

*THE*  
**KING'S  
RANSOM**

## BY JANET EVANOVICH

### THE STEPHANIE PLUM NOVELS

*One for the Money*  
*Two for the Dough*  
*Three to Get Deadly*  
*Four to Score*  
*High Five*  
*Hot Six*  
*Seven Up*  
*Hard Eight*  
*To the Nines*  
*Ten Big Ones*  
*Eleven on Top*  
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*Lean Mean Thirteen*  
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*Going Rogue*  
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*Dirty Thirty*  
*Now or Never*  
(Thirty-One on the Run)  
*Split Second*  
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*The Recovery Agent*

### **THE FOX AND O'HARE NOVELS**

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### **THE ALEXANDRA BARNABY NOVELS**

*Metro Girl*

*Motor Mouth*

(with Alex Evanovich)

*Troublemaker* (graphic novel)



# JANET EVANOVICH

A RECOVERY AGENT NOVEL

## *THE* KING'S RANSOM

**ATRIA** PAPERBACK

**New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London**

**Toronto Sydney/Melbourne New Delhi**



**ATRIA**  
PAPERBACK

An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, LLC  
1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10020

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First Atria Paperback edition June 2026

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Interior design by Jill Putorti

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025942439

ISBN 978-1-6680-2747-9

ISBN 978-1-6680-6591-4 (Can exp)

ISBN 978-1-6680-2749-3 (pbk)

ISBN 978-1-6680-2750-9 (ebook)



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# CHAPTER ONE

**G**abriela Rose sipped her champagne and looked around the room at the 156 people who had each paid \$5,000 to participate in a political fundraiser hosted by Eldridge Parker Rollings. Their contributions had gotten them through the elaborate gated entrance, up the short driveway to valet parking, and through the oversized mahogany front door of Rollings's Montecito mansion. Once inside they were treated to bargain basement champagne and vegan appetizers. If they wanted their picture snapped with Barry Burlew, a Ringo Starr look-alike and candidate for the California State Assembly, it would cost them another \$2,000.

Gabriela was here for reasons other than warm champagne. She'd bought her way onto the guest list because it gave her a unique opportunity to get her hands on a sack of shiny baubles that were worth \$13 million, give or take a few cents. This was the first time Gabriela had been in the sprawling Spanish Colonial Revival mansion, but she'd studied photos from a realtor website,

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and floor plans from blueprints her assistant had provided. She had Google Earth photos and drone videos of the grounds. As it turned out, the videos of the grounds would be the most useful.

In ten minutes, the candidate was going to speak to the crowd and thank them for their support. When everyone was focused on the candidate, Gabriela would leave through an open patio door and slip out into the dark yard. Her only obstacle was Rollings. He was currently standing by the double door, exchanging pleasantries with an elderly couple. Rollings's girlfriend du jour was plastered against him, reveling in her girlfriend status, basking in Rollings's wonderfulness.

Rollings and his Russian-born wife, Olga, had bought the house seven years ago, during happier times. Now they were in the final stages of a contentious divorce. Rollings was going to keep the Montecito property, and Olga would get the slope-side Aspen house plus the Bentley and the Malibu beach house. Somehow \$13 million in jewelry had disappeared during all the shouting and finger-pointing that had preceded Olga's final departure in the Bentley. Theft was suggested but never proved.

Rollings submitted an insurance claim and as a result, Gabriela Rose was on the scene, drinking warm champagne, on the clock for the insurer. Insurance Fraud Investigator was printed on her business card, and she had an international reputation for excellence in the field. Most of her jobs had one thing in common. Something needed to be found. And it was a fact that where others had failed, Gabriela was known to succeed.

Gabriela left her secluded corner and pushed through the crowd to join Luis Salazar. He looked bored, standing next to a potted palm

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in the back of the room. He was retired LAPD. Forty-three years old. Slim and fit. Handsome enough to get bit roles when a film needed a Latino extra. He was also available for freelance security jobs. He knew how to keep a secret, and his morals were flexible. Gabriela had used him on previous jobs when she needed a little extra muscle.

Luis nodded at Gabriela when she approached. "You aren't actually drinking that piss water, are you?" he asked, looking at the glass of champagne.

"No. Do you want it?"

"Sure. What the hell." Luis polished off the champagne and set the empty glass in the palm tree's massive midnight-blue ceramic pot. "When's showtime?"

"In five minutes, when everyone's attention turns to the candidate. He's supposed to address the audience from the platform they've placed on the other side of the room. We'll make our move when he starts to talk."

"What about Rollings? He's standing in front of our door."

"He's going to introduce the guest of honor," Gabriela said. "Here we go. He's checking his watch."

"And he's on the move," Luis said, "along with the woman who's surgically attached to his hip."

