



CHARLIE  
COCHRANE

LESSONS IN  
*Discovery*

*A Cambridge Fellows Mystery*

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A Cambridge Fellows Mystery  
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Lessons in  
Discovery  
A Cambridge Fellows Mystery

*Charlie Cochrane*

# Dedication

For my family, who put up with my eccentricities marvellously. I,  
of course, have to put up with theirs.

# Chapter One

Champagne. A dressed Cromer crab. Strawberries.

How Jonty Stewart could have got hold of strawberries on the fifteenth of November only the angels could say, but there they were on the table along with a jug of cream and a bowl of sugar to indisputably prove their existence. Orlando Coppersmith reached across to take one of the little ruby-like fruits but a sharp slap to his hand stopped him.

“No pudding until firsts are done with, you know that!” Jonty grinned like a schoolboy and began to heap crab upon their plates.

“Why all this opulence? I’ve not seen such a lunch in ages.” The bright noontime sun slanted in through the latticed windows of Jonty’s study, the mellow gold stone of St. Bride’s college shining with a warm lustre.

“Do you really not know, or are you teasing me again, in revenge for all the times I’ve teased you?” The blank look on Orlando’s face seemed to show that he really had no recognition of the significance of the date. “It’s exactly a year to the day that I came back to St. Bride’s and so underhandedly stole your chair in the Senior Common Room. Don’t you remember?”

Orlando smiled. “The day is forever etched into my memory. That afternoon was the last time I enjoyed any peace and quiet, for one thing.” A crab claw came flying through the air but he swerved neatly to avoid it. “This champagne is truly extraordinary.”

“Mother sent it, she always has champagne on her wedding anniversaries.” Jonty admired the sunlight-kissed bubbles then took a deep draught. “Do you know, the man who invented this compared it to tasting stars. He was absolutely right.”

Coppersmith looked at his glass with something like suspicion. “Just why did your mother send us champagne?”

“For our anniversary, of course. Do I need to spell it out to you like I spell out *As You Like It* to my dunderheads of students? She wanted us to have something special today, as she and father do.”

Orlando didn’t seem mollified by the answer. He knew that Helena Stewart was exactly aware of what went on between him and her son, but this gift seemed a touch too blatant. He drank it nonetheless, enjoying the food which he guessed Jonty’s mama had also had a hand in providing.

“Seems appropriate, really—” Jonty had finished his seafood and was ready for more chatter, “—as I often feel like we *are* a married couple in all but name. Oh, I say, let me slap your back.”

The food and drink had conspired to attempt an attack on Orlando’s lungs and he began to choke. A whack from Jonty’s strong hand dislodged the offending items, enabling him to take several breaths, and another glass of bubbly, to recover. “You feel like we’re married?”

“Of course I do, don’t you?”

“I’ve never thought of it. Still, I guess that marriage of any kind has never really entered my head.” Orlando frowned, having to mull over that common thing, a revolutionary thought from Jonty.

“Consider this. We spend as much time as we can together, we often share a bed, we take holidays with each other, we are absolutely faithful—well I am, I have my suspicions about you and that chap from *the college next door*—so many things that any respectable married couple would do. It’s only the matter of

getting children that makes us different and neither of us have the anatomical requirement to oblige on that score.”

“And we can’t take the vows, Jonty, the marriage vows. No respectability for us.” Orlando knew it galled his lover, not being able to walk hand in hand together along the river, never to be able to dance together or show any untoward display of affection. Perhaps one day the world would be a more understanding place, but not now.

“Bit of a shame, if you think about it, because we live by them. ‘For better or worse, cleaving only to one another’ and all that. Think we might do a rather better job of it than some of my father’s friends.” Jonty sighed, refilled their glasses and ushered his guest from the table to the deep armchairs before the fireplace. “Such a shame that I can’t show everyone how much you mean to me.”

Orlando’s chest swelled with pride. He knew exactly how much they loved each other, and couldn’t help but bask in the glow every time Jonty said something like this. He reached for Jonty’s hand. “You mean the world to me, too.”

Jonty looked at him, as if he was making absolutely sure of what he was about to say, which wasn’t a usual Stewart trait. “The university is modernising. These are new times. We don’t need to live in college anymore, you know. We could take a nice property up on the Madingley Road and set up house together. As long as we had a housekeeper who wouldn’t be too fussy about how many beds had been slept in. Miss Peters could probably find us a suitable one.”

“A house?” Dining out of college had been shock enough, going on holiday a jolt to the system, but to live outside of St. Bride’s, that was unheard of. “And why Miss Peters? You don’t think that she suspects about us?” Ariadne Peters was the sister of the Master of St. Bride’s, and the only woman, apart from the nurse, permitted to live in the college’s hallowed grounds.

“I think it quite likely that she does, she being possibly the most perceptive person in St. Bride’s. In any case, she’d be far too discreet to say anything as this college has seen enough scandal. Nonetheless think on the idea of a house. I don’t propose it idly.”

“I will think on it, but you must let me recover from my surprise at the suggestion before I can make a rational decision.”

Jonty nodded his head in acknowledgement and they refilled their bowls with the last of the fruit. When there wasn’t even the merest hint of the existence of a strawberry left, Orlando wiped his hands with great precision then reached into his pocket. He drew out a small red box which he handed to his friend. “Thought you might like this, as a memento of the last year.”

“So you did remember, you cunning old fox.” Jonty opened the lid and immediately shut it. “I can’t accept this, it must have cost you a small fortune. Take it back, get the money and put it in your savings.” He flushed red and couldn’t even look his lover in the eye.

“I will not take it back and you will accept it. You were the one who spoke of marriage, so perhaps this is an appropriate gift.” Orlando opened the box himself, taking out an exquisite signet ring—Welsh gold, of an amazing hue—that had been made specially to his order, great subterfuge and a piece of string having been used to gauge the size of Jonty’s little finger as he slept. “Please put it on for me.” He admired the golden circlet as it twinkled in the late-autumn light. Jonty could walk around Cambridge wearing *his* ring and it would always be symbolic of their union.

Jonty slid the band over his finger, pronounced amazement at the accuracy of fit, and grinned. “I’m ashamed to say that I have no equivalent gift for you.”

“No need, strawberries in November are priceless. And you’ve given me the best year of my life.”

“Truly? Even including murder most foul, an unwanted suitor and our lives endangered?”

“Absolutely. Never been so happy.”

“And is that you talking or the champagne?” Jonty put his head to one side, like a bird.

“Oh, definitely me. The drink would make me say much naughtier things.”

Jonty smiled, indulgence lighting his face. “Let’s take a walk up to the lock and enjoy this unseasonably mild weather.” Through the latticed window the piercing blue of the sky, found only in England in spring and autumn, mirrored Jonty’s eyes. “Then we can come back here and read the sonnets together. Even number eighteen.”

Jonty liked the early sonnets, although Orlando had been terribly shocked to find out that the intended recipient had been a man. When he’d discovered number twenty-nine it had brought tears to his eyes, speaking to him so clearly of his own situation—the death of his father, the years of brooding and then the arrival of Jonty.

*Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,  
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,  
Like to the lark at break of day arising  
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate...*

Orlando always read it every time he felt low, which was less and less often, now.

It was such a fine afternoon, they ventured far beyond the lock to a stretch of river where a few rowing eights were practicing, their red-faced coaches cycling along the towpath, scattering ducks and little old ladies as they went.

“Did you ever attempt rowing, Dr. Coppersmith?” They’d been content to use Christian names when they were in public on

holiday, but back in their own city they'd gone back to their usual formality.

"I did, with no great success. Every time I took to a boat I seemed to have acquired an extra pair of knees and all four of the bony things kept trying to smack me in the ear."

Orlando laughed and Jonty laughed with him. Orlando's attitudes had changed beyond all recognition this past year. Before Jonty had come and stolen *his* chair, he'd been sullen, unsmiling, someone who viewed intercourse as akin to the preparation of Egyptian mummies—he knew the procedures existed, but the mechanisms were a puzzle and the process itself of no interest. Neither love nor easy laughter would have been possible before Jonty came along. Anything was possible now, even intimacy. Now they made love for all sorts of reasons, not just for gratification but in friendship, for consolation, because they were happy or because they were sad.

Jonty smiled indulgently as they walked along, even while he was sniggering just a little at the sight of a seven-foot oarsman suffering a tongue-lashing from a cox who was all of four foot eleven. He could see this idyllic life stretching long into the future, God willing, with his true love by his side and a bank balance full of his grandmother's money to support them in whatever they decided to do. To buy a little house, with an apple tree in the garden and a flowering cherry outside the bedroom window, that would be ideal. Some of the furniture held in store for him up in London or down in Sussex could grace it, although it might seem rather grand for a little villa up the Madingley Road. If Orlando would ever agree to their buying one.

The two men tired of watching the rowing, turned and began to amble back to the college, a slight anticipation starting to bubble up in Jonty's stomach. There was every chance that he could get Orlando into a bed this afternoon, and that would be an absolute delight. Even if the mattress wasn't visited there would

still be at least a hug or two on the sofa which was always very pleasant. They'd reached a stage where *the last favours* were not the be-all and end-all, wonderful as they were. Jonty cast a glance across at his lover and caught him, unquestionably, in the same act of anticipation.

Orlando blushed, something that hadn't happened for a long time. *I know what you're contemplating*, Jonty mused. *Great minds definitely do think alike.*

Their pace quickened and by the time they'd reached the Bishop's Cope they were no longer just ambling but striding along with great purpose. Their tempo was brisk by the time they passed the porters' lodge and they positively sped up Jonty's staircase, eager to find themselves alone and safe to express their affection.

Orlando was taking the steps two at a time, as usual, in his desire to be in the room as soon as possible. He misjudged the edge of a particularly worn stair, which had endured hundreds of years' worth of treading and wasn't inclined to be kind anymore, then slipped. Perhaps nine times out of ten a man might have done that and suffered no worse than bruised knees or a scraped hand. Orlando suffered the ignominies of the tenth, and went clattering halfway down the flight.

It was ironic. Orlando normally led the way, making the joke that Jonty should be behind him in case he slipped, so that there would be adequate padding to break his fall. But this day Jonty was ahead, even more eager to reach the room than his friend was. He heard the tumble, turned—dismayed—and rushed back.

"Orlando!" the rule about names was immediately broken. This was a moment of crisis, as the minute Jonty looked down he could see that his friend wasn't moving. "Can you hear me? Are you all right?" He reached the crumpled body, was relieved to see the chest rising and falling and to hear that the breathing sounded clear.

But there was no response, not even a moan, and blood had begun to trickle from the back of Orlando's head.

Jonty leapt up, his heart racing and a nauseous feeling filling his stomach. He knocked at the nearest door, demanding that the occupant go to the lodge to make the porters fetch a doctor. The inhabitant of the next room was sent for Nurse Hatfield. He returned to keep an eye on Orlando, making sure that he was comfortable and not about to do anything dramatic like swallow his tongue. It was all he could do, apart from worry himself sick.



Nurse Cecily Hatfield steamed up the stairs like a great ocean liner, cleaving a path through the knot of ghoulish students who'd formed to observe the scene and who'd ignored Jonty's instructions to "bugger off". They didn't dare ignore the nurse's rather more politely worded invitation to do the same.

"Don't know why they do it," she complained, kneeling down and efficiently checking Orlando over for breaks or bleeding. "Nothing interesting in another person's distress, is there? Well, there are no bones broken as far as I can see and I think—" she gingerly felt around Orlando's head, "—the skull's intact too. Bit of bleeding, but his breathing's nice and steady. Not been sick, has he?"

Jonty shook his head, afraid to speak in case his voice betrayed him. He was petrified that the words *No, he's just lain there* would actually come out as *Please don't let him die, I love him so much*.

The doctor arrived promptly, the same man whom Jonty had first met over the dead body of a murdered man, years ago it seemed now. He made his own examination, confirming Nurse Hatfield's initial diagnosis and advising that the man could be moved on a stretcher to the sick bay.

Jonty sped off to the porters' lodge to organise the people and equipment to do this, glad to have something to do that was helpful and practical. Something which took his mind off the poor bloodied head lying on his staircase.

