

Amanda Lester and the Orange Crystal Crisis

PAULA BERINSTEIN



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SHOW

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements		i
Chapter 1	Lestrade, Meet Holmes	1
Chapter 2	Gordon Bramble Explodes	19
Chapter 3	Professor Redleaf's Surprise	31
Chapter 4	Nick's Secrets	48
Chapter 5	Just the Treasure	61
Chapter 6	Amanda Lester, One-man Band	68
Chapter 7	Scars and Bruises	82
Chapter 8	Blackpool	93
Chapter 9	Earthquake!	107
Chapter 10	Mushy Letters and Candy Stashes	119
Chapter 11	The Crystals	129
Chapter 12	Another Dead Body	134
Chapter 13	Stuck	148
Chapter 14	The Magnificent Basements	155
Chapter 15	The Trove of Secrets	171
Chapter 16	Back to the Whatsit	184
Chapter 17	Crystal Weirdness	194

Chapter 18	I'd Like to Thank the Academy	201
Chapter 19	Triboluminescence	215
Chapter 20	Eureka!	222
Chapter 21	An Unexpected Party	230
Chapter 22	The Whatsit	242
Chapter 23	Phone Calls	249
Chapter 24	Overwhelmed	257
Chapter 25	Acoustic Levitation	271
Chapter 26	Couple of Clowns	287
Chapter 27	London	300
Chapter 28	Regrouping	312
Chapter 29	Answers	321
Chapter 30	In Pursuit of a Culprit	332
Chapter 31	Scapulus Holmes, Dreamboat	343
Chapter 32	Windermere	353
Chapter 33	The Quarry	367
Chapter 34	Debriefing	377
Chapter 35	The Detective's Bible	384
Chapter 36	Goodbye to the Crystals	390
Chapter 37	It's a Wonderful Life	398
Discussion Questions for Your Reading Group		408
Acoustic Levitation Is Real!		411
Q and A with Author Paula Berinstein		412
About the Author		415

LESTRADE, MEET HOLMES

Amanda Lester wasn't ready for what she'd just heard. Life was already weird enough at Legatum Continuum, the secret school for descendants of famous detectives in England's Lake District. After the events of the last few months, including her father's kidnapping, two murders, a teacher's disappearance, an explosion, and a criminal plot to corner the world's sugar market, she was battered, fed up, and downright depressed, especially since one of the kidnappers had turned out to be the boy she thought was her best friend. So when she arrived at Headmaster Thrillkill's office on the first day of the new term and overheard one of the teachers say that the school was facing the worst crisis in its history, her first impulse was to run. But when she caught the word "Moriarty," she couldn't help listening, even though she knew eavesdropping was wrong. And that was when all the trouble started, or at least *this* round of trouble.

Moriarty, of course, was the master criminal Blixus Moriarty, whom Amanda had helped catch just a few weeks before. Elegant, brilliant, and cruel, he was at least as dangerous as his infamous ancestor Professor James Moriarty, archenemy of the renowned detective Sherlock Holmes. Even though Blixus was locked away in Her Majesty's Prison at Manchester, nicknamed

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

Strangeways, and his wife, Mavis, in Holloway Castle in London, the detectives who ran Legatum kept him under constant surveillance. And now, it appeared, there was news.

Amanda moved as close to the door as she could without being seen and closed her eyes so she could hear every word.

"I'm starting to think we're out of luck," said one of the teachers. "This is a catastrophe."

"You're overreacting," said another. "There are still places to search. It will turn up."

"Hogwash," said a third. "The Moriartys have it."

"If that's the case," said yet another, "it's gone. It wasn't in their possession when they were captured, or in their rooms here at the school. It must have been destroyed in the fire."

The teacher was referring to the fire that had killed the Moriartys' son Nick, aka Nick Muffet, and destroyed the sugar factory where their cartel had manufactured deadly sugar-powered weapons—the factory where they had created a virus that tainted their competitors' products. The same factory that had housed Schola Sceleratorum, the secret school for criminals, where Amanda had discovered that Nick wasn't the person he'd claimed to be. The factory where they'd held her father and beat him till he nearly died. That factory, which Nick had deliberately destroyed by igniting the highly flammable sugar dust inside.

"Look," said the evidence teacher. "Whatever happens, we can't alarm the students or the parents. We have to keep this quiet."

"I think we can all agree on that," said Headmaster Thrillkill.

"It wasn't our fault," said the dead bodies teacher.

"No, of course not," said the self-defense teacher. "We did everything in our power to protect it."

LESTRADE, MEET HOLMES

“I don’t think we did,” said the poisons teacher. “If we had, it would be here, wouldn’t it?”

“I don’t see how you can say that,” said the police procedures teacher. “I’ve got the checklist right here. See? Every requirement followed to the letter up until the 22nd of February. Then boom, gone. What else could we have done?”

“Fault is not the issue,” said Thrillkill. “The point is that the situation is dire. We need to correct it immediately. Suggestions?”

This was freaky. Amanda had never heard the teachers talk this way before. She’d never seen them panic, and that scared the wits out of her. These were hardened detectives with years of experience. They’d faced down the world’s most evil criminals without blinking. Or had they? What was that crack in Professor Also’s armor she’d seen the time someone had mentioned the Khyber Pass? Or when Professor Ducey had slipped and accidentally revealed that someone in his family had been a dirty cop? Even if they’d occasionally made mistakes, she was certain that these people were the toughest in the world—the Navy Seals of detecting—and they were close to unflappable. Except that now they were flapping like a pair of your grandfather’s BVDs in a hurricane. The situation was more than unsettling. It was downright weird.

“Hey, you’re eavesdropping!”

Amanda whirled around to see that prissy little Wiffle kid standing before her, the one who was always getting on her case about not following the rules. What a goody two-shoes he was, always complaining that her behavior didn’t measure up to some mythical standard. And here he was doing it again, except this

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

time she was eavesdropping, and if he tattled the teachers would be furious.

“Shut up,” she said in a stage whisper. “Thrillkill asked me to come to his office.”

“Not like this,” said the kid, who seemed to have gotten a really bad haircut over the break. His pale red hair looked as if someone had taken a machete to it. “You’re not supposed to listen to other people’s conversations.”

“I’m not listening,” she protested. “I’m waiting for a lull.”

“Are too.”

“Am not.”

“Are—”

“What’s going on out there?” Headmaster Thrillkill poked his head out. His beard was covered with crumbs. “Oh, Miss Lester, I’m glad to see you. I have a task for you. Will you please stop by my office after your classes? Now off you go.” He shooed the two first-years off, then turned back to the teachers and closed the door behind him.

“He’s going to give it to you,” said the kid. “Wish I were a fly on the wall. Probably something about how you helped that crook Nick Muffet infiltrate the school and—”

“You are a fly,” said Amanda. “You’re nothing but a bug, David Wiffle. I feel sorry for you. Go back to your dog poop.”

“Ha ha! You wish. You just can’t deal with the fact that *I*’m descended from an aristocrat. I’ll have you know that my ancestor, Sir Bailiwick Wiffle, was the most popular and successful detective of the 1930s, way beyond . . .”

But Amanda wasn’t listening. What was up with Thrillkill? He hadn’t taken them to task for their arguing, and he’d given no indication that he thought they’d been eavesdropping. The

LESTRADE, MEET HOLMES

omission only added to Amanda's worry, especially because he didn't seem to remember that he'd asked her to come to his office in the first place.

What could the headmaster want from her? Did it have anything to do with the argument the teachers were having? She didn't want to know. The man had thawed a bit by the end of last term, but he was still demanding, gruff, and awkward. And yet if she didn't know what he wanted she would be caught unaware by whatever it was, and that might be even more unpleasant.

"And by the way, it wasn't cool what you and that criminal did to me. You got me in a lot of trouble over that kicking thing. I'm not done with you, Lester."

Wiffle was referring to the time he'd accidentally injured Amanda with an errant kick in self-defense class. Despite her antagonism toward him, she had taken the high road and insisted that it was an accident, but Nick, who always came to the rescue, had tried to punch him and ended up twisting his ankle. The teacher had punished the kid anyway, and now he'd never let her forget that there was a permanent note in his file.

"You don't scare me, chicken hawk," she said. She glanced at the clock. "OMG, you're going to be late to class. Can't afford another detention, can you?"

Wiffle took one look and started running toward their observation class. He was so predictable.

Amanda knew she should go too, but suddenly she heard the name "Holmes" from behind the door. Oh brother. It was probably the new kid—Sherlock Holmes's descendant, Scapulus Holmes, whom Thrillkill had mentioned at the end of last term.

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

What was *he* going to be like? And what could he possibly have to do with the missing item? Did they think he had taken it?

It was true that a few short months ago Amanda would have done anything to avoid Sherlock Holmes. And it was true that now she was somewhat less sensitive, although not entirely sanguine, about the man who'd made her own ancestor, Inspector G. Lestrade of Scotland Yard, and by extension *her*, a laughingstock. She had finally decided that she was no longer embarrassed to be the descendant of a police detective known by all to be a dodo. She was pretty sure she had resolved all that. Lestrade wasn't her and she wasn't him. *She* was going to be the greatest detective ever, as well as the greatest filmmaker, her life's desire, despite her duddy genes. But theory was one thing and practice another. The new kid was probably here, right now, doing his worst. This was getting juicy as well as nerve-racking. She had to find out more.

"Chop, chop," Miss Lester, said Professor Mukherjee, the legal issues teacher, who had suddenly emerged from Thrillkill's office to look for something in the anteroom. "We don't want to be late on the first day of class, do we?"

Nuts. There was no way she'd hear anything now. "Er, no, Professor. I was just . . . I'm on my way."

Oh well. If whatever it was was that important, there would be other opportunities to find out about it. Truth be told, Amanda was actually looking forward to seeing this legendary Holmes. At the end of last term, Thrillkill had said that a descendant of Sherlock Holmes was coming to Legatum, and he wanted *her* to show him the ropes. Her! Little did he know that she was the last person who should be doing that. All she'd have to do was take one look at the boy and she'd throw up—a stunt

LESTRADE, MEET HOLMES

she'd become well known for ever since that first day of spring term when she'd hurled all over poor Simon Binkle. Fortunately Simon was now a friend, although he could still be irritating in a nerdish sort of way.

But between that incident and the one in the dead bodies, aka pathology, class, where she'd made the whole class puke, she had quite a reputation and she didn't want to enhance it. She just knew, though, that this Holmes kid was going to be trouble, although what sort of trouble she wasn't sure. She was pretty sure he'd be arrogant. These sorts of things ran in families: the Wiffle family was arrogant, the Moriarty family was arrogant, Sherlock Holmes was arrogant, ergo their descendants would be the same. She wondered if Professor Ducey, the Logic teacher, would buy that argument. It seemed airtight to her.



Suddenly she realized she hadn't had breakfast. In her haste to get to the headmaster's office before class, she'd completely forgotten to eat and she was hungry. Breakfast was officially over as of one minute ago, but she took a chance and snuck into the dining room, making sure to keep an eye out for the new cook, whoever she might be. The previous one had been strict about mealtimes, and if you missed them you were out of luck. Of course the previous cook had also been a mole working on behalf of the Moriarty cartel, so you couldn't go by anything she'd done. Perhaps the new one would be nicer and a bit more lenient, not to mention less crooked.

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

Amanda hustled as quietly as she could to the dining room, which was next to the stairs leading to the girls' dorm. She looked around, first behind her, then to either side, then whirled around to get a 360-degree view and almost lost her balance. She heard some clunking coming from the kitchen, but there was no sign of the new cook. Was someone coming? Should she chance it?