Rollings stepped onto the stage, the crowd gravitated toward him, and Gabriela and Luis stepped outside, onto the broad, tiled lanai that was lit with vintage gas lanterns. Beyond the lanai was a sloping lawn that quickly disappeared into the dark night. Gabriela knew that a small cottage was sitting in that darkness. It had been the original

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structure on the property and was now simply a picturesque relic. And beyond the relic was a kitchen well that had also been passed over by time.

Gabriela knew that all of Rollings's security was concentrated on the front of the house tonight. They were policing the gated entrance and checking IDs at the front door. No one was watching the cameras in the back of the house. And if they were watching, they would see two lovers stealing away, into the dark, to do whatever. And one of them would be carrying her Louboutin slingbacks and walking barefoot.

"I can't see anything," Luis said. "I can't see you next to me. You're next to me, right?"

"Right," Gabriela said, reaching out and grabbing him by his jacket sleeve.

It was a moonless night. Gabriela was navigating by periodically looking over her shoulder at the brightly lit mansion. She knew if she continued to walk straight ahead, she would come to a hedgerow and then the cottage. Luis also knew about the cottage because this morning he'd talked his way in as part of the gardening crew. He'd left a pair of rubber boots, a length of rope, a pry bar, and two PVC pipes behind the cottage.

"I don't mean to be nosy," Luis said, "but what the hell are we doing? If I didn't know better, I'd think you were bringing me back here to tie me up and have your way with me. Or maybe to kill me."

"Neither of those," Gabriela said. "I need you to help me get the two-hundred-pound capstone off the well and to secure the rope when I rappel down."

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"I assume you have good reason to go into an abandoned well at night?"

"I have a reliable source who, after too many shots of Don Julio, told me that Rollings dumped his wife's jewelry into the well. Rollings told him that Olga got the Bentley and two houses, and he'd go to his grave before she got her hands on her jewelry."

"He didn't trust a safe-deposit box?"

"Not for a second."

"I like it. I'm guessing you aren't going to keep the jewelry," Luis said.

"Tempting, but no."

Gabriela suddenly stopped short but Luis crashed into the shrubbery.

"Shit," he whispered. "What the fuck?"

"Good work, you found the hedgerow," Gabriela said.

They carefully walked past the hedge and around the cottage. The well was in the shadow of the cottage and wasn't visible from the main house, so Gabriela took a penlight out of her Birkin bag and clicked it on. She dropped her shoes and her bag onto the ground and stripped her little black dress off over her head and handed it to Luis. She had black techno tights and a rash guard on under her dress. She unrolled the legs of the tights to just above her knee and stepped into the boots Luis had brought earlier.

"I feel overdressed," Luis said.

"You don't have to go into the well. And you aren't wearing a two-thousand-dollar dress."

"All good things," Luis said.

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They pried the capstone off the well and moved it to the side.

Gabriela flashed the penlight down the shaft. The walls of the well were stone, covered in slime. She judged the width to be three feet and the depth to be thirty to forty feet. It looked like there was water at the bottom. She hoped it wasn't too deep. Her boots only went to midcalf. Luis gripped the rope and Gabriela rappelled down. She splashed into about two inches of water at the bottom and then it was soft muck. No visible snakes. No frogs. Just disgusting muck. She kicked around and felt something solid underfoot. Her heart skipped a beat. She put her hand into the muck and pulled out a plastic ziplock gallon freezer bag filled with jewelry. She continued to slosh around and push through the muck with her hand to make sure there were no more bags.

"What's going on?" Luis called down. "Everything okay?"

"I found it. I'm coming up. Hold tight."

In less than a minute she was out of the well with the bag tucked into her tights.

"What were you in a previous life?" Luis asked. "Marine commando? Where'd you learn to climb like that?"

"I've had some tactical training. Comes in handy."

"No shit."

Gabriela kicked her boots off and took stock of the tights and rash guard. "These are going to have to go," she said. "They're muddy and slimy."

She peeled them off and was left in her La Perla bra and panties.

"I love this job," Luis said, handing her the dress.

She slipped into the dress and took a plastic bag out of her purse.

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She emptied the jewelry into the clean bag, dropped it into her Birkin, and stepped into the boots.

“What about your muddy clothes and the equipment?” Luis asked.

“Leave everything here. And we’ll leave the capstone off. The police will be here in the morning. They can re-cap the well. I’ll shuck the boots when we get closer to the house.”

“Going back will be easier,” Luis said. “We just head for the lights and the noise.”

Gabriela agreed. Nothing in front of them but lawn and party house. She forged ahead in total darkness, carrying her shoes and Birkin bag. The lawn close to the house was perfectly manicured. The lawn further out, closer to the hedgerow, was thick and unruly, going to seed. Luis was walking slightly ahead of Gabriela. She heard his foot connect with something, there was an ungodly shriek, and a creature jumped out of the high grass and attacked Luis.