The time began to become distorted and things passed in a daze. It seemed to take forever to get Orlando onto the stretcher, then only a matter of seconds before he was being put onto a bed in the sick bay and the nurse was thrusting a piece of paper into Jonty's hand. It was a list of things that the patient might need, carefully written down, *Because I'm not sure you'll remember otherwise, Dr. Stewart. Not in your present state.* She'd no doubt recognised his need to be busy, filling him up with heavily sugared tea to give him the resources to do it. *I don't want another young man falling down those stairs, this time because of fainting or delayed shock.*

While Jonty was away fetching Orlando's nightclothes and wash bag, Orlando recovered consciousness and the extent of his injuries became clear. Or so Dr. Peters informed him as they met outside the door to the sickroom, his firm grip, stopping Jonty barging straight in to greet his now-awakened friend.

"Dr. Coppersmith's just with the doctor at present." Peters saw Stewart's worried look and smiled kindly. "He is in no danger, our medical friend seems quite confident about that. But there is something you should know before I let you in there. He's lost some of his memory."

"I don't understand. Is this usual with a head injury?" Jonty was full of renewed concern. He'd heard Orlando go flying and seen the way his skull had struck the step; it worried him enormously.

"The doctor assures me that it is not abnormal. He may regain all that he has forgotten, eventually. He can remember the students coming back for the start of Michaelmas term..."

“Poor Orlando. He’s been hard at work on a treatise these last few weeks and now I suppose he’ll have to rethink it.” Jonty smiled tentatively.

“No, Dr. Stewart, I have expressed myself poorly. It is the Michaelmas term of *last* year he remembers, nothing since. I think it’s even possible that he will not recognise you. I had to make this plain.”

Dr. Peters stepped back from the door and let them both into the room, one that Jonty was familiar with from spending time here recovering after the murders which had ripped into the heart of St. Bride’s. Orlando looked up from the neat little bed, black curls peeping out from a bandage that Nurse Hatfield had made the apotheosis of neatness. He inclined his head to the Master but then eyed Jonty with a blank and puzzled look.

“I have brought Dr. Stewart to see you. He was with you when you took your fall.” Dr. Peters spoke in a kind, quiet voice, suited to the sickroom.

“How are you feeling now, Orla—Dr. Coppersmith?” Jonty tentatively moved to the side of the bed, but not too close, not until he knew the worst. He smiled as brightly as he could manage.

“I am so sorry, but I don’t know who you are.” Orlando looked to Peters for enlightenment.

“Dr. Stewart is one of our English fellows. He came here last November. You two are the very greatest of friends.”

Orlando’s jaw dropped slightly, but he soon recovered his poise. “I apologise, sir.” He held out his hand for a dumbstruck Jonty to shake. “I can’t remember in my life ever having a friend, but if the Master says it is so, it must be.”

Jonty felt his eyes become distinctly watery. He said—blustering, turning his face to hide the tears—that he’d return when Dr. Coppersmith had been given a little time to recover. He

only just made it back to his own set of rooms before bursting into inconsolable sobbing.

## Chapter Two

Orlando felt the medicine the doctor had given him starting to take effect. It was some desperate draught that both alleviated pain and took away the ability to think logically, so he was aware of a creeping fuzziness invading his brain. Before he lost all his rational faculties for the night, he had to ask Dr. Peters exactly who the young man was who'd been introduced to him as "your close friend". Peters explained, with great patience, that Stewart was an English fellow, one who'd been back at the college almost exactly a year, having taken his original degree at Bride's.

"And he's a rugby player and a great frequenter of the Bishop's Cope, or so they say." The Master of St. Bride's seemed as if he was about to say more, but held his tongue.

Orlando had quickly tagged on to the rugby part, wondering whether his and Stewart's mutual interest in the game had been one of the reasons they'd enjoyed each other's company. It was all incredibly odd, to have lost a whole year and to have found a friend. A friend he knew nothing about. The first friend he had ever possessed. As he became drowsier under chemical stimulus, he puzzled over what it must be like to feel true camaraderie and what else the last year had held which had also gone astray in his mind.



Orlando awoke early the next morning, carried on this speculation over breakfast—a meal exquisitely presented on a tray

but sadly lacking in a pot of strong coffee—but to little end. If the memories he'd lost had covered the same period a year earlier, say mid-1904 to mid-1905, he would have been able to reconstruct the lost time from guesswork. There'd have been lectures, tutorials, the odd visit to other colleges or universities, hours spent in his chair in the SCR thinking about some abstruse formula. But 1906 couldn't have been entirely like that, because in 1906 he had a friend at the college, and who could tell what effects that would have had on his life?

There was simply no point in wondering about what he and Stewart had been up to the last year; he would just have to be brave and ask the man. He marvelled at his own boldness the night before. He couldn't recall having been quite so direct with the Master back in November 1905, which was the date of the last solid memories he possessed, but he put this uncharacteristic audacity down to the doctor's potions. No doubt he would feel his old shy self once Dr. Stewart arrived, assuming Dr. Stewart came to call. Orlando supposed that was what friends did although he couldn't be sure.

He closed his eyes and tried to form a clear mental image of the man who had visited him so briefly the night before. He didn't seem at all to be the sort of chap Orlando anticipated making friends with, if he'd ever thought of such a strange eventuality. If he'd been asked to conjure up an image of an acquaintance, he'd have imagined someone much more like himself, another grave mathematical fellow. However, the first time this Dr. Stewart had spoken to him, the man had unleashed a smile of such wattage that it seemed to light the room. And he was an English fellow. Orlando didn't think he had said above seven words to a single student of the Bard, or whoever it was they studied, in all his time at Bride's. It was all too odd, so much so that his bewilderment was turning into apprehension.



Jonty finished shaving and looked at himself in the mirror. There was still a trace of redness around his eyes and some bags under them, reflecting the fact that his weeping had happened on and off all night. The doctor had promised that Orlando would be all right, although doctors had a habit of saying any old rot if you weren't watchful, so it wasn't just a matter of worrying himself sick about the condition of his friend's skull. He'd also spent the hours wondering about Orlando's mental state.

The best possible outcome would be returning to the sick bay to find that all Orlando's memories had come back, and being greeted with a huge smile and a "Jonty, what kept you?" He wouldn't let himself seriously contemplate this possibility. That would be to tempt fate.

The worst case would see his lover still without recall of the last year and not wanting to have any more to do with this friend who had been foisted upon him unasked. Orlando had survived for many years without a close companion, so why should he opt to choose the same route as he had done a year previously, risking everything by letting himself become close to another person? Jonty wouldn't contemplate this eventuality either. Self-fulfilling prophesy and all that.

He stiffened his upper lip and put on his most dazzling suit of clothes. If he was to begin wooing all over again then he might as well show himself to the best advantage, so he added a little flower to his buttonhole before he set off for Nurse Hatfield's den.

He was greeted by a pinny starched to almost ramrod straightness that seemed to enter the hallway hours before its owner, pushed forward by a bosom of such magnificence that, if he hadn't been immune to feminine charms, would have made him breathless. There was many a poor undergraduate who had been treated unnecessarily for laboured breathing when all he had visited Nurse Hatfield for was to have his ears syringed. She was

a widow, with much speculation among the students about the reason for her husband's demise, suffocation being the favourite.

Jonty was rather crestfallen when Nurse H informed him the doctor had insisted Dr. Coppersmith have no visitors for the next few days. "Now, I don't count you as a 'visitor' really, more like one of the family. You can see him as often as you like if you promise not to tire him."

She ushered him into the little private room where his friend had been ensconced, although not without first checking that he wasn't bringing in anything unsuitable that might be detrimental to her patient's condition. Jonty was puzzled at this, as he wasn't sure what she could have been looking for. A bottle of whisky? A catapult? He was pleased that he'd hidden a packet of sweets away in his inside pocket, being certain that she would have disapproved had she found them, whisking them off with much shaking of both head and bosom. He was hopeful that they would remain secure in their little sanctuary, unless she were to insist on a body search.

Orlando was sitting up, surrounded by plump pillows, browsing through the day's newspaper, no doubt trying to come to terms with what had happened to 1906. He looked up as Jonty entered, producing something like a smile of recognition, if not yet one of love.

*At least, Jonty reflected, I've been remembered since yesterday.*

Orlando looked pale in the meagre light which was trying to penetrate the small leaded window, but he didn't appear to be on the brink of pegging out. His eyes seemed bright and there was no dullness in his speech or other worrying sign.

"Dr. Stewart, good morning."

"And to you, Dr. Coppersmith." Jonty perched on the chair by the bed, relieved to find Orlando much perkier today. "Nurse Hatfield, may we have a cup of tea, please?"

The nurse beamed at them. She loved well-behaved and well-mannered little boys, which is exactly how she regarded these two. “Of course, and I’ll rustle up a biscuit or three. You both look like you need nourishment.”

Once she had gone, Jonty couldn’t resist a laugh. “What is it about ladies of a certain age? How does their eyesight change that they can look at a muscular frame and see only the sort of stick men that children draw? You may need building up after your mishap but no one could accuse me of being thin.” Jonty patted his muscular stomach and Orlando smiled wanly. “And before the sergeant major gets back I thought you could hide these somewhere.” He produced a packet of bull’s-eyes from his jacket. “Put them where she won’t find them or else we’ll both be in trouble.”

“My favourites! How did you—sorry.” Orlando stopped short. “You would have known, wouldn’t you? If we were friends. If we *are* friends, I mean.”

Jonty tried to provide reassurance. “That’s perfectly all right. It’s going to take a bit of time to get the old status quo back, while we wait for that brain of yours to get itself organised.” He thought about the surprises that would be in store for his friend—his lover—and felt a sudden qualm.

“I feel at such a disadvantage, Dr. Stewart. You must know so much about me, yet I know nothing of you.” Orlando managed another constrained smile.

*Indeed, the location of every mole on your body, the taste of your hair, the words you use in darkest despair or deepest ecstasy.* Jonty shook himself, trying to set aside such thoughts. “Well, I’ll bore you to death about all of that if you wish me to. There’s a fair amount to catch up on, I guess.”

The arrival through the doorway of tea and a plate of biscuits, followed shortly after by a pinafore and lastly by Nurse Hatfield herself, gave them a chance to gather their thoughts.

Although it was, on the surface, a lighthearted conversation between two old friends, this was starting to feel rather strained.

When they were left alone again, Orlando continued. “I’d very much like to be brought up to date with events over the last year. The college, the university, the world at large. Anything of significance.”

So Jonty began. He didn’t present a very orderly account, switching from place to place, now talking about summer, then referring back to the previous winter, as thoughts occurred to him. Orlando would chip in with the odd question but it soon became obvious that he was finding the process tiring and Jonty decided that they would need to take their time over this. Bull’s-eyes would be fine, but no bulls in the china shop.

The discussion ended up stretching over the next few days, Jonty visiting for a short while each morning and afternoon as his commitments allowed, gradually helping Orlando to build up a picture of a twelve months full of events. Jonty was pleased to find that, although the mental store of proceedings had disappeared, the last year hadn’t been totally lost and the benefit it had on Orlando was still in evidence. The man chatted with more ease than he had a twelvemonth ago and there was little sign of the barrier that he’d put between himself and the world. He could even be positively forthright with Nurse Hatfield when the occasion required.

Jonty was still reluctant to divulge all that had gone on in 1906. He skirted around the matter of the St. Bride’s murders, just saying there had been a series of killings in the college during the late winter, that the whole affair *had been rather sordid* and that he didn’t think it was wise to discuss this sort of thing until Dr. Coppersmith was feeling a bit stronger. While he was perfectly honest about their having taken a holiday together—*you were a great one for swimming in the sea, Dr. Coppersmith*—and even

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mentioned that there had been another murder, *at our very hotel*, he hadn't explained the exact sleeping arrangements nor Orlando's encounter with Matthew Ainslie and his honey buzzards.

Any hint of intimacy, of something other than a simple friendship, he passed over. He hadn't even explained about their adjacent chairs in the Senior Common Room—it would be too painful. While his companion still showed every sign of wanting to carry on the acquaintance, Jonty had no guarantee that they would ever achieve their previous state of intimacy. To mention it now, at this delicate stage, would probably scupper all chances of it happening. He was keeping Orlando on an even keel and at present that was all that mattered.



After three days of rest, Orlando was showing signs of frustration with his prison. The fourth brought both Dr. Stewart, to sit on the other bed as usual to amuse him with stories, and a diversion just outside the door. Two female voices, already raised, were becoming louder. Orlando and his guest were intrigued and frustrated, only being able to make out fifty percent of what was being said.

“The doctor...no college work until further...complete rest.” Nurse Hatfield's high-pitched tone was vying for supremacy with a deeper yet equally feminine voice.

