

## THE EGYPTIAN CAT

By

Christine Poulson

‘Perhaps the ancient Egyptians were onto something?’ As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Jilly realised that Jean-Luc wouldn’t understand. He was such a rational person in that very French way.

He turned from where he was standing by the window. ‘What was that, cherie?’

‘Oh nothing.’

‘I think I’d better go back to the office, so much paperwork ...’

They had met for lunch and had come on to the museum. She was copy-editing a book on the ancient Egyptians and the Book of the Dead and the museum in Boulogne had a first-rate collection of amulets and other grave goods.

He kissed her, his hand lingering on her hip. ‘I’ll try not to be too late home.’ The promise she saw in his eyes made her bones dissolve.

He strode off across the gallery. The October sun raked the floor and dust motes hung in the shafts of light. A woman was staring at Jean-Luc. When she saw that Jilly’s eyes were on her, she looked away. It wasn’t the first time Jilly had seen a woman eyeing up her husband. *Hands off*, she thought, *he’s mine, all mine*. She still hadn’t got used to having a husband like Jean-Luc - so good-looking in that slightly battered rugby-player way.

Jilly turned back to the display case. It was fascinating: little clay figures representing servants, pots, amulets, jewelry, everything the dead person might need in the after-life. There was even a little cat made of shiny black stone, sitting upright, erect and alert, its ears pricked. Jilly thought of her mother and what she might have put in her coffin: her favourite earrings? The coffee cup and saucer that she always used? Her laptop?

Jilly became aware of someone standing next to her. It was the woman who had been staring at Jean-Luc. She was about Jilly’s age, attractive, with long dark hair and a mole like a beauty spot next to her mouth.

‘Pardon, Madame, cet homme . . .’

Jilly didn't catch the rest. She wished - not for the first time - that Jean-Luc didn't insist on speaking English to her. Although Jilly's French was improving, she still found it hard to follow people.

'Trop vite, too fast,' she said.

'Ah, you are English, yes?' the woman said. 'This man, who has leave just now? I think I know him. He is friend?'

'He's my husband.'

'Your husband! He is lawyer? From Béziers?'

'No, he's an estate agent here in Boulogne.'

Jean-Luc *had* been a legal assistant at one point, but he originally came from Lyon, and had worked in Paris as an estate agent, before buying into the agency in Boulogne. Béziers was somewhere in the south of France. Jilly knew he'd never lived there.

'I am sorry,' the woman said. 'I was sure, but it must be I make mistake.'

She smiled and turned away.

In the little museum shop Jilly bought a facsimile of the little black cat.

She drove back to the cottage through a landscape that she was coming to love: the lines of poplars with their balls of mistletoe, the manor houses and little chateaux glimpsed through trees, the gently curving valleys with their villages clustered round a church spire.

The cottage, a long low building, a converted *fermette* typical of the region, was down a lane leading off a minor road. Behind it was a field of rough pasture and then the *forêt de Boulogne*. On the doorstep a real cat was waiting. Henri was black and white, long-haired, with a funny little piebald face. He belonged to their nearest neighbour - their only neighbour - an elderly widow. He was ridiculously soppy and rolled over for Jilly to rub his belly. But she was careful to keep him out when she let herself in. She made a cup of tea and took it upstairs to her study.

Copy-editing could be done anywhere and she worked mostly at home with an occasional trip to London. Her parents had been wealthy, but they had both been doctors and they'd insisted that she had some kind of profession, too. They'd been right, she realised, as she grew older and met other people with inherited wealth and saw what not working did for them. Her father had died when she was in her teens and on her mother's death a year ago, she'd inherited everything. She'd met Jean-Luc

when she came over to sell her mother's French house. Six months later they were married and instead of selling the ferme, she'd moved into it with Jean-Luc. He hadn't known about the money until after they'd decided to get married. Because that was another thing about inherited wealth: you had to be sure that people liked you for yourself.

She freed the little cat from its tissue paper. The curve of its back fitted snugly into the palm of her hand. She was alone all day when Jean-Luc was at work and would have liked a real cat. But Jean-Luc was seriously allergic, so this little creature would have to do. Cats had been sacred in ancient Egypt. She opened up her lap-top and went on-line to find out more. 'In Egyptian mythology' she read, 'the cat is the animal incarnation of Bast or Bastet, goddess of joy, love, and pleasure. She is the protector of women and childbirth, as well as a loving goddess who enjoys music and dance.' She couldn't help but think well of a religion that had a goddess of love and pleasure in the form of a cat.

