glass is highly collectible these days, and the prices have reached the point where there are inevitably fakes around. They looked okay to me, and of course they had a Molesworth & Cox certificate of authentication to back them up. There was a reserve bid of \$175 on them, which was fine. Jean Yves was prepared to pay about \$50 per goblet, and this left some manoeuvring room.

Following my usual auction strategy, I spent as little time as possible on the objects I really wanted, feigning indifference, and then spent time looking at what I didn't want, in this case a set of Royal Doulton china with an impeccable pedigree, having belonged at one time to the Duke of something or other, and purportedly commissioned especially for a visit to the Duke's castle by none other than Queen Victoria. I don't know what I think I accomplish with this mild subterfuge: I can't imagine anyone bids high on objects because they saw me looking at them. Superstition, perhaps.

At Molesworth & Cox, purchasers are required to register and establish credit, and once they have proved themselves worthy, are given a number and a paddle with that number on it. No unseemly yelling at M & C. To make a bid, one merely raises one's paddle with a hand sign for the amount if necessary, in as refined and dignified a way as possible.

I took my seat early, sitting as I usually do in the middle of the row toward the back and watched others take their seats in front of me. The usual suspects were there -- about a dozen dealers, one or two of whom I knew by name, the others only by sight. I was a little disappointed to see Sharon Steele. She's a dealer with an antique store on Queen Street West specializing in old glass, and I expected she, too, would be interested in the water goblets. There were also a few yuppie couples, an Arab businessman or two, and a few obviously wealthy Chinese. There was also Ernie, an older gentleman who had been at every auction I'd ever attended in this place, and someone I'd never seen buy anything whatsoever.

One person seemed rather out of the ordinary, and I'd never seen him here before, not that that meant anything. He seemed rather out of his element. He was medium height and build, dark, his collar and cuffs were a little worn, his shoes a little scuffed, his black suit a little shiny, nothing that would look out of place anywhere but here, perhaps. He was nervous, and if anything, rather furtive. He kept his hands in his pockets, his eyes kept darting about the room, and from time to time, his tongue would flick quickly out of his mouth and back. In the very bad habit I have of giving strangers nicknames, I mentally named him Lizard.

I half expected Lizard to leave when the time for the auction came, but he didn't. In fact, he had obviously passed muster because he had a paddle, number 9, and he took a seat several rows ahead of me and off to the right.

Maud's mirrors and candlesticks were to be the third and fourth items up for sale, and the goblets, the tenth. Bidding was brisk for the first few items, but I had little competition for Maud's possessions and got both the frames and the candlesticks for what I considered a satisfactory price. I then sat back to wait for the goblets. Sharon Steele had not yet bid on anything, so I figured she was waiting for the goblets too. I knew her to be a conservative bidder, so I thought I stood a reasonable chance of getting what I wanted.

Sharon was number 18, I was 23. When the goblets came up, opening with the reserve bid, a number of people put in bids, but by the time the bidding reached \$230, only Sharon and I were in. The auctioneer see-sawed between the two of us until we got to \$300, Sharon's bid. This, of course, was Jean Yves' limit, but I raised her to \$310 hoping that would be the end of it. It wasn't. Sharon, it seemed, wanted these pretty badly too. By this time I was mentally calculating how much of a loss I was prepared to take for this customer. Jean Yves was a good, no, a great, customer, and business wasn't bad these days. But Sarah and I would never get rich, and as the saying goes, on a good month we could almost pay the rent.

As another saying goes, he who hesitates is lost. The bidding hit \$400, and for a few seconds I lost my nerve. Much to Sharon's surprise and mine, someone further back raised the bid to \$450, and the gavel came down. "Sold to 31," the auctioneer said.

I was sitting dealing with my disappointment when a voice I knew only too well came from behind. "I think Jean Yves will be pleased with the goblets, don't you?" the voice asked amiably.

Clive. I turned around to find my ex-husband, a smug expression on his face, sitting directly behind me. He was very elegantly attired, maybe Armani, I remember thinking --Moirra would know -- with very trendy little wire glasses and an expensive-looking haircut.

"Why are you doing this?" I hissed at him. He was stroking his moustache as I spoke, a gesture that at one time, I seem to recall, I had found profoundly attractive, but which now just incensed me.

"Doing what?" he asked innocently. "I just thought I'd pick these up for Jean Yves. I was afraid Sharon would get them, so I leapt in."

"You didn't do it for Jean Yves. You did it for the same reason you opened up across the street from me," I whispered, acutely conscious that people nearby were watching us, but too angry to care.

"You did it to spite me," I went on. "Why? I gave you half the money for the store, and surely Celeste has enough money to keep you in style," I hissed.

"But it was never the money, my darling. I just need a chance to express my creativity," he said.

Yeah, right, I thought. "I'm not your darling," I sputtered, getting up from my seat and heading for the door.

By the time I'd climbed over the legs of several people sitting between me and the aisle, the tears of rage I was determined not to show pricking at the back of my eyes, the bidding on the next item had already begun. As I was about to stumble out the door at the back of the room, I saw someone lurking, there is no other word for it, behind a potted palm at the back of the room. I could not imagine what he was doing there. He didn't appear to have a number, and he looked, if anything, even more out of place than Lizard. He was dressed completely in black, and he was concentrating very hard on the bidding that was going on. As I went by his hiding place, he turned, his concentration broken by my passing, and for a moment he stared right at me. It was all I could do not to gasp out loud. His eyes were very dark and hooded, and the backs of his hands were covered in dark hair. For some reason I cannot explain, something about the way he held his arms out from his body, almost like pincers, he reminded me of a crab, or perhaps an enormous black spider, and a poisonous one at that. His eyes held mine for a second or two, and then he turned back to the bidding.

Intrigued, I turned back, as well. The bidding was getting really competitive, and two parties were battling it out for something, number 9 and number 31: Clive and the Lizard.

The item that was being auctioned was a box of small objects that had not been claimed in customs and was therefore on the block. I'd seen it on my quick survey before the auction began. I really hadn't taken much notice of it, and in my haste to get out of the place, I hadn't heard the description of it from the auctioneer. My vague recollection was that there was a fair amount of junk in the box, and maybe a couple of things that looked interesting, although nothing I cared about.

But I knew which object held Clive's attention: a small carved jade snuff bottle. Collecting was one of Clive's passions, and on a scale of one to ten, snuff bottles would score a nine point five with him. He had an impressive collection which at one time we'd displayed on the shelf beneath a glass coffee table in our living room. I'd managed to find a few nice ones as Christmas and birthday presents, and he'd invariably been pleased with them.

The bidding was getting quite hot and moving up fast. Lizard, when he wasn't holding up his card, was casting desperate glances back towards Clive. The price continued to rise. Clive was leaning forward in his chair, and Lizard was mopping the sweat from his brow, he wanted the box that badly. But it was clear that Clive had the resources, Lizard did not.

As the gavel was about to come down on his bid, smelling victory and convinced he had won, Clive leaned toward a pretty young woman sitting next to him and whispered something to her.

And then, on impulse, I did to Clive what he had done to me. I held my paddle up, and before he knew what was happening, I found myself the proud owner of a box of junk that was suddenly worth, by one action, \$1100. It was a malicious thing to do, to say nothing of infantile, reckless and even foolhardy.

It was also one of the worst mistakes I have ever made.