He was close enough to the house for some ambient light to show him in outline, all flailing arms and a large winged creature hopping on him, beating him with its wings. Gabriela ran to help, and in an instant, the creature turned on her, screaming and attacking, slashing her dress with its talons, pecking at her Birkin.

“Stand back and I’ll shoot it,” Luis said.

“It’s a peacock,” Gabriela said, swatting at the bird, trying to keep it away from the Birkin. “You can’t shoot a peacock.”

“The hell I can’t,” Luis said.

The peacock left Gabriela and returned to Luis, gaining some altitude before it dive-bombed him. Gabriela threw her shoe at it. The bird caught it midair and awkwardly flapped away.

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“What the hell?” Luis said.

“I didn’t see that coming,” Gabriela said, plucking a large feather from her hair. She got the penlight out and looked at the feather.

“Definitely peacock.”

“No way. You’re kidding, right?”

“You must have stumbled onto her nest.”

“This is embarrassing,” Luis said. “I just came out on the losing end with a peacock.”

“It took my shoe!”

“Sorry about the shoe. I hope it was one you didn’t like.”

“It was a Louboutin slingback.”

“I don’t know what that means, but I appreciate the effort you made to save me from death by peacock,” Luis said. “Am I going to get combat pay?”

“No, but I’ll buy you a new suit.”

They skirted the back of the house, entered through the kitchen door, and went straight to the front foyer and valet parking.

“Whoa,” the valet said when Gabriela and Luis stepped forward. “That must be some party in there.”

Their clothes were shredded. Hair was scarecrow. Gabriela was in rubber boots, carrying a single slingback.

“We stepped outside for air, and we were attacked by a peacock,” Gabriela said.

The valet nodded. “Yeah, they’re vicious at this time of the year. They lay their eggs all over the backyard. They’ll peck your eye out. I guess you didn’t get the peacock memo.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Two days later, Gabriela boarded a flight back to New York City. It was ten o'clock at night and she wanted nothing more than to take a long steamy shower and slip her tired body between her thousand-thread-count, professionally ironed sheets. Tomorrow she would get a manicure. She had no plans beyond that. Bliss.

The Uber driver maneuvered his way through the narrow, congested streets of Gabriela's neighborhood. Most shops were closed but restaurants were open and busy. This was SoHo, and the noisy vibe was like a shot of adrenaline to Gabriela. She smiled when the driver parked in front of the building that contained her condo. It was good to be home. She wheeled her carry-on suitcase into the small lobby and took the elevator to the seventh floor. She let herself into her 1,500-square-foot oasis of sanity and stopped dead in her tracks.

"What the hell," she said, her brown eyes narrowed, her Manolo

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Blahnik-clad feet firmly planted on her hand-scraped-and-finished wide-plank floor.

A man was passed out on her white chenille sofa. He had a week-old beard and bedhead hair. He was close to naked, wearing only Tom Ford boxer briefs and a half-eaten slice of pizza on his bare chest. She knew the man on her sofa, and she also recognized the voice that was belting out “Afternoon Delight” in her shower. The moron crooning in the shower was her ex-husband, Rafer Jones. The pizza-wearing idiot on the sofa was his cousin Harley Patch.

Gabriela had only recently moved beyond her contentious divorce to a more civilized relationship with her ex. That didn’t mean she wanted him in her shower. Or her condo. Or her life.

Calm down, she told herself. There’s probably a good explanation for this, so take a moment before you go in there and kick his naked ass out of your bathroom. Let the man get dressed before you threaten to carve him up into little pieces with your chef’s knife.

The singing stopped and Rafer Jones strolled out of Gabriela’s bedroom. He was six feet two inches tall and nicely muscled. His sun-bleached hair was out of control. He was beach-bum tan and had the beginnings of a beard. He was wearing a low-slung towel and a smile.

“Hey, Gabs,” he said. “Welcome home.”

One of the many reasons for the divorce was Rafer’s insistence on calling her Gabs. At the top of the list of reasons was the fact that ever since they’d met in kindergarten, they could never agree on anything.

“What’s the story?” Gabriela asked.

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"I was hoping for a more enthusiastic greeting. Maybe a big hug and kiss."

"Not going to happen," she said. "You broke into my condo."

"I didn't break in. I have a key from last time I stayed here."

Note to self, Gabriela thought. Change your locks.

She cut her eyes to Harley. "Why is he on my couch?"

"Okay, so that's the story. It's kind of complicated." Rafer moved to the small high-tech kitchen and grabbed a bottle of cabernet from the under-the-counter wine cooler. He uncorked it, poured two glasses, and gave one to Gabriela. "Here's the thing, he's in a bit of a pickle."