She stifled a yawn. Wine at lunch-time always made her sleepy. A walk would help. She locked up the house and set off on the road that ran along the edge of the forest. Madame – that was how Jilly thought of her - lived in a little house that had belonged to a forester, and as Jilly walked past, she emerged. She was one of those elderly French women who take good care of themselves, smartly dressed, nails varnished a deep red, pearl earrings, hair always immaculate.

Jilly had been fascinated by her ever since a dinner party when Arnaud, Jean-Luc's partner in the agency and a distant relative of Madame's, had told them that as a girl she had been in the French Resistance, taking messages between groups. One night she was sent to a remote farm with a herbal remedy for a sick child as cover. The farmer's wife greeted her kindly, and she could hear the child coughing in another room. The farmer and two other men were playing cards. But it was all wrong. The way she described it was 'everything was as usual, but more so.' The small silences buzzed with tension, voices were a tiny bit too loud. She went away without asking for the message. She found out later that one of the men playing cards was a member of the Gestapo and two others had been listening in the next room. Madame's silence had saved the family from arrest and deportation.

When Arnaud had finished, his wife had blurted something out that Jilly didn't catch and Arnaud silenced her with a warning glance. On the way home Jilly had asked Jean-Luc what she'd said.

'There was a rumour that Madame killed a German soldier – after the Normandy landings – when the Resistance were sabotaging the lines of supply. She's never admitted it, but she hasn't denied it either.'

'Killed a man! But she was only – what? – fifteen?'

Jean-Luc shrugged. 'In those days, children grew up fast. And this was war, remember.'

Jilly would have liked to get to know Madame better. But though Madame always said bonjour when Jilly met her on the lane, she never said anything else. She wasn't unfriendly – she did the neighbourly things of taking in deliveries and looking after a spare set of keys - but her formality was intimidating. And she spoke hardly any English.

Today she beckoned to Jilly. She rattled off something that Jilly couldn't make out,

'Encore, s'il vous plaît,' Jilly said.

This time she caught a few words: 'forêt' and what sounded like 'chasseur.' But what was 'chasseur?' Jilly was being reprimanded – she understood that - but for what?

Madame resorted to gestures. She shook her finger at Jilly and pointed down the lane into the trees. 'Non, non,' she was saying. There was the crack of distant gunfire. She pointed to the forest and put her hand up to her ear. 'Dangereux! Boom! Boom!'

And then Jilly understood. Hunters were out, searching for wild boar and rabbits. She already knew not to go into the wood after the start of the hunting season - every year people were shot by accident - but she'd thought she'd be safe enough on the road. Madame was telling her that she wasn't.

Feeling foolish, Jilly thanked her, and Madame nodded approval.

Jilly walked glumly home, scuffling the dry leaves. Did this mean that she couldn't go for a walk until the spring?

As she unlocked the door, the phone began to ring. It was Jean-Luc. He was going to be late home. 'Someone's interested in that big villa in Wimereux,' he told her, 'but they're going back to the UK in the morning. It's a nuisance, but if there's any chance of shifting it.' She heard the shrug in his voice. 'Arnaud's working late, too, we'll have something to eat together.'

Jean-Luc had had to work late a few times lately, and it was a good thing really, because it meant the market was picking up. She made and ate an omelet, and went up to her study. She worked until nine and decided to have an early night. In bed she skimmed *La Voix du Nord*, the local newspaper, on-line. She made a point of keeping up with the local news and it was good for her French. There were the usual reports of house fires and car crashes accompanied by photos of twisted wrecks. This week the lead story was about a spate of burglaries aimed at holiday homes.

She half-woke when Jean-Luc slid into bed. His lips sought hers. She tasted toothpaste. He fitted himself round her and she sank back into sleep. She was woken by Jean-Luc gasping for breath. She sat up and switched on the bed-side light. He was fumbling with the drawer of the bed-side cabinet. She jumped out of bed and ran round to get his inhaler for him.

He seized it with the fervour of a drowning man. She hadn't seen him as ill before and it was alarming: the rasping, his face red, eyes bulging.

Between pulls on the inhaler, he managed to say, 'Cat - on bed -'  
'I'll have a look.'