She tiptoed up to the kitchen door and looked through the round window. No one. The new cook and her assistant must be in the pantry or outside accepting deliveries. She twirled around again, then felt both dizzy and silly. By the time she'd done all that twirling she could have been in and out with her prize. Enough of that. She tiptoed over to the sideboard and grabbed the last roll, sticking it in her bag for a surreptitious getaway. Yay! She'd done it! She stepped out of the dining room as quietly as she could and power walked down the hall toward her first class.

Unfortunately, as soon as she started moving she realized there was no way to consume the loot without anyone seeing, and if they did she'd probably get into trouble. As great a school as Legatum had turned out to be, sometimes it still felt like a prison. Should she duck into a closet and eat the roll? Why not? She opened the door to a supply area, stepped in, tore the thing in two, and stuffed it in her mouth, almost choking. When she'd swallowed the last lump she was so thirsty she knew she'd never make it to class, so she stopped at a water fountain and managed to get water all over her face, hair, and sweater. Great.

Normally she would have noticed the décor and committed it to memory but she was too rushed. With Professor Sidebotham's daily observation quizzes constantly requiring fresh material, Legatum's décor gremlins were always changing the look of the school, and the kids were supposed to note both

LESTRADE, MEET HOLMES

its present and past states in great detail. Some of the quizzes had been downright unfair though. Like the time when they had to gauge the thickness of dust on a clock. And then there was the time when she wanted to know how many heel marks there were on the Secret Seven House common room floor. Amanda knew that detectives had to hone their powers of observation, but sometimes Professor Sidebotham got carried away.

She opened her new class schedule and checked it to make sure she was going to the right place, barely noticing the camel standing in the main hall. The décor did not normally feature live animals, but the gremlins seemed to have been particularly active over spring break and had gone a bit crazy. They must have been in some kind of “Lawrence of Arabia” mood, which under normal circumstances Amanda would have very much appreciated, “Lawrence of Arabia” being one of her all-time favorite films. Now, however, nothing registered.

Summer Term First-Year Class Schedule

	<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Friday</i>
<i>8:00-9:15</i>	<i>Observation, Sidebotham</i>	<i>History of Detectives, Also</i>	<i>Crime lab, Stegelmeyer</i>	<i>Fires and explosions, Pole</i>	<i>Logic, Ducey</i>
<i>9:30-10:45</i>	<i>Fires and Explosions, Pole</i>	<i>Observation, Sidebotham</i>	<i>Cyberforensics, Redleaf</i>	<i>Crime lab, Stegelmeyer</i>	<i>Cyberforensics, Redleaf</i>
<i>11:15-12:30</i>	<i>Cyberforensics, Redleaf</i>	<i>Self-defense, Peaksribbon</i>	<i>Logic, Ducey</i>	<i>Self-defense, Peaksribbon</i>	<i>History of detectives, Also</i>
<i>12:30-1:30</i>	<i>Lunch</i>	<i>Lunch</i>	<i>Lunch</i>	<i>Lunch</i>	<i>Lunch</i>
<i>1:30-2:45</i>	<i>Crime lab, Stegelmeyer</i>	<i>Sketching, Browning</i>	<i>Disguise, Tumble</i>	<i>Observation, Sidebotham</i>	<i>Sketching, Browning</i>

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

She checked the first box. Yup. She was going the right way. But as she rushed down the hall, she couldn't stop thinking about not only what the teachers had said, but how they'd said it.

The school was full of tough people. None of the teachers was the least bit shy about expressing him- or herself, and they could be harsh with the students. But she'd never heard them argue like this. Maybe they'd hidden their internal disagreements up to now, but she didn't think so. She was pretty sure they'd always been united in their mission—to produce the best detectives in the world—and their approach to it. Or maybe Thrillkill had always quashed dissent. Whatever it was, she'd never heard a peep before today, not even when she'd overheard Professor Feeney talking about some missing item on the phone last term. At the time, the criminals and their methods teacher had obviously been concerned, but she wasn't arguing with whoever was on the other end. No, this situation was different.

Wait a minute: last term! Whatever it was had been missing for quite a while. Amanda was sure that at least a month had passed since Professor Feeney's phone call, if not longer. If that were the case, why were the teachers talking about it only now? Something must have happened recently. Could it have anything to do with Blixus Moriarty? He'd been in prison for a month. Might he have pulled something off from there?

As she turned to enter her observation class she almost collided with the door. Everyone was already seated, including David Wiffle, who had obviously eaten breakfast when he was supposed to. She made her way to an empty seat next to her roommate, petite, blind, copper-haired Ivy Halpin, whose

LESTRADE, MEET HOLMES

golden retriever guide dog, Nigel, wagged his tail at the sight of her. At first she ignored him, but when he looked at her with those soulful eyes she realized she'd been completely distracted and gave him a big hug. This gesture was not lost on David Wiffle, who rolled his eyes. Amanda stuck out her tongue. He mouthed, "Real mature." She turned away.

"Ivy," whispered Amanda. "I have to tell you something important."

"What—is something wrong?" Ivy said so quickly that Amanda started. Ivy was normally the calmest and most together of Amanda's friends. Even when she was concerned about something you could barely tell, but not now.

"Yes, but I don't know what," said Amanda.

"Is it serious?" Ivy reached out and petted Nigel so hard that hair flew off in all directions.

"Yes." Amanda looked around to make sure no one was listening. That Wiffle kid was so nosy.

"Super serious?"

"It could be really bad. I'll tell you after class."

"Is it about Editta?" said Ivy. "She didn't make it to the dorm last night." She looked like she was about to cry.

"She's not here? No, that isn't it."

Amanda looked around. No Editta. Since the whole first-year class took the same courses their friend from down the hall should have been there. She was probably just late though. Most people had returned from the holiday over the weekend but there were always a few stragglers. Maybe there was a traffic jam on the M1.

"I tried to phone her but all I got was her voicemail," said Ivy. "Five times. I'm getting worried. I don't know why. It's not that

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

late. Are you sure your thing doesn't have anything to do with this?"

"I'm sure. Still, it isn't like her not to show up. You know how superstitious she is. Everything has to be just so or she freaks out."

"Yes. That's what I thought." Ivy twitched in her seat and resettled her butt in her chair. It was a small butt and there was plenty of space to work with.

"I wonder if there's a way to smoke her out." Amanda didn't realize it, but she was mirroring Ivy, wriggling her slightly larger but no longer pudgy butt into her own seat.

"What do you mean?"

"You know how she's always counting things and looking for magic numbers and stuff?"

"Uh huh." That she was. Editta Sweetgum was one of the most superstitious, OCD people Amanda had ever met. The trait seemed to run in her family. From the way Editta described all the odd things her mother believed, she sounded like she practiced voodoo or something.

"How about if we send her three messages one right after the other? When she counts them she'll see how important they are and she'll answer." Ivy tapped the arm of her chair three times to demonstrate. She had a great sense of rhythm.

"I see. A code. Like a light that blinks so many times for yes and so many times for no."

"Exactly."

"Let's do it. Here I—"

Ivy's other roommate, Amphora Kapoor, a tall, chestnut-skinned girl with long dark hair who had just entered and was

LESTRADE, MEET HOLMES

sitting on the other side of Ivy, turned to them and interrupted with, “Hey. I hate to bring up the topic of Nick . . .”

Simon Binkle, who was sitting behind the girls, leaned forward and said, “Then don’t.”

“Butt out, Simon,” said Amphora.

“You butt out,” said Simon.

“I see you’re still irritating. Apparently the break did nothing to change that.” Unfortunately she was right. Simon could be extremely annoying.

“Apparently it did nothing to change your bad temper.” He was right too. Amphora could be tetchy, especially with him. The two were like chalk and cheese.

“Oh, stop it, you two,” said Ivy. “What’s wrong with you?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” said Amphora. “Ask him.” Simon glared at her. “Anyway, I heard they’re moving Nick’s mother from one prison to another. She’s going to be in the same one as his father. I wonder if she’ll try to escape. Do you think she could?”

“I would,” said Simon. Amphora turned around and gave him a long dirty look. “She has nothing to lose. Lots of prisoners escape. Look at Bosul Fopy and Cowboy Quash. They got away from the two toughest maximum-security prisons in the country. Fopy tunneled under his cell for a mile. A mile! And Quash got away while they were moving him. Of course he had help from his mates, but the Moriartys have lots of friends who aren’t locked up. Yeah, she’ll give it a go.”

“Thanks a lot, Simon,” said Amphora. “That was really helpful. What if she comes after Thrillkill, or Amanda?”

This was a thought that hadn’t occurred to Amanda. When she’d helped capture the Moriartys she’d thought that was that.

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

It had never occurred to her that either of them might escape. If she'd been thinking from a filmmaker's point of view, she'd have got it at once because the prospect of escape would have added suspense and danger to the story and she would have milked it. But thinking like a detective she'd missed it. Boy, she still had a lot to learn. And BTW, ouch. The thought of either of those two coming after her was terrifying.

"Good morning, class," said Professor Sidebotham. Amanda started. She had been so wrapped up in picturing Mavis Moriarty coming after her with an axe that she hadn't seen the teacher enter the room. Ivy jabbed Amanda with her elbow and mouthed the word "Editta," but because the teacher was watching them Amanda put her phone away without having sent the texts. She'd have to do it later.

Suddenly Simon poked her in the back. "Hey," he whispered. "Did you see that camel?"

"Mr. Binkle," said Professor Sidebotham loudly. "I'm so glad you have volunteered to start the class. Come up here, please. And remove your fedora in the classroom."

Simon was always wearing his fedora now, ever since the first day of school when he'd begun to create his detective's mystique in Professor Also's history of detectives class. The look included said hat and sometimes a red sweater vest. The hat suited him better than Amanda had thought it would, but she still wasn't convinced about the vest, which she felt was too old a look for a twelve-year-old. Maybe not in the UK though. At home in L.A. people would have thought he looked ridiculous. Everyone was more formal here. Everyone but her, that is.

Every time Simon took the hat off you could see that crazy cowlick of his, and then he'd smack his head constantly trying to

LESTRADE, MEET HOLMES

get it to lie flat. Now he removed the hat and immediately felt for the disobedient hairs. *Slap, slap*. His efforts did no good. He grumbled under his breath and slunk up to the front of the class.

“Stand up straight,” said Professor Sidebotham. Simon complied. “That’s better. Now, let’s do a little exercise. Class, has Mr. Binkle gained in height since last term?”

Last term was about ten days ago. If Simon had grown since then it would be a miracle. Ivy raised her hand. Amanda noticed that the floor around her chair was covered with dog hair.

“Miss Halpin?” said the teacher.

“Simon has grown about a quarter of an inch in the last two weeks,” said Ivy. “His voice is coming from a slightly different place now.”

Ivy was already an amazing detective. She may have been sightless, but her ears were incredible. She could detect better than any of the other kids just by listening. If she said Simon had grown a quarter of an inch, he had.

“I don’t think so,” blurted out David Wiffle.

Oh no. Here we go. Amanda sat back in anticipation of the argument to come.

“Mr. Wiffle, from now on wait until I call on you,” said Professor Sidebotham. “Now, why don’t you think Mr. Binkle has grown?”

“Sorry, Professor. But no one grows a quarter of an inch in ten days.”

The class laughed.

“This is a class in observation, Mr. Wiffle. Not common wisdom,” said the teacher.

More laughter. Amanda was particularly gratified to see the thorn in her side taken down a peg, especially by an old lady.

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

“But aren’t we supposed to use everything we know to solve crimes?” said the thorn.

“In general, yes,” said Professor Sidebotham, “but this is a class in observation. You must perceive what’s around you, not project onto it.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The Wiffle kid looked more annoyed than usual. He didn’t like being wrong, and he *really* didn’t like being laughed at.

“What is the answer, Mr. Binkle? You have been keeping track of your height and weight as I instructed, have you not?”