Gabriela sipped her wine and looked around her condo. The walls were pristine white, and the floor was stained the color of her favorite dark chocolate. The furnishings were clean lined, comfortable, and modern. Two club chairs and the sofa in white chenille. Large flat-screen TV. Rectangular glass-topped dining table with six chairs. A home office in an alcove by a window. One bedroom and one and a half baths. The rugs throughout were antique, hand-knotted Orientals. As far as she could see, nothing had been trashed, and the pizza sauce was confined to Harley's chest.

"The story," Gabriela said.

"Maybe we should sit."

"Maybe you should get dressed first," Gabriela said.

Rafer grinned and looked down at the towel. "Does this bother you?"

"Yes. I don't want you sitting on my furniture in a wet towel."

"I could take the towel off."

"That would be even more objectionable. And I'd appreciate it

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if you'd get Harley off my couch, or at least remove the pizza and throw a blanket over him.”

Rafer walked over to Harley and pried the piece of pizza off his chest. “Hey, Harley!” Rafer yelled. “Get up.”

Harley opened his eyes. “Yuh?”

“Gabs is home.”

Harley propped himself up on an elbow and looked over at Gabriela. “Hey, Gabs, how’s it going?”

Ten minutes later, Gabriela, Rafer, and Harley were seated at the dining table with the bottle of wine, a jar of peanut butter, and a box of Ritz crackers.

“This is great,” Harley said, scooping peanut butter out of the jar with his knife. “This is like high school when we’d sit on the dock in the dark and eat peanut butter and crackers and get high.”

Rafer and Gabriela grew up in Scoon, South Carolina. It was a small, blue-collar, coastal town that relied on fishing to stay alive. Harley grew up in a gated golf course community in Charlotte, but he spent his summers in Scoon with Rafer, working on the charter boats.

“This isn’t Scoon,” Gabriela said.

“But the peanut butter is the same,” Harley said, smiling.

Gabriela checked out the jar. It had been full when she left two weeks ago, and now it was almost empty.

“How long have you been here?” she asked Rafer.

“Ten days,” Rafer said. “That’s the second jar of peanut butter.”

“We’re hiding out,” Harley said. “I’m sort of in trouble, and we were hoping you could help.”

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Gabriela slid a glance at Rafer. "You could have called."

"This isn't something you would want to discuss on the phone," Rafer said. "Harley isn't *sort of* in trouble. Harley's in *big* trouble. Harley's in trouble up to his eyeballs."

Gabriela couldn't imagine Harley Patch in big trouble. Harley was Mr. Nice Guy. He was Mr. Blue Skies. Okay, so he could be a bit of a doofus sometimes. But he was a likable doofus. He'd graduated from college, gotten a master's in finance, and landed an entry-level job in a large investment firm. Gabriela lost touch with him after her divorce was finalized and she moved to New York. And now here he was at her dining room table, eating peanut butter and crackers in his underwear.

"I know I'm going to regret asking," Gabriela said, "but tell me about the trouble."

"It all started when I took the job at the bank," Harley said.

Gabriela made herself a Ritz-and-peanut-butter sandwich. "I thought you were working for an investment firm."

"That didn't work out," Harley said. "There was a misunderstanding about the CEO's wife."

Rafer rocked back in his chair and grinned. "Harley slept with her. A lot."

"I met her in a bar," Harley said. "I didn't know she was the CEO's wife in the beginning. She was so much younger than him. I didn't put it together. Anyway, while I was looking for a new job, I ran into a guy I knew from grad school. He said his father was on the board of directors for a bank and he might be able to help me."

"Ever hear of Searl and Junkett?" Rafer asked.

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Gabriela nodded. “It’s a pretty big bank but very under the radar. Privately owned. Caters to the worldwide elite. Located in Manhattan.” She looked over at Harley. “You had a position with Searl and Junkett?”

“I interviewed and they really liked me,” Harley said. “They told me I had potential and a refreshing attitude.”

“And?”

“And I got the job. It didn’t pay much but it had a great title. I was vice president of antiquity acquisitions.”

“That’s a strange job title for someone working at a bank,” Gabriela said.

“It was a new department, and the title was a little misleading. It wasn’t about acquiring antiquities. It was about insuring antiquities. The board felt like insuring antiquities was a safe investment of the bank’s money. In the beginning I didn’t have a lot to do. The bank didn’t have a lot of antiquity insurance policies. I was mostly playing pickleball and reviewing a handful of small accounts. At the end of my first year, the bank president walked out of the building on his way to lunch and took two bullets to the head.”

“He was killed?” she asked.

“Totally,” Harley said. “They were in a panic to replace him, and I was chosen to be interim bank president. Everyone else inside the company had actual work to do, but I was just playing pickleball. Even after I was made president, I was mostly playing pickleball. There was a corporate court in the basement of the building.”