She went round the house, turning on all the lights and looking under chairs. Could Henri have sneaked in somehow? Perhaps when she came back from her abortive walk? But she was sure he hadn't.

'Nothing there,' she told Jean-Luc.

His breathing was under control now. 'There was a weight on my chest. Hot. Furry.' He shuddered.

He had hated cats ever since he was a small boy and had had his first terrifying attack, triggered by a pet kitten.

'Perhaps it was a dream that was trying to explain why you were finding it hard to breathe.'

'Maybe.' He didn't sound convinced. He sank back on the pillow, exhausted.

She stroked his hair, loving the way it sprang up from his forehead. He smiled at her, his eyelids already drooping.

She got in beside him and turned off the light.

She was on the verge of sleep, when she remembered that she'd stroked Henri. She had been careful to wash her hands afterwards, but perhaps it had still been enough to trigger an attack. She'd stay well clear of him in future.

The next week-end the weather was glorious, a real Indian summer. On the Sunday they took a picnic and walked around the bay of the Somme. In the evening they ate salt-marsh lamb in their favourite restaurant in Le Crotoy. Full of wine and food, Jilly was drowsy in the car, dipping in and out of sleep, her body swaying as they went round corners.

There was a sudden rush, a thud, and a screeching of brakes. She was flung forward and caught by the seat-belt.

She was dazed, bewildered. 'What's happening?'

'Sorry, sweetie,' Jean-Luc said, 'something in the road. Just a – what's the word, that black and white thing, badger, yes, that's it, badger. Are you alright? We're virtually home.' He started the car again and pulled into their drive.

'Did you hit it?'

'I don't think it was hurt. It ran off.'

She looked back. There were no streetlights, just the security light that their arrival had triggered. It blazed a path down the road. There was nothing there.

It was a couple of days later and mid morning, when Madame came to her door.

Jilly was having a cup of coffee and was reading *La Voix du Nord*. She was deciphering another item about a burglary – only a few miles away - when the doorbell rang.

As soon as Jilly opened the door, Madame came out with a stream of anxious commentary. She didn't look formidable any more. She looked like an anxious old lady. Jilly managed to make out that Henri had been missing for two days. He always came home in the morning: 'toujours, toujours.'

Madame was asking, had Henri perhaps got shut in somewhere?

'Let's look,' Jilly said. '... erm ... allez a voir.'

They went through the house into the garden and looked in the shed, but no Henri. They walked down to the end of the orchard, the grass wet with dew and studded with apples, and called his name. Jilly was hoping that Henri hadn't been mistaken for a rabbit and shot by hunters, when they heard piteous mewing from under the hedge.

Jilly got down on her knees and parted the branches. Henri blinked up at her. When she reached in, he pushed his face against her hand.

His leg seemed to be broken and he was in pain, though he never stopped purring as they manoeuvred him into a cardboard box.

Madame didn't have a car. She relied on the bus and on her daughter, who drove her to Carrefour every week. So Jilly took Madame and Henri to the vet in Boulogne, Henri on Madame's knee. The vet thought that Henri had been hit by a car, and his leg needed to be set, but he would probably make a full recovery. He would have to stay at the surgery for a couple of days.

Jilly drove Madame home and was invited in for an aperitif. The sitting room was just as she had imagined it: lots of dark heavy furniture and ornaments, framed photos everywhere of children at every stage of development. When Madame came back from the kitchen with a little dish of cheesy biscuits, Jilly was gazing at a photo of a much younger Madame. She was arm in arm with a mustachioed man, a gun over his arm and a dog at his feet.

'Mon mari,' Madame said fondly.

The aperitif was something fruity and homemade that made Jilly's head swim. When she got up to go, Madame put her veined old hand, heavy with rings, on Jilly's and squeezed it. Jilly squeezed back. She had made a friend.

At home she stripped off her clothes and put them in the washing machine and had a shower. It didn't matter about the cat being in her car – Jean-Luc never got in it. When they went anywhere together, they always went in his car, and he always drove: typical man . . .

She heated up some soup for lunch and sat down to think things through. Cars didn't come down their lane. Jean-Luc had said he had clipped a badger, but what if it had been Henri? Could he have mistaken a black and white cat for a badger? Something that had been vaguely troubling her crystallised in her mind. She felt again the movement of the car and the pressure of the seat-belt. The first thing she remembered was the car surging forward. Jean-Luc hadn't braked until *after* he had hit the badger – if it was a badger.

