a desperate fortune

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sourcebooks landmark

Chapter 1

My cousin didn't try to catch the bride's bouquet. She knew me well enough to know I wouldn't try to catch it, either.

"Come keep me company," she said, and drew me firmly to one side of all the colorful commotion. "I need to sit."

My father's wild Aunt Lucy, nearly lost in layered flounces of bronze taffeta, tried once to herd us back as we went past. "Oh, girls, you mustn't run away. Go on, get in there. Have a go." Smiling at my cousin, she said, "Third time lucky, Jacqueline, so they say. And Sara, dear," she added in a cheering tone, to me, "there's always hope."

I might have pointed out there wasn't, really. Catching things had never been my strong suit, and it always seemed ridiculous to go through all that effort just to field a bunch of flowers that, while pretty, only showed which of the women at the wedding was the most determined to be married next, not which one would be.

Jacqui didn't give me time to point out anything. She simply answered, "Yes, Aunt Lucy, thanks for that, but Sara isn't feeling well."

And then she steered me off again.

I looked at her. "I'm feeling fine."

"I had to give her some excuse, or she'd have never let us be. You know the way she is. And I could hardly say *I* wasn't feeling well—she'd only think that I was pregnant."

I had to admit that was true. Jacqui's love life—including her two short-lived marriages, one to a singer flamboyant enough to ensure their divorce had been given a place in the tabloids—was frequently a source of gossip at these family gatherings. She fueled that gossip on her own sometimes when she got bored, and had been known to start a rumor in one corner of the room to see how long it took to travel to another, but this evening she did not seem bored.

I asked, because I couldn't see the man she'd come with, "Where did you leave Humphrey?"

"Over there. He found the punch bowl, I'm afraid, before I had a chance to warn him. Drank three glasses of it."

Uncle Gordon spiked the punch at every family wedding. No one knew with what, but even those of us who'd only ever heard about the hangovers knew better than to drink the stuff. "Poor Humphrey."

Jacqui sighed. "Poor me, more like. I doubt he'll make it into work on Monday, and we've got a sales meeting. That's what I get," she said, "for bringing my assistant to a Thomas family wedding."

I agreed she should have known better. I hadn't brought a date myself, but then I didn't have a Humphrey, clever and good-looking, sitting handily outside my office door. And no one here expected me to bring somebody, anyway.

"Let's find a table," Jacqui said.

We found one tucked quietly off in a corner, half-hidden by one of the faux-marble columns that held up the wedding hall's high ceiling, painted ethereal blue with winged cherubs. The whole setting was a bit over-the-top, but it suited our young cousin Daphne, whose wedding this was. Daphne lived and breathed drama, which made her quite fun in small doses but very exhausting in larger ones.

"All a bit much?" Jacqui asked me. At first I assumed she was thinking, as I was, about the wedding, but then she asked, "How are you coping?" and I understood.

She had always been something of my guardian angel, since I'd been put into her arms as a baby when she had been ten. She was, if one worked out the family tree, more properly my father's cousin, daughter of his youngest uncle, but that made her still my own first cousin once removed, and I had claimed her and was keeping her.

It had been Jacqui who'd first noticed something was a little different in the way I saw the world, and through my childhood and my teens she'd been close by to show me what to do, like an interpreter to guide me through the labyrinth; to pick me up and dust me off if I stepped off the path and took a tumble. And the first year I had spent at university, that awful year when things had started coming all unglued for me, it had been Jacqui who had taken me to lunch with a new author, whose first book she had been editing.

"He's a psychologist," she'd introduced him. "Brilliant book, just fascinating. All about these children who have—how do you pronounce it, Colin?"

"Asperger's." He'd said it with a hard *g*, as in *hamburgers*.

At Jacqui's prompting, he had talked all through our lunch about the syndrome that at that time was believed to lie midway along the sliding scale between the "normal" world and full-on autism, making those who had it all too miserably aware that they were different without understanding why, unable to read and interpret all the complex social cues most other people took for granted—tones of voice, and body language, and the strange figures of speech that made a person say that he had been "knocked sideways" when he hadn't moved at all.

And I had known.

It had, if I was honest, been a great relief to finally put a name to what the issue was. I'd gone for consultations later with that same psychologist, and with my cousin waiting just outside his office door, we'd done the proper tests. He had explained it very clearly, using terms I could relate to.

