

As the train gathered speed, Isabelle Bernard leaned back in her seat and took a deep breath. She'd had an anxious start, with the taxi being late, then a delay due to roadworks before they reached Bayonne, and when they'd finally arrived at the station, she'd only had a few minutes to sprint to the right platform and jump on the train. The carriage was almost full but there was nobody sitting in the seat next to her, so she'd been able to fall into her seat, glad she had only brought her faithful Longchamp tote bag as luggage—she was an old hand at packing a surprising amount into a small space—for the baggage racks were absolutely crammed with enormous suitcases. Now, relaxing into the smooth, comfortable quiet of the TGV, and the four-hour journey to Paris ahead of her, she reached inside the soft leather pouch she used as a handbag, and drew out a small plastic wallet. It contained a cream-coloured envelope which bore a name and address in faded, elegant black handwriting, and a faint postmark with 'March 1930' just about visible.

Isabelle didn't open the wallet. She didn't need to read the letter inside the envelope. By now, she knew its words by heart. But she hadn't told anyone about her find, not even Carlos. *Especiallly* not Carlos. She pushed that thought firmly away, along with the memory of his warm body as she slipped out of bed that morning. Instead, her mind turned to the moment she'd first spotted the letter.

It had been in a battered tin box on Ari Meyer's stand at a local *brocante* market. *Brocante* dealers, who buy and sell secondhand, vintage and antique items, may specialise in particular items or periods, or have a more general range. Isabelle concentrated on her speciality—genuine vintage clothing, jewellery and accessories from the 1920s and 1930s. But Ari sold all kinds of bits and pieces, from nineteenth-century plates illustrated with hunting scenes to 1970s fluoro Toot-a-Loop wearable radios, from touching postcards sent to soldiers in the Great War to stuffed foxes with glaring eyes and reproductions of antique clockwork toys. Ari mixed everything up—time periods, the genuine and the reproduction, the charming and the grotesque—and some of the other dealers raised eyebrows at that. Not Isabelle; his style certainly wasn't hers, but she liked Ari, enjoyed looking at the objects on his stand, and had occasionally

bought from him as well. This included a lovely orange and black Art Deco bakelite brooch which she'd managed to get her hands on before Moustique, who had been hovering at the next stand, could spot it. This man, a regular customer and compulsive hoarder, was aptly nicknamed Mosquito by the traders because of his bizarre trick of making an unpleasant buzzing sound close to buyers' ears to put them off something he wanted to grab himself. It worked surprisingly well—at least with people who were encountering it for the first time.

She smiled grimly to herself, thinking that if Moustique had known what treasure lay hidden in that unpromising tin box, his buzzing would have reached ear-splitting decibels. But he'd had no idea, and neither had Ari—and neither had she, in fact—because the box with its cargo of old letters and cards from the 1920s and '30s had been sold as a job lot and she'd only briefly riffled through its contents before buying the whole thing. She sometimes used ephemera—old correspondence, ads and magazines—as props in the photos she took for her website and socials. It wasn't until she got home that she'd looked at the box more closely.

She yawned, the early start beginning to take its toll, as well as the adrenaline of excitement that had been building up in her ever since she'd first read that letter, just three days ago. She'd booked the Paris trip that very day. Sure, it was a long shot but she had always operated on instinct in her business and it had rarely let her down. With men, that was another story, she thought ruefully, as she put the wallet with its precious contents back in the pouch, closed her eyes and let herself drift off, intending only to doze for an hour or so.

In the event, she only woke from a deep sleep because an enormous suitcase had slipped out of someone's hands as they tried to heave it from the baggage rack right behind her, the sharp corner of the suitcase hitting her shoulder, painfully jerking her out of a vivid dream. 'Are you okay, Madame?' its owner, a thin middle-aged man with an English accent, asked anxiously, and she managed to nod reassuringly before following the rest of the

passengers out of the train and into the terminus, the station of Montparnasse.

Still feeling a little groggy from the nap and her shoulder beginning to ache after the blow from that ridiculous suitcase, she looked around for a coffee stand. After a swallow of mediocre but hot coffee, she started to feel better. Taking out her phone, she checked Google Maps once more for the route she needed to take from the station. It looked fairly straightforward and should take her less than fifteen minutes. And though the sky was filling up with dark clouds, she thought the weather should hold out for the walk. Draining the last of the coffee, she picked up her tote bag, adjusted the strap of her pouch, and set off.