“Okay, back up a little,” Gabriela said. “Who shot the bank president? Why was he gunned down?”

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“No one knows,” Harley said. “It was a guy dressed in black, with a black hoodie, wearing one of those rubber Halloween face masks.”

“It was a Chucky mask,” Rafer said. “Classic choice for a close-range assassination.”

“Weren’t there any persons of interest?” Gabriela asked. “Rumors? Office gossip?”

“No persons of interest that I know about,” Harley said. “Lots of gossip. He was in the middle of an ugly divorce, and some people thought the board wasn’t happy with him, but I thought he was okay. I played pickleball with him a couple times.”

“Get to the good part,” Rafer said to Harley.

Harley grinned. “As acting president, I had a lot of business lunches and social engagements representing the bank. It was like all my life I was preparing for that job. I’m a people person. Everyone likes me. I can do lunch and social engagements better than anyone on the planet. And look at me. I’m cute. I’ve always been cute.”

This was true, Gabriela thought. He was boyishly cute. He had dark blond hair and freckles. Adorable nose. Pleasant smiley mouth and perfect white teeth. He was shorter than Rafer. She was guessing around five feet ten inches. His body was okay but soft compared to Rafer’s, and their attitudes had always been different. Rafer was kick-ass, and Harley was kiss-ass.

“Next thing you know, the board voted me in as permanent bank president because I turned out to be a good negotiator,” Harley said. “I was a freaking success.”

“Harley’s a schmoozer,” Rafer said. “And a moron.”

“He’s right,” Harley said. “I’m a moron. I got talked into insuring

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some stuff I should never have even considered. It was all because as bank president I was still in charge of the stupid antiquities insurance department. I knew we didn't have the money to back up all of the policies we were acquiring but a couple of the board members were insistent. They said it gave us unequaled prestige. And they were right about that. Besides, the premiums were excellent, and the risk of theft or damage seemed small to none. I mean, what were the chances of someone stealing a sarcophagus?"

Gabriela leaned forward. "Excuse me? A sarcophagus?"

"King Tut's brother's," Rafer said. "Actually, it wasn't the sarcophagus. It was the inner coffin."

"Omigod," Gabriela said. "You aren't serious."

"Give her the list," Rafer said to Harley.

Harley slid a folder over to Gabriela. "This is embarrassing. I can't believe I let myself get talked into this mess."

"A couple Van Goghs from the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, valued at five hundred million dollars," Gabriela read out loud. "The Rosetta Stone from the British Museum, valued at seven hundred fifty million dollars." She looked up at Harley. "You insured the Rosetta Stone?"

Harley nodded. "Yup."

Gabriela continued reading. "You also insured the coffin for four hundred seventy-five million dollars."

"It sounds better if you refer to it as a sarcophagus," Harley said. "They're almost the same thing and sometimes the words are interchangeable. When we were writing up the policy, we thought a four-hundred-seventy-five-million-dollar coffin sounded too expensive. I mean, you can get a top-of-the-line casket at Costco for a couple

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grand. So, we wrote it up as a sarcophagus. Costco doesn't sell any of those."

"I don't care what you call it, it's a lot of money to spend on a mummy," Rafer said. "Was the mummy included?"

"No, the mummy wasn't insured. At least not under our policy. And honestly, the sarcophagus might have been overinsured a little, but the guys on the board didn't seem to care. It was solid gold. The Egyptians were big on gold. They mined it along the Nile and in the eastern desert," Harley said.

"And now it's missing," Gabriela said.

Harley nodded. "It's missing. Almost everything I insured is missing."

Gabriela scanned two more pages of missing art and artifacts. "Unbelievable. It's a joke, right? I'm getting punked?" She looked at Harley. "How did you even manage to insure so many things in such a short period of time?"

"I had an assistant," Harley said.

Rafer nodded affirmation and smiled at Gabriela. "He slept with her too."

"And the board of directors helped," Harley said. "I didn't sleep with any of them."

Everyone clinked their wineglass in a toast to Harley's restraint.

"I read through the folder," Rafer said. "It includes detailed information about the items and timeline descriptions of the thefts. They all occurred last month."

"This is huge if it's true," Gabriela said. "Why haven't I heard anything about any of this?"

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“So far, the museums have hidden the losses from the public,” Harley said. “The museums wanted to keep a lid on it while investigators are working to solve the crimes. Some of the museums have substituted replicas for some of the stuff, like the Rosetta Stone and the sarcophagus. If any of this leaked out, it wouldn’t be good for the museums. No one’s going to rush to the British Museum to see a fake Rosetta Stone. And it would be even more of a disaster for the bank. Total value for the losses is close to twelve billion dollars. The bank has only about five billion dollars in cash to cover the claims. If someone leaks that the bank is in financial trouble of this magnitude, there could be a run on the bank. The federal regulators would intervene, and it would be a massive scandal.”