“Nonsense! Dr. Copp...mad with boredom. All very well to rest the body...brainwork needed. Otherwise...recovery.”

Orlando was particularly exasperated to have missed most of that sentence.

“I can't be...consequences.”

“I bet she can't,” muttered Stewart, “whatever it was.” The men both giggled a little, but not too much for fear of being caught.

“Tell...brother.”

“She would as well,” hissed Orlando, “and then the fat would be in the fire.” They laughed again, with an ease which Orlando found staggering. He’d never been a great one for humour before, although with Dr. Stewart it seemed that jokes were always the order of the day.

The bit about the brother seemed to be the last part of the conversation, as the door was flung open and a middle-aged lady trooped in carrying a pile of old papers. “Hello, lads!”

“Hello, Miss Peters.” The pair of voices spoke in unison, which made all three of them laugh.

If the Master’s sister’s tones contrasted with the college nurse’s, then her appearance did even more so. Dark haired where Nurse Hatfield was blonde, a boyish figure to differ from the buxom one that ruled the sick bay, Miss Peters could have passed for a lass in her twenties from behind, although the wrinkles and grey streaks in her hair made her likely age—late forties, most folk speculated—obvious from the front. She had never been pretty, not even in her prime if photographs were to be believed, although what she lacked in looks she made up for in confidence.

She was the only lady who didn’t frighten Orlando and had been absent from the college on a fossil-hunting trip during the last part of 1905 that he still had clear memories of. Jonty, in his briefings, had informed him of her return but not of the role she had played in cleaning up a gore-splattered room only days afterwards.

“Now, Dr. Coppersmith, I hear that you have been excused all duties for a while and I’m sorely concerned that you’ll be lying here bored stiff. I know what these medical people can be like, far too fussy. What you need is a little mental stimulation.” Miss Peters tapped the sheaf of papers, producing a cloud of dust. “A mystery, an old, notorious and unsolved one. Well, not solved to either Lemuel’s or my satisfaction.”

Jonty stifled a little snigger at the unexpected use of the Master's Christian name. Like the process of procreation, it was known about in college but *never* referred to. He hastily covered this up by asking, "Not the Woodville Ward, surely?"

"The very same, Dr. Stewart." Miss Peters perched herself daringly on the edge of the bed and laid the papers on Orlando's lap. "These are copies of all the documents kept at the Master's lodge concerning the case. Nothing novel here, but—" her eyes glinted, "—there are some developments. Various new papers and letters have turned up which seem to have a bearing on the matter. Some of them appear to be encoded, and these Lemuel is having copied as we speak. I'll produce them for you as soon as I can. We thought—" Orlando caught the "we" and realised it was not just Miss Peters' scheme, "—that you might like to set your mind to it while you recover. Doubt you'll get back to work before term ends and it's only a few weeks now. At least you could look at breaking the codes if not solving the mystery itself."

The Woodville Ward, everyone at Bride's knew about him. He was a protégé of their foundress, Elizabeth of York, who had put as much as she could of her and her mother's money into setting up the college, primarily to keep it out of her husband's grasping Tudor mitts. Her children and grandchildren had made sure that the foundation was supported, and Queen Elizabeth Hall, as it had been called originally, had thrived. The rowing club still toasted their patroness in a way that reflected her uniqueness. "Daughter of a king, niece of a king, sister of a king," they would proclaim, taking a swig between each title, "wife of a king, mother of a king, grandmother of a king." Woe betide anyone whose glass had even a drop in it at the end.

Elizabeth had established her ward—Charles Shaa, a distant relative of the erstwhile Lord Mayor of London—in the college, but the lad had mysteriously disappeared. It must have reminded his patroness horribly of her own two brothers, although foul play

wasn't suspected at first. Charles had often expressed his wish not to be at the Hall but on a ship sailing westward towards the New World, so it was generally held that he'd run away and secured his ambition, being too ashamed to then return.

This view prevailed for the next two hundred years, until some renovation work uncovered an old well that had long been boarded over. The workmen found the body of a young man and there was enough evidence from the jewellery he was wearing to hazard that he was Charles. It was never made clear how he'd died, three separate reports at the time coming to contrasting conclusions, so the matter had rumbled on and on in St. Bride's over the years. There were numerous treatises on the subject lodged in the college library, most of them not worth the paper or parchment they were written on, which successive Masters had hoarded, adding to the documents relating to the case whenever new information turned up.

Copies of these original papers Miss Peters happily left on the sick bed, wishing her friends the best of luck. "I'm sure you'll succeed where others haven't."

As soon as she'd departed, Orlando questioned his colleague. "But why should she feel that I—we—should be able to solve a mystery that has taxed so many other people? There's been speculation about this case for years. Surely a few newly discovered papers can't make all that difference?"

Stewart grinned ruefully and fiddled with a sheaf of papers. "Ah, this may be another thing that you'll find hard to believe, but we've got ourselves a bit of a reputation for sleuthing. I never could decide which of us was Holmes and which was Watson, yet murder and mystery seemed to beat a path to our door."

"Was this the college murders?"

"Yes. The police asked us to keep an ear and eye out in Bride's, provide them with some inside information. I think we

*Charlie Cochrane*

helped to bring the case to an earlier conclusion than might have been otherwise.”

Stewart didn't seem to want to elaborate further so Orlando didn't ask him to. He decided to accept this bald explanation as adequate, at least for now. “And the other murder, when we were on holiday?”

“Now that was one of your great successes, although it wasn't so to start with. You seemed to suspect any and everyone, for a million different reasons, although in the end you deduced the whole thing before the police did. Think you might have a distinct knack for it. It's the mathematical training, no doubt.”

Stewart's face seemed awash with pride at his friend's achievement and Orlando felt himself blushing. It seemed an appropriate moment for them to part company for the day, leaving Orlando to eye the pile of papers with relish.



The next morning the nurse decided that Orlando could be allowed to return to his own room, so long as he promised to rest all afternoon, a decision that left Jonty hopping mad as he had commitments all day and couldn't help with the process.

Orlando was assisted back to his set by Summerbee, the porter, who carried all his stuff, apart from the papers Miss Peters had entrusted to him. He found the place much the same although some things he didn't recognise, like the half-finished bottles of sherry and port which had appeared on his sideboard and the beautiful tie pin that lay nestled in tissue paper among his underwear. He took the latter out and examined it under the light. There was no inscription or other clues to its provenance, so it was added to the many mysteries he had to solve.

What he didn't find, as Jonty had carefully removed them two days earlier, were any of the little signs that the room occasionally had a second occupant. Even the spare key to Jonty's

set of rooms, which had been affixed to Orlando's key ring, had been whisked away and no trace of it left behind.

Orlando was allowed to go to dinner in hall on the understanding that he retire early and be sensible. He was dreading it but knew the ordeal would have to be endured at some point. There would be questions, concern and fuss, none of which he wanted. As it was, he was met en route by Stewart, who'd sped back from a late meeting with a motley collection of English fellows to accompany his friend to High Table. Jonty provided an effective shield, telling all who began to make a nuisance of themselves that Nurse Hatfield had insisted that Coppersmith wasn't to be harassed. Anyone who tried to do so had to go to sick bay and report to her as to why the instruction had been disobeyed. No one was likely to risk having to do any such thing.

Going to the SCR afterwards had been something that Jonty had been, if not dreading, then ill at ease with. He was still unsure how Orlando was going to react to the pair of them sitting so close, but he needn't have worried. Orlando had been thinking it all out and had deduced that Jonty would occupy the seat next to his. "It's only logical that, if we're friends, we must sit together here."

Jonty felt a wave of relief sweep over him. He desperately wanted to say something like *This is where we first met* but that would have sounded far too romantic, so he settled for, "This is exactly where we first ran into each other. I sat in your chair and you were officious beyond all belief. 'Well, Stewart,' you said, 'we are great ones for resisting change and the particular chair a man inhabits after High Table is regarded as sacrosanct.'" It was an uncanny impression of Orlando's tone on the day.

Orlando frowned. "I never said that, did I? Not in that voice?"

"You did, you were a terrible grouch then. You seem to have lightened up no end."

They drank their coffee and chatted pleasantly in the dark, comfortable room, Orlando pointing out several of their fellow dons and wanting to have the latest information about them. Jonty noticed the signs of weariness gradually creeping over his friend's face and laid his now-empty cup down in a gesture that spoke of *time to go*. "Does Nurse allow you to take a drink? I notice you were abstemious during the meal."

"Oh, a little one would be allowable, but it's a bit late now."

"I have an excellent port in my room. It's on the way back to your set and you could spare ten minutes, surely, to celebrate your release from incarceration?"

Orlando smiled, with slight hesitation. "A small one and a swift one. That would be fine."

They slowly made their way over to his set, Jonty nervously scrutinising every step Orlando took on the stairs and making sure he stayed behind him this time, just in case he was needed to play wicketkeeper.

Jonty led the way in, ushered his guest towards a chair, then found the decanter, pouring a small libation for them both. "This was always your favourite seat, Orlando." Jonty pointed to the sagging but comfy armchair where Orlando was wont to stretch out his legs in front of the fire. He felt the other man's sudden unease and looked up. "Orlando? What's the matter?"

"No one outside my family has called me by my Christian name since I was a boy. I've always been Dr. Coppersmith here at St. Bride's. Even with you these last few days. What has changed?"

Jonty swallowed hard and attempted a reassuring smile. "It's been Jonty and Orlando in our own rooms ever since...well, ever since we began to visit each other. For reading or chess, or tea and buns," he added with a degree of haste.

“Never anywhere else?” It was as if Orlando had to relearn all the rules of their relationship, as he had learned the sacred rules of mathematics as a boy.

“Nowhere else in college or in the town. On holiday we relaxed our regulations, and at my parents’ house as well. But in the university and SCR we are always Dr. Coppersmith and Dr. Stewart.”

“Thank you...Jonty.” Orlando said it hesitatingly, making the vowel sound long and languorous, reminding Jonty of just how he’d spoken the name when they’d been intimate.

“My pleasure, Orlando.” They finished their port and Jonty escorted his friend home to his own rooms, seeing him safely through the door but not entering himself. That particular invitation would have to wait.

Orlando didn’t immediately turn in. He sat by his own fire, contemplating the flames, as he had sat alone many an evening since coming to St. Bride’s. Now he’d visited Stewart’s set for a drink and was apparently a regular guest there. He never used to visit any of the other fellows in their rooms, and no one had been allowed past the portals of his, but perhaps this was another rule which had to be learned anew. With Dr. Stewart—Jonty, how pleasant that name sounded—as part of his life, the world had to be viewed afresh.

He recalled Jonty’s impersonation of him at their first meeting and he knew it would have been correct; he remembered clearly what he’d been like a year back. He wouldn’t be like that now, he was certain, and that was one more piece of evidence that 1906 had been a watershed year. He was becoming increasingly convinced that something out of the ordinary had happened to him, something which had a lasting effect, but Stewart had given no indication of what that had been. Perhaps the man didn’t know.

## Chapter Three

Orlando sat by his desk, coffee and rolls to hand and Miss Peters' papers next to them. He was enormously grateful that she'd hunted out this little puzzle for him, being a man who liked to think—there had been too much time recently for contemplation and only two subjects for consideration. One was what had happened to him over the past year, another was the fact that his room didn't seem to be a refuge from the world anymore. There were distinct impressions left that someone else might visit it, at least on occasions.

Which brought him immediately to the second point for consideration—Dr. Stewart. Orlando wondered whether it was normal, when regarding a friend, to be quite so obsessed about him as he seemed to be. He'd eagerly awaited the man's visits to sick bay and in between had thought of him often. Almost all the time, if he was being honest. Jonty was a great mystery, garrulous about so many things, yet there seemed to be whole areas upon which he seemed reluctant to expound. Irrespective of this, he was a constant source of joy and entertainment, the like of which Orlando couldn't at any point remember in his "old life".

He'd begun to construct a timeline of the past twelve months, not just in his head but on paper too, put together from what he'd read in the newspapers and in university publications. And from the endless chatter that had proceeded from his friend. It had been an incident-packed time—*could he really have started playing bridge on a regular basis, and at another college?*—but

he got no clues as to this significant event, if one there was. Perhaps it had been linked to his close involvement, twice over, with violent death.

Now he'd been given another possible murder to set his mind to. Once he'd had his breakfast, Orlando's first trip of the morning was to the college library to borrow what was generally regarded as the most accurate of the summaries of the Woodville Ward case. The story was well known to anyone at Bride's, being one of the frequent topics for conversation in both common rooms. Theories were often bandied forth as to the means and motive for the death, hypotheses that were often completely outrageous.