Simon looked like he wanted to sink into the floor. “Yes, Professor.”

Amanda leaned over to Ivy and said, “I don’t know what his problem is. He looks good.” She was right. Simon was tall and trim, albeit a bit geeky-looking.

Ivy whispered back, “Too personal.” Amanda nodded, then realized Ivy couldn’t see her, so she said, “Yeah. We *are* talking about Simon, aren’t we?”

“We’re waiting, Mr. Binkle,” said the teacher.

“I, um, er . . .”

“Out with it. Have you grown or haven’t you?”

“I, uh, yes. I’ve grown a quarter of an inch since the end of last term.”

The students let out a yell—that is, all the students except Mr. Wiffle.

“Gold star, Miss Halpin,” said Professor Sidebotham. “Better luck next time, Mr. Wiffle.”

This humiliation did not go over well with the Wiffle kid. He groused under his breath and made faces at his freckled friend Gordon Bramble, who was sitting next to him as usual.

LESTRADE, MEET HOLMES

“Now then, class,” said Professor Sidebotham. “I know you’ve all seen the camel in the hall. I want you all to text me the answer to this question within ten seconds: one hump or two? Miss Halpin, you may skip this exercise if you desire. Go.”

“That’s all right, Professor,” said Ivy. “I have an answer.” She started texting into her specially adapted phone.

Ack! Amanda had no idea. She’d run right past the animal and had barely noticed it. She didn’t want to blow another of Professor Sidebotham’s pop quizzes. At least she had a fifty-fifty chance, though. She took a chance and texted “1.”

“Time,” said the teacher. “Let’s see what we have. Ten ones, nineteen twos, and what’s this? None? Who said none?” She peered out over the class. “I don’t like wisecracs.”

“But it didn’t have any,” called out David Wiffle. “It’s a flatback highland humpless from Tanzania.”

“Actually, he’s right,” said Simon, thumbing his phone. “And ironically, it was discovered by a biologist named Humphrey something. Pretty good, eh? Hump, Humphrey?” He started to crack up, then stopped abruptly. “I knew that. Why did I say one hump?” He reddened again.

“Well done, Mr. Wiffle. It was a trick question. You passed with flying colors. The rest of you, this is what happens when you let your expectations color your observations. Empty your mind of preconceived notions. Do not see what you expect to see. See what is.”

Amphora raised her hand.

“Yes, Miss Kapoor,” said the teacher.

“Professor, if there really were no humps, why did you say we’re wisecracs.”

Oh great, thought Amanda. Now she’d stepped in it.

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

“Part of my strategy to trick you, Miss Kapoor. Be ever vigilant. Don’t let your senses fool you. And on that note, I’d like to announce that we will be using our senses in a very concentrated fashion in one week. We will be going on a field trip to Blackpool.”

“Yay!” “Hurrah!” “Cool!” “Radical!” “Sweet!” said the class.

Amanda leaned over to Ivy. “What’s Blackpool?”

“It’s a huge amusement park-y place. Kind of like Disney World except way bigger and with lots more stuff to do.”

“Oh, cool! I love Space Mountain.”

“Now, while I expect that you will enjoy yourselves, the purpose of the trip is to practice observing,” said the professor, ambling around the room. “You will need to be ready for anything, and I do mean *anything*. I will be presenting observing exercises on the spot. These will count toward your grade, so it will behoove you to pay attention. Mr. Bramble, please put your phone away.”

“Yes, Professor. Sorry, Professor,” said Gordon Bramble, stuffing his phone in his pocket. Amanda just knew he’d been playing games instead of listening.

“For example, I might ask you to pick out a certain number of items and make a story out of them. Miss Lester, you should be good at that. I’m looking forward to sitting in on your storytelling seminar.”

“Thank you, Professor.” Amanda beamed. Thrillkill had asked her to present a special storytelling workshop to the class, and she was so excited she couldn’t wait.

“Or, I might ask you to give me the background of a number of items that have something in common. For example, I want to know where all the blue items within ten feet might have come

LESTRADE, MEET HOLMES

from. How many of this or that are there? Move your point of view n degrees and tell me how the scene has changed. If you had to testify in court about this or that, what would you say? These are only some of the questions I'll be asking. Others will come as a complete surprise and I expect you to rise to the challenge." She stopped at Prudence Starshine's seat and stared directly at the slender golden-haired girl, who quailed under her gaze.

"You will also describe your methods. I will ask you to write a paper on this topic later. Hearing about how each student works will allow you to expand on what you see, and later you will look at a given scene the way one or another of your classmates does. So, shared experiences will be critical." She glanced from Owla Snizzle to Clive Ng. "Perhaps you, Miss Snizzle, and you, Mr. Ng, will team up." Both kids looked terrified.

"And don't forget to use all of your senses. Miss Halpin, obviously I don't expect you to use your eyes, but I want you to help the other students develop their auditory, olfactory, and tactile senses. In fact I would like you to prepare some lectures on this topic. Please see me at the end of the day to discuss this project."

Ivy grinned for the first time. "Yes, ma'am." Then she turned to Amanda and said, "You're better at this stuff than I am. She should ask you. You notice stuff because of your film training."

"I'm not better," whispered Amanda. "It's just that when you're responsible for every detail of look and feel, you notice everything. But you're naturally better."

"No, I'm not," said Ivy, looking like she'd lost her best friend.

What was up with her? Amanda was starting to worry. She looked around the classroom. "Still no Editta, I see."

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

“I know,” said Ivy. “I don’t like this. You don’t think her parents pulled her out of school, do you?”

“I don’t see why. And even if they did she’d say goodbye.”

“Yes, she would. This isn’t good.”

Suddenly the door opened and Headmaster Thrillkill stuck his head in. He gave a sign to Professor Sidebotham, then entered followed by a nice-looking dark-skinned boy wearing a bow tie and a serious expression. The kid seemed to gleam. The buttons on his blazer glinted like diamonds, the creases in his trousers were impossibly perfect, and he was wearing freshly buffed tasseled loafers. Even his short afro sparkled. He looked like he’d just arrived from the 1950s.

“Sorry to interrupt, Professor,” said Thrillkill, “but I have a new student for you. Class, this is Scapulus Holmes.”

The room went silent. The boy stood by the door and smiled ever so slightly.

Amanda took in the sight before her. *This* was Holmes? This vision of smugness? Ugh. He was going to be awful—worse than she’d expected. Who dressed like that? He was obviously so self-involved that he couldn’t recognize how real people looked and behaved. She wanted to run up and pull that prissy little bow tie off his neck, rub dirt on those too-shiny buttons, and scuff up his look-at-me shoes.

Before she knew it she had blurted out, “OMG, what a dork!” Then, realizing what she’d done, she turned as red as Simon’s sweater and bolted from the room, leaving behind a roomful of gaping would-be detectives.

GORDON BRAMBLE EXPLODES

Amanda had pulled some stupid stunts in her life, but reacting to Sherlock Holmes's descendant that way was the worst ever. How gauche could she be? She could hear Nick's voice in her head saying, "Good one, Lestrade." He had called her by her ancestor's name when he turned mean, and it had stung like a thousand wasps. She was so ashamed she wanted to die. How could she ever go back into that room? Maybe she should just stow away on another delivery truck the way she'd done last term when she was trying to find her father, and go home, or anywhere that wasn't Legatum. Her parents had offered her the chance to go back to L.A. and live with relatives. Maybe she should take it and leave this craziness behind.

Actually that might not be such a bad idea. Maybe she didn't belong at Legatum at all. For a girl who prided herself on her observational skills, she had really messed up. How could she have failed to see what Nick really was? Now that she looked back, it was obvious he'd been playing her. Was she that stupid?

Obviously she was. He'd known she was gullible. Out of a class of thirty students he'd singled her out as the one most likely to believe his lies. By spending so much time with her, he'd limited his exposure to others who might have been more skeptical. He must have had highly developed turkey radar. What was it that had made her such an obvious choice? Of course—what else? It was those awful Lestrade genes again.

She heard the door to the observation classroom open and saw Professor Thrillkill come out. Fortunately she was out of his line of sight and was able to duck around a corner without being seen. She tried to make like Ivy and prick up her ears, but her heart was pounding so hard it was difficult to hear footsteps. Still there was the headmaster's voice, joined by another she didn't recognize. She caught the words "Blixus" and "Feeney," but she couldn't make out anything else. She was sure the two of them were discussing the missing item, but she was unable to glean anything beyond that. Nevertheless, the conversation seemed to add proof to her fear that something weird was happening.

She knew she was going to have to face the music so she tiptoed back toward the classroom. Thankfully, Professor Thrillkill and whoever he was talking to had disappeared, but she was still supposed to see him later. Ugh. He'd definitely say something about her outburst. Just when he'd seemed to thaw a little she'd had to go and ruin everything. Typical.

She opened the door slowly to minimize the creaking and stepped back inside. The room was dead still except for Professor Sidebotham's voice. The new student had found a seat. Everyone turned to look at her, obviously embarrassed on her behalf, except for Wiffle and his friend Gordon Bramble, who giggled. She sat back down and drew her body inward, as if to hide in

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

plain sight. Should she say something to Holmes? He was sitting way across the room, paying rapt attention to the teacher. He seemed to be acting like nothing had happened but she couldn't tell for sure. He certainly didn't seem to be brooding, or laughing. He was a complete cipher. Well, wasn't that just like a Holmes—completely wrapped up in himself. Still, she'd done a terrible thing and there would be a price to pay.

"Miss Lester? I asked you a question," said Professor Sidebotham.

The whole class, Holmes included, turned to look at her.

"I'm sorry, Professor. Would you mind repeating it?" Amanda's face felt so hot she thought she could fry an egg on it.

"I said would you please elaborate on my point." The professor looked at her sternly.

"Uh, sure. Er, you were talking about using all the senses instead of just sight." It sounded good anyway.

"That was ten minutes ago, Miss Lester. Please join us in the twenty-first century."

"Sorry, Professor. I was, uh, I didn't hear what you said."

"No, you did not, Miss Lester. You committed a faux pas, which is entirely human, but a detective stands up and accepts the consequences of her actions. She doesn't run away. Being out of the room is no excuse. I'm deducting fifty points from your next test. Is that clear?"

The Wiffle kid was gloating so hard he looked like a mask of himself. Amanda felt that she'd gotten off easy, however, and said, "Yes, Professor. It won't happen again."

"No, it won't. Now, class . . ."

Professor Sidebotham's voice faded out of Amanda's consciousness. Maybe she had been too cocky thinking she was

GORDON BRAMBLE EXPLODES

over the whole Holmes thing. She'd just demonstrated that Holmes and his family could still get to her. This was not good.

Except that it wasn't her, it was him. She was the victim. She decided she hated Holmes more than ever. She even convinced herself that it was his fault that Nick had betrayed her and the school. Holmes and his family must have provoked the Moriartys into that whole sugar scheme and made them so angry that they'd had to use their twelve-year-old son to infiltrate the detectives' school. Moriarty was only Moriarty because he had Holmes to play off of. If there were no Holmes, he'd just be an ordinary, run-of-the-mill loser. She seethed so hard she could barely keep it together.

When the class ended Holmes was nowhere to be seen. Amphora ran to Amanda and said, "I can't believe you said that." Although she knew what she'd done was horrific, Amphora's accusing comment got her dander up and she huffed off.

Then Simon came up to her and said, "Way to go, Amanda."

"Don't be mean," said Ivy, who had joined them. "It wasn't the greatest thing to say, but it's not the end of the world."

"It was incredibly embarrassing," said Amanda. "Who's the dork here—him or me?"

"Live and learn," said Simon in his maddening way.

"I think he's cute," said Amphora, rejoining the group.

