



An extract from *The Salt Road* by Jane Johnson

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The Salt Road

by

Jane Johnson

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I

When I was a child, I had a wigwam in our back garden: a circle of thin yellow cotton draped over a bamboo pole and pegged to the lawn. Every time my parents argued, that was where I went. I would lie on my stomach with my fingers in my ears and stare so hard at the red animals printed on its bright decorative border that after a while they began to dance and run, until I wasn't in the garden any more but out on the plains, wearing a fringed deerskin tunic and feathers in my hair, just like the braves in the films I watched every Saturday morning in the cinema down the road.

Even at an early age I found it preferable to be outside in my little tent rather than inside the house. The tent was my space. It was as large as my imagination, which was infinite. But the house, for all its grandeur and Georgian spaciousness, felt small and suffocating. It was stuffed with *things*, as well as with my mother and father's bitterness. They were both archaeologists, my parents: lovers of the past, they had surrounded themselves with boxes of yellowed papers, ancient artefacts, dusty objects; the fragile, friable husks of lost civilizations. I never understood why they decided to have me: even the quietest baby, the most house-trained toddler, the most studious child, would have disrupted the artificial, museum-like calm they had wrapped around themselves. In that house they lived separated from the rest of the world, in a bubble in which dust motes floated silently like the fake snow in a snow-globe. I was not the child to complement such a life, being a wild little creature, loud and messy and unbid-dable. I liked to play rough games with the boys instead of engaging in the sedate, codified exchanges of the other girls. I had dolls, but more often than not I beheaded or scalped them, or buried them in the garden and forgot where they were. I had no interest in making fashionable outfits for the oddly attenuated pink plastic mannequins with their insectile torsos and brassy hair that the other girls so

worshipped and adorned. I had little interest even in my own clothes: I preferred making mud missiles and catapults and chasing my playmates till my sides hurt from a combination of laughing and stitches, building hides and running around half naked, even in the winter.

‘You little savage!’ my mother would admonish, accompanying the words with a sharp smack on the backside. ‘For God’s sake put some clothes on, Isabelle.’ She would say this with all the severity her clipped French accent could deliver, as if she thought she could imprint civilized behaviour on me by the use of the full version of my old-fashioned name. But it never really worked.

My friends called me Izzy: it fitted the chaos of me, always buzzing, always noisy – such a trial.

In the garden behind our house my friends and I played at being cowboys and Indians, Zulus, King Arthur and Robin Hood, armed with swords and spears in the form of bamboo canes robbed from the vegetable patch, and make-believe bows and arrows. When it came to the Robin Hood game I always insisted on playing a merry man, or even the Sheriff of Nottingham – anything other than Maid Marian. In all the versions of the legend I’d come across Maid Marian didn’t do very much except get imprisoned and/or rescued, which didn’t greatly appeal to me. I had no interest in being the swooning prisoner: I wanted to wrestle and hit people with sticks, like the rough little tomboy I was. This was in the late sixties and early seventies: girlpower hadn’t yet turned Maid Marian, Guinevere, Arwen or any of the other complaisant heroines of legend into feisty, all-action go-getters. Besides, in comparison with the pale, pretty girls who were my friends, I was too ugly to play the heroine. I didn’t care: I liked being ugly. I had thick, black hair and dirty skin and earth under my nails and calluses on my feet, and that was how I preferred it. How I howled when my mother made me take a bath, when she attacked me with Wright’s coal tar soap, or tried to untangle my hair. If guests were staying at the house, as they occasionally did, she had to warn them, ‘Take no notice of the screaming: it’s only Isabelle. She hates having her hair washed.’

You’d never have recognized me three decades later.

The day I went to the solicitor’s office to take charge of the letter

my father had left me in his will I wore a classic Armani trouser suit and Prada heels. My unruly hair was cut and straightened into a neat shoulder-length bob; my make-up was discreet and expertly applied. The dirt under my nails had been replaced with a practical square-cut French manicure. Ironic, really: I now presented myself in a manner of which my mother would have thoroughly approved, had she still been alive. It was hard even for me, who had travelled every step of the long path between the grubby little hooligan I had once been and the carefully turned-out businesswoman I had become, to reconcile the two.