Having made another strong pot of coffee and settling himself in a comfortable spot on his old, familiar sofa, Orlando began to re-familiarise himself with the main points of the case. Charles Shaa had been orphaned at eleven, taken under the wing of Elizabeth of York, who had been a great friend of his mother, then conveyed to the college for safekeeping. He was raised among the students, much cosseted by them and by the college tutors. The Queen Elizabeth Hall records which had survived showed that he'd been well cared for and had soon been taken on as a student himself, to study astronomy. His name, the treatise stated, showed up among various remaining documents of the time, even appearing on a laundry bill that had somehow continued in existence until the 1850's.

Any mention of Shaa ceased in early 1497 and the records showed that the queen had herself visited the Hall in great agitation to seek her ward, for whom she felt a particular responsibility. She'd returned home with no more understanding of what had happened than when she came. Much time and money had been spent on a search, extending, given the lad's avowed wish to be a sailor, to the local seaports. In the end the hunt had, like all the other avenues explored, drawn a complete

blank—the Master at the time believed the young man had simply given them all the slip and was halfway across the Atlantic.

The body had been found in 1701, a sad corpse in a dried-out, disused well. College records put the closure of the water supply at June, 1497, so the theory was that Shaa had been put in there almost as soon as he'd disappeared. The hue and cry had been in vain, the net spread far and wide for someone who all the time was just outside the Hall's portals. The body had been identified by means of the distinctive jewellery he wore, items which could be traced back to his grandmother, whose portrait was still in existence at the time. So was a sketch of Shaa himself, with the items clearly displayed. To clinch things, the body showed signs of a slight fracture to the arm that had not had a chance to heal. It was known that young Shaa had suffered a suspected break in one of his bones shortly before his disappearance.

The author of the work concluded with a series of summaries. First of all the probable means of death, which was given as drowning, strangulation or suffocation. All these had been put forward at the time of the body's discovery, although given the long interval since his demise, none of them were likely to be more than guesswork. Then there was motivation, which centred on Shaa having left a small amount of money that had been put in trust to him. His next surviving blood relative had been little more than a baby at the time of Shaa's death, and only the most ludicrous of theorists implied that *he* had done it.

The rival Yorkist and Lancastrian factions had inevitably been drawn into the reckoning, their inferred motives being as varied as the people writing the treatises. Virulent followers of Henry VII were sure that the ward had been killed by supporters of Gloucester, in revenge for Elizabeth taking a Tudor husband. Supporters of Richard III were convinced that Henry himself had been jealous of his wife's affection for the boy and had made a

midnight visit to the college, sword in hand to dispatch him, bribing the college servants to hide the corpse. There were serious yet extravagantly wild theories abounding, at least one of which involved Shaa being a woman dressed as a man to gain access to the exclusively male learning process at the college. The case was notorious, not just because it was unsolved, but because of the lunatic fringe it seemed to attract.

Orlando sighed, decided to reread the document and make notes, but he had no idea exactly how he was supposed to get further forward. All he was sure of was that he didn't dare fail Miss Peters.

A sharp knock startled him out of contemplation. He ambled across the room, opened the door gingerly and beamed at Jonty. He should have known it would be his friend—for a wonderful moment he savoured in his mind the words *my friend*, before daring to speak. “Come in, please do. Sorry I couldn't invite you in last evening but I was rather tired.”

Stewart grinned. “That's all right. Last year it took me weeks to be allowed onto this hallowed ground. It's nice to be welcomed with open arms.” He entered the room and went over to the fireplace. “There's a raw wind outside that's appeared from nowhere and my nether regions are frozen, as I was idiot enough not to put on an overcoat for the walk across the court. Anyway, I just wanted to ask whether you'd be up for visiting the Bishop's Cope tonight, it being Saturday and all.” He noticed Orlando's look of confusion. “Oh sorry, I forgot. It was so much like old times and I...”

Orlando smiled fondly. “That's of no consequence. I take it that we always dine at the Bishop's Cope on a Saturday? How did we ever get into that particular habit?”

Jonty turned to the fire and attacked it with a poker. It didn't need any such attention but the action proved useful in hiding his blush. “Oh, we went there during those murders, back in January I

think it was. We needed to get out of the college for a bit. You were so very smitten with the steak and kidney pie, and the beer, you were extremely fond of that, it just became a fixture. The other fellows would have apoplexy if they saw us at High Table tonight.” He was glad to find that the explanation was accepted and he didn’t need to elaborate.

“Do you think Nurse Hatfield will let me? Or when she finds out do you think she’ll make me write *I must not go to public houses* one hundred and fifty times in my very best handwriting?”

“Two hundred and fifty at least.” Jonty smiled broadly and slapped his friend on the shoulder. “But you must remember to ask for ‘snake and pygmy pie’ tonight. That’s what we always call it and the landlord would be very disappointed to be deprived of his weekly joke.”

“We can’t risk letting him down then. What time should I be ready?”

“We normally wander up there at seven but I think that in deference to Nurse H we should make it half past six. Then we can get you back here and into your blameless bed without the risk of a wiggling.”

Orlando nodded, indicating the papers he’d been ploughing through. “I’ve been hoping we could spend some time on these. Would you be free this afternoon?”

“Of course. I could do with refreshing my memory on the case. It’s been a long time since I talked to anyone about the Woodville Ward, and the man concerned was a rampant supporter of the old crookback, He insisted that Margaret Beaufort had been at the root of it, trying to get one over on her daughter-in-law.” He giggled. “Dreadful creatures some of these medieval women were, talking of which, I have a surprise for you. If I say that it comes in the form of a be-hatted and bejewelled woman of very loud voice and extremely hard hand you will be none the wiser,

although if I say that the same paw was frequently applied to my backside you could make an educated guess.”

“Your mother?”

“The Honourable Helena Stewart indeed. Now don’t look quite so petrified, Orlando, you’re a great favourite of hers. In fact I’m not sure that she doesn’t prefer you to me. She’ll descend out of a cloud of steam at eleven o’clock tomorrow, by which I mean that she’ll take the train, probably providing the engine with extra power by breathing fire into the boiler.”

Orlando couldn’t have felt more astonished. He had no idea that people could refer to their family so, especially when the insults were accompanied by a look of adoration. Jonty obviously thought the world of his mother, more than Orlando had loved his, and he would never have dared refer to her in such a manner. Jonty had told him that they’d spent time with the Stewarts on more than one occasion and guessed that the great lady had been kind to him. He wondered whether she would resemble her son and what brilliant marriage could have produced such a shining child. “Will we meet her at the station?”

“Oh no, not required. She’ll fly up here on her broomstick as usual then whisk us off to lunch. You’ll have plenty of warning. Her voice will be audible by the time the train passes Royston.”

“And she wants to see us both?” Orlando was still baffled at the thought that an earl’s daughter might choose to visit him of all people.

“Actually she insisted, Orlando. All joking aside, she’s been terribly worried about you. Now she wants to make sure face-to-face that you’re still alive and not turned completely gaga.” Jonty began to rub Orlando’s head with his knuckles then pulled them hastily away. “Tell you what, shall I go off and search out a bit of bread and cheese and possibly a jar or two of pickle, then we can take a look at that Woodville Ward stuff?”

Lunch was simple but delicious, the cheese being a stilton which had been doused with port every time it had been dug into until it was almost dissolving, and pickles that came straight from the Stewarts' cook. Orlando ate with relish, beginning to find his appetite again, then explained what he'd done with the case so far. He showed Jonty the neat and perceptive notes he'd started to make, something which impressed his friend.

"Should have done this those first two times, Orlando. A bit more method might have prevented that young lad from—" Jonty stopped. The pleasant intimacy of their lunch had lulled him into forgetting that Orlando had never been given the details of that fateful afternoon when his lover's life had been in the balance.

Orlando tapped his notes, as if his friend were a rather stupid undergraduate who had to explain his workings-out. "Jonty, I believe that in your account of the last year you have held back several things from me."

Stewart blanched, although Orlando didn't seem to notice. The thought of the Bishop's Cope had been preying on his mind—their first kiss had followed a visit there and it was a very special place for them. Or had been. Had Coppersmith got wind of this somehow?

"I'm talking about these murder cases. You've not given me a full account of either. If we're to attempt to solve Miss Peters' problem, I'll need to understand what went on and how we helped to solve things. I promise that it won't harm my recovery if you tell me."

"As you wish. I'll try to summarise them both, and you can ask me what you need to know further." Jonty sighed in relief, laying down the treatise he had begun to flick through. "The St. Bride's victims were all men who lay with their own sex and the killer left nasty little notes on their bodies to make this plain. He was a young student who'd been badly abused by older boys when at school—I hope that I don't have to spell out to you what

that means, because it isn't pleasant. Anyway, he was taking a belated revenge, but we didn't know any of this until he came to my rooms and threatened me with a razor. He'd strangled his other victims—I still don't know why he chose to change his method in my case. You came into the room just in time to dissuade him from using that razor on me, although neither of us could stop him using it on himself. And before you ask, I'm aware why that had such a disturbing effect on you. I know all about your early life as you, time was, knew all about mine."

He stopped, waiting for a reaction. All he got was a nod and a series of questions. *How did we, and the police, miss this young lad? In retrospect, what clues should we have spotted? Why was your life threatened?* The first two were easy to answer, the third less so, although Orlando seemed to accept that their interest in the case had made them both potential targets. About his own family Orlando spoke not at all. "And the murder while we were on holiday? Were our lives in danger then?"

Jonty noticed that the *your life* had subtly changed to *our lives* and was heartened. "That was a strange business, a murder which was obscured by a coincidental case of blackmail. The son of the victim had been the recipient of threatening letters from the barman—I told you that, although I never said why. Ainslie junior shared the same inclinations as the victims here, a fondness for other men." He paused, to gauge Orlando's reaction to this revelation, but again it seemed to be just an analytical one.

"Did we identify the blackmailer?"

"In concert with Matthew Ainslie, yes, and before Inspector Wilson did. The identification of the murderer—" there was no need for further elucidation here, he had been perfectly frank about this with Orlando from the start, "—was all our own work. Well yours, really. We applied much more logic and analysis, although you'd been led astray when you started to formulate

theories without sufficient evidence. I think we both learned a thing or two about detection on holiday.”

Orlando showed his satisfaction with these explanations by politely thanking his friend then returning to the Woodville letters and his own notes. Jonty had a sheaf of papers on his lap but stared at them unseeing. It was lovely sitting in Orlando’s room again, as it seemed years since they’d been there together although in reality it was little more than a week. Lovely and yet agonizing; to be so close to his lover and not to be allowed to touch was torture indeed.



“Jonathan! Orlando!”

A voice that seemed to have been designed to penetrate concrete at two hundred yards rang through the college court. It was Sunday morning and the broomstick had obviously landed successfully. Its arrival had been anticipated by the two fellows so they were lurking around to greet the pilot.

“Mother,” Jonty whispered to his companion, before saying in a tone as hearty as hers, “Mama! You’re looking ridiculously well. What has the doctor been giving you to make you look so young?” He was scooped up into his mother’s arms and had the breath squeezed out of him.

“Looking thin again, dear.” Helena Stewart always seemed to think that her son was on the brink of starvation, even though he was more muscular and well set up now than he had been this last year. “Dr. Coppersmith, you look positively emaciated.” She grabbed Orlando and squashed any answer out of him, too.

Orlando was stunned. His own mother had never shown any such physical affection for him and the perfume-soaked, genial embraces of this ample lady were a complete shock. He knew he’d met her before although he had no recollection of the events and he’d no time now for reflection, with Mrs. Stewart thrusting

an arm through those of both her son and his *thin and starving* friend and insisting that they go immediately to the Blue Boar for a jolly good feed.

She was most sympathetic over lunch, a meal taken in a quiet room away from the noisy masses so that the recovering invalid shouldn't be overwhelmed. She'd asked, with great concern, about Orlando's condition, gently talking him through the times he'd been her guest, the pleasure it had given her to receive him. "Because it has always been a delight to us whenever Jonathan has brought you home. I think of you rather like a son now, which of course must seem very odd today when you no doubt regard me as a stranger. But one day you'll remember everything, dear, and then it will be like old times." She beamed.