That evening she watched Jean-Luc's face when she told him about the cat. It revealed nothing except concern for Madame. And yet – she wasn't sure why - she

didn't tell him that she had given Henri and Madame a lift to the vet. Or that she had offered to go and collect Henri when it was time for him to come home.

But she did ask him, 'Are you sure it was a badger the other night? Could it have been Madame's cat?'

He smiled at her. 'Quite sure, darling. The security light came on and I saw it clearly. It was much too big to be a cat. Wrong shape, also.'

While Jean-Luc was having a shower, she read *La Voix du Nord* in bed. There was a banner headline: 'Mort Mystérieuse a Wissant.' Wissant was a sweet little resort just up the coast. They sometimes went there to eat moules. She pieced together the story. The body of a woman had been found in an empty holiday let. 'Etranglée.' Strangled. She hadn't yet been identified. It wasn't clear whether this had anything to do with the spate of burglaries, but it all felt a bit close to home.

Jean-Luc came out of the bathroom, naked. He'd shaved. Her heart lurched. He slid into bed and bent his lips to hers. The mingled scent of soap and toothpaste filled her head. She pushed her fingers into his hair and pressed herself to him. He ran his fingers down her spine and she arched her back. The world went away.

Afterwards she lay listening to Jean-Luc's steady breathing.

He was her husband and she loved him and trusted him. OK, so he disliked cats. That was a long way from trying to kill one. Then – out of the blue – the thought came to her. If Jean-Luc had hit something, wouldn't it have left a trace on the car? Blood? Fur?

Quietly, she moved to the side of the bed and got out. When she reached the bedroom door she paused and listened. Jean-Luc's breathing was regular.

She went downstairs, put on her coat, got a torch from the kitchen and went outside. She stood still and listened. The countryside was different in the dark. Small sounds were magnified. An owl hooted. There was a rustling somewhere.

Jean-Luc's car, a Peugeot Estate, was parked by the side of the house. Which bumper would it be? Which way had Jean-Luc swerved? With a chill, she realised: he hadn't swerved at all. That was something she hadn't taken in at the time.

She ran the beam of the torch round the near-side wing. She couldn't see any fur or blood. She squatted down to look more closely. Nothing. She shone the torch on the wheel rim and felt around the edge. Her fingers came away with a tuft of fur. The bit that wasn't bloody was pure white and soft and silky.

To reach the afterlife it wasn't enough to be well equipped with servants and household goods and amulets. The dead person had to be judged. Their heart would be weighed in the balance, the heart in one scale, a feather representing truth in the other.

It was the following morning and she was at her desk, trying to work.

She picked up the little Egyptian cat and stroked it. She was certain that Jean-Luc had hit Henri. But surely, surely he couldn't have done it on purpose? That would be horrible.

'How heavy is your heart, Jean-Luc?' she thought.

This was no good. She'd better have a break. She made some coffee and took it back to her desk to browse on-line for a few minutes. There was more on the web-site of *La Voix du Nord* about the dead woman in the house in Wissant. She was still unidentified. The police thought she might have been on holiday in the area and had launched a nation-wide appeal. There was a description: around thirty, long dark-brown hair, and a mole by her mouth. That rang a bell . . .

Her thoughts were interrupted by the ping of a text coming in on her phone. It said, 'Arrived in B. See u soon. H.'

Jilly's hand flew to her mouth. Harriet! How could she have forgotten that she was meeting her for lunch in Boulogne. She grabbed her coat and bag and dashed out of the house.

She passed Madame walking up the lane to catch the bus. She gave her a lift and heard that Henri was making good progress. He would be ready to come home tomorrow.

'Is something wrong, Jilly?'

'No, no . . .'

'Really?'

'Really.'

Seeing Harriet made Jilly realised how much she missed her English friends. She and Harriet had met at university where Jilly had been studying English and Harriet, French. Harriet was a teacher herself now. It was the beginning of half-term and she was on her way down to Normandy to join friends in a *gîte* for a long week-end.

'You are happy, though? With Jean-Luc?'