"You would," said Simon.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Here we go again. Amanda wondered if those two would ever get along. Probably not.

"Nothing much. You're just a bit moony," Simon said.

"What do you mean moony?" Amphora crossed her arms the way she often did with him.

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

"You're always mooning over guys, that's all," he said.

"I don't moon. Ivy, do I moon?" Amphora uncrossed her arms and turned to her roommate.

"No, I don't think you moon," said Ivy.

"What do you mean you don't *think* I moon?"

"You don't moon, okay?" said Ivy with uncharacteristic pique. What was up with her? Maybe this thing with Editta was really getting to her.

"What am I going to do?" said Amanda. "I hate that guy. I mean, I don't hate *that* guy because I don't know him, but I hate Sherlock Holmes and everything about him, and—well, I *do* hate that guy because did you see how he looks? He's going to be terrible. And now he knows I hate him and Thrillkill is forcing me to be his big sister and that kid is going to cause me so much grief and what about all the other kids who heard me say that, and Sidebotham too?"

"You're making too much of this," Amphora said.

"Agreed," said Simon, astonishing everyone. He never agreed with her.

"I don't think so," said Amanda. She was pacing now.

"They'll get over it," said Simon. "Anyway, he looked fine to me."

"I don't think he looks bad at all," said Amphora. "It's refreshing when someone pays attention to their appearance."

"Yeah, I saw you noticing him," said Simon. "You looked like a dog discovering a steak." Amphora glared at him.

"He has a lovely voice," said Ivy.

"When did you hear his voice?" said Amphora. She looked startled for some reason Amanda couldn't fathom.

GORDON BRAMBLE EXPLODES

"He said something under his breath," said Ivy. "You didn't hear?"

"No," said Amphora.

"Well, he does," said Ivy.

"You girls are nuts," said Simon, shaking his head and walking off.

"Did you do what we talked about?" Ivy said to Amanda.

"What? Oh, you mean the texts?" She rummaged in her bag. "Got it." She held her phone at the ready. The light hit it at just the right angle and it glinted.

"Yes."

"What texts?" said Amphora, who seemed annoyed at having been left out.

"Have you heard anything from Editta?" said Amanda.

"What? No. Where is she? Why isn't she here?" Amphora seemed to be reading disaster into the question. She did that a lot.

"Exactly," said Ivy.

"We're going to text her three messages in quick succession and see if she answers," said Amanda.

"Oh, I see," said Amphora. "Like a pattern. She'll answer that."

"We hope so," said Ivy. "Amanda, please do it now."

"Okay." Amanda quickly thumbed until she had sent three identical texts in rapid fashion. The girls stood there for a second and stared at the tiny screen. Nothing. "We have to give it some time. Maybe she's busy."

"Yes," said Ivy. "I'm sure that's it."

"Definitely," said Amphora, who didn't look at all convinced.

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS



“I need to tell you something,” Amanda said to Ivy when Amphora had left. “It’s important.”

“Something bad?”

“It is bad, I’m afraid,” said Amanda. “Maybe very bad.”

“Oh no,” said Ivy. “You’d better tell me quick.”

Amanda explained what she’d overheard before class. As she revealed more and more of the detail, Ivy’s expression grew increasingly serious until her brow was deeply creased with worry.

“This isn’t good,” she said. “We need to do something.”

“Do what?” said Amanda. “We don’t even know what’s missing.”

“We have to figure it out fast,” said Ivy. “You’re right. We’ve never heard the teachers act like this before. Something terrible is about to happen. Anything to do with the Moriartys can’t be good. I need to know more. I’ll bet I can pick up something if I nose around.”

“Okay. Let’s talk about this at lunch. Maybe Simon and Amphora can help.”

“If they ever stop fighting. What is it with those two?”

“I don’t know. They sure don’t like each other.”

“No. They don’t.”



GORDON BRAMBLE EXPLODES

Amanda, Ivy, and Nigel scooted off to their fires and explosions class. They wished they'd taken it last term, when the school's garage had exploded as part of the class project. As they investigated the explosion and the fire it had started, the kids were unsure what to look for and how to preserve the evidence, but the teachers had structured the exercise to be difficult on purpose. They'd wanted to test the new class's skill at handling an unfamiliar and dangerous situation. In the end, only Holmes House, which was where Amanda, Ivy, Amphora, Simon, Editta, and Nick had been assigned, had cracked the mystery. The other houses, especially Secret Seven House, which included David Wiffle and Gordon Bramble, had resented them, going so far as to complain that Holmes House had cheated, which had not gone over well with the powers that be. Holmes House's victory had helped melt Thrillkill's icy exterior and led to him asking Amanda to teach that storytelling class.

The first thing Amanda noticed when she arrived at Professor Pole's classroom was Scapulus Holmes sitting in the first row. Suddenly she remembered that she was supposed to take him under her wing and show him around. There was no way she could do that now. She'd rather be pulled apart by wild camels. Then she had a thought: maybe Thrillkill had forgotten. The kid looked like he could take care of himself just fine. He'd found his way around so far. What did he need her for? *She'd* done all right without a guide. What was the guy, five years old? He was a Holmes. She'd carry on normally and see what happened.

Professor Pole was an affable man in his forties. As a child he had been burned in a house fire, and half his face was scarred and some of his hair missing as a result. If you didn't know him, you

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

might be afraid of him because he looked kind of scary, but once he spoke he was so funny and nice that you quickly forgot.

Not only was Professor Pole fun to be around, he was also brilliant. A physicist by trade, he solved astrophysics problems in his spare time, a pursuit he found relaxing. He also hunted for fossils and had even discovered some dinosaur bones on a dig in Montana. The class promised to be challenging, useful, and fun, and Amanda was looking forward to it, despite the fact that she'd heard it could be dangerous. She was getting used to risk now and wasn't nearly as worried as she'd been a few months before.

"Boo!" yelled Professor Pole while the students were still jabbering among themselves. A couple of the kids dropped things on the floor and one or two clutched their chests as if they'd had a heart attack. "Explosions. That's exactly how they occur. They're strong, sharp, loud, sudden, and almost always unexpected. But you can prepare yourselves for them, and that's one of the things we're going to learn how to do in this dynamite class. Ha ha!" He beamed, obviously proud of his little joke. A couple of the kids groaned, but quite a few of them broke into nervous laughter. Amanda felt her body tense up. She was just sure he was going to try to scare them again.

"You there, Mr. Bramble." Professor Pole motioned to Gordon. "Come up here, please. That's right. Don't be shy."

Gordon Bramble, a me-too sort of boy who normally relied on his friend David Wiffle to take the lead, looked embarrassed and confused, but he managed to get himself to the front of the class.

"Now, I want you to add this liquid to this beaker. Before you do, please put these goggles on." Professor Pole pointed to a clear vessel that contained glittering blue powder. It was sitting in a

GORDON BRAMBLE EXPLODES

pan. The liquid he was referring to resided in a smaller beaker that looked like the larger beaker's child. Amanda had visions of Dr. Frankenstein and his monster. What a great film that was with Boris Karloff. She should watch it again.

Gordon took the goggles and nervously fitted them over his eyes. They made him look like a deep-sea diver. He eyed Professor Pole tentatively, as if to say, "Please don't make me do this."

"All right, go," said the professor. Gordon stood stock-still. "It's okay. I promise."

Shaking visibly, Gordon held his arm out as far as it would go and gingerly picked up the beaker with the clear liquid. Then, standing as far away from the large beaker as he could, he poured about a drop into it.

"More," said Professor Pole. "Do the whole thing at once. Upsy daisy."

This baby talk seemed to embarrass Gordon so much that he stood closer to the large beaker and dumped the clear liquid in, whereupon a sparkly blue explosion blasted out of it and overflowed into the pan. It made a snapping sound, like a whip being cracked. It was more show than danger, though. The stuff didn't even get on Gordon's clothes. He winced and turned away, then slowly pivoted around and, seeing what had happened, smiled from ear to ear.

"Awesome," he said. "Can I do it again?"

"Yes, you may," said the professor. "How about a different color? But first, let me explain what just happened. The large beaker contained baking soda with blue dye and glitter. The smaller beaker contained white vinegar. Perhaps you can smell it." Gordon wrinkled his nose and nodded. "The baking soda and

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

the vinegar reacted and caused the mixture to explode. So for you cooks out there, never mix those two ingredients together or you'll have a birthday cake to remember. Now, Mr. Bramble, would you like to do the honors?"

"Professor, Professor," yelled out David Wiffle. "Can I try?"

"You'll get your turn, Mr. Wiffle. Let's see what Mr. Bramble can cook up."

Now that he knew he wasn't going to die, Gordon really got into the experiment. He mixed several different colors of dye and glitter and put them all into the same container. The explosion they created looked like the Fourth of July. He got so excited that he managed to trip. As he started to fall, Scapulus Holmes raced to the front of the room and caught him before he crashed to the floor. Now Gordon was embarrassed again. He murmured a word of thanks and asked if it was okay to return to his seat. Professor Pole nodded.

"Thank you, Mr. Holmes," said the professor. "That was quick thinking."

"Thank you, sir," said Holmes. Ivy was right. He did have a nice voice. He was probably a good singer. As if Amanda cared.

As he turned to go back to his seat, Holmes caught her eye. Oh no. He was probably out to get her after that awful thing she'd said. He stared for a second, then slowly began to smile in a way that seemed to say, "Thanks for the joke." In spite of herself, Amanda felt her lips widen, and before she knew it she was grinning too. The boy gave her a wink. Wait a minute. Was he serious or making fun of her? Whatever he was up to, she would *not* be made a fool of again. She felt herself stiffen. Holmes and Moriarty, Moriarty and Holmes. They were two sides of the same coin. She couldn't believe she'd ever thought

the ancestral Moriarty was cool. Well, she was over that bad girl stage. From now on, she would give these guys the disrespect they deserved. She frowned. Seeing the change in her, Holmes's face fell and he turned away.



Despite Holmes's odd behavior, and despite the fact that Professor Pole's program that simulated fires and explosions reminded Amanda of the *Explosions!* game Nick was so crazy about, she enjoyed the rest of the class and looked forward to the exercises the teacher had assigned. The students were not to try any more real-life experiments for the first few weeks of the class. Rather, they would simulate various types of disasters digitally, starting with the garage explosion and fire that had kicked off the class project last term. After that they would tackle electrical fires and gas explosions before moving on to dynamite and lightning fires. Professor Pole's graphics were incredibly cool, but the real power of his program was in the physics and chemistry, which he'd worked on in consultation with experts around the world. Later on the kids would do lab experiments, but only if they achieved certain scores on the simulations and with strict safety protocols in place. Everyone was super excited, especially Simon, who started planning all sorts of weird conflagrations. He had some nutty idea about seeing if he could change Earth's tilt so he could fix global warming. Amanda and Ivy were looking forward to seeing *that*.

"You can tease me all you want," he said. "Glitter explosions in a beaker are nothing. The point of all this training is to solve

big, important problems. If you must know, I wrote to that professor at UCLA over the break, the one who invented the microscope/cell phone apparatus we used to detect the sugar virus last term. I told him we used the lens from my glasses and it worked great. I asked him if he thinks that's worth an academic paper, and I'm sure he'll say yes."

Simon and Professor Kindseth had discovered a way to turn a cell phone into a powerful microscope using an attachment manufactured on a 3D printer. The only catch had been that they didn't have the proper lens for it, that is until they hit on the idea of using one from Simon's coke bottle glasses. The microscope had worked beautifully, and they had discovered that the cook's pink sugar was actually tainted with a destructive virus.

"That's admirable," said Amanda.

"I'll say," said Ivy. "I'm impressed."