The letter he left for me was short and cryptic, which was apposite: my father was a short and cryptic sort of man. It said:

My dear Isabelle

I know I have been a great disappointment to you, as a father and as a man. I do not ask for forgiveness, or even understanding. What I did was wrong: I knew it then, and I know it now. One bad decision leads to another and another and another; a chain of events leading to catastrophe. There is a story behind this catastrophe to be told, but I am not the one to tell it. It is something you need to piece together for yourself, for it belongs to you and I do not want to reinterpret it for you, or to spoil it as I have spoiled everything else. So I am leaving you the house: and something else besides. In the attic you will find a box with your name on it. Inside that box are what you might call 'waymarkers' for your life. I know you have always felt at odds with the world in which you found yourself, and I must take at least half of the blame for that; but perhaps by now you have come to terms with it. If that is indeed the case, forget this letter. Do not open the box. Sell the house and everything in it. Let sleeping beasts lie.

Go in peace, Isabelle, and with my love. For the little it is worth.

Anthony Treslove-Fawcett

I read this in the lawyer's office in Holborn, a brisk ten-minute walk away from the office where I worked as a highly paid tax accountant, with the solicitor and his clerk watching on curiously. Also in the envelope, a set of house keys on a battered leather fob.

‘All well?’ the solicitor asked brightly. A strange question to ask someone whose father has just died; though maybe he was not to know that I had not seen that father in the best part of thirty years; not in person, at least.

I was shaking so much I could hardly speak. ‘Yes, thank you,’ I replied, stowing the letter and keys clumsily into my handbag. Summoning every ounce of resolve, I gave him a smile so bright it would have dazzled blind Justice herself.

The senior partner tried not to show his disappointment at my failure to disclose the contents. Then he passed me a folder of papers and started to talk very fast.

All I wanted was to be outside now. I needed sunlight on me; I needed outdoor space. I could feel the walls of the office – its stacked shelves and massive filing cabinets – closing in on me. The words ‘probate’ and ‘frozen accounts’ and ‘legal process’ came at me thick and fast, a maddening buzz of flies in the back of my skull. While he was still in mid-sentence, I wrenched open the door, stepped out into the corridor and fled down the stairs.

When my father left us, I was fourteen. I had not cried, not one tear. I had mixed feelings about his absence: I hated him for walking out, despised him for running away and abandoning us; but from time to time I suffered flashes of mourning for the father he had occasionally shown himself to be and also felt a considerable relief that he was not there any more. It made life easier, if colder and poorer. My mother did not show the distress his disappearance must have caused her. She was not a demonstrative woman, my mother, and I didn’t understand her: she remained a mystery to me throughout my life. My father, with his volcanic temper and choleric disposition, seemed more like me; but my mother was a perfect Ice Queen, chilly and polite, interested only in the outward face one turned to the world. When it came to child-rearing she made it her business to monitor my progress at school, my appearance, my manners. She found emotional display vulgar, and I must have been a terrible disappointment to her with my exuberance and rages. She treated me with a sort of cool impatience, a repressed

exasperation, forever repeating her corrections and strictures as if I were an espaliered pear tree that constantly needed lopping in order to make it grow along the correct lines. For most of my life I thought all mothers were like this.

But one day when I returned from school there was something different in the atmosphere of the house, something charged and threatening, as if an electric storm was lurking inside. I found my mother sitting in the half-dark with the curtains drawn. 'Are you OK?' I asked, scared suddenly by the idea of losing a second parent.

I pulled the curtains back and the harsh late-afternoon sunlight obliterated her features, making her face a flat white Kabuki mask, turning her into a foreign, disturbing presence. For a moment this faceless woman sat staring at me as if I were a stranger. Then at last she said, 'Everything was wonderful between us until you came along. I knew you would ruin everything from the first moment I held you in my hands.' She paused. 'Sometimes you just know these things. I told him that I never wanted children; but he was so determined.' She fixed me with her dark eyes and I was appalled by the quiet malevolence I glimpsed there.

Long moments passed and I felt my heart beating wildly. Then she smiled at me and started to talk about the rhododendrons in the garden.

The next day she was just the same as usual. She clicked her tongue over the state of my uniform (I had fallen asleep in it and it was crumpled and ruined) and tried to make me take it off so that she could iron it, but I was out of the door quickly. From that day on I lived as if I were walking across the surface of a frozen lake, terrified that the fragile, apparent surface might at any moment give way, plunging me into the roiling darkness I had glimpsed beneath. Of course, no one else knew about our strange and strained relationship: who was there to tell, and what was there to say? Abandoned by one parent, afraid of another sudden glimpse of the terrifying void inside the other, I realized I was on my own; and so as the years rolled on I devoted myself to being self-sufficient, not just in terms of financial means but in all the ways that matter, sealing myself off from need and desire and pain, making a bubble around myself that no one could penetrate.