For a moment Jilly was tempted. But what could she say? ‘I think my husband ran over our neighbour’s cat on purpose?’ It sounded absurd, and anyway she didn’t want to do Jean-Luc an injustice. She wanted Harriet to like him. Some of her friends had been surprised and doubtful when she announced that she was marrying someone she’d only known for a few months. They hadn’t said much, but she knew. Harriet though had liked Jean-Luc from the start and thought it was romantic.

Harriet smiled. ‘Remember how you said you’d catch a glimpse of someone one day and be ready to follow him to the ends of the earth.’

‘Love at first sight!’

‘And that’s what happened!’

Jilly smiled, remembering those early days with Jean-Luc . . . the thrill falling in love, of discovering that they had so much in common, and their compatibility in bed. It had seemed meant to be. Here, in the busy restaurant, the things she’d been imagining about Jean-Luc seemed ridiculous. She was spending too much time on her own, that was the problem. She should get out of the house more, maybe do some voluntary work.

A man stopped by their table.

‘Jilly, bonjour!’

‘Arnaud!’

Jean-Luc’s partner was a small, dark energetic man. His English was nearly as good as Jean-Luc’s, but heavily accented. Fluent English was an asset for an estate agent in this part of France.

Jilly half-rose and he kissed her on both cheeks. Jilly introduced Harriet and he shook her hand. They exchanged a few words and Arnaud marvelled at her accent.

‘Harriet teaches French,’ Jilly explained.

‘Ah, bien. I hope you enjoy your meal. Me, I am here to celebrate. We have finally got a big property off our hands. We thought it would never go.’

‘Oh, is that the big villa in Wimereux?’

‘That’s the one. We’ve just come from the notary. All done and dusted, as you say.’

‘So soon!’

‘It *has* gone through quickly. Only a couple of months since the offer.’

But hadn’t Jean-Luc been showing someone round just the other day? Had she misunderstood –

Arnaud gestured to a table where people were waiting. ‘I must . . . ‘

‘Of course.’

After lunch Jilly walked Harriet to her car and they hugged. Harriet was getting into her car, when she hesitated.

‘Jilly – if there *was* something wrong, you’d tell me, wouldn’t you?’

‘I’m fine, honestly.’

She waited and waved until Harriet was out of sight.

Back at home, Jilly looked at the agency’s web-site. The villa that had just been sold wasn’t there, of course. The French system is different from the English. If completion had just taken place, a deposit of 10% would have been paid several months ago, and the house would have been taken off the market. The web-site showed no other villas for sale in Wimereux. So how was it that Jean-Luc had been showing one to a client on the night he had been working late?

She picked up the little black cat and stroked it.

She must have misunderstood.

She got absorbed in copy-editing a section about scarab beetles. Amulets carved in the form of scarab beetles, sometimes with a human face, were placed over the heart of the mummified body. The heart scarabs were weighed against the [feather of truth](#) at the final judgement and they were often inscribed with a spell from the *Book of the Dead*, entreating the [heart](#) not to stand as a witness against the dead person. The idea of your own heart testifying against you was startling – and yet somehow apt.

She stopped work about six. She had a quick look at *La Voix du Nord* to see if there was anything more about the woman in Wissant. There wasn’t – but there was something about another break-in and burglary, this time on the outskirts of Baincthun. That was only a few miles away. She didn’t like it. She was isolated here, on her own a lot, with only one neighbour, who was not very near and an old lady at that. It got dark so early these days. She wished Jean-Luc would come home.

She went down to the kitchen to start dinner. She was pulling leaves out of a lettuce, when she saw a movement, surreptitious, hurried. A little beetle was hiding under a leaf. She went out outside, squatted in the light from the kitchen window, and tried to shake it off. It clung on.

‘Oh, buck up,’ she said. ‘Don’t you know beetles were worshipped in ancient Egypt?’

It fell on its back, squirmed, righted itself, and scuttled off.

There was a sound behind her and she turned her head to see a figure, dark against the light from the kitchen door. She was so startled that she almost fell over. The figure stepped forward and resolved itself into Jean-Luc. He slipped his hands under her arms and lifted her to her feet.

Her heart was beating fast.

‘You gave me such a fright,’ she said. ‘I didn’t hear you come in.’

He put his arms round her. ‘So who is he, this secret lover?’

‘What?’

‘Who were you talking to?’

‘A beetle – on a lettuce leaf.’

‘Ah, you English, so sentimental about animals.’ He locked his hands in the small of her back and pulled her to him.