"I think it's nuts," said Amphora, invading their little circle. "You're twelve. There's no way you could publish a scientific paper. Fugeddaboutit." She sounded silly trying to affect a Brooklyn accent with her posh London/Cambridge way of talking.

"I don't care about your opinion, dodo," said Simon. "You know, one day your frivolous behavior is going to come back to bite you. You should get a clue and grow up."

"You're a prat," said Amphora. "I'm going to blow you up in my simulations. It will make the class so much more fun."

"You know what, you two?" said Ivy. "You're getting so predictable you're boring me. I've had enough. Come on, Amanda."

GORDON BRAMBLE EXPLODES

Ivy grabbed Amanda's arm, pulled Nigel's lead, and headed off toward the Holmes House common room. Amanda glanced behind her. Simon and Amphora were still arguing.

PROFESSOR REDLEAF'S SURPRISE

Amanda had never seen Ivy so edgy. She was normally the calmest person in the world, but something had rattled her. It couldn't be Editta's disappearance, which wasn't even a disappearance yet. And it couldn't be Simon and Amphora's constant bickering because Ivy was used to that. What was up?

The two girls ducked into the Holmes House common room, which this day had been decorated to look like an airplane hangar. Amanda found it baffling. She didn't know anything about planes, other than what she'd seen on the trip over from L.A., and she couldn't figure out what she was looking at. Ivy dragged her over to a couch and practically threw her down. Nigel sat next to Amanda and let his tongue loll out.

"What's going on?" Ivy demanded. She seemed more impatient than Amanda had ever seen her. Somehow her dark glasses made her look menacing when she was like that, which was weird considering that Ivy was less than five feet tall.

PROFESSOR REDLEAF'S SURPRISE

"Are you okay?" said Amanda, staring at her from this angle and that, trying to read her.

"No, I'm not okay. Something bad is going on around here and we have to find out what it is." The reflection from her sunglasses flashed as she moved her head.

"You mean what I told you earlier? How do you know about that?" She leaned in and kept her voice low so their conversation would be private.

"How do I know about anything?" said Ivy too loudly. Amanda jumped back as if she'd been hit. "I've heard stuff. You know how good my hearing is."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Amanda tried lowering her voice again.

"There wasn't time," said Ivy softly, getting the message. "I know something is up with the teachers. They're talking about catastrophe. We need to figure out what this is and fix it. They sound like they haven't any idea what to do, and that worries me half to death."

Amanda delivered the nutshell version of what she'd heard outside Thrillkill's office. Ivy kept shaking her head. Nigel wagged his tail against her, *whomp, whomp, whomp*, and she scratched her leg. Between Ivy's red hair and Nigel's golden coat, they looked like life itself against the backdrop of the hangar. Amanda wondered what it would be like to have colored hair. Brown was okay, but it wasn't very interesting.

"Yes, that confirms what I've been hearing," said Ivy when Amanda had finished. "What worries me the most is that the teachers seem so disorganized. I've never seen them like this. Do you think Mavis is really going to escape? If she does, maybe she'll break Blixus out of Strangeways too."

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

"I don't know," said Amanda. "They've gone up against the Moriartys before. Why should this time be any different?" A thought struck her. Maybe losing Nick had made the criminals more desperate and dangerous. It probably wasn't a good idea to raise the possibility, though. Everyone was sick to death of Nick, and every time she mentioned his name she felt like she was imposing.

"That's what I can't figure out," said Ivy. "Unless they have whatever it is the teachers lost. Do you have any idea what it could be?"

"Not a clue."

Amanda got up and started pacing, then remembered that she had to stay close to Ivy to keep anyone who walked in from hearing their conversation. She caught sight of the new clock Nick had hung up after breaking the old one, which had bothered Amanda with its loud ticking. Nick again. Why did everything have to remind her of him? If this kept up she'd do poorly in her classes. She had to exorcise him. Maybe she should learn to meditate. Or throw darts at his picture. Editta would probably have stuck pins in his effigy. Where was that girl anyway?

"Me either," said Ivy. "We're going to have to do it soon, though."

"Yes. Maybe we should talk tonight."

"Definitely. I'm a little worried about discussing all this in front of Amphora, though. She seems so distracted with all that fighting."

"I know what you mean," said Amanda. "She and Simon have gotten worse. Maybe they stored it all up over the break. Let's meet somewhere we don't usually go and she won't look for us."

PROFESSOR REDLEAF'S SURPRISE

"One of the labs?"

"How about the disguise room up on the top floor?" Amanda felt the most at home there. It was a theatrical place, full of costumes, wigs, makeup, and props. A filmmaker's dream.

"Yes, that sounds like a good idea. Eight o'clock?"

"You're on."



Amanda was really looking forward to cyberforensics class. The previous term when she'd needed to get into the Moriartys' computer she'd had no idea how to get past the logon screen. After that she'd promised herself she'd become an expert so that would never happen again.

The class was taught by Professor Redleaf, a white hat hacker of mysterious origin who was rumored to have broken into some of the most sensitive computer networks on the planet. A number of the older students said she came from the Amazon jungle. Others said she had been born in the heart of Africa. She always wore a white hat of one sort or another, Amanda guessed for symbolic reasons, and appeared to be completely emotionless, speaking in a voice that resembled a dial tone. She also seemed to be full of secrets, which wasn't unusual at Legatum, but her manner implied that her secrets were rather more sinister than those of the other teachers. There was an air of magic about her, which was saying something considering that detectives are among the least magical people in the world. What really floored Amanda, however, was that as soon as Scapulus Holmes walked into the class, Professor Redleaf seemed to know him and even

smiled at him, whereupon he smiled back and said, “Good morning, Professor. How’s that Silver Fern project coming along?”

Showoff! How did they know each other? Did this mean that Holmes was some hacking genius? Was he going to be the teacher’s pet? Amanda could feel herself fuming. She realized she was being irrational but she didn’t care. Sometimes irrationality was called for, and this seemed like one of those times. Who did he think he was, anyway? Here not half a day and already acting like the great Sherlock.

Professor Redleaf didn’t answer Holmes’s question out loud, but somehow Amanda got the feeling she had conveyed the answer anyway. Holmes seemed satisfied with whatever invisible message she had delivered and settled in his chair. Professor Redleaf started the class immediately after that, and told them that their project for the term was to divide into teams that would simultaneously try to hack into each other’s computers.

Instead of going by the school’s houses—Holmes, Secret Seven, Dupin, and Marple—the students would be assigned randomly using an algorithm Professor Redleaf had written. Amanda was disappointed to find that she wasn’t on the same team as her friends, who had been split up as well, but when she learned that she would be working with the Wiffle kid, she just about had a fit, and so did he. Whiny brat that he was, he asked the teacher if he could be transferred, a question Professor Redleaf wouldn’t dignify with an answer. Normally Amanda and the kid found themselves competing, and the idea of working together not only didn’t sit well with either of them, but seemed to make them hate each other even more. Amanda had no idea how she was going to manage this. The only consolation was that

PROFESSOR REDLEAF'S SURPRISE

she wasn't on the same team as Holmes and wouldn't have to listen to his bragging. Not that she knew for sure that he would brag. She just figured it was in his genes. That and winking, apparently.

Amanda knew the class was going to be hard, but when Professor Redleaf offered an overview full of unfamiliar jargon (she'd heard of SSL and IP addresses, but that was about it), she realized that it was going to be way more difficult than she'd imagined. She was conversant with a variety of media capture and editing programs, but the technical details that made it all work were another thing. Apparently Amphora was feeling the same way because when Amanda glanced at her, her mouth was hanging open. Ivy seemed unperturbed, thank goodness, and Simon, well Simon was eating the whole thing up with a relish Amanda had seen only when he'd made the smartphone microscope last term. Needless to say, Holmes was smiling as if he knew something the others didn't, which no doubt he did. If he already knew the professor, he must be a technical whiz. Oh great. Another freakish Holmes.

Suddenly it occurred to her that perhaps they would *all* emerge from the school as freaks. Look at the kind of observational skills they were developing. They were so attentive and detail-oriented that they might never be able to turn off all that analyzing and would be beset by runaway trivia racing through their heads day and night. And what about the self-defense training? Could they ever walk down a street again without imagining that everyone they saw posed a physical threat? No wonder all the teachers were so weird. This stuff warped a person. It had certainly warped Sherlock Holmes, but funnily enough not her ancestor, G. Lestrade. He was too dumb

to get it, and yet his stupidity had saved him and let him live a normal life. Maybe she *should* get out now, before she turned into a freakazoid.

Suddenly she realized that something was going on up front and she was so lost in her own morbid thoughts that she was missing it. Professor Redleaf was standing there staring at her screen with a horrified look on her face. She looked at Scapulus Holmes and said sharply, “Mr. Holmes, please see me after class.”

During the rest of the session Professor Redleaf seemed distracted. Everyone was jumpy as a result—except Holmes, who remained stolid. Just watching him convinced Amanda that Simon wasn’t the world’s most irritating nerd anymore. Holmes had just bumped him out of first place.



The first thing Amanda thought as she headed for lunch was that Professor Redleaf’s alarming surprise must have had something to do with the missing item. The second thing was, what was wrong with Ivy? And the third thing was that Editta was still AWOL. What was going on?

When she arrived at the dining room she could see that everything looked different from the way it had earlier. The tables, which were arranged lengthwise at 8:00 a.m., had been pushed together to form geometric shapes. The sideboards with beverages and condiments now stood smack in the middle of the room and sported bright-colored cloths decorated with abstract designs. The normal silverware had been replaced with clunky implements that were so heavy and awkwardly designed that it

PROFESSOR REDLEAF'S SURPRISE

was hard to eat with them. And each plate featured a great big hole in the middle. How you were supposed to eat off those was anyone's guess. It seemed that the décor gremlins had lost their minds along with everyone else. Or was this supposed to be a test? Maybe the students were supposed to rig up something before they put food on the plates so it wouldn't drip through. You never knew around here.

Whatever the intent, Simon had solved the problem by placing a glass over the hole in his plate, which seemed to do the trick. The other kids did likewise, except for Holmes, whom Amanda caught sticking a dessert plate under his. Typical. He had to do everything better than everyone else.

After placing a small portion of spinach lasagna around her glass, Amanda said to Ivy, Simon, and Amphora, "Something big is happening."

"Something big is always happening around here," said Simon. "That's what it means to be a detective." The sauce from his lasagna was starting to separate from the solid parts and roll toward the glass. Amanda wondered if it would make it through the hole.

"No, I mean something big and very bad," said Amanda.

"Ah, this must have something to do with Nick, then," said Simon, whereupon Amphora glared at him so hard that he stuck his tongue out.

"Actually, I don't know," said Amanda. "Maybe it does." She didn't like the idea that Nick had wreaked even more havoc than they knew about, but she couldn't discount the possibility.

"Well, what is it?" said Amphora. She hadn't quite managed to get her glass in the right place, and her food was definitely seeking the hole in the plate.

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

“Something really important to the school is missing and the teachers are going nuts. Thrillkill has completely lost it. When I showed up at his office this morning, he’d completely forgotten that he asked me to be there. He was like all, ‘Oh, hello, Miss Lester. Fancy meeting you here.’”

“Did he have his hair dryer?” Simon said. He was referring to the hair dryer the headmaster always carried in order to melt icicles. He had a morbid fear of them and destroyed them when they crossed his path. This late in the year (mid-April) there weren’t any, so Simon’s question was obviously designed to provoke rather than elucidate. Was something wrong with him too? Come to think of it, he was being more obnoxious than usual.

“Simon, cut it out,” said Amanda. “This is serious.”

“Sorry,” said Simon, looking down at his plate. The food had pooled around the sides of the glass, which were red with marinara sauce. It was getting to be a huge mess.