Orlando thought how much Mrs. Stewart resembled Jonty and how lovely she must have been at the same age. A sudden, small voice in his head informed him that his friend was beautiful *now* and when he looked at Jonty he realised it was quite true, which was another terrible shock. He had never really considered before whether anyone was eye-catching and he'd now done it for two people within a minute.

They finished their meal with a wealth more gossip and made their way back to Stewart's set for a cup of tea to refresh them and to give Orlando a chance to collect his thoughts.

Helena Stewart insisted that there was nowhere better to take a cup than in front of one's own fire. She was now ensconced on Jonty's sofa and her thoughts ran to old acquaintances.

"So you met old George Le Tissier on Jersey. I wonder if he remembers me?"

"I don't think that anyone would ever forget you, Mama." Jonty smiled affectionately. His mother, once met, was never to be expunged from the memory.

“Especially true in this case. Not my most shining moment, Jonathan, I positively disgraced myself.” Mrs. Stewart blushed, something that seemed out of character.

“Whatever did you do?” Their interest was piqued, their appetite whetted at the thought of what revelation might come from this lady’s lips. Jonty in particular was intrigued at the thought of his mother disgracing herself in any way.

“It was a grand ball. A very big occasion, all the handsomest young men were going to be there, including George who was a subaltern at the time. Not that I had eyes for any of them except your father—that’s why I was so excited. Richard Stewart was going to be present and we’d arranged in advance to have several dances together. Got out my best bib and tucker and set off. Within a quarter of an hour of arriving there, a young man I’d taken a waltz with, I can’t remember his name, the ill-favoured surly thing.” She glanced surreptitiously at the often surly thing on her left but he was looking remarkably sweet and kind today. “Anyway, he drew me off into a corner, said he’d never loved anyone the way he adored me, proposed a marriage within three months and when I refused to take up his offer, threatened to kill himself. I spent twenty-five minutes trying to talk him out of it. Meant that I missed my first dance with your father, so I was rather miffed. When I tracked Richard down to apologise he hooted with laughter. He said he knew the chap and that he’d done the same thing numerous times—the suicide threat was all a big bluff of course. I was livid. Your father had to hold my hand and try to get me to calm down. I was all for going and tweaking the chap’s ear, but I suppose the hand-holding made it all worthwhile.”

“It always does.” Jonty smirked slightly and there was a suggestion of a blush on Orlando’s cheeks. *How odd*, Jonty reflected, wondering if the embarrassment was due to subconscious memories.

Mrs. Stewart sailed on undaunted. “Then blow me down if three dances later a similar thing didn’t happen, though I remember the chap’s name this time. Samuel Parker, and he was a toerag. We were walking through the portrait gallery at the back of the house en route to get an ice when he plighted his troth. I gave him the old ‘thank you but no thank you’ and he pulled me behind the arras—I can see you sniggering, Jonty and it doesn’t become you—and started to take the grossest liberties. All he got was a black eye—it was a real shiner, I was rather proud of myself—and he departed. Then I had to go and find Richard again and explain why I’d been late for our *next* dance. Had the suspicion that he thought your dear mama was a bit of a flibbertigibbet, but he held my hand once more and called me his ‘dear little peach’. I can see you smirking *again*, Jonty, and if it happens a third time I will have no hesitation in taking you across my knee and spanking you. Anyway, I was furious, furious beyond all measure. So when poor George Le Tissier came up all beaming with excitement and asked for my hand, I forgot myself entirely. It was pent-up anger, and I am not proud of myself. Now, are you ever going to make me that cup of tea or will you watch your poor mother sit here, wasting away parched and drained?”

“Mother, I won’t even put the kettle on until you tell me what you did that was so bad.”

“Laid him out, dear. One great big punch and *goodnight sweetheart*. Now that ends that trifling matter and you need to address the greater one of my desiccated throat.”

When Mrs. Stewart was watered sufficiently to be able to attempt the return journey, Summerbee, the porter, found a cab (she wasn’t inclined to fly the broom). With many a kiss, hug and wave she was sent on her way.

“Well, what do you think?” Jonty grinned as they wandered back to his set.

Any answer was stifled by the call of Miss Peters, who sped across the grass with a bundle in her hand. “Can’t stop, have to get back to sick bay. This flu is making life very difficult for all concerned. These are the things I told you about, copies of a whole raft of documents which were discovered not two weeks back, up in the attics of the lodge. Came out of the ark with Noah, well, out of the abbey with the Woodvilles, perhaps. Bit of a complication on the horizon, though.” She thrust her burden into Stewart’s arms, then went on her way, tripping along like a girl.

“Extraordinary woman.” Orlando looked on awestruck.

“Now does that remark refer to Miss Peters or to my mama? She’d be very cross to know that she had a rival for your affections.”

“Both of them, Dr. Stewart. But I’ll keep your mother at the top of my list, if I may. Miss Peters never sees fit to cover me with perfume and powder, even if it is accidental. You can tell her that she has my heart forever.”

Jonty swallowed hard at the familiar words, ones that Orlando had spoken to him on many an intimate occasion. He smiled at his friend affectionately. “Let’s take these back to your rooms to put with the others—we could manage an hour or two on them before hall. I wish I knew what this wretched complication was, though.”

Once back in his set, Orlando decided to take a first look at the codes and Jonty, applying his knowledge of the period, thought he might pore through the other documents with a view to building upon the notes his friend had started to make.

The room was hot, Orlando having stoked the fire up, so Jonty stripped off his jacket and tie and rolled up his sleeves. He wore a fine pair of dun-coloured braces, articles which brought bittersweet memories. He and Orlando had often, on their return from holiday, played a game in which they tried to ping the other’s braces in public without anyone else noticing. Such

satisfaction it had given, not just from the wonderful *thwack* which the elastic made when it was released, but from the little sting of pain that it would provoke in the man who'd been caught. There were no such games now.

Jonty bent over his work, but was interrupted by a hand upon his back. "Bit of a problem here, I'll have to adjust it." The clip at the back of the braces had worked loose and was starting to snag on the material of his trousers. Orlando deftly worked the teeth loose and refastened them, giving the little thing a pat of satisfaction when finished. It was a gesture at once innocent and exceedingly intimate, which made Jonty almost a shivering wreck. They hadn't touched so closely since Orlando's accident and it smacked of earlier, happier times.

Jonty forced a smile and a "Thank you", buried his nose in the old leaves of parchment and hoped Orlando hadn't noticed his confusion. They sat working for some time, although Jonty's mind was distracted and when he chanced a glance at his friend, he knew he wasn't the only one who couldn't concentrate on the task in hand.

"Jonty, I have a question I must put to you." Orlando sat on his settee, surrounded by his notes on various forms of ciphers. "I can't concentrate on these—" he waved the papers in his hand, "—until my mind is at rest."

"Ask away, Orlando. We have no secrets between us, or used not to have anyway." Jonty could feel his throat constricting, the terrible urge to cry welling up.

"I have just had such a clear image come into my mind. It's of your shoulders and a peculiar line of moles across the left one, a bit like Orion's belt and sword. Why should I know that they are there, or see them so clearly?"

Jonty laid down his sheaf of letters, turning slowly to his friend. The crunch point had come, as he'd known that it must. He could lie, say "We holidayed together, Orlando, you've seen me

getting changed often enough,” but the time had passed for continuing economy with the truth. Especially after the way he’d felt himself react to Orlando’s touch.

He moved over to his friend, sat down, very gently took the other man’s hand in his, was encouraged by the lack of reaction to the move, and spoke. “My dearest friend, what I’m going to say to you may well prove a very great shock, but you must understand that, as God is my witness, it is nothing but the truth. We’ve been close, this last year, closer than just friends.” He observed the look of bewilderment on Orlando’s face and pressed on regardless. “You should know that we’ve been intimate for nearly a year. Lovers. That’s how you know my shoulders so well, as I know every mark on your frame.”

Orlando didn’t speak. He turned deathly pale, shook his head but uttered no sound.

“I can assure you that it’s so. See this ring?” Jonty held aloft his left hand, heart rapidly sinking although desperate to assert itself. “You gave it to me the day of your fall. To celebrate a year since we met and almost as long since we fell in love.”

Orlando flung his hands from him, rose and stumbled to the bathroom, from where Jonty could soon hear him vomiting, spewing up, no doubt, both his disgust and his erstwhile lover’s faint hopes of a continuation of their relationship.

Jonty had thought his heart would never be broken again, but he’d been wrong, ridiculously wrong, and the pain he felt now was more than he felt he could bear.

Orlando emerged eventually, wiping his mouth and dabbing his face with his handkerchief. There seemed to be no words that either man could find appropriate to the situation.

Jonty slowly removed the ring from his finger, placed it on the desk and left.

## Chapter Four

Jonty's eyes were raw from crying. He'd used up most of his clean hankies and couldn't keep from looking at the mark on his finger where the ring had been not an hour since. It was the only tangible thing he had left of the glories of the past year and now it had returned to Orlando, along with the last vestiges of any hope of a recommencement of their love affair. Jonty's thoughts were already turning to a change of college, of university, maybe going off with an archaeological expedition for the next four years until his heart didn't hurt quite so much. He'd never felt so wretched as he did now, a great gaping hole echoing inside him, one he was convinced would never heal. Orlando had been sickened at the thought of their being lovers. It was as simple as that and now there was no hope in all the world. And how on earth would he tell his mother?

There was an instantly recognisable rap on the door. Jonty's instinct was to stay quiet, to pretend he wasn't present, but his treacherous tongue gave voice to a "Come in" before he could stop it.

Orlando gently opened the door, bearing the papers they'd been looking through, a neat little pile with a small velvet bag on the top. Without a word he opened this and tipped the contents—the signet ring—into its rightful owner's unsteady hand. "This is yours and you shouldn't be parted from it." He looked at his sheaf of papers. "Thought we could carry on with these."

Of all the words Jonty had expected to hear from his friend's lips, these seemed the most incongruous. *Never darken my doorstep again* would have been more like it, but there was no logic here at all. He weighed the ring in his hand but couldn't bear to put it back on yet. "I thought you wouldn't want to see me again."

Orlando's eyes remained fixed on the documents. "That would have been discourteous. I feel ashamed enough already about my behaviour. I'm sorry that I caused you such pain—it was just such a shock, you see." He at last looked up and held Jonty's eyes. "I believe everything that you say to me Jonty, and if you tell me we have been...intimate...these last few months then I accept the fact. But to have no knowledge of it, no memory at all of things we must have done, that's so very hard. Especially hard when as far as I knew I've never had such experiences in all my life."

The urge in Jonty to take his friend's hand, to caress his face and whisper comforting words, was almost overpowering, but he settled for the English refuge in times of distress. "Want a cup of tea, Orlando? Make us both feel a bit better."

Jonty went off to find his beloved teapot and the solace it always seemed to provide. It was the same one that had witnessed the afternoon when Orlando had got drunk. When he'd pranced around this very set of rooms in a state of undress, finally lying on the carpet with his friend and going to sleep like a baby. Only the carpet had changed, for the obvious reason that a madman had cut his throat and spilled his blood all over it.

Jonty produced tea and jam tarts, sitting at the opposite end of the sofa to Orlando whilst trying not to appear too eager. The man seemed to have a question or two on his mind given the look of concentration that was fixed on his face.

"Jonty, I'd already come to the conclusion that something had happened this last year. Happened to me, to make me change

so completely. I really hadn't even considered something like this, yet it explains so much. You said we were lovers..."

"That's true, Orlando. I couldn't deny it." Jonty felt the great hole in his heart start to close just a little. They were still talking, taking tea and being civil—there was, after all, the slightest glimmer of hope.

"I have no knowledge of romance, or at least I thought I hadn't. Not in my first twenty-seven years. Will you tell me what we did? Did we kiss?"

Jonty's voice, when he eventually found the courage to speak, was dripping with tenderness. "Of course we did. And held hands." He considered whether he should try holding hands now, but was too scared. "It was very nice, you know, for both of us."

Orlando nodded, taking in all this new evidence as if to add to some strange theory he was formulating. "But there must have been more, mustn't there?"

Jonty smiled wistfully, remembering a lot more than he dared to say at present. The effects of one devastating burst of honesty had made him much more wary now. "Indeed."

"Where did we touch?" Orlando's voice was barely above a whisper.

"All over. There was no shyness between us then. Not recently, anyway." Jonty cast his eyes down and studied the rim of his teacup with as much concentration as if it had been an original folio.

"And was that it? The Bible speaks of becoming one flesh, man and wife cleaving together. I assume that men can do the same. Did we ever..."