But that evening at my kitchen table when I reread the letter I knew that bubble was about to be shattered.

Forget this letter. Do not open the box. Sell the house and everything in it. Let sleeping beasts lie . . .

Was there ever a farewell letter so guaranteed to torment? Whatever did he mean by ‘sleeping beasts’? The phrase plagued me. It also filled me with a mysterious, deep-seated excitement. My life had been so settled, so dull, for so long: but I sensed that something was about to change.

At the gym the next morning I determinedly ran and stepped and skied and pulled weights for an hour. I showered, dressed in Chanel and arrived at my office at precisely ten minutes before nine, as I did every working day. There, I switched on the computer, examined my calendar and made a list of the day’s tasks, allotting times and precedence to each of them.

I had sought security in all aspects of my life, and as Benjamin Franklin’s old saw goes, there is nothing sure in life but death and taxes. Not much fancying the trade of an undertaker, I had opted for the latter. As a corporate tax accountant my working life ran in a smooth routine from day to day. Most nights I’d leave the office at half past six, catch the tube and train home, put together a simple meal and read a book, watch the news on television and go to bed, alone, before eleven. Occasionally, I’d go into town and meet a friend; or a stranger. Sometimes I went to the indoor wall at the Westway or the Castle and climbed like a demon: my one concession to the lost Izzy trapped within. And that was my life.

I kept no ties to the girl I had been. Except for Eve.

I had known Eve since I was thirteen and she had moved into the area with her father. Eve was everything I was not: pretty, funny and more sophisticated than the rest of us, who were busy with trying to stick safety pins in our ears and join, rather belatedly, the punk revolution. Eve wore authentic Westwood bondage trousers and ripped T-shirts tied artfully at the waist; with all this and her dandelion-blond hair she looked like Debbie Harry. Everyone loved Eve, but for some reason it was me she chose as her friend, and it

was Eve I turned to that first Saturday morning after taking receipt of my father's bombshell of a letter.

'Come over,' I said. 'I need some moral support.'

At the other end of the phone, her laugh rang out. 'You hardly need me for that! Give me half an hour, I'll be over for some immoral support. Much more fun.'

She'd come to the funeral with me, and cried till her eyes were red, while I remained stone-faced throughout. Everyone who didn't know me had thought she was Anthony's daughter. 'He was nice, your dad,' she said now, turning her coffee cup around in her hands. 'Remember when Tim Fleming broke my heart?'

Tim Fleming had been seventeen to our thirteen, louche, long-haired and leather-jacketed. Going out with him was just asking for trouble, which was exactly what Eve wanted, and got. I grinned. 'Who could forget?'

'Your father gave me that look of his – you know' – she put her head on one side and fixed me with a beady eye; it was an absurd exaggeration of his most quizzical expression but strangely accurate – 'and said: "Pretty girl like you, you're wasted on a git like that." It was so funny, a word like that being said in that incredibly posh accent of his: I just burst out laughing. And that's what I told him myself when I saw him next, remember? "I'm wasted on a git like you!"'

I remembered Eve striding up to Tim Fleming outside the kebab shop, where he was mooching around that Saturday lunchtime with the rest of his friends, and shouting the words out, her blonde hair flying like a banner. She'd seemed so bright and defiant, and I was so proud of her. Hers was not the image of my father I most often remembered, though.

She read my father's letter, frowning in concentration, then read it again. 'Weird,' she said at last and handed it back to me. 'A box in an attic, eh? Do you think your mother's corpse is in it, mouldering away? Perhaps she never died in France at all.' She made a Gothic face at me. The eyeliner beneath her left eye had smudged. I itched to reach over and wipe it away, not out of any lesbian urge but purely for the sake of tidiness.

'Oh, she went back to France, all right.'

As soon as I left to go to university, as if abnegated of all responsibility for me, my mother had sold her share of the house back to my father for some astronomical sum (I had not realized they were even in contact) and gone back to France. I visited her there twice before she died; and each time she was as distant and polite as a passing acquaintance. Each time I sensed dark shadows gliding beneath the composed exterior, and knew that if those shadows were to surface they would emerge with monstrous teeth and the power to destroy. It was probably a relief to both of us that I decided not to visit again.

Eve put a consoling hand on my arm. ‘How are you feeling about it all?’