“Whatever it is, the teachers are fighting because of it.” Amanda’s food was pooling too. Simon was usually so good with engineering problems. Apparently his solution to this one needed some tweaking, however.

“Which teachers?” said Amphora, looking toward the kitchen.

“Scribbish, Hoxby, Peaksribbon, Mukherjee, I think Pargeter, and some others whose voices I didn’t recognize.”

“Were they yelling?” said Simon.

“Pretty much, yes,” said Amanda, trying to eat faster than the sauce could run. She wasn’t winning the battle.

“She’s right,” said Ivy. “I’ve been hearing things too.” Her plate was nice and neat. How did she do it?

PROFESSOR REDLEAF'S SURPRISE

"Oh?" said Amphora. "What things?" She looked at the kitchen again.

"Something important is missing and the teachers are blaming each other," said Ivy. "I don't know what it is or why it matters, but every time I hear them discussing it they act as if it's a disaster."

"Yes, that's what I've gathered too," said Amanda.

"Does this have anything to do with that phone call we heard Professor Feeney make last term?" said Simon, who now had a marinara mustache.

"What phone call?" said Ivy, who didn't.

"When Amanda and I were analyzing the sugar virus in the lab, we overheard Professor Feeney out in the hall talking to someone about something that was missing," said Simon. "She seemed upset."

"That was quite a while ago," said Ivy. "I didn't hear anything last term. I got the impression this was all new."

"It doesn't seem so," said Amanda. "What I can't figure out is why things have exploded now, though."

"We have to investigate," said Simon, who was definitely looking clownish. All he needed was a red nose. "You don't suppose this is another class project, do you?"

"Agreed, and no," said Ivy. "The teachers can be diabolical but this feels like a real crisis. And I've never heard of a second class project for first-years. Fern would have told me." Fern was Ivy's sister, and a fifth-year student. She knew everything about the school and Ivy often relied on her for critical information. "But when we do investigate, we can't let anyone know what we're doing. We don't want the teachers to know that we're aware of

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

whatever it is that's going on, and we don't want to alarm the other students."

"We're going to have to search the school," said Simon. Amanda did not want to see what was under his plate. For that matter, she was afraid to lift her own. She hoped the teachers weren't expecting them to clean the dining room after this little adventure.

"But we don't know what we're looking for," said Amphora. She looked down at her plate. "Don't you think this lasagna is amazing?" Everyone stopped eating and stared at her.

"I think we're going to have to go on the assumption that we'll know it when we see it, like what happened with the class project last term," said Ivy, ignoring Amphora's question. She was referring to the fact that when Headmaster Thrillkill and the teachers had presented the instructions for the class project, they had refused to tell them what the mystery was—only that they'd know it when they saw it. And they had. The garage had exploded in the middle of the night. You couldn't miss that.

"But how big is it?" said Amphora. "What if it's really, really tiny, like a piece of jewelry? How could we possibly find that?"

"It's a problem," said Amanda. "The teachers know what it is, and *they* can't find it. I don't think our chances are very good."

"Do you think we should ask Scapulus to help us?" said Simon.

"I knew it," said Amanda. "You like him, don't you?"

"Sure. Why not? He seems like a smart guy."

"That's your standard for whether you like people?" said Amphora.

"Not completely," said Simon. "But mostly." The implication was clear: he didn't think Amphora was smart and that was why

PROFESSOR REDLEAF'S SURPRISE

the two didn't get along. Amphora sighed so loud you could have heard her in the kitchen with dishes clattering and the refrigerator cycling.

"So do you?" said Simon.

"What?" said Amanda.

"Think we should ask him."

"Absolutely not."

"I knew it. You're afraid he's smarter than you are, aren't you?"

"SIMON!" said all three girls together, so loudly that everyone in the room, including Holmes, looked at them.

"Keep your voice down," Amanda said. "That isn't true and you know it. And by the way, you've got a red mustache." She indicated where it would be on her own face if she had one.

"I know what I saw and what I'm seeing now," said Simon. "And so what? I mean about the mustache." He felt his upper lip.

"Simon Binkle, you are the most exasperating person at Legatum," said Ivy. Amanda's mouth fell open. Ivy never talked like this. "Shut up. Now look, Amanda doesn't like Scapulus because she doesn't know him yet. In fact I'm not even sure she doesn't like him. What do you say, Amanda?"

"I don't know him," said Amanda, trying to wriggle out gracefully.

"I think he's cute," said Amphora dreamily.

"You think everyone is cute," said Simon.

"Not you," said Amphora.

"STOP IT, all of you!" yelled Ivy. Amanda had never heard her yell. "You're all acting like children. This is serious. Stop being petty and let's figure out what to do." She pushed her plate away. She'd barely touched her food.

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

By this time the entire dining room was staring at them. David Wiffle looked like he was going to say something but instead broke into a huge grin. Probably planning some revenge or other, Amanda thought. Why couldn't the guy chill out?

"We're all going to have to spy on the teachers," said Ivy. "I don't like invading anyone's privacy, but detectives aren't called snoops for nothing." She grinned. "That was a good one, wasn't it?"

"Very cool," said Amanda. She was glad to see Ivy making jokes. Things had been getting way too serious. "But how are we going to do that? Follow them around until they get together and listen outside their doors?"

"I've got an idea," said Simon. "I can make sound magnifiers. We'll all be able to hear like Ivy."

"Really?" said Amphora. "Aren't you worried they'll catch us?" She pushed her plate away as well, exposing a big red spot.

"Nah," said Simon. "How are they going to tell from so far away?" He lifted up his own plate, took one look underneath, and lowered it again. Amanda was sure the spot underneath was worse than Amphora's, but no more so than her own.

"I don't think it's exactly criminal to listen to people who aren't behind closed doors," said Ivy. "I'm sure they talk in public too." She lowered her glass to Nigel's mouth. The dog lapped loudly. This little ritual always astonished Amanda, who never would have been able to get away with something like that at home.

"I don't even mind listening at doors," she said, "if it's that serious. And I'm pretty sure they won't be watching us to see what we're doing. They seem completely preoccupied."

PROFESSOR REDLEAF'S SURPRISE

"I agree," said Ivy. "I'm not worried about being caught. How long do you think it will take to make these things, Simon?"

"Dunno, but I'll start researching right after class. Say, what did you think of Redleaf today?" He popped a marinara-drenched grape into his mouth.

"Very weird," said Amanda. "She looked like someone had just told her World War III had started."

"Agreed," said Amphora. "And she and Scapulus seemed to know each other from somewhere else. Think all of this weirdness is connected?"

"It might be," said Ivy. "We should listen super carefully. But I'm also worried about Editta and I can't see how she could be involved in any of this." She felt under the table. "I'll get you some more water in a minute, Nigel."

"I'll get it," said Amanda, not for the first time. She was always glad to help with Nigel. He was such a sweet dog, and she'd never been allowed to have one of her own.

"Nope," said Simon. "Too flighty."

"She's not flighty," said Amphora. "She's really talented at math."

"Doesn't mean she isn't flighty," said Simon. "All that mumbo jumbo she believes in." He made a gesture. Rather than mumbo jumbo, it looked like he was in pain.

"Okay, that's it," said Ivy. "From now on, any time one of us makes a negative remark, we put 20p in a jar. If you get five nasty remarks, it goes up to 50p."

"That's not fair," said Amphora, eyeing the kitchen door again.

"Why do you keep looking over there?" said Simon, popping another grape into his mouth and chomping for emphasis.

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

"I'm not looking anywhere," said Amphora, making a face.

"Yes you are. You keep looking at the kitchen."

"I'm just wondering if they're going to bring out anything more interesting. I don't like grapes."

"You don't need anything more interesting," said Simon.

"You look good with all that weight off."

"Simon!" yelled Ivy. "Twenty p."

His face fell. "But I complimented her."

"Backhanded compliment. Twenty p. Here, give it to me. I'll set up a jar." She held out her hand.

Simon dug into his pocket and practically slapped the change into Ivy's palm. "Madoff," he said.

"And another twenty p," said Ivy, who was beginning to lose her temper again.

"I think you should go charge David Wiffle 20p," said Simon, crossing his arms.

"He isn't part of this," said Ivy, crossing hers in exactly the same way. How did she know he'd done that?

"He's always insulting people," said Simon petulantly.

"Yes, but he's not our responsibility. Anyway, back to Editta. She hasn't answered your texts, has she, Amanda?"

"No."

"This isn't like her. She doesn't like being left out of things," said Ivy, uncrossing.

"She'll turn up," said Simon, mirroring her. "Probably just has the Monday blues."

"I don't think so," said Ivy. "You don't suppose the Moriarty gang has got hold of her, do you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," said Simon. "What would they want with her? You're starting to sound like her."

PROFESSOR REDLEAF'S SURPRISE

"Fifty p!" yelled Ivy. Simon passed the money to her through Amanda this time. She could tell he was getting exasperated as well.

"I don't trust anyone," said Amanda. "Those Moriartys have a lot of connections. Any one of them could have kidnapped her. And by the way, speaking of the Moriartys, how do we know Holmes is who he says he is? Maybe he's another mole." Nick, his mother, the cook, and the doctor had infiltrated the school last term and everyone was paranoid about the possibility of that happening again.

"Yes, how did Nick get into Legatum in the first place?" said Amphora.

"Forgery," said Simon. "And you're not going to charge me 20p for saying that."

"No," said Ivy. "That's perfectly all right to say. I imagine forgery is part of it. That and planting witnesses. It's weird, though. How could the teachers fall for all that?"

"People see what they want to see," said Simon. "Like Amanda wanting Nick to be Prince Charming."

"Fifty p!" said Ivy.

"Hey, no fair. I only had four 20 ps. I've got one more to go," said Simon, folding his arms again.

"We need Editta to keep track of this stuff," said Amphora.

"Will you forgot all those pence and listen?" said Amanda. "How do we know Holmes is who he says he is?"

"Okay, fine," said Simon. "We'll check him out."

"Thank you," said Amanda. "I'll feel better being sure."

"Dahlinks," came a loud voice from the door to the hall. It was one of the two décor gremlins who redecorated the school every day to help Professor Sidebotham test her students' powers

of observation. He was wearing a bright red tux. While the two gremlins always wore amazing clothes, Amanda thought this was a bit over the top. "You're all looking mahvelous today."

"Thank you, Mr. Dropoff," said Amphora, beaming. "And you. Nifty threads."

"Thank you, my dear. What's over there, dahlink? Something going on in the kitchen?" He glanced at the door.

"No, sir. Not a thing. Hello, Mr. Updown." She smiled warmly at the second gremlin, who was wearing a torn rainbow-striped T-shirt and ripped jeans.

"Hello, dears," said the second gremlin. "Do you have a moment?"

"Uh..." said Simon.

"Yes, of course," said Ivy, motioning to the seat next to her.

"Good," said Alexei Dropoff, dropping into it. "We'd like you to settle a dispute for us, dears. Hello, Nigel, dahlink." He gave the dog a warm look. Nigel wagged his tail.

"Oh, I don't know," said Amanda, who didn't like getting in the middle of people's arguments.

"We'd be delighted," said Ivy. "What's the issue?"

"Well," said Noel Updown, slinking into a chair next to Simon, "you see, one of us thinks you students are more likely to notice our little details on Mondays and Wednesdays, and the other thinks Tuesdays and Thursdays. I won't tell you which of us thinks which so as not to prejudice you."

"You don't have to," said Alexei. "It's obvious which one of us is correct." He gave Noel a smug look.

"Twenty p," yelled Simon. Amphora kicked him under the table. "Ouch."

PROFESSOR REDLEAF'S SURPRISE

Ivy elbowed Amphora. "Well, uh, I don't know," said Amphora.