Jonty looked up into dark eyes which were full of hunger to know the truth and a fear about so much that had been forgotten. "Aye, we did. It was one of our greatest pleasures, Orlando..." He couldn't continue, feeling his eyes once more beginning to well and a lump forming in his throat.

Orlando didn't say anything except, "It's fine," and could do nothing other than pat his friend's shoulder and refill his cup of tea. They sat for a good ten minutes not talking, until Orlando seemed to finally pluck up the courage to speak.

"I would ask you to bear with me and be patient. I know it can't be easy, but you must understand that I feel no ill will at all about what you told me. If we were intimate then I must have loved you a great deal and I can appreciate how anyone could fall for you, Jonty. You're like a great shaft of sunshine on the very darkest day, and when you appeared at my bedside that afternoon I fell down the stairs, it was such a startling thing. I'd never had a friend and then, out of the blue, I was told I had one. These last few days I've had to relearn all that means, what a friendship truly is. Now you say that we were lovers and I've another set of rules to get my head around. I need time to understand things, if I can ever understand them. I hope that you'll give me it."

"Of course I will, you chump." The enormous relief Jonty felt was clear in his voice. "You've been the most precious thing to me for a whole year—I'd never do anything to harm or frighten you."

"Have we had happy times, Jonty? I've never known much contentment in my life. Did I find it this last year?"

Jonty felt almost giddy with happiness, his intense sadness turning to a mad delight. "Oh, we've done such things in high spirits, Orlando. We even punted in January, can you believe it? And we slid along the Backs on the ice like two silly undergraduates and you even got drunk down at Thomas's and wanted to bathe in the fountain. Well, don't look so disbelieving, because you did and I have a porter who'd witness to it."

"I don't believe a word of that." Orlando pouted, the first time he'd produced that expression since August. It made Jonty hoot like an owl.

“Oh, that’s the very expression you wore that day at Thomas’s. I had to drag you back to my set and then you decided that you’d take a soak in my bathroom, so your clothes got strewn everywhere. I didn’t know where to look, honestly. You sailed into the bathroom and launched yourself into the water, murdering Gilbert and Sullivan songs all the time until you sobered up. Next thing you fell asleep in front of my fire, stark naked. It was just as well that Miss Peters was away at the time, because if she’d come visiting, she would have had the shock of her life.” Jonty laughed till he was breathless and in the end Orlando had to laugh too.

“Well, I still think you made most of that story up. I never sing in the bath and I don’t lie around naked. Unless...” It appeared that a sudden awful thought had struck him. Perhaps he’d realised there might be all sorts of things that he’d taken to doing this last year which he knew nothing about. Scandalous things. “I don’t take my clothes off at any other times, do I?”

“Not that I’m aware of. I don’t think you’re a disciple of Adam in his unfallen state. Quite respectable in public.” Jonty grinned. He slipped the ring back on his finger, surreptitiously admiring it. He didn’t mention some of the more daring things his friend had seen fit to do over the year, like kissing him on a beach in broad daylight (albeit their only audience being some seabirds and starfish) or making love in a punt at midnight under the willows down at Grantchester this last September, before the university became alive again for Michaelmas term. They’d been bold then, not going as far as the last favours but sharing some of the more discreet pleasures that they’d known. Orlando wasn’t ready for that particular revelation and there was still a chance that he never would be.

Jonty smiled wistfully, putting down the papers he’d been given. “Come on, Orlando, let’s leave this stuff for today and get some fresh air. You’ve been cooped up far too long and a nice walk to the Bishop’s Cope for a pint wouldn’t be good enough.

Charlie Cochrane

The Backs are what you need, and some icy air in your lungs to blow the cobwebs out. We might find a moorhen to make us laugh or hear an owl out a bit early. I always like the water in the evening, it's nice and peaceful. We'll go and find your coat and gloves once I'm ready—and wear a nice warm hat or our friend with the starched pinny will be giving us lines again.”



The next day Jonty's pigeonhole contained a package from Miss Peters, which he hurriedly took over to Orlando's rooms. They spread it over the broad oaken desk to pore over the contents like two excited schoolboys.

*In all the commotion I forgot to put this in with the new documents, the covering note said. We discovered these papers among the joists when we had the recent renovation work on the lodge. Whoever had hidden the things had possibly done it at the time of the original part of the building's construction, which was soon after Shaa's disappearance. Lemuel is most excited, especially at the coded pieces. Someone must have had something that he wanted to hide but had, at the same time, felt the need to record it. Perhaps a translation of the documents into plain English would give a clue to the motive for such contradictory behaviour. My brother feels that, as his speciality is zoology, he hasn't the wit or understanding to decode these ciphers. The implication was but you, Dr. Coppersmith, have.*

*The original documents should be entering the college library after the history fellows have had their grubby mitts on them.* Orlando and Jonty sniggered at the words their friend had used here. Miss Peters lost no love over the *makers up of stories* as she referred to historians. She preferred a nice invertebrate to dissect and draw or experiment on; there were facts, there was scholarship for you. Not some namby-pamby, so-called intellectuals taking a series of facts and making ninety different

interpretations of them. For donkey's years the historians had argued over the Woodville Ward and none of them were any closer to solving the mystery. *A nice mixture of mathematical logic and Shakespearian feeling is needed here. I hope you succeed, and quickly, as the complication we feared has arisen. A complication named Dr. Owens.*

"Oh." That was a name Orlando remembered.

"I'll take your 'Oh' and raise it with a 'hell'." Jonty's eyes narrowed. "Grubby little swine."

If any true Bride's man sought a solution to the mystery of the Woodville Ward in the dry well, he also would have liked to see Dr. Arthur Owens tipped into a full one, with his books tied around his obnoxious neck. He'd been a Bride's man himself, a notable philosophy scholar, then had taught at the college for five years, before taking himself, and several works purloined from the library, off to the college next door, the arch rivals of St. Bride's. He'd then published a series of papers, all of which were said to be plagiarised from his students' work although no one had been able to prove it.

*He has persuaded the vice chancellor...*

"Sheer nepotism, the man's his godfather." Orlando snorted, sending several sheets of paper flying in his anger.

*...to coerce Lemuel into letting him have a look at these documents, him being a historian—they could almost see the hatred written into the word—and an alleged expert on the period. Lemuel refused outright at first, but has been pressured into complying, assuming that you can't find a solution. You have until the start of the Lent term and then, should you have failed, Owens is to be allowed to infect the original documents with his slimy fingers.*

She had finished the letter with the words *your dear, but outraged, friend, Ariadne Peters*. Under the name was a tiny mark which Jonty was convinced was a kiss and over which he and

Orlando argued for ten minutes, the other man being sure it was a blot.

The new papers fell into two categories: coded texts which Orlando had gleefully taken hold of to work on, and some letters addressed to, and received from, one Johan Breton. These Jonty was delighted to plough through. As he'd re-familiarised himself with the case, among the names of the great and good and powerful—not necessarily the same people in each case—he'd come across this young friend of the Woodville Ward. There had been just one mention of Breton in the summary document, an occasion when he, Shaa and one Isaac Gaveson had got themselves into hot water with the college authorities for associating with ladies of a lewd nature. The idea of that had tickled Jonty's imagination, although *he* had never knowingly associated with such women himself.

Only one other document had referred to Breton. The writer had found out that the man had been a local lad who must have shared his friend's desire to go to sea. Breton had subsequently served ten years aboard a ship, presumably associating with a few more lewd women along the way, then returned, marrying a local lass, and living to a respectable old age. He was buried up at Swavesey.

To find letters from Shaa himself, along with Breton's replies, was a real bonus. Jonty had no great hopes that they would shed any light on the case and on his first reading of them this seemed to be vindicated. They were full of tittle-tattle and gossip, with some personal outpourings of feeling, but nothing new was revealed. Shaa spoke often of his sea longing, of how his studies in astronomy only further enhanced his wish to travel and to make something of himself on his own terms. He voiced his frustrations in being cooped up at "Elizabeth Hall", as he referred to it, dropping the "Queen". His fondness for Breton shone through the pages, although Jonty recognised that it wasn't the

same sort of fondness he felt for Orlando; there was too much mention of the lewd women, and some of their more respectable counterparts, for that. Gaveson was also referred to—he appeared to be another student, a none-too-welcome hanger-on to a happy partnership.

It struck Jonty as odd that no one had tried to pin the disappearance on Breton. Just about everybody else had been put forward as a suspect by some author or other, even the queen herself had been accused, the motive being that Shaa had turned down her advances. Jonty reflected that with the references made to women in these newfound letters, he found it unlikely that Shaa would have turned down any reasonably young and fairly willing female.

He considered the two mysteries he and Orlando had been involved in and the lessons they'd learned. In both cases it had been the least likely suspect who'd been found to be guilty. So who was the least likely person in this case? He would have put his money on Henry VII or Elizabeth, though not Margaret Beaufort—she sounded far too much like his own mother to have put anything past her once she set her mind to something. Neither a king nor his consort nor even, he supposed, the Archbishop of Canterbury himself should be discounted.

“What do your papers show, Orlando? Look like gibberish to me.”

“I’ve no idea what they contain, Jonty. I’ve played about with some of them and there’s nothing so far, although it’s early days. I’m fairly certain some of them are merely letter substitutions, given the patterns that seem to recur, but others look much more complex.”

“Never realised you were such an expert in cryptograms. Is there no end to your talents?”

Orlando beamed. “I thought you knew everything about me, but I guess I still have a surprise or two in store. I loved codes

when I was a lad, used to send myself messages and then translate them and send them back.” He looked blissfully happy, the first glimpse Jonty had ever had into something good in Orlando’s childhood. It was typical that it involved only him. “When I first came here I found all sorts of books on the subject and I’ve tackled many of the things for amusement—my mathematical colleagues pride themselves on cryptography. I must have found the diversions of the last year rather took my mind off them.” He blushed, becomingly.

Jonty grinned in memory of some of the forms those diversions of the last year had taken. “And what is your favourite method, if you disdain the easy substitution?”

“Wheatstone’s old coding. They’re calling it ‘Playfair’ now, or so I understand from one of the men at Thomas’s who has connections in Whitehall, but Wheatstone was the man behind it as far as I’m concerned. Difficult to break unless you know the code word. I doubt that Shaa used anything like it.”

He returned to his papers, as did Jonty. It was pleasant at present just to sit together, the tension of earlier having gone now that the great secret had been brought into the open and their friendship had survived it.

They worked on until half, where they took their places at the end of the table that Lumley, the chaplain, frequented. Orlando sat next to him and Jonty opposite, the candlelight sending strange shadows up onto the ancient walls, the all-pervading—wonderfully familiar and comforting—smell of cabbage not lessening the allure of the setting. Lumley was relating the tale of an undergraduate who’d been allegedly labouring under the misapprehension that Noah’s wife was Joan of Ark.

Jonty giggled, although he’d already heard the story. It had the same effect on Orlando, who produced the revelation that when *he* was young, he’d been convinced that the words to a

certain famous hymn had been “Onward Christian soldiers, marching on the wall”.

Jonty hadn't heard that tale and, this being Orlando's second disclosure of the day, felt quite excited that his erstwhile lover might have all sorts of eye-openers in store for him, the loss of recent memories somehow leading to easier access to half-forgotten childhood ones. Jonty produced his own confession that as a child he'd always wanted to read the Song of Songs but had never been allowed to, that part of the Old Testament having mysteriously disappeared from the copies which the Stewart children had access to. He'd not discovered it till he was seventeen and hot stuff it proved, very similar in style and substance to the works of the Bard.

At this, several of the fellows looked curious, so Lumley hurriedly launched into a little speech about Solomon's use of allegory which fooled no one, least of all himself. He discreetly changed the subject. “I hear Miss Peters has got you onto the case of the Woodville Ward.”

“She has indeed.” Jonty smiled. It was rumoured around Bride's that the chaplain had a soft spot for the Master's sister, although in this college gossip was for once wrong. It was upon the expansive bosom of Cecily Hatfield that he actually longed to rest his head.

“It is a shame that no one has taken an interest in the chapel records in this regard.”

Orlando's ears pricked up like the 1906 Derby winner's had as the horse approached the winning post with a wodge of Stewart and Coppersmith money on its back. “Would they have found something of interest?”