‘I don’t know.’ It was true.

‘Oh, come on, Iz. It’s me: emotional trainwreck Eve. You don’t have to stay buttoned-up with me.’

‘To be honest, it was a bit of a shock to hear he was dead. The last time I saw him on TV he looked fine. But the money from selling the house will come in handy.’

For a moment she looked appalled. Then she gave me the bright, forced smile you might give a three-year-old that’s just inadvertently (or not) stamped on a frog. ‘You’re probably still feeling a bit numb, from the shock of it all. Some people grasp the enormity of a death at once; it just takes longer with others. The grief will kick in later.’

‘Honestly, Eve, I don’t think so. He walked out of my life when I was fourteen. This wretched letter is the first time he’s been in contact since. How are you supposed to feel about a father who did that to you? No matter how rich he is.’

My father might have ended up as a rich man, but he hadn’t started out that way. Archaeology isn’t an occupation known for making fortunes. He had a genuine passion for the ancient past, having spurned the modern world as a thoroughly bad lot, which was not an entirely surprising attitude for a young man coming of age immediately after the Second World War, with all the horrors and inhumanities that liberation had revealed. When he met my mother on a dig in Egypt in the fifties he barely had the price of a meal. She, however, came of aristocratic French stock, with a smart

house in the first Paris *arrondissement* and a small chateau in the Lot. They travelled together all over the world, from one ancient site to another. They visited the excavated ziggurat at Dur Untash and joined for a while Kelso's dig at Bethel. They saw the Neolithic plastered skulls unearthed at Jericho and marvelled over the rose-red city at Petra. They saw Imhotep's stepped pyramid and the city of the dead at Saqqara, spent time walking amid the Roman ruins of Volubilis and visiting the ancient capital of the Hoggar at Abalessa. They were, as they loved to tell me, academic nomads, always on the trail of knowledge. And then I came along and put a stop to their joyous quests.

My father got work as a researcher just as the new medium of television was taking off; soon every family in Britain was basing its evening life around its television set. Not long after, he got a lucky break and ended up presenting an hour-long segment when the regular presenter fell ill. He was good at it; he was an immediate hit with the public, with his slightly old-fashioned academic air. He was handsome without being overly distracting, a man whom women enjoyed watching and men would listen to, and infectiously enthusiastic about his favourite subjects. He was the David Attenborough of archaeology: he made history entertaining, and the British have always loved history – they lay claim to so much of it. On the screen he radiated bonhomie and a generous delight in sharing his passion. I remember him on one programme horrifying a British Museum curator by trying on the Sutton Hoo helmet and getting it stuck on the crown of his head. Ancient peoples were smaller than we are today, he spluttered, struggling to wrestle it off, leaving his dark hair standing up in tufts. People loved him for gaffes like this: they made him human and accessible, and by association brought the subjects of his programmes closer to them. It was exceedingly odd to see him still walking and talking on television even after he'd left us, as if nothing had happened. The worst of it was that you never knew where he'd pop up next: he was a public institution, a national treasure. It was easy enough to avoid programmes about history and archaeology, but turn over to watch a charity appeal for some godforsaken corner of Africa and you'd suddenly be caught out as he appeared, running

a hand through his increasingly mad hair and making an impassioned plea for funds.

‘Come on,’ Eve said, leaping to her feet and grabbing up her handbag. ‘We’re going to the house.’ She saw my face and added quickly, ‘We can make an assessment in preparation for the sale. Instructions for the agents, stuff to be cleared, that sort of thing. You’re going to have to do it some time or another, so why not now, while I’m here? Bit of moral support, remember?’

I stared past her shoulder into the rain-sodden courtyard, where a pair of cats were squaring up to one another, one on the wall, the other on top of the shed. The one on the shed roof had its ears laid flat to its skull; the tabby on the wall looked ready to spring. I walked quickly to the window and tapped on the glass. Both cats turned to stare at me, their yellow gazes inimical. The cat on the shed stood up and stretched its back legs, then its front legs, and leapt neatly down on to the patio. The tabby started unconcernedly to lick its paws. Humans: what did they know?