"You're a programmer, aren't you?" he'd asked me. "You work with computers. Well, if you think of your own mind as a computer, which it is, then your basic architecture is different from most of the other computers around you. You're wired differently, you connect differently, and you run different software on a different operating system. You're like the lone Mac," he'd concluded, "in an office of PCs. They're all running Windows, and you're running OS X."

That had helped. I'd been able to picture that one Mac computer alone on its desk with its own software, processing everything in its own way while all of the other computers, the PCs, shared their incompatible system.

But Jacqui hadn't liked that image. "You don't want to be alone, off in your own corner," she had told me in decided tones. And having helped me put a name to what the problem was, she'd tackled it the way she tackled everything: head on. She'd bought me books and studied on her own, and with a single-minded focus Henry Higgins might have envied, she had tutored me in how to hide the signs, to pass for normal.

"You just have to pretend," she'd said, choosing another analogy, "that you're an alien, come here to learn about earthlings. Our language, our customs, our idioms, all of that. Study and learn them, the way you would any strange culture. But you don't want to *look* like an alien, and that means learning to mimic. I'll show you."

She'd shown me. Most days, I still felt like an alien, if I was honest. But Jacqui had done her job so well these past several years that my own parents, even when faced with the facts, still refused to believe I was anything more than a little bit quirky. And in a family like mine, I thought—bringing my mind firmly back to the present as new bursts of clapping amid shrieks of laughter announced that somebody had caught the bouquet—being quirky was hardly unusual.

"How are you coping?" asked Jacqui again, and I shrugged.

"I'm all right. I could have done without the DJ."

"Yes, well, so could we all. It was too loud for me," she admitted, "so I can only imagine what it must have been like for you."

My senses were…sensitive. Easily jangled and jarred. The wiring of my mind made sounds that other people could ignore strike at me with the full force of a whining dentist's drill. Strong lighting sometimes gave me headaches, certain fabrics rubbed as painfully as sandpaper against my skin, and when all that was added to a room packed full of people, interacting in a way I had to work to understand, then staying calm became a test of my endurance.

Jacqui smiled and took a piece of paper from her handbag. "Here," she said, and slid the paper over to me. "This might help."

Shaking my head, I assured her, "I'm not at that stage yet."

"What stage?"

"The Sudoku stage." Then, because she was still watching me with that expression I'd known from my childhood, I added more firmly, "I'm fine."

I admittedly found it a little endearing that she'd always fed my addiction to numbers, in full understanding that, when I felt overwhelmed, nothing could calm me like complex equations or, lately, Sudoku—the neat, tidy patterns of numbers in squares, like a warm, fuzzy blanket that wrapped round my mind and was instantly soothing.

It hadn't surprised me that Jacqui had noticed when I'd made the switch to Sudoku. There wasn't much Jacqui missed noticing. And for the past several months she had seemed to have one of the puzzles conveniently tucked in her handbag whenever I'd needed one. But…

"You can stop looking after me," I told her. "Honestly. I'm a big girl now."

"I know that." Her tone told me nothing, but I'd learned that whenever her mouth tightened down at the corners like that, she was being defensive. "And anyway, that's not a puzzle, exactly."

I looked at the page. She was right. These were numbers, but not in an order I recognized—just numbers printed in pairs and threes, with dots between them:

106.62.181.189.68.172.766.86.128.185.64.175.19
.67.164.186.65.47.679.55.173.25.122.13.64.562.215
.128.196.29.56.63

I was already starting to look for the patterns when I asked, "What's this?"

"It's a code. Codes were one of your things, weren't they?"

"When I was ten, sure." I'd been in Year Six then. Our studies had taken us through World War II and the work of the code breakers at Bletchley Park, and I'd been so obsessed with cryptanalysis that, for the whole remainder of that winter, I had written all my school notes in a cipher of my own devising, much to the frustration of my teachers and my parents. "But that was almost twenty years ago."

"Well, I'll lay odds you've not forgotten. That code," she said, with a nod towards the paper I was holding, "is an old one, from the early eighteenth century."

It wasn't actually a code, I could have told her, but a cipher. More specifically, it seemed to be a substitution cipher, in which numbers had been used in place of letters of the alphabet. But I only asked, "And why do you have it?"

"I got it from one of my authors. You've never met Alistair Scott, have you?"

"Who?"

"The historian, Alistair Scott. He's quite famous. He used to be on television all the time."

I took her word for it. I didn't have a television. "And?" I smoothed the paper with my fingers as I focused on the numbers. There weren't many that were higher than 500, so I guessed those might be placeholders, to mark the ends of words.