“And on a personal level, massive misery for Harley, who isn’t looking good,” Rafer said. “He has no paper trail of being directed to make the bad investments. It’s only his word against the board of directors’. And the board consists of a very powerful group of men with serious political connections. Unless the missing crap is recovered soon, someone is going to jail, and Harley is set up perfectly to take the hit.”

“This isn’t just some ridiculous scheme to get me to go traipsing all around the world with you, is it?” Gabriela asked Rafer.

“Sweetheart, if I wanted to traipse with someone, it wouldn’t be you. I’m in this for Harley. We’re here because you find things. You’re good at it. And we need you to find the stolen pieces.”

“Boy, this is just like old times,” Harley said. “For as long as I can remember, you two fought like cats and dogs. Then next thing you’d be all lovey-dovey.”

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“Lovey-dovey is no longer part of our relationship,” Gabriela said. “Lovey-dovey was negated in the divorce agreement.”

Rafer leaned toward Harley. “Secretly, she still has the hots for me.”

It was true, Gabriela thought. She still was attracted to him. And she’d fight the attraction to her death . . . or his. She pushed her chair back and stood. “I need to unpack and get some sleep. We can take this up again in the morning. As you’ve probably already discovered, there are extra blankets in the linen closet in the hall.”

Gabriela thought it was unlikely that Harley would go to jail for making bad banking decisions. He might be prohibited from pursuing another finance-related job. And if the bank failed and its investors lost money beyond what was FDIC insured, she imagined his life could get very unpleasant. Harley could suck it up and live through all this. What nagged at her was the killing of the former bank president and the fact that some of the board members coerced Harley into taking foolish risks. These two things were red flags that she couldn’t ignore.



## CHAPTER THREE

Harley and Rafer were still sleeping when Gabriela came out of her bedroom. Harley was on the couch and Rafer was sprawled on the living room rug. They were two of her oldest friends and she felt a twinge of guilt that she couldn't have made them more comfortable. The guilt was quickly replaced by annoyance that they were in her condo and they were disrupting her life. She walked past them to her kitchen, slipped a mug under the spout of her built-in gourmet coffee maker, and pressed the go button.

Harley and Rafer woke up even before the mug was full, dragged out of sleep by the smell of coffee.

"Oh man," Rafer said, "there's only one smell I like better than the smell of coffee in the morning."

"Does it have to do with sex?" Harley asked.

"It has to do with food," Gabriela said. "Unless Rafer has changed, it's bacon."

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Rafer got to his feet and stretched. "I don't suppose bacon is on the morning menu?"

"Nothing is on the morning menu," Gabriela said. "I need to check in with Marcella, and I'll grab a wake-up smoothie on my way to the office."

"Who's Marcella?" Harley asked.

"Marcella is Gab's office manager," Rafer said. "She's awesome."

"You've been here for ten days. Why aren't you at work?" Gabriela asked, looking over at Harley.

"I was put on administrative leave," Harley said. "I wasn't too worried at first, but then I started getting questioned by lawyers and some private security people. And one of my friends at the bank told me I was getting set up to take a bullet, figuratively and maybe literally, like the bank president I replaced."

"Was your friend serious? Was this based on reliable information?"

"Yeah. He's an IT guy. He said he sent me an email, but I never got it, so he called to warn me. So, I panicked and decided I needed to hide out somewhere, and I thought of Rafer. No one would think to look for me on St. Vincent, right? And I could do some diving. Have you seen Rafer's dive shop?" Harley asked Gabriela. "It's the best. He's like a big deal on the island."

"Unfortunately, Harley didn't take any steps to hide his travel plans, and a private investigator tracked him to the island," Rafer said. "When Harley declined the offer to return with the PI on his private plane, the guy pulled a gun on him. We figured the plan

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might have been to pitch Harley out of the plane somewhere short of Miami.”

“What happened to the PI?”

“Harley projectile vomited on him at the sight of the gun. The guy was so revolted that he dropped his guard, and Harley was able to scramble away.”

“It happened behind the dive shop,” Harley said. “Rafer has a little area back there with tables and chairs. I was having lunch when the guy approached me. After the gun and the vomit, I don’t remember much except that I ran until I couldn’t run anymore. I hid behind someone’s garage and called Rafer.”

“Seemed like it was time that we got serious and asked for help,” Rafer said. “So here we are.”

Gabriela handed the coffee over to Rafer and made another cup for herself. “I did some research last night before I fell asleep. The Rosetta Stone is in the British Museum. It’s protected by the latest and greatest security, and it’s encased in impact glass. Plus, it’s an awkwardly shaped chunk of black granite that weighs three-quarters of a ton. And you’re telling me someone snatched it.”