Abruptly, I remembered the cat we had owned in my youth – Max, short for Doctor Maximus ibn Arabi, a lithe beast with huge ears and a sleek, sandy-brown coat like a fennec fox – and how he would lie stretched out in my sandpit at the bottom of the garden, blinking at the sun as if he had located himself in a tiny yet infinite desert. At the age of eight I asked my father why our cat had such a strange name. My friends’ cats were called simple descriptive things such as Blackie or Spot or Socks. ‘That’s not even his real name,’ he told me solemnly, as if imparting one of the world’s long-hidden secrets. ‘Nor is he even just a cat. He’s the reincarnation of an ancient scholar and his real name is Abu abd-Allah Muhammad ibn-Ali ibn Muhammad ibn al-Arabi al-Hatimi al-TTaa’i. And that’s why we call him Max.’ Which left me none the wiser. But every time that cat looked at me I sensed it regarded me through the veil of hundreds of years of acquired wisdom. Other children might have been unnerved by such a concept, but I was fascinated. I would lie nose to nose with Max out in the garden to see if that wisdom would leap the gap between us, inter-species. I had completely forgotten not just that cat, but the entire sensation of magic and promise and possibility it had represented to the child I had been.

Remembering now, I felt like an entirely different person to that naive and trusting eight-year-old; but perhaps her shade was waiting to be reunited with me under the eaves of my childhood home. 'All right,' I said, making what felt like a momentous decision. 'Let's go.'

2

We took my car. On those rare occasions when other people drove me, my right foot hovered constantly over a phantom brake pedal; I had to grit my teeth to prevent myself from yelling ‘Watch out!’ or ‘The light’s changing!’ I watched other road-users in the rear-view mirror, and out of the corner of my eye, anticipating their every move. My fingers itched to change the gears or take hold of the wheel. I was not what you would call a relaxed passenger.

We crossed the river at Hammersmith, manoeuvred around its clogged-up roundabout and took the A40 into the West End, overtaking the slow weekenders in their family saloons. As we were cutting up through the backstreets around Regent’s Park we came upon two men loading a camel into what looked like a glorified horsebox. Or were they taking it out, delivering it to the zoo? It was hard to tell. The camel was single-humped and looked as if it had reached the end of its patience. It had planted its wide, padded front feet sturdily on the wooden ramp and wasn’t budging an inch one way or another. Just before we turned the corner into Gloucester Gate, I looked in the rear-view mirror and it was still there, as immobile as a statue.

We reached the house twenty minutes later, having toiled through the clogged traffic of Hampstead Village. I hadn’t been back since I’d walked out of it at the age of eighteen, with any illusions I’d had about the benevolence of the world lying in tatters around me and with only the hundred quid I’d raided from my mother’s study to sustain me until my university grant came through. ‘Give me a couple of minutes, will you?’ I asked Eve, and left her sitting in the car on the driveway.

The house regarded me furtively through its shuttered windows. If it recognized me it gave no sign. But I remembered everything about it: the pattern of the creeper as it wound up around the eaves and how it turned to crimson in the autumn, then became plague-

spotted and finally a sickly yellow before littering the garden with its annual death. I remembered the rhododendrons whose contorted branches hid the dens of my youth, and the smooth patches on the slate path up to the front door that had been worn by the passage of thousands of feet. It was a Georgian house and its proportions pleased the eye of the adult who regarded it now. As a child, it had seemed vast to me; now it seemed substantial but hardly enormous, impressive but not ostentatious, as if it had somehow shrunk over the course of the intervening years. I looked at it steadily, and knew that I would sell it. I did not even want to go inside. Too many memories waited for me, and not just in the box in the attic.

Instead, I took the path that led around the side of the house to the back garden and gazed at its familiar landscape, hardly breathing, as if to move or make a sound might frighten away the delicate shades that lived there still. I felt that if I were to slip past the screening cover of the dense yew hedge I would surprise my six-year-old self, barefoot and sun-browned, my hair braided in untidy squaw-plaits, victoriously flourishing my latest find: a slow-worm or a toad unceremoniously disinterred from the rockery. Or that if I closed my eyes I would hear the whoops and howls of our little band as we chased one another between the flowerbeds with spud-guns. But the only sound I heard was the alarm cry of a blackbird high up in the cedar tree, liquid and shrill.

I walked on, into my past.