"He's working on a new book," she went on, "and there's a source he needs to use, but it's in code. He wants someone to break it for him. So I thought of you."

"I'm hardly a professional."

"You need the work."

I paused, and faintly smiled. "I wondered how long it would take before you brought that up. Who told you?"

"Need you ask?"

My mother, then. I looked more closely at the numbers, noting the most common ones were in the 60s. Probably the *e*'s, I thought. The letter used most frequently in English, after all, was *e*. It also was the letter we used most for ending words. If I was right about the placeholders, then two words in this cipher ended in 60-somethings, so again, they were most likely *e*'s. I took a pencil from my handbag. "So she's told you all the details, has she?"

"Only that you handed in your notice," Jacqui said. "You can't keep doing that."

"They wouldn't let me work alone."

"Most people in IT do work in teams."

"I don't." And if the 60-somethings were all *e*'s, that meant it was the 6 alone that mattered, and the final digit didn't count. Testing this, I tried removing all the final digits right across the board, from all the numbers, and put *e*'s where all the sixes were, and spaces for the placeholders. I ended up with:

> 10.e.18.18.e.17.space.8.12.18.e.17.1.e.16.18.e.4
> .space.5.17.2.12.1.e.space.21.12.19.2.5.e

There, I thought. Much less unwieldy. Right then. Twenty-six letters in the alphabet. Except if I were dealing with a simple substitution cipher, in which *a* was 1, and *b* was 2, and so on, then *e* would be written as 5 and not 6. I flipped *e* and *f* round, and got gibberish: *Jerreq hlreqaepred fqblae ulsbfe.*

Jacqui told me, "It would mean a trip to Paris. You like Paris."

"In December?"

"Well, you wouldn't have to go till after Christmas."

"Even worse."

She held her silence for a moment, then she said, "You're right. You'd do much better staying here and moving back in with your parents. That would be a lot more fun."

I wasn't always good at detecting sarcasm, but in this instance just the words alone were all I needed to be certain she was teasing. Glancing up, I tried to straighten out my smile. "Ha-ha."

"No, really. And your mother could invite young men to lunch on Sundays. You could have a lovely time."

"I won't need to move home," I said. "I've got three months left on my lease. I'll find another job."

"*This* one would let you work alone. Besides, he pays obscenely well, you know, does Alistair."

I shook my head. "I couldn't take his money." I flipped a few more letters, moving closer to an understanding of the patterns used by whoever had made this cipher. "This," I said, "is really pretty basic, not so difficult. I've nearly got it. When I've finished here, I'll let you have the key, and you can pass it on to him, and he can do all the deciphering himself, for nothing."

"Yes, well, there's one problem with your logic," Jacqui told me.

"What's that?"

"The code you've got there," she informed me, "is not the one Alistair needs to have broken."

My pencil paused, but only briefly, because I was too far along to just stop. "Then why do I have it?"

"It's sort of a test. I told Alistair you were a wizard with codes and things, and he said if you cracked this one in under a week, he would not only hire you, he'd buy you a bottle of whisky."

I wasn't sure what letter had been flipped with *r*. The first word, with its double *r*, was likely my best clue. It might be meant to be a double *l*, perhaps, or double *t*. Since *t* was the most common English consonant, I went with that. *Jetteq*, read the first word now, unhelpfully. "He knows what this says, then?"

She nodded. "It's out of an old book, or something."

I had only two bits of the cipher left to unravel.

"Tell Alistair Scott," I said, "that if he's buying me whisky, my preference is sixteen-year-old Lagavulin." I jotted the translation down and rotated the paper to slide it back over the table towards her.

I knew that I'd done it correctly when I saw her smile. That was how Jacqui always smiled when I did something to make her proud. "See? I was sure you could do it."

"I'm not a real code breaker."

"Sara." She held up the paper. "You solved this in seventeen minutes. You're good at it."

Probably not good enough, said my inner perfectionist.

Jacqui, who'd known me so long and so well that she likely could hear that voice, too, said, "Come with me tomorrow, I'll take you to meet him."

"To Paris? Be serious."

"Alistair Scott's not in Paris."

"But you said—"

"He only lives over the river, in Ham. It's the job that's in Paris."

She asked me again to come meet him, and of course I told her yes, because I knew she wouldn't let it go until I gave the answer that she wanted. But my gaze stayed on the paper in her hand while we were talking, and I wondered who had written it, and whom they'd meant to warn with those four words. Not me, I knew…and yet the final two words resonated, curiously:

Letter intercepted. France unsafe.