"That's an invalid question," said Simon. "Your assumptions are wrong." There were no grapes left to underscore his statement, so he just bored into the gremlins' eyes with his own.

"Of course they're not wrong," said Noel, sticking his nose in the air.

"Outrageous," said Alexei, turning his head away snootily.

"You're assuming that it's one or the other and nothing else," said Simon. "Or that there's a difference at all. Professor Ducey would fail you." The logic teacher definitely would have taken points off for the gremlins' flawed assumptions.

Ivy was looking like she wasn't sure whether to charge Simon another 50p. Amanda whispered "Uh uh" into her ear to forestall any punitive action.

"I beg your pardon," said Noel. "That isn't true at all. It's a scientific fact that people do one thing on Mondays and Wednesdays and another on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"Save us," said Simon. "Another Editta."

"Fifty p," said Ivy, holding out her hand.

"Uh uh," said Simon.

"Uh huh," said Amphora, holding out her own hand.

"I've had enough of this," said Simon. "I've got work to do." He stood up and left the room noisily without looking back.

"Terrible posture, that one," said Alexei. "But now we can address the question properly." He looked disapprovingly at Simon's plate, which he had not bussed.

"Indeed," said Noel. "So what is your answer?" He looked at the three girls.

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

“Well, sirs,” said Ivy kindly, “I would say Mondays and Wednesdays.”

“Told you so,” said Alexei looking smugly at Noel.

“Not correct,” said Noel, giving Alexei a snide look.

“Why do you say that, Ivy?” said Amphora.

“Because we’re more keyed up and therefore more alert on Mondays, and we’ve mellowed out a little by Tuesday, so we’re less observant then. Then on Wednesdays, once we’ve had a chance to adjust to the rhythm of the week, our minds are sharp again.”

“Not so,” said Noel looking crestfallen. “It’s the exact opposite.”

“How so?” said Amanda.

“On Mondays you’re too traumatized by the change of routine to think straight. By Tuesday you have relaxed. On Wednesday, you congratulate yourself for having such a productive Tuesday, and you let your guard down. Then on Thursday you feel guilty so you buck up again.”

“That’s quite an interesting analysis,” said Ivy.

“And correct,” said Noel, folding his arms.

“And incorrect,” said Alexei, folding his. Amanda thought they might come to blows.

“Correct.”

“Incorrect.”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” said Ivy. “I think both hypotheses have merit. Would you like to conduct a scientific experiment to see which is correct?”

“Absolutely not,” said Alexei huffily.

“Rubbish,” said Noel abruptly.

PROFESSOR REDLEAF'S SURPRISE

"Well, then," said Ivy, "I'm not sure there's another way to be certain."

"I am certain already," said Alexei.

"As am I," said Noel. "Thank you for your time. Have a pleasant day." And with that, the gremlins got up and walked out, continuing to argue.

"That was interesting," said Amphora, watching them leave.

"Yes," said Amanda, thinking that if Alexei got marinara sauce on his tux it wouldn't show. "I wonder who's right."

"Simon," said Ivy, barely squelching a giggle. "I just didn't want to say so in front of them."

NICK'S SECRETS

With all this unexpected drama going on, Amanda was starting to freak out a little. It seemed as though everything she'd finally started adjusting to was falling apart, and there were signs that things were going to get a whole lot worse before they got better. At least she had her storytelling class to look forward to. This was something she knew through and through, and she was excited by the prospect of sharing her passion.

She'd spent some time preparing at her parents' in London, but with her father still recovering from his kidnapping at the hands of the Moriartys, she'd found it difficult to concentrate. Ever since his ordeal, her father had become a shadow of his former self. He'd lost enthusiasm for his work at the Crown Prosecution Service, a position he'd aspired to all his life, and was talking about quitting and going off to find himself. What finding himself? Herb Lester, scion of the Lestrade family, had spent forever basking in the legacy of his ancestor, prosecuting criminals and making the world a safer place. *That* was his self. What else could there be? At least that was how Amanda's mother looked at it.

Amanda, however, could see his point. To her way of thinking, he'd spent his life in a straitjacket, trying to live up to an ideal that had never existed. The really sad part was that everyone *except* her parents knew what Lestrade really was: a bumbler. To them he was a god, and they had been in thrall to him.

On the other hand, Lila Lester, a successful mystery novelist, hadn't changed at all, or at least not that Amanda could see. Overbearing and opinionated, she was still pushing both her husband and her daughter to do what *she* wanted them to do. No grief, no empathy, no sensitivity whatsoever. In fact she was flourishing now that she had the two of them to talk at, which she did incessantly. If her husband's near death hadn't mellowed her, what would?

With her parents' woes adding to her feelings of loss, Amanda had started digging into her class preparation in earnest on the train ride from London to Windermere. She had devised a brilliant way to get across basic story concepts, which was to use examples from the Harry Potter stories. She'd thrashed around until she'd come up with that one, trying out one dumb idea after another, but now she was getting excited. Harry Potter had everything: a likeable underdog, a powerful and shadowy villain, fascinating supporting characters, high stakes, suspense, a rich world, and FUN. It was perfect! She wanted desperately to get back to it, but with so many distractions she wasn't sure when that would be, especially with Thrillkill wanting something else from her.

After lunch the first-years went to their crime lab class, which built upon the introductory course from last term. Professor Stegelmeyer, never a pussycat even at the best of times, was surly

and rumpled, which, given that he usually looked like a Marine, was almost alarming. Amanda's lab partner this time was Dreidel Pomfritter, a kid she didn't know very well. He seemed okay, at least so far. Short, with glasses and a dark brown crew cut, he was courteous and competent but not very interesting. Last term she had partnered with Nick and he'd been a blast—for a while, anyway. Come to think of it, maybe it was better that Dreidel wasn't so much fun. Then she wouldn't get attached or sidetracked and everything wouldn't blow up again.

After Crime Lab, Amanda betook herself to Headmaster Thrillkill's office as requested. Surprise, surprise, he seemed distracted. She must have sat there for two minutes, during which time he barely looked at her. Then there was a knock at the door and Scapulus Holmes walked in, whistling. Amanda hated whistling. It was so Huck Finn. Not that there was anything wrong with Huck Finn per se. He was just so read-fifty-pages-by-Friday-and-then-we'll-have-a-test, which she could do without.

At last Thrillkill, glassy-eyed from the effort of staring at whatever had transfixed him, looked up from his computer. "Ah, Miss Lester, Mr. Holmes. Just the two people I want to see." Well of course they were the people he wanted to see. He'd asked them there, hadn't he? Come to think of it, Amanda wasn't sure whether Thrillkill had invited Holmes or the boy was worming his way into her territory unbidden. But about thirty seconds later she found out.

"I have a task for you two," said Thrillkill. Them? Together? This didn't sound good. "I want you to make a training film. Effective immediately. You have thirty days." Amanda couldn't believe what she was hearing. Holmes make a film? With her?

Why him? What could he possibly know about filmmaking? Then Thrillkill dropped a bombshell. "Miss Lester, I'm afraid you will have to postpone your storytelling class. There isn't time to do both."

What?! That Holmes. This was all his fault. How dare he mess with the one thing she was excited about? What a waste of her talents—working on a training film with some newbie—a kid who wasn't even there last term and couldn't possibly know as much about anything as the rest of the first-years. It was an outrageous request. She felt like screaming.

"Your topic is cyberforensics. I've made a list of the concepts I want you to cover. Please set a time to start work. I expect you to keep me up to date on your progress with a daily report. This is a critical project. Professor Redleaf needs all the help she can get. There's too much important material for her to cover alone. Questions?"

Amanda didn't dare open her mouth for fear she'd lose control. Holmes simply shook his head and said, "No, sir. Thank you, sir." How original.

"Now then," said Thrillkill, "I would like a project plan in forty-eight hours. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," they said in unison, although Amanda was looking at her feet when she spoke.

"Good enough. Mr. Holmes, you are excused." *Mr. Holmes? What about me?* "Miss Lester, I have another job for you." *Oh great. Now what?*

"Now I know this is going to be difficult, but I have complete confidence in you. You will do this because it's critically important, and I know you will put the good of the school ahead

of your personal feelings.” This did not sound promising. Amanda braced herself.

“I would like you to help search Nick Muffet’s room. The school would like to reassess the damage he might have caused. Of course this won’t be the first time we’ve searched it, but we want to be even more thorough. I understand that this will be unpleasant for you, but you knew him better than anyone else. You may be able to spot important evidence the rest of us have missed. Miss Lester?” Amanda was looking down again. Thrillkill lowered his head and peered up at her, trying to catch her eye. It was a gesture of submission, an extremely rare move for him.

It didn’t help. Amanda felt herself about to go ballistic. She was the last person who should be searching Nick’s room, and it wasn’t because girls weren’t normally allowed in the boys’ dorm. The idea was unthinkable. She couldn’t take one more blow. But how could she refuse? Thrillkill had a point. She was the best qualified and the detectives *did* need her help.

But it would be excruciating, especially coming on the heels of the two things that had just occurred: losing her storytelling seminar and having to work with *that* kid. She wouldn’t just be searching through a bit of this and that. She would have to look through Nick’s most personal possessions.

“When do you want me to do this?” Amanda said.

“Right now,” said Thrillkill. “You don’t have any commitments at this instant, do you?”

“No, sir.”

“Excellent. Let’s begin then, shall we?”

NICK'S SECRETS



Amanda and Thrillkill made their way to the boys' dorm, which was situated in the southeast corner of the main building. As they entered, the headmaster placed himself in front of her and called out, "Girl in dorm. Make yourself decent," then kept repeating his warning over and over. At one point she caught a glimpse of a boy in his underwear—one of the older students—but it was so quick that it barely registered. As they passed through, boys' heads kept emerging from doorways and she could hear a lot of whispering. She had no idea whether the boys were simply curious or outright mocking her, but she was so miserable she didn't care. Anyway, she'd been teased so much for being Lestrade's descendant that insults didn't bother her anymore—except when Nick had said those awful things. His vitriol had just about destroyed her.

Nick's room was on the top floor. Ever since the tragedy it had stood empty, his two roommates, Philip Puppybreath and Gavin Niven, having moved into David Wiffle's room when David's previous ones had transferred out. Amanda could barely stand to look inside, let alone step over the threshold, but Thrillkill pushed in and she had no choice.

The room was as neat as a pin, although Amanda wasn't sure how a pin could be considered neat. She didn't know if Nick or his roommates had kept things that way or the investigators had straightened everything up before they left. A Batman poster hung on the wall, presumably Nick's, the roommates no doubt having removed whatever decoration they owned. Amanda

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

could see holes in the wall where their pictures might have hung, although those might have been there for years.

The room held three beds, two of them stripped bare. The third was covered with a heavy dark blue quilt with white shapes on it. It looked like the night sky. Amanda thought she could even see the Big Dipper. Nick had good taste.

The room also held three small wooden dressers, three nightstands, three tiny desks, one of which supported a gooseneck lamp, and one not overly generous closet. An uncomfortable-looking wooden chair was nestled under each desk. A large window outfitted with flimsy drapes overlooked the expansive east side of the campus. The room was as bare bones as Amanda's, and especially depressing because of its vacancy.

"This is it," said Thrillkill. "Let's dig in."

It didn't seem that there was much to dig into. The room was so bare that searching it seemed a futile exercise. But Amanda had to do something so she cast around for a suitable starting point.

She didn't want to look through Nick's underwear, if he'd left any, so she started with the closet, which held several school uniforms, three pairs of shoes, a couple of jackets, four casual shirts, and an umbrella. Amanda felt all the pockets and looked inside them. They were empty except for bits of lint, a few pence, and a couple of five-pound notes. She was surprised that the crime scene investigators hadn't removed the money. She looked toward the shelf but couldn't reach it, so she grabbed a chair and climbed up.