The pond where I had lain on my belly for hours on end, spying on the lazy meanderings of the ornamental carp through the murky depths, was now matted with weed and overgrown with convolvulus and meadow grass. There was the rockery, now little more than a random pile of stones overrun with ground ivy, nettles and dandelions. My father had been no gardener even in his youth; it was my mother who had set about keeping nature at bay. Armed with long-handled loppers, her gardening gauntlets and a pair of secateurs, she seemed like a medieval knight going out to do battle with a small but annoying dragon. Clearly no one had done anything to the garden in years. Wandering through the long grass, I half expected to find the remains of my old wigwam: tatters of faded yellow cloth flapping from skeletal poles like a becalmed *Marie Celeste*, my old rag-rug and toys still

scattered where they had been suddenly and mysteriously abandoned. I walked over to the spot where it had stood all those years ago, but there was not even the tell-tale crispy brown circle it left on the lawn when dismantled and packed away for the winter. It might never have existed; and neither might that laughing, bright-eyed child.

Dark clouds had gathered overhead and as I stood there, remembering, it began to rain. Sticking my hands deep into my coat pockets, I trudged back to Eve.

‘Come on, then,’ I said. ‘Let’s go inside.’

I avoided the subject of the attic for as long as I could, though I kept catching Eve casting her eyes towards it every time we passed through the hall, with its winding baronial banister. By the end of three hours we had made a rough inventory of the contents of the house, concentrating on the furniture, the paintings and the more valuable artefacts my parents had collected from around the world. I could not bring myself to enter what had been my parents’ bedroom. My own room was along the corridor. Gingerly, I pushed open the door.

Everything was just as I had left it all those years ago, except that it was now rather dusty and faded. On the walls were posters for The Slits and Crass and The Rezillos, angry music for an angry girl; inside the wardrobe, a jumble of clothes that were probably back in fashion in the seedier streets around Camden. I closed the door. That was an era of my life I never wanted to return to, a chapter of a book I wished to leave closed for ever.

Back out in the corridor, I found that Eve had pulled the attic ladder down.

‘You know you’ve got to,’ she said gently.

I knew she was right. There was no avoiding it. Up I went.

I have heard of people with a morbid fear of attics. There are countless tales of ghosts and mad folk lurking in the hidden, dark spaces of our houses: all good psychological symbols for the Self and the Other, for the dark side of our personalities that we fear, for the irrational part of the world that we cannot understand and so feel threatened by. It was not the attic that made my hands shake on the

ladder. I had no fear of ghosts, as such. I'd scared the kids at school half to death with stories of vengeful spirits and the walking dead. I had no idea where I got such stories from, except that as a child I seemed to be possessed of a ghoulish imagination and a strong stomach. When next door's terrier was run over in the road and I saw its guts spilling out on to the tarmac like great fat white worms, I didn't run away and cry but stood there, gripped by my own fascination. Who knew a dog's body contained such things? I elaborated my next ghost story with these gruesome details and Katie Knox was sick in a rosebush. But since then I'd spent a very long time suppressing my overactive imagination, straitjacketing it into the world that accountants and other such grown-ups inhabit. My fear as I went up into that dark, cobwebby space was of giving the dead power over me in the form of things that would prey on my mind rather than on my body.

At the top of the ladder I reached for the flashlight that my father stowed to the right of the hatch; and there it was, in the same place it had always been. The memory of the last time I had been up here jangled at the edge of my consciousness and I pushed it away into the dark place it had come up from. I clicked the switch and a beam of light swept over the attic space. Boxes. Boxes everywhere.

What had I expected? A solitary box sitting in the middle of a great void, waiting just for me?

I climbed up over the edge and walked the boarded floor in search of the one with my name on it. I'll say this for my father: he was organized. I supposed I had inherited that trait from him. I wondered, scanning the neat labelling and the clarity of his archiving, whether he had known he was going to die, and, if so, for how long? There were boxes of books, by subject; boxes of shoes; boxes of archaeological records; boxes of old papers.

At last I found it. I had probably passed it two or three times, as it was a lot smaller than I'd been expecting; perhaps I'd been influenced by Eve's ghoulish suggestion about it containing the remains of my mother. I crouched down. *Isabelle*, it said on the top in my father's striking italic scrawl. The paper on which this had been written was yellow with age, and the ink was faded. I wondered just how long the box had been sitting there. It had been carefully closed

with packing tape so that I could not simply rip into it then and there, tip whatever it contained over the floor and walk away. I picked it up. It was light, but as it tilted something inside shifted position and fell to the other side of the box with a dull thud.

What on earth could have made a noise like that? I stared at the box as if it might contain a skull, or a withered hand. Oh, stop it, Iz, I told myself firmly, and tucked the thing under my arm. It was hard descending the ladder with one hand, but I managed it without mishap. Eve eyed the box greedily. 'Go on, then, open it.'

I shook my head. 'Not now. Not here.'



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