“I believe so. Nothing much, I grant you, but something I feel to be too important to have been overlooked.” Lumley now had both fellows' rapt attention. “Just previously to the time when Shaa disappeared, a young lad—I assume he was young, all the

details I have are that he was ‘Stephen, a college servant’—went missing as well. I find that to be quite possibly significant.”

“It may be.” Jonty’s eyes shone in the candlelight. “Was there any other reference made to him?”

“No. Sadly, in all the kerfuffle about the disappearance of the queen’s friend, poor Stephen’s loss seems to have been given no more consideration. And after the events of last January, it did strike me as odd for two men to have been lost at the same time.” The chaplain paled at the horrors the college had endured the previous winter. He’d found one of the bodies and the sheer hatred in evidence in the killing had distressed him enormously.

“But why has no one considered this already? The two might well have been linked.”

“I daresay people have considered it, Dr. Coppersmith—” Jonty lunged into a particularly delicious-looking crème caramel, “—and if this fact didn’t suit their pet theory they probably just as soon discarded it. Even if you mathematicians pride yourselves on your intellectual rigour and honesty, I can assure you that it isn’t uncommon for evidence to be ignored or even suppressed willy-nilly by some of your rather less-scrupulous counterparts.”

“But that’s scandalous! If an established fact doesn’t fit a theory then it’s the theory that must be changed, not the other way around. I know people say it’s the exception that proves the rule but they misunderstand the meaning of the word *prove*.” Orlando looked indignant, as he always did when sloppy methods were proposed.

“They do indeed, sir,” Lumley chipped in, “and I’m afraid that some of my fellow clerics are the worst offenders. However, I feel certain—” he beamed at both of his friends, “—that you will take my poor Stephen into your considerations.”

“You may rest assured of that.” Jonty nodded his head with great determination. “We’ve learned our lesson from jumping to

conclusions or complicating issues. This time we'll be as clinical as you like.”

After dinner, coffee in the SCR was rejected in favour of some peace and quiet in Stewart's set. They sat companionably in the chairs in front of the hearth, the fire stoked up high this bitter November evening. Orlando had found a book on the nature of the electron which he swore was fascinating. Jonty was content with a book about Marlowe, one likely very near the truth about the man's life and making much of the great reckoning that had proved so deadly in the small room.

Jonty kept glancing sidelong at his friend, wondering if he should risk reaching across to touch his hand, maybe venture a tentative touch and see if any electrons were sent flying in the process. It had taken months the first time—could he risk being more forward now? The remembrance of Orlando retching came flooding back, Jonty's mind's eye awash with the sight of his lover wiping saliva from his chin. He could wait; he would have to wait. Orlando seemed to have accepted the nature of their previous relationship, but what would he do if faced with meaningful physical contact? Jonty returned his attention to Christopher Marlowe although he didn't seem to have the answer, either.



Orlando wandered back to his rooms in a puzzled state. It had been another few days of emotional ups and downs. To discover that he thought his friend not just handsome but beautiful had been shock enough, although he hadn't understood its significance at the time. To then find out they'd been lovers the best part of this past year had been a severe jolt, yet it explained so much about the changes in himself. He hadn't really been disgusted, his sickness simply due to the shock to his system, and he was grateful that Jonty's interest in him hadn't been flushed

*Charlie Cochrane*

away with the vomit. He'd had to think very hard in the hour afterwards, while cleaning himself up.

*We are great friends. He lights up my life like no other. I have no inclination towards women. I think Jonty attractive. I must be the sort of man who finds his own sex desirable. We were lovers.*

A thesis about the last twelve months, about his whole life up to this point, had begun to form. He knew about the legal penalties he and Jonty had risked over the year and was amazed at his own audacity. He ignored the detail that the church frowned on such liaisons, although he was puzzled that Jonty, whom he had soon established was a great believer, didn't appear that concerned about his unorthodoxy. And Jonty still seemed interested in him, not just as a friend—there was a special tenderness that had perhaps been evident from that first meeting in the sick bay.

For the first time he could recall, Orlando counted his blessings. He had a friend, he'd had a lover, and maybe one day he'd be brave enough to try kissing Jonty. His life was once again—as it must have been this last year if he could only damn well remember—full of possibilities.

## Chapter Five

The birthday cake was magnificent, if unusual. Certainly the college kitchen had never been asked to produce an item decorated with an image of an ammonite, but it had done Drs. Stewart and Coppersmith proud. The resultant creation, displayed proudly on Jonty's desk, which was—for once—clear of clutter, looked just like the intended object in form if not in colour. No bright pink ammonite had ever been found on the fossil hunts which Miss Peters had attended. Nevertheless she was delighted with the offerings of cake and a tea party, going so far as to kiss both men on the cheek and making Orlando turn the colour of beetroot. As he'd predicted, there was no cloud of powder such as Mrs. Stewart emanated although there was a strong fragrance of an elegant scent and the merest suggestion of some sort of subtle cosmetic on the lips. Miss Peters was proving to be a dark horse.

"I'm sorry it's not a planarian worm, knowing how fond you are of the little blighters, but I suspected that a drawing of them might have scared the cook." Jonty beamed at his companions. He was in a contented mood, had been ever since the return of his ring had shown him there was a light at the end of the tunnel.

Miss Peters laughed heartily, like a man. "Now that might have been too much of a good thing. Lemuel has already given me some marvellous engravings of planaria which is an ample sufficiency. Just being out of that sick bay for an hour or two is a delight. Shall I cut the cake?"

“Please do, but no dissection-sized pieces please.” Orlando smiled as he spoke. He too seemed all aglow.

The men might not have glowed quite so much if they’d been able to read their guest’s thoughts. Ariadne Peters knew how much Orlando had changed since he first came to Bride’s and recognised that her old friend Jonty Stewart was at the root of it. She might be an aging spinster but she knew a thing or two about the world—there had been a young man called Tom to whom she’d been much closer than her family had suspected, and it was only a fortune of the calendar that a young Wilkinson hadn’t been born while its father had been weathering the Lizard. Miss Peters knew what passed between a man and a maid, and between two men as well. As much as she despised historians she understood the significance of the death that Edward II had suffered at Berkeley.

She’d observed certain signs every time she was in the company of Coppersmith and Stewart, despite the fact that everyone else in the college, even her brother, was seemingly blind to them. It had to be love, and she wished good luck to them. She only hoped that they wouldn’t be parted before their time, as she’d been from her own sweetheart.

“I’ve cut a nice piece of cake for you, Dr. Coppersmith. You always seem very thin, so you’d better have a double ration. Dr. Stewart—” Miss Peters passed a smaller piece to Jonty, “—you don’t need building up at all so you can make do with this. I never put on an ounce so I’ll have a double ration too. Lemuel can lump it if he can’t be bothered to get here.”

Whether this was entirely fair, given that her brother had a meeting with the vice chancellor and had sent his apologies for tea, was a moot point. Jonty and Orlando just smiled, knowing full well how fond their guest was of her brother and sure that he would be getting the very largest slice of the cake.

“How are we progressing with the Woodville Ward? Early days, I suppose?”

Jonty motioned them to his best armchairs, perching himself down on the rug.

“Indeed, Miss Peters. We’ve been getting ourselves up to date with all the pertinent points and I suppose we’ve as many of the established facts at our fingertips as anybody has ever had.” Orlando also had cake crumbs at his fingertips and was surreptitiously licking them off.

“What about these new papers?”

“Those letters make very interesting reading,” Jonty interjected. “Orlando doesn’t agree with me but I have a feeling that Johan Breton is somehow involved in the case. The simple fact that no one else has him down for a suspect seems to me very odd.”

“You’ve not said a truer word. Especially considering that just about everyone else alive at the time has been accused by some theorist or other.” Miss Peters produced her anti-historian snort.

“Which theory do you think would win the prize for the most outlandish?” Jonty asked. “We must all have one we admire for its sheer audacity and we should share them. I have a particular fondness for something concocted by one of my fellow undergraduates—he wasn’t a historian, I hasten to add, so wouldn’t have gone straight into Miss Peters’ bad books.”

“And will you enlighten us with it?” Orlando smiled at Jonty then raised an eyebrow at their guest.

“Not until Miss Peters has told us hers, as I think mine would out-trump both of your offerings.” Jonty looked as if he was trying to appear innocent and not quite succeeding.

“I’m always happy to share my opinions, as you well know, gentlemen, so I’ll begin. I doubt that Dr. Stewart’s friend’s theory can be as farfetched as my favourite but I’ll attempt to present it

as it came. Him—Dr. Smarmy Owens—now no longer with us. Oh, I don't mean he's dropped dead, more's the pity; still infesting the college next door, although I suppose that amounts to the same thing."

"Swine," Orlando muttered.

"As I was saying, he'd allegedly studied all the evidence then to hand in great detail, and his conclusion was that Richard III had committed the deed." It was a known fact in the college that the only thing the Master's sister and her great rival Nurse Hatfield had in common was a fondness for the house of York and particularly for its most notorious member.

"But that's ridiculous!" Jonty spluttered. "He died in 1485, long before Charles Shaa disappeared."

"Indeed he did, cut off in his glorious prime, but Ramsey didn't believe that fact for one moment. As far as he was concerned, Richard had ridden away from Bosworth with his tail between his legs and hidden in the priory at Thetford. From there he finally emerged to start taking revenge on his Tudor adversaries and any Woodvilles who remained for him to get his hands on. The queen being seemingly untouchable, he killed her ward to spite her. Stuff and nonsense of course, but not unusual among the sort of things that Woodville Ward theorists come up with." Miss Peters snorted and drained her glass, which was straightaway refilled with champagne.

Orlando was impressed. "Now that's novel. I've not come across that in any of the library's papers. If asked for my most ridiculous theorem I'll ignore the one that puts Shaa as a woman. As if you would find one of those at Bride's!"

Jonty started to choke on his drink. Miss Peters slapped his back and Orlando went red, mortified at his faux pas. "Oh I say, I didn't mean to insult you, Miss Peters. I regard you as almost one of us, I mean—"

“Dr. Coppersmith—” the lady’s cheeks were flushed with suppressed laughter, “—I must go home and get my excavating tools so that you can dig an even bigger hole for yourself. I’ve taken no offence at your remark nor do I intend to. Please carry on.”

Orlando gathered his thoughts. “In the library there’s a paper dating from 1821 written by a Lord Exbury. He appeared to believe that Shaa had been the victim of a predatory admiral, or whatever the equivalent medieval rank was, who’d visited the college in early 1497, taken a shine to the lad and been rebuffed. Exbury said the admiral took such umbrage at the refusal that he belted Shaa over the head in his own room with his own cutlass and carried him bodily to the well at dead of night, being possessed of muscles like Dr. Stewart here.” He stopped, embarrassed.

“I can appreciate that. I saw Dr. Stewart on the rugby field when he was an undergraduate and he was built like the *Dreadnought* then.” Miss Peters smiled a rather wicked little smile, assumed a look of innocence, then continued. “Why should he have been so offended at being refused, this admiral or whatever he was? What suggestion had he made?”

Jonty regarded his guest out of the corner of his eye. *The hussy, she’s doing this deliberately to wind Orlando up. Who’d have thought the old girl had such a spark of mischief in her?* Recognising that Orlando was floundering, he leapt to the rescue. “Miss Peters, I suspect that if you have to ask the question, you might not understand the answer. Suffice it to say I’ll warrant it was a proposal of an intimate nature and that Shaa would have been mortally offended. Seems rather farfetched though.”

“It does indeed.” Orlando was slowly regaining his composure. “Especially as the college had a rule for the first ninety years of its existence that no sailors of any sort were allowed through its portal, our foundress not liking the breed at

all. That's probably part of the reason why she was so loath for her ward to go to sea and why he was so keen to get going, to be spiting her. I think there was some friction between Shaa and Queen Elizabeth."

"Well it's not outrageous as theories go, Dr. Coppersmith, but it certainly qualifies as being ridiculous on the grounds of lack of research. Who was this Exbury? A historian?" Miss Peters rolled her eyes every time she mentioned the name of the untouchable caste, as she called them.

"As I understand it he was a distinguished admiral himself," Jonty suddenly chipped in, astounding them all with his knowledge. "Probably had muscles like mine as well, if the stories about him are anything to go by. Very courageous, if not sound on his medieval history."

"Ah," said Miss Peters wistfully, "a sailor. How delightful. Then I can forgive him anything."

"And what is this theory you have come across that is so outrageous it had to be told last? Little green men from Mars wafting Shaa away with them and leaving a changeling in return?" Orlando had indulged in a second glass of champagne and was becoming bold.