How solid he was, how reassuring, and the aftershave that he wore . . . There was no way to be sure about the business with Henri. Best to assume she had made a mistake – by far the most likely thing - and just forget all about it.

She put her mouth up to his and felt him freeze.

He drew back. ‘What was that? I thought I saw something,’

‘Where?’

‘A movement – among the trees.’

She looked round, but saw nothing. ‘A fox, maybe?’

He frowned. ‘I don’t know. I didn’t really see.’

She put her arms round him and they kissed, but the mood had gone.

That night Jilly slept badly. So did Jean-Luc. He woke up more than once, short of breath, and had to use his inhaler.

Once he’d left, Jilly went round and collected Madame to take her to the vet’s. They brought Henri home and settled him in. Jilly turned down an aperitif, but she invited Madame to come round about six. It was only later that she thought of Jean-Luc’s allergy. But he wouldn’t be home until 7.30 and she’d vacuum the living room after Madame had gone.

It was late afternoon when she clicked onto the web-site of *La Voix du Nord*. It was head-line news: they had identified the woman found dead in the house in Wissant. There was a large photograph of her. Jilly stared at it. It was hard to be sure

– the photo was grainy – but that birthmark . . . Surely it was the woman in the museum, the one who had asked her about Jean-Luc. She read on. The woman had been on holiday. That was why she wasn't missed straight away. She'd lived in Béziers. The woman in the museum had mentioned Béziers. It *was* her. And she'd mistaken Jean-Luc for a lawyer that she knew.

Jilly googled 'lawyer' and 'Béziers.' Béziers was right down on the south-east coast near the Spanish border. You couldn't get much further from Boulogne and still be in France. The name was familiar, but she couldn't quite think why. There were the usual listings that you'd expect – and then her eye was caught by a headline: 'Meutre.' Murder. She followed a link to an article in a local newspaper. Four years ago a local lawyer, Jean Michel Cazin, had arrived home to find his wife of six months dead. It seemed that she had disturbed a burglary in progress. Jilly scrolled down and found a photograph of the couple on their wedding day. The man *did* look like Jean-Luc, different hairstyle and he was wearing glasses, but he had the same nose and his face was the same shape. She read the article carefully, making sure that she understood every word.

She looked again at the photograph. No wonder the woman in the museum had mistaken Jean-Luc for this other man.

*What if it wasn't a mistake?*

The thought sprang into her mind as if of its own volition.

But this couldn't be Jean-Luc. Jean-Luc had a whole history, a past, people who knew him, who'd been guests at their wedding. She thought about that. Naturally she hadn't wanted a big wedding so soon after her mother's death. And neither of them had much family. Jean-Luc's parents were dead, and there were no siblings. He had a cousin, but she lived in the States. She had sent a present and a card.

It struck her now that the few guests from Jean-Luc's side were people who had known Jean-Luc in Paris – and of course Arnaud and his wife.

But this was crazy thinking. Jean-Luc had had an existence in Lyon before he had moved to Paris, of course he had.

She went downstairs to the little room off the sitting-room that Jean-Luc used as a home office. She slid back the drawer of the filing cabinet: household bills, mostly. Where was the personal stuff? She tried the desk drawers. They were locked. She went back upstairs. Outside it was growing dark. Looking out of the window, she saw that the wind was ruffling the grass, tossing dead leaves. She thought for a moment

that she saw someone standing among the trees in the orchard. But no, it must just be one tree trunk overlapping another, because when she moved her head, there was no one there.

What about looking on-line? When she'd first met Jean-Luc she'd been surprised that he didn't use social media much. Of course she'd googled him, but she had only got the estate agency Facebook page. He didn't have a personal account. Looking again now, she didn't find anything that went back beyond his time in Paris.

She googled Jean Michel Cazin, but there was nothing recent, just old adverts for the firm he had worked for. And he didn't seem to be on Facebook either. There was no overlap between him and Jean-Luc.

She sat back and tried to make sense of this. But her brain didn't seem to be working properly. She needed to get away somewhere, find a quiet place where she could think things over. Where should she go? She could decide that later. The main thing was to get out of the house.

As she went down the stairs, the living room was suddenly flooded with light. Jilly stood, frozen to the spot. The security light outside the front door had come on.

The doorbell rang. Not Jean-Luc then. He had a key. And anyway she hadn't heard a car. Jilly let out the breath she'd been holding and went down to look through the little window in the door. It was Harriet.