Rafer sipped his coffee. “Yep.”

“And you want me to find it.”

“Yep.”

Gabriela thought this had potential. Finding lost things was a business and it paid very well, but there were times when it was also a passion. And this might fall into the passion slot. After all, it wasn’t every day a girl got the opportunity to find the Rosetta Stone.

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And she supposed it could be considered a good deed to save Harley Patch.

“I’ll tackle the Rosetta Stone first,” Gabriela said to Rafer. “You and Harley can stay here. Don’t go out any more than is necessary.”

“No way,” Rafer said. “We’re in this together. You’re going to need help.”

“Yeah, suppose you find the stone and you have to move it?” Harley said. “You can’t pick up a Rosetta Stone all by yourself.”

“No, but I can drive a forklift,” Gabriela said. “I don’t need help. I work alone. End of story.”

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Gabriela shoved her MacBook Air into her Prada tote and zipped the bag shut. In minutes she would be landing at Heathrow, and she would set off on a mission to find the Rosetta Stone. All because her ex-husband and his nice but naive cousin said it was missing. And if that wasn’t disturbing enough, they were sitting two rows behind her.

She’d rearranged work commitments with Marcella. She’d squeezed in a manicure, and she’d googled a virtual tour of the British Museum, even though she’d been there several times. She’d managed to get a seat on a nine thirty flight out of JFK. It was now ten in the morning British Summer Time, and if it weren’t for the two millstones traveling with her, she’d be looking forward to spending time in one of her favorite cities.

Two hours later, the black cab dropped Gabriela, Harley, and Rafer off at the Soho Hotel on Richmond Mews. It was Gabriela’s

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London hotel of choice. She liked the location, the colorful art and fabric, the eclectic bar and restaurant, and the ten-foot Botero cat in the lobby. Gabriela thought the entire hotel was an explosion of positive karma. She also thought that the carefully created karma would be put to the test with her and Rafer in residence.

She crossed the small lobby, checked in at the reception desk, and got their room keys.

“I want to freshen up and then I want to take a look at the British Museum,” Gabriela said to Rafer and Harley. “I’ll be at the front door in thirty minutes if anyone wants to walk over with me.”

• • • •

Gabriela took a fast shower and changed into navy straight-legged pants, a white cotton T-shirt, Allbirds flats, and a tan lightweight Alice + Olivia boyfriend blazer. She pulled her dark brown hair into a knot at the nape of her neck and tucked her cell phone, her wallet, her passport, and her Charlotte Tilbury lipstick into a small Fendi cross-body bag.

She left her room, took the elevator to the lobby, and spotted Rafer and Harley standing by the front door. They were still in the jeans, running shoes, and untucked collared knit shirts that they’d worn on the plane. Harley’s shirt looked brand-new and had a Polo emblem on it. Rafer’s shirt was faded to an unrecognizable color, and had a New Zealand All Blacks rugby team patch on the sleeve and a small, ragged hole above the hem.

“I can’t believe you’re still wearing that shirt,” Gabriela said to Rafer.

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“I like this shirt,” Rafer said. “It’s my favorite. What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s got a hole in it, for starters.”

Rafer looked down at the hem. “Yeah, that’s where Rufus got me. He’s my neighbor’s terrier. He’s a nipper. Anyway, look at you. You look like my aunt Ruthie.”

Gabriela knew Aunt Ruthie. She was ninety-three years old, she had a lot of chin hair, and she wore her long-dead husband’s clothes. Not a good look.

“I don’t look like your aunt Ruthie. This is business casual,” Gabriela said.

“And what’s with the hair? *Who are you?*”

“I’m an insurance investigator,” Gabriela said. “I have a professional relationship with this museum. I would ordinarily be in a skirt and heels, but I wasn’t sure how much walking I would be doing today, so I dressed down.”

“I think she looks nice,” Harley said. “I saw a picture of Princess Kate, and she was wearing her hair like that.”

Rafer opened the door for Gabriela. “Well hell, I didn’t realize it was a princess hairdo. After you, Princess Gabs,” he said with a sweep of his hand and a full-on smile. “Lead the way. Are we walking or riding?”

“Walking,” Gabriela said, stepping out into the sunshine. There were days when she wondered if she did the right thing by divorcing Rafer. And then there were days like today when she was grateful that she got out of the marriage before she lost control and sucker punched him in the throat.

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“Did you get a chance to read the file on the thefts?” Rafer asked her.

Gabriela turned toward Dean Street. “Yes. I found the timeline interesting. The major pieces were all stolen in a four-week period.”

“I noticed that too,” Rafer said. “Hard to believe it’s just a coincidence.”

