

THE FIRE THEFT

A Novel

by

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The ferry out of Calais was dangerously overloaded.

Among the endless procession of vessels that daily traversed the frigid waters between this French seaport and Dover's Admiralty Harbor twenty-two miles to the west, it was *unofficially* recognized that at best half were truly seaworthy. The *Spirit of Long Life* was one of those in the wrong half. Even at anchor the ferry groaned under the burden of its excessive load, two hundred and thirty-two people, sixty-two vehicles.

Hardly a majestic picture, the *Spirit of Long Life's* hull was a bleached shade of orange. A cancerous rust spread indiscriminately across its face. The ferry's superstructure hinted of a white paint long since turned gray. Its funnels were a fatigued and weathered blue.

On the most idyllic day in spring, the *Spirit of Long Life* could manage the trip between Calais and Dover in just under three hours, a minor miracle. But this was the first week in March and the winter wind off the North Sea had a cutting edge to it. A legion of thunderheads marched defiantly across the sky. Not a day made for miracles.

Departure was seven minutes away. The harbor gate had already closed. The harbormaster, by then content with his pipe and tea, saw the beastly black Mercedes roll to a halt before the gate. It carried diplomatic plates. A tiny American flag flapped on the antenna. The harbormaster emerged from his house even as the driver leaned on his horn. Though the ferry's vehicle bay was already crammed from bulkhead to bulkhead, the harbormaster, a diplomat in his own right, ordered a half dozen bicycles hoisted into the luggage bin. He waved the Mercedes aboard.

Moments later, a woman on foot climbed over the gate. She was wearing khaki shorts and hiking boots. A bulky wool sweater hung well below her waist. Her hair was cut boyishly short, a convenience of style that was also a compliment to her lithe, sinewy figure. Without a word, Jaymin Bartel took the harbormaster by the hand and curled his bony fingers around a five-franc note, effectively silencing any protest he may have been contemplating. She bounded aboard the loading ramp at the rear of the ferry. Climbing an iron ladder normally reserved for crew members only, she paused long enough to light a cigarette. She peered back into the vehicle deck, at the Mercedes. Jaymin knew the driver and his companion would stay with the car the entire trip. She also knew that the colonel, as planned, had boarded the ferry ten minutes earlier.

Lingering a moment longer, Jaymin was struck by the sight of an apparent stowaway pulling himself effortlessly from among the bags of lamb's wool stored in the back of a farmer's flatbed. He was a dark-skinned man. Wild eyes stared out from a cadaverous face. He was dressed in a sackcloth pullover, a pair of filthy drawstring pants, and sandals worn through at the heels. He carried an oil-stained duffel bag over his shoulder. A long narrow tube protruded from the end of the bag. There was a familiarity about him that Jaymin couldn't place. Curious now, she watched the stowaway closely as he climbed the rear stairs to the passenger deck. When his gaze fell with inordinate attention upon the Mercedes, Jaymin felt compelled to follow him.

In a makeshift lounge passengers drank beer and wine from plastic cups. Jaymin saw the stowaway pause at the door. It was obvious by now that he was searching for someone. His reaction, however, suggested just as clearly that he wasn't finding the person, and he pressed on.

The restaurant was crowded. It smelled of beef and curry. The stowaway wove doggedly among the tables, his head pivoting. He paused only once, and then only for an instant. With growing impatience, he returned to the corridor.

A line stretched from the duty-free shop. The bartering was spirited. A man waved wooden dolls in the air. A woman shuttled between cotton rugs and imitation bronze statues. French wines were being sold in bottles or cases. While Jaymin viewed this as the logical place for a rendezvous, the stowaway moved on with little more than a glance.

They entered an open chamber that served as the ferry's main passenger compartment. People of all stations loitered among the benches and booths here, smoked, made idle conversation, and slept. Jaymin closed the distance between herself and the stowaway; she saw a change register on the man's haggard face, a glint of life lighting his dark eyes.

The focus of his attention proved to be neither a man nor a woman, but rather a young girl. She was standing next to the railing, thumbs hitched under the straps of her backpack, gazing into the channel's turquoise waters and watching a school of playful dolphins. A Polaroid camera dangled from a strap around her neck. Though alone, she seemed, Jaymin thought, quite content.

And though the stowaway approached her cautiously, it was clear to Jaymin that his appearance was unexpected. The girl took a quick step away, obviously repelled by his slovenly dress and chiseled face. The indigent man bowed diffidently, keeping his distance, yet there was no mistaking the girl's guarded posture. She looked down at his outstretched hand, but didn't take it.

They exchanged words. The stowaway bowed again. He offered his hand once more and this time the girl shook it, though her body language spoke clearly of her reluctance. She put her back to the railing, and Jaymin saw that she had fair skin and auburn hair pulled back into a ponytail. A strong nose and wide mouth affected a maturity beyond her years. My God, Jaymin thought. That face. I know that face. "Marion." She said the name aloud, her eyes and heart struggling with an image her head insisted wasn't true, and was thrown back into a past she had tried for so long to bury.

The orphanage walls had been like a prison for Jaymin until Marion's arrival. Their friendship had blossomed from the first moment, the one and only time in Jaymin's life she had experienced such instantaneous communion. Marion led Jaymin into a world of books and music. Jaymin led her into a world of boys and makeup and never-ending mischief Marion discovered laughter. Jaymin discovered tears. They had been inseparable.

A year and two months after her arrival, Marion had been formally adopted. Jaymin died a little that day. They vowed to write. At first, Marion did write; but her new family moved her to Maine, then to Colorado. Soon after, the letters stopped. "Marion."

Jaymin searched this young girl's face, looking not for similarities but for differences. Her auburn hair was longer, the ponytail braided, but the tint was identical to Marion's; Jaymin had spent hours combing that hair, wishing hers was as thick, as glistening. There was a severity in this girl's gaze, worldliness; Marion's eyes had laughed constantly. And even if their high cheekbones had been cut from the same mold, Marion's lips had not been so full as this girl's. Jaymin shuddered. This was wish fulfillment, nothing more. The girl resembled Marion, but she was not Marion.

Melancholy now, Jaymin slumped in a nearby chair. The girl and the stowaway had moved to a port-side bench. Jaymin saw the man laughing, the gaiety forced and unpracticed, and a jolt of sympathy played upon the girl's face. That was Marion, too; always there with a word of encouragement, a joke to ease the pain.

Jaymin forced her eyes beyond the ferry's streaked and cloudy windows. A veil of mist hung in the air. Fishing boats congregated around a vast island of kelp. On the horizon, navy vessels were like tiny motes in the eye.

When Jaymin looked back, the stowaway was lifting the metal tube from his duffel bag. He was whispering, a bent finger resting against his nose. He held the tube out to the young girl, but she shook her head, her arms folded across her chest.

If her refusal left the stowaway momentarily nonplussed, Jaymin could also see that it fed his determination. His gestures were increasingly adamant, even pleading, and Jaymin realized now that this was more than just a gift. From her vantage point she guessed that the tube was some sort of lightweight metal alloy, aluminum maybe, twenty-four inches long, and clearly sealed at the top.

In the end the young girl accepted the tube, though it wasn't clear to Jaymin whether he had forced it upon her or if she had been convinced by his sincerity. Nonetheless, she slipped off her backpack, loosened the top flap, and slid the tube inside. The stowaway watched feverishly as she tied the flap down again.

He rose. His last words must have carried a warning, or a threat even, Jaymin thought, for the girl seemed to shrink in her seat. Then the man turned on his heels, his retreat quick and unflinching, his baggy pants fluttering with each stride.