Jilly opened the door and fell into her arms.

'I had to come,' Harriet said, after they'd hugged. 'I knew something was wrong yesterday.'

'Oh Harriet . . . I can't tell you how wonderful it is to see you.'

'What is it? What's the matter?'

Jilly looked into Harriet's calm and sensible face. How could she say, 'I think my husband might be a murderer.' It seemed a mad idea, and yet . . .

'Come and look.'

They went upstairs and Jilly called up the photo of Jean Michel Cazin.

'Doesn't this look like Jean-Luc?'

'It does, a bit,' Harriet admitted.

'That's not all. Jean Michel Cazin doesn't have an on-line presence, at least not a recent one, and I can't find any evidence that Jean-Luc's goes back further than four years. Read it. Read the article.'

Harriet did, with Jilly looking over her shoulder.

Jilly remembered why Béziers had sounded familiar. ‘Isn’t Béziers where you were a teaching assistant? Wasn’t this around the time you were there?’

‘Yes, and I think I do remember it. But Jilly, you don’t really think . . .?’

‘They’re the same person, Harriet, I’m sure of it. What if he killed her? What if Jean Michel Cazin killed his wife? And what if Jean-Luc is Jean Michel Cazin?’

‘But the husband wasn’t even charged, was he, according to this?’

‘He claimed to have got home and found the house broken into and his wife already dead. There’d been a series of burglaries in the neighbourhood. And Harriet, that’s been happening around here.’ She told Harriet about the woman in the museum. ‘That woman – the one who thought she recognised Jean-Luc– she’s dead!’

She couldn’t bring herself to say, ‘what if he’s planning to kill me?’ but it hung unsaid in the air.

‘Oh, Jilly, surely . . .’

‘You’re going to say that these things just don’t happen, but it happened to her, didn’t it?’

They looked at the smiling face of the young bride on screen.

Harriet said, ‘But it couldn’t have been the husband. He had an alibi. He rang her from the office just before the time that she must have died. Look, love, why don’t we have a cup of tea, think a bit more about this.’

As they went downstairs, Jilly said, ‘Where’ve you left your car? I didn’t hear you drive up.’

‘Got confused by the satnav, damn thing. I left it further up the lane.’

They went down into kitchen and Jilly put the kettle on. Something was bothering her, something off-key.

Harriet was still wearing her outdoor clothes, including, strangely, her gloves.

‘Aren’t you going to take your coat off?’ Jilly said.

Harriet smiled. ‘I’m fine, thanks.’

Was it the sight of those black leather gloves? Or was it that the details of Jean Michel Cazin’s alibi hadn’t been mentioned in the newspaper article? It all came together in her mind in the way that accumulating snow at last sets off an avalanche.

It was incredible – yet it explained everything.

No wonder she and Jean-Luc had seemed to have so much in common. He had already known everything about her. He had known before he met her that she was a wealthy woman.

But she'd been wrong about one thing. Jean-Luc wasn't going to murder her. Harriet was.

Why hadn't it already happened? Harriet had explained that herself. She was waiting for Jean-Luc to ring and establish his alibi.

The kettle clicked off, loud in the silence.

Harriet slipped her hand into her coat pocket. With the other she scooped up Jilly's car keys and her mobile, left charging on the kitchen worktop.

'I've slipped up, haven't I?' she said. She sounded like the old Harriet and her face was still calm and sensible, but she was a different person. 'It doesn't really matter.'

And then the doorbell rang.

'Who's that?' Harriet hissed.

For a moment Jilly couldn't imagine. Then she remembered: 'It's Madame from down the lane. I invited her for an aperitif.'

'This is what's going to happen: you'll answer the door and tell Madame that you're very sorry – you're ill – and don't think of trying to run away or whatever. I'll shoot her and come after you.' The doorbell rang again. 'Go. Now. Get rid of her'

In other circumstances Jilly might have admired Harriet's coolness. It didn't occur to her to doubt what Harriet said. Harriet never said anything that she didn't mean.

As she went to the door, her mind seemed to be working at stupendous speed. She saw in her mind's eye the young Madame, crossing dark fields to a lighted farmhouse and the door opening into a room where the wrong move could mean death. It was all so long ago. Was it too much to hope that Jilly could somehow tip Madame off? She was still desperately hunting for a way, when she reached the door.