Streets in this area were narrow and lined with skinny four- and five-story brick buildings. Shops and restaurants on the sidewalk level and residences above. Gabriela took Carlisle Street to Soho Square Gardens. She crossed the park and in minutes she was on a street with wide sidewalks and red double-decker buses.

“So, what do you think?” Rafer asked Gabriela. “Do you think there’s one person masterminding all these thefts? Some evil genius antiquities collector?”

“It could be one person with many resources, or it could be an organization with dedicated followers. This wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment operation. These thefts took planning and expertise, and they were executed by people who were willing to take a risk.”

Gabriela turned onto Bloomsbury Street, and in two blocks she turned onto Great Russell Street. One side of the street was lined with redbrick town houses dating back to the 1800s. Five or six stories and an attic. White-trimmed windows stacked one on top of another and separated by white columns. Shops and businesses sprinkled throughout on the ground floor. The British Museum was on the other side of Great Russell. The sidewalk was wide and tree lined. The museum was behind a high black wrought iron fence with an iron gate that was open for visitors.

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Gabriela, Rafer, and Harley walked through the gate and into the courtyard that led to the main entrance. Gabriela had been to the museum many times and she loved its collections, but she didn't think the Greek Revival entrance with its forty-three columns was as impressive as the Met Museum in New York. The Met beat out the Brits in stairs alone.

They passed through security, entered the Great Court, and made a left turn into Room 4 and the Egyptian sculpture gallery. The Rosetta Stone display was dead ahead.

"So, this is it," Rafer said, staring at the glass case that contained the stone replica. "The scene of the crime."

"Do you know anything about the Rosetta Stone?" Gabriela asked Rafer.

"No. I slept through that part of my education," Rafer said.

"The Rosetta Stone is a granodiorite stele," Gabriela said. "That's a fancy way of saying it's a tablet of black granite. This isn't the whole stele. As you can see, the top part of the stone is broken off at an angle. The piece of the stone that the museum owns is inscribed with a decree that was passed by a council of priests and issued in Memphis, Egypt, in 196 BCE. The decree was written in hieroglyphic, demotic, and Greek, making it possible for a wide variety of people to read it. This is one of many steles that were distributed throughout the region. There are twenty-eight known copies of this particular stele. Twenty-one of them remain in Egypt."

"Okay, then what's the big deal with the Rosetta Stone?" Rafer asked. "It's not like it's the only one."

"Hieroglyphic writing died out in Egypt in the fourth century CE,

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and the knowledge of how to read hieroglyphics was lost until soldiers in Napoleon's army discovered the Rosetta Stone in 1799. They were digging the foundations of a fort near the town of Rashid, which the French called Rosetta, and they found this chunk of stone. When Napoleon lost the war, the stone became the property of the British government. In the early nineteenth century, scholars realized they could use the Greek part of the stone as the key to deciphering the hieroglyphics."

"And that makes it worth seven hundred fifty million dollars?"

"The importance to Egyptology was immense," Gabriela said. "It's a priceless piece of history."

"And now it's in someone's basement," Rafer said. "This glass box looks pretty secure. And it looks to me like there are cameras and motion sensors everywhere."

"The bank sent a bunch of experts to snoop around and certify that the museum had really substituted a fake to temporarily take the place of the real stone. There's a sign displayed somewhere explaining that the real stone is being restored," Harley said. "It wasn't difficult to prove it's a fake. It weighs a fraction of the real stone."

"While they were snooping, did they figure out how the stone got out of its glass box?" Rafer asked.

Harley shook his head. "No. The sensors didn't go off and the cameras didn't catch anything. The glass is high impact, and the temperature and humidity inside the glass is strictly controlled. Every possible precaution had been taken to protect the stone."

"This had to be an inside job," Rafer said.

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“Possibly,” Gabriela said, looking at the museum map that she’d picked up when they entered. “Maybe.”

She was standing ten feet from the case, scanning the room, picking out cameras and exits. She was cataloging museum employees who were in the area. And she was wondering how this could have happened. If she wanted to steal the Rosetta Stone, how would she go about it? She would need help. A computer expert to disable the security. Easier to do in the movies than in real life. Then she would need at least one other person to assist in removing the stone from the case and getting it out of the building. It would help if the assistant knew how to do this. And what about the night guards? There was no mention in any of the reports that they’d been injured or incapacitated. Hard to believe.

Gabriela checked her watch. “I’m meeting someone in a couple minutes. He’s one of the curators here. I worked with him on a case last year. Nothing as big as what we have in front of us, but I was able to locate their missing object. I thought it would be interesting to get his take on this.”

“You have friends in high places,” Rafer said.

“In this case it’s more of an acquaintance who occupies a medium-to-high place,” Gabriela said. “I’m meeting him for lunch, so you guys are on your own for the afternoon. Marcella made reservations for dinner at the hotel restaurant. Seven o’clock. I’ll meet you there.”