The top shelf was incredibly dusty. It looked as if it hadn't been used in ages. That was weird. With space at such a

premium, you'd think the boys would have used every nook and cranny, but they'd neglected to avail themselves of this valuable resource. It couldn't have been because they were too short to reach it. Nick, at least, had been considerably taller than Amanda, who was five feet, and she was pretty sure that Philip and Gavin weren't exactly shrimps either. Anyway, there were always chairs to climb onto, but maybe they just didn't have a lot of stuff.

"Find anything?" said Thrillkill, who was rummaging through one of the desks.

"No, sir," said Amanda, standing on her tiptoes. "It's odd, though. This shelf hasn't been used in months."

"Really? How peculiar. Now this is a good example of what to look for. What you fail to find can be just as important as what you uncover. That's a lesson worth remembering."

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sure there's nothing up there?"

"There's a lot of dust," Amanda said. That was true. The dust was so thick that Editta would have insisted on measuring it. "I—wait a minute. There's some writing in the dust. Let me see if I can make it out."

"Do you need a torch?" said Thrillkill, reaching into his coat pocket.

"I have a light on my phone," said Amanda. "Let me get it." She started to get down but Thrillkill was faster. He grabbed her bag and handed it up to her.

"Thank you, sir." She took out her phone and activated the light. "It's . . . oh."

"What is it?" he said.

"It says, 'Dust me.'"

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

Thrillkill laughed. Amanda didn't think she'd ever seen him do that. "Typical," he said. "They manage to get up there to write in the dust, but heaven forfend they should actually clean the shelf."

"Sir, don't you think it might mean more than that? I mean the writing."

"You think it's a code?"

"I don't know. I'm just trying to keep an open mind."

"Excellent, Miss Lester. Please take pictures of the shelf from a variety of angles and let's get a sample of the dust. The crime scene people have already dusted for prints and didn't find anything that shouldn't be there, but it doesn't hurt to do that again."

Amanda processed the shelf using her evidence kit, then turned her attention to the desks. She thought she'd start with the two that probably weren't Nick's. The longer she could delay going through any more of his personal things the better. If she stalled long enough, maybe Thrillkill would abort the mission and she wouldn't have to endure the pain of such intimacy.

Not surprisingly, neither of the two desks near the empty beds held anything other than lint. Philip and Gavin must have cleaned those out pretty thoroughly. However when she came to the third, she almost couldn't open the drawers, and not because of her feelings about Nick. They were all stuck. She had to wiggle the top one to move it at all, but when she finally got it free, she saw that it was empty.

The second of the three drawers was just as stuck but it was not empty. Inside Amanda found a printed copy of a screenplay entitled "Thaddeus Bott and the Magic Fog." Nick Muffet was listed as the author. It appeared to be a steampunk story he had

written, and from the first few lines it looked darn good. She wondered briefly why he hadn't mentioned it, but then realized he'd never told her the truth about anything so of course he wouldn't have. She felt as if she'd been kicked in the stomach—again.

Now to the bottom drawer. Like the first two, this one did not want to open, but it was even more stuck. Amanda couldn't tell if it was blocked or there was something wrong with the sliders.

"Having trouble?" said Thrillkill.

"I can't get the drawer open."

"That's odd. Perhaps the humidity . . ." He yanked on the drawer but it wouldn't open for him either. "Blasted thing. Come on, you." He pulled harder and harder, until all of a sudden the drawer gave way and he fell back on his butt. Amanda wanted to laugh. This was certainly not a position she'd ever seen the headmaster assume. He, however, was unperturbed and said, "There you go, Miss Lester. Have at it."

Thrillkill had pulled the drawer completely out of the desk and Amanda could see that it held an evidence kit full of sample bags, tweezers, a fingerprint kit, and so on—all the items found in every detective's toolkit. In addition, she found the results of the fingerprint exercise she and Nick had conducted that very first day of Crime Lab. There were also some tools, including a hammer, pliers, screwdriver, and Allen wrench. Nick had been handy. It wasn't surprising that he'd owned his own tools.

Amanda dusted all the items for prints, including the screenplay. She would run them through the national database later. She also swabbed everything in case there was any residue that might help paint a better picture of what the Moriartys had

been up to. But on the surface none of the stuff looked suspicious.

Then came the dressers. She wasn't looking forward to them. What if Nick had left underwear? That was way too personal, although it crossed her mind to wonder whether criminals' underwear looked different from other people's. Dirtier? Torn? With secret compartments? With pictures of spiders or skulls and crossbones on them?

Reasoning that he would have stored such items in the top drawer, she started at the bottom. The lowest drawer contained a few pairs of jeans, which were folded more neatly than she would have expected. Not exactly come-from-the-dry-cleaners folded, but better than most kids would do. She lifted each pair out and examined it thoroughly, cringing all the while. She found a couple of clean handkerchiefs in the pockets, plus a wrapper from some crackers. She remembered the time Nick had offered her saltines and put the wrapper back in his pocket. Could it be the same one? If so, it had been there an awfully long time. There was no way. She was letting her emotions run away with her.

The drawer itself contained some lint but was otherwise clean. With Thrillkill's help, she removed it from the dresser and looked to see if there was anything attached, or any secret compartments. Nothing. The floor underneath was also free of evidence, so she replaced the jeans and the two of them reinserted the drawer.

Next she pulled out the middle drawer. There she found an array of sweaters, which her English friends called jumpers, a word she thought rather peculiar, but then calling cookies biscuits was also strange. She had seen Nick wear every one of

NICK'S SECRETS

these and didn't like looking at them. But the results of this search were the same as the previous one: nothing interesting.

Unfortunately, she had now reached the top drawer. She was tempted to ask Thrillkill to search it for her, but he'd insisted that she look so she figured she'd better do so. Slowly, slowly she pulled the drawer open. Of course she'd been right. The drawer was full of underwear and socks. She thought she'd die. Handle these? She'd never even touched her father's underwear. How could she possibly *feel*—*feel*—Nick's. She hoped he'd kept it all clean, because she really, really didn't want to deal with it if it wasn't.

She could feel herself start to gag. Luckily she had a couple of gingersnaps with her. She'd begun carrying them everywhere when Simon had discovered that they settled the stomach. Since she was so prone to puking, they'd been a godsend. She popped one in her mouth and waited a minute for it to descend. She was still upset but the nausea was subsiding. Hands shaking, she pulled the drawer out all the way and looked inside.

The first thing she realized was that Nick was indeed well organized. Whether it was his show business training (where had he gotten that anyway?) or just came naturally, it was a relief. All his Y-fronts, T-shirts, and socks were clean and neatly arranged. She breathed a sigh of relief, although her hands were still shaking. She removed each item and examined it thoroughly.

She was able to get the drawer out by herself this time, but when she turned it over, she got a shock. There was something taped underneath—a white letter-sized envelope. She felt underneath the tape and pulled, then squeezed the envelope. Whatever was inside was small, hard, and flat. She opened the envelope to find a memory card. What could that be for?

AMANDA LESTER AND THE ORANGE CRYSTAL CRISIS

She gave Thrillkill the card, although she would have preferred to take it to her room and look at it by herself. If it was embarrassing, she might be able to forestall the worst of the teachers' reactions. Her mind raced with terrifying possibilities. She had to know but she didn't want to. What if, what if, what if?

After a quick search of the other two dressers, which were completely empty and free of secret stashes, Amanda stared at the bed. She was no more comfortable riffling through this than Nick's underwear. It was the most personal item of all and she was dreading it. She considered asking Thrillkill if she could skip it but she knew what the answer would be.

She started by looking underneath. That was the safest part, the least intimate. She saw more dust, but unlike the dust on the closet shelf, no evidence of its having been disturbed. She took a couple of samples and stashed them in her bag. She examined the underside of the box spring, crawling under the bed (which precipitated a lot of sneezing) to feel carefully. Nothing there either.

Then, trembling, she gently pulled back the quilt. She examined it top and bottom, side to side. She lay it on the floor and pressed it. Nothing. It was just a quilt. She extracted a scissors from her evidence kit and started to cut. *Snip, snip, snip.* It was torture invading the blanket that Nick had pulled over himself every night. With each snip, she felt as if she were cutting herself. She cut and cut and cut until the poor thing was in ribbons but found nothing unusual. Still, she took a couple of pieces for analysis, just in case.

When she had finished destroying, er, searching the quilt, she turned back to the bed. It held the usual bedclothes: a pillow in

NICK'S SECRETS

a case, a blanket, plain white sheets. Amanda pulled back each of the layers to find nothing special. Then, with the same result, the pillow and its case.

When she had removed the pad that underlay the sheets, she stared at the mattress. In the middle was a Nick-shaped depression. She felt as if she would burst into tears. Of course the dent could have been the result of various boys sleeping on the bed over the years, but in Amanda's eyes Nick had created it. She blinked and tried to regain her composure. Then, after a few seconds, she leaned down and started to palpate the mattress, carefully moving along an imaginary grid. Nothing. She knelt and did the same to each of the sides. Still nothing. Now there was only the side that faced the wall. She kneed the mattress away to make room for herself and squatted to feel there too. Right side, nothing. Left side, nothing. Middle—what was that? Something weird was there, sticking out from underneath. It made a crinkling sound when she pressed it.

She kneed the mattress away from the wall to reveal a bit of paper sticking out from underneath. Was that the mattress tag? Oh well, even if it was, she'd better check. If she pulled too hard though, the paper would tear, so she gently lifted up the mattress and carefully removed it. It was all wadded up, but she could tell it was no mattress tag. It looked like a piece of heavy printer paper.

Afraid that the contents might be embarrassing, she slowly unfolded the sheet, pulling a little this way and a little that way to a refrain of *crumple, crumple, crumple, pop*. When she had smoothed the paper out, she was looking at the wrong side. Then she stopped. Maybe she should let Thrillkill do this. No, if it really was embarrassing, she didn't want him to see it before she

did. She took a deep breath, flipped the paper over and saw . . . herself! It was a picture of her that Nick had taken one day in the common room. She was smiling and looked as happy as she'd ever been. The composition, lighting, and color balance were all excellent. It was a work of art. But what was it doing under Nick's mattress?!

The discovery threw her for a loop. Why would Nick hide a picture of her? Come to think of it, considering how he claimed to feel about her, why would he even possess a picture of her? Was it because the Moriartys were targeting her and he wanted to show the gang what she looked like? Surely that was it. It did seem strange, though, that he'd keep the picture in such an obscure place. Everyone had known the two of them were friends. Why the mystery?

Unless . . . It wasn't possible. Could it be that he really *had* cared about her and it was a memento? He'd always acted as though he did, up until the end, that is, but that didn't mean anything. During their last encounter he'd been false and treacherous. No, this was about a plot that hadn't been implemented, probably related to whatever data was on the memory card, which meant that if Blixus and Mavis hadn't been caught Amanda might be in real danger. Thank goodness they were safely behind bars.

"Sir, I found something," she said.

"Oh?" said Thrillkill. "What have you got?"

She showed him the picture and explained where she'd found it. He didn't react. Amanda wasn't sure she knew what he was thinking and didn't want to know, so she said, "I'll bag it. I've found nothing else other than the memory card. No wallet, no

NICK'S SECRETS

phone, no computer, nothing stolen. There's not much to go on."

"We shall see," said Thrillkill. "Perhaps our analysis will turn up something. Let's check a few more things and that will be it for today."

For today? Did he mean he wanted her to come back? She certainly hoped not.

"Thank you, Miss Lester," he said kindly when they had finished. "I know how painful this must have been for you and I appreciate your sacrifice. Now off you go. You and Mr. Holmes have work to do." Amanda breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed he'd completely forgotten that she was supposed to act as the new kid's big sister.