Madame was standing outside, as immaculate as ever, smiling.

'Je suis malade,' Jilly stammered. '...er...mal de tête.'

Was that the right word? Presumably, because Madame clucked in sympathy and nodded when Jilly suggested tomorrow. For a moment their eyes locked and Jilly tried to send a message. Madame's face registered only polite concern, then she turned away, and Jilly was closing the door, her last chance gone.

Harriet came out of the kitchen.

‘Let’s sit down,’ she said. She glanced at her watch. ‘In ten minutes or so the phone will ring. It’ll be Jean-Luc’s assistant to say that he’s gone to a viewing and will be late home. If you play along, I’m happy to leave Madame alone. She’ll be useful confirmation that you were alive when she came round.’

They sat on either side of the coffee table with the phone between them. Harriet hadn’t taken her hand out of her pocket. Perhaps she was sparing Jilly the sight of the gun.

A great calm settled on Jilly. Perhaps dying wasn’t so bad. She thought of her mother. Wherever she was – nowhere probably - soon Jilly would be there, too.

‘How long have you had me in your sights?’ she asked. ‘Surely Jean-Luc didn’t move to Boulogne with this in mind?’

Harriet shrugged. ‘That was an off-chance. But then your mother died and . . .’

Under French inheritance law, a parent gets 25% of a child’s estate. With both Jilly’s parents dead, Jean-Luc would inherit the lot.

Jilly wanted to say, ‘You won’t get away with it,’ but it seemed increasingly likely that they would.

Jilly shivered. It wasn’t just fear. The room did seem colder. Harriet must have felt it too, because she turned up her collar, though she was careful to keep her hand in her pocket. Was there a window open somewhere?

Harriet had her back to the kitchen door, so she didn’t see what Jilly saw. The kitchen door was slowly opening. She registered the amazement on Jilly’s face and turned to see Madame standing in the doorway with a hunting rifle, the muzzle pointing at Harriet.

The phone rang.

Jilly leaned forward and snatched up the receiver ‘Harriet! It’s Harriet!’ she shouted.

Harriet’s hand came out of her pocket. Madame squeezed the trigger. There was an explosion that made Jilly’s ears ring and Harriet dropped the gun and clapped her other hand to her arm. The gun went spinning off across the tiled floor towards Jilly. Madame was gesturing to Jilly and shouting. Jilly couldn’t hear a word, but she didn’t need to. She leaned forward and picked up the gun,

Harriet was on her feet, grimacing in pain. Jilly saw her look at Madame, weighing up her options and calculating her chances. Her eyes met Madame’s and

what she saw there decided her. She backed towards the front door, her undamaged arm raised in a gesture of surrender.

Then, before Jilly had realised what was happening, Harriet was through the door. It slammed behind her. Jilly ran to the door. An engine revved, and a car went roaring down the lane. She watched the tail lights disappear. Harriet had taken off in Jilly's car.

As Jilly packed the following week, it occurred to her that Jean-Luc had been right to be afraid of cats. It was thanks to Henri that he was dead.

Harriet had driven to the house where Jean-Luc was establishing an alibi by showing a client round. She was bleeding heavily, so Jean-Luc took the wheel. They were heading down the A26 towards Paris when the fur that Henri had left behind in Jilly's car triggered an asthma attack. Jean-Luc lost control. Harriet's injuries were less severe, but she would be in hospital for a long time – and in prison even longer if the police could find evidence that she had murdered Jean-Luc's first wife.

Jilly closed the suitcase. She would put the house on the market eventually. For now though, she was heading back to London to stay with friends.

The doorbell rang. She was going downstairs when she realised that she'd forgotten something.

She went back to the study and picked up the statue of the Egyptian cat: Bast the protector of women, the goddess of love and pleasure. Jilly felt weak, like someone who's had a serious illness and has a long convalescence ahead. But one day she would be ready for a fresh start. She slipped the cat in her coat pocket and went downstairs to where Arnaud and Madame were waiting to drive her to the Eurostar terminal at Calais.

*Find out more about Christine's writing at <http://www.christinepoulson.co.uk>*

*Where you can sign up for A Reading Life. A free quarterly newsletter with news about Christine's writing, tips and highlights from her blog. Each issue Christine reviews a favourite Golden Age novel and gives it away as a prize.*