Jonty carefully emptied the rest of the bottle equally between his guest's glass and his own. Any more for Orlando and the man would be wanting to strip his clothes off again. Jonty had a suspicion Ariadne Peters might insist on staying and witnessing the show.

"Not quite as bad as that, but pretty close. There was a lad here when I was an undergraduate, a *zoologist*, you will note, Miss Peters, who was convinced, utterly certain, that the Woodville Ward had been killed by William Shakespeare himself and that the death is alluded to in the master's works."

"Oh, for goodness' sake!" Two voices chimed in unison.

“Even *I* know that Shakespeare couldn’t have been alive then.” Orlando rolled his eyes in disbelief. “He must have been born fifty years later.”

“Nearer seventy, but that didn’t matter to Kit Vincent. You see he didn’t believe that the man we know as Shakespeare had written the plays at all. He was certain that the Master of Elizabeth Hall in Shaa’s time, a Doctor Deboyne, had written all the works then hidden them away for a future generation to publish. All stuff and nonsense of course but relevant to his theory.”

“And what, I dread to ask, constituted the references to the Woodville Ward’s murder? ‘To be or not to be’ and all that?” Miss Peters had a glint of mischief in her eye again. She remembered Stewart’s japes when he was a student—the chances were this was another one.

“The first piece was the title of the play *All’s Well That Ends Well*, a pun of course on where Shaa’s body was deposited. ‘Praising what is lost makes the remembrance dear’ is a line from it, and Kit pointed out that the Master had been very eloquent in lamenting the loss of such a talented pupil when Shaa first disappeared.”

“That’s a bit thin. There must have been more, surely?”

Jonty had the feeling his guest knew exactly what he was up to and was egging him on to greater heights, or depths, of silliness. “There were many references, or so Vincent assured me when he bored me stiff one wet Sunday afternoon. There was *Richard III*.” Jonty was warming to his subject and the pace was stepping up. “‘So wise so young, they say, do never live long’ was supposed to be an obvious reference to his victim, and of course the whole play had been written to please the Tudors.”

“And how did this Doctor Deboyne write *Henry VIII*? Was he a clairvoyant?”

Stewart blanched then stopped in his tracks, amazed at how quickly Miss Peters had come up with this little dart. He'd never anticipated such a question when he'd begun his little charade and some quick thinking was required. "Kit always alleged that *Henry VIII* was the only play that Shakespeare *did* write, which is why it is so lacking in grandeur compared to the others. Not a collaboration, as so many assert, but the work of a lesser playwright. A poor thing but his own." Jonty smiled in relief at having taken the fence so nimbly.

Ariadne Peters burst into her hearty laugh. "Dr. Stewart, I'll have to tell that to Lemuel once he's home. The real Shakespeare indeed. You are such a wag!"

Orlando looked from one to the other, his face a picture of bewilderment. It was a face Jonty could read like a book from almost the first time they'd met and now the book said plainly that Orlando had taken everything he'd said at face value. It then seemed to strike him that his friend was putting one over on his guests. Jonty was frightened at what his reaction might be—if Orlando had no memory of their larking about, their joshing each other, he might respond in the same aggressive way the Orlando of a year previously would have done. Much to Jonty's relief, Orlando simply laughed and cuffed his shoulder, with no doubt as hard a blow as could be construed as friendly but still show the man's displeasure. Clearly many traits of the 'new' Orlando hadn't been lost alongside his memories, and Jonty was very grateful for the fact.

"Now, my dear friends," Miss Peters' cheeks were flushed from champagne and laughter, "I must leave you. I don't want to interrupt your work." She indicated the Woodville Ward papers, which had been sorted, marked and awaiting attention. "The honour of the college is at stake."

“We’ll try our best not to fail you. No one wants to see the glory going *there*.” Jonty pointed vaguely in the direction of the vile establishment next door.

“Lemuel would be so grateful. So would I.” A sudden, unaccustomedly serious look came into Miss Peters’ eyes. “I’m not one to bear a grudge—”

Jonty wondered whether Nurse Hatfield would agree with that statement.

“—but I have good reason with Dr. Owens. He...he...”

Orlando had never known his guest lost for words. “You needn’t tell us if you don’t wish to. It’s enough to know that we’ll be serving your honour as well as St. Bride’s.”

“Dr. Coppersmith, you make me feel like a maiden in a fairy tale, and you’re my knight in shining armour.”

Not only did Jonty agree with the sentiment, the blush it produced on Orlando’s face was the highlight of his day. The party broke up in good humour, leaving the men to look rather more sensibly at the case as it stood. They’d taken the momentous decision to ignore all the previous assumptions, theories, whatever you’d call them. Unless the evidence and clues were in the things that they had firsthand access to or among the sworn testimonies—for example those from the men who had found the body—they’d accord them no authority. All that was indisputable was they had a body in a well and no clear indication that anyone had benefited, either directly or indirectly, from putting it there.

Orlando was convinced that if they found out who had gained from Shaa’s death, then they would be tightening the net around the culprit. He referred to some papers he’d brought with him. “I’ve decoded two documents so far—very simple this pair proved, just a letter substitution. He obviously didn’t want to make it too difficult for someone to read them at some point. I’ve made copies for Dr. Peters.” He held out his original for Jonty to look at.

Charlie Cochrane

*I dare not write these words in plain English, yet written they must be. Were I not to survive this winter, I would have my lady know the troubles I have borne, though I dare not as yet name those I suspect of being culpable. Evil has many eyes and ears and tongues, each as sharp as a serpent's tooth and as poisonous. I lock my door against it but I cannot keep only to my chamber, as it could seek me as easily here as out in the streets. I keep my dagger close by and its point honed. The Lord and Saints preserve me.*

“Powerful stuff!” Jonty whistled. “It seems like whatever or whoever Shaa feared managed to get behind his defences in spite of that blade’s point.”

“Aye. And it was some person of consequence, if all this artifice and subterfuge is anything to go by. Shaa must have been desperate to confide his fears in someone, to let the queen—I assume she is *his lady*—know of what he most dreaded.” Orlando shuddered. “To live under the fear of death, Jonty, who could bear it?”

“That’s what we all endured last winter, my friend, when evil again walked the courts of this college. It is as well that you’ve forgotten some things—the dread we all felt wasn’t easy to bear.” Jonty looked at the papers he held, not wishing to catch Orlando’s eye.

“Was it really so hard? I know you said we were under threat because of the interest we took in the case, but was there more? The murderer hated men who lay with other men, so did he threaten you because of our special friendship?” Orlando touched Jonty’s arm with something like tenderness.

Jonty sighed and sat down wearily on the leather settee—he felt unusually tired. “Yes, he did, Orlando. He’d been spying on various people in the college and had concluded that we were more than colleagues or even friends. We would have kept strange hours for just two ‘fellow fellows’. The peculiar thing is that he

chose me to kill first. He said it was because he was rather fond of me and he didn't want me to be upset by your death. I've often wondered since whether his affection had played some part in tipping him over the edge into a killing spree. It isn't a pleasant thought."

Orlando sat down beside his colleague, awkwardly twisting a glass in his hand. "No doubt I said this at the time, but I'm awfully pleased he didn't succeed. In killing you."

Jonty smiled, rubbing his thumb over his own knuckles, as he'd often caressed his lover's. The urge to kiss his friend was becoming unbearable but he was still convinced Orlando wasn't ready. He took refuge in the mystery. "I would hope Shaa had someone as kind and understanding as you by his side when he was here. You say you have decoded two pieces—does the other give us any clues?"

Orlando shrugged. "I'm sure it does but I can't read them. He says, *My life's course is not mine own to choose, my moves have been predestined, my way dictated. They watch my every step to see whether I will turn to the right or left. Like one of the planets I chart my course, but I have no influence over anyone's life. Johan is kind and good although he does not understand the machinations of which men are capable. He is a trusting, innocent soul. Pray God that he remains so.*"

"It all sounds rather paranoid, Orlando. As if he was looking over his shoulder every five minutes. I wonder if it was only this man Johan Breton whom he trusted?"

"I suspect so. Do your letters give us any help?"

"Only that Shaa and Breton were very fond friends who had got into trouble, along with Gaveson, over associating with women of loose morals. Breton seems to have been a local lad—not sure how Shaa came across him—and he shared Charles' enthusiasm for the seagoing life. There were indications that they were planning a voyage together. Breton had a berth set up on a

ship leaving Lowestoft and Shaa seems to have been planning to do a runner and join him.”

“That’s interesting. No one has ever suggested that there was collusion over Shaa’s projected disappearance.”

“No one had access to these letters. And I didn’t realise when I first read them that a joint venture was what was being discussed. The language used is very veiled—Shaa seems to have been fond of subterfuge and Breton answered in kind.”

“And did Breton get to sea when Shaa didn’t?” Orlando tapped the papers with his pen.

“He did indeed. There is a letter from him, written in Lowestoft, full of enthusiasm for his ship and the life ahead. Must have stuck in Shaa’s craw a bit, although I do wonder if it arrived in time for him to even read it.” Jonty shuddered at the thought of the body dumped so unceremoniously into the well. Even at such a distance of years, murder could still make him tremble.

“You don’t think this Breton could have been responsible and the letter was a subtle way of his displaying his ‘innocence’? You understand my drift—by writing to a man who was already dead, he showed he didn’t know about the killing?”

“If he was responsible, then no one suspected him. He stayed ten years at sea then returned home to marry a local girl and live a respectable life. I can try to find out more, but I can’t see what he had to gain from the murder.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Orlando rose from the settee, pulling Jonty up with him. “Come now. The doctor says I should get out and about a bit more so long as I’m careful and have a reliable companion with me. As I can’t find one of those, I suppose I’ll have to make do with you. I would dearly like to visit the town and buy some ink or paper or anything to make me feel like life is getting back to normal.”

“Would that include a visit to the little shop with the liquorice?” Jonty squeezed the arm that held his.

Orlando grinned. “Undoubtedly.”

The man in the sweet shop was delighted to see Dr. Coppersmith up and about again, lading the men with samples of some very special toffee and fudge he’d been making. The latter in particular reeked so much of whisky that Jonty bought a pound of it for his father and two pounds for the porters to share, their having been very kind to him during the days when he’d been a bit low. Orlando’s eyes lit up like a little boy’s at the sight of all the sweets and he proceeded to stock up with goodies, quantities enough to last him through till spring, it seemed.

“You’ll take forever to get through those!” Jonty laughed as they left the shop laden with brown-paper packages full of treasure.

“Dr. Stewart, they’re not all for me, I’m not such a glutton. The toffee in particular is for your mother. If we’re to be her guests at Christmas then I won’t be arriving with empty hands. I mightn’t be able to think of many things which a lady of distinction would like, but this toffee would be fit for the queen herself.” Orlando knew he sounded pompous and wasn’t surprised that this was rarer than it had been in the pre-Stewart days. Jonty had obviously proved an extraordinary influence on him and it all seemed to be for the better.

“Indeed it would. Nearer the time we’ll need to be getting a fair amount of gifts in—the smaller Stewarts will no doubt be expecting their bachelor uncle to be splashing out on a thing or two.” Jonty stopped suddenly. “Excuse me, Dr. Coppersmith, but—aaaachhoo!” An enormous sneeze, as powerful as a broadside going off, rent the air. Jonty groped for his handkerchief, the parcels he bore severely hampering him.

“Let me.” Orlando added Jonty’s packages to his own enormous heap and let the man find the linen he required.

“Thank you. I really don’t know where that came from.”

*Charlie Cochrane*

“Well it nearly went right through my ear, like a rocket on Guy Fawkes Night.” Orlando grinned, then felt suddenly apprehensive. “Are you quite all right?”

“Oh of course, just a bit of a tickly nose and throat. I suspect it’s the fault of old Lumley in the SCR with that awful pipe infecting the air. Dr. Peters should have it banned. Perhaps we should drop a subtle hint to Nurse Hatfield and see what transpires.” He smiled. “Home and a cocoa, that’s what’s called for.” The two men walked back to college briskly, Jonty anticipating the milky comforting brew, Orlando full of concern although not sure why.

## Chapter Six

The influenza which was sweeping through East Anglia had hit St. Bride's with a vengeance. Even Nurse Hatfield was ill and she was never sick—no microbe would dare to attack her system. But this time she was confined to her room, being cared for by an old colleague from her hospital days, while Miss Peters had taken charge of the sick bay.

This was a new regime and some of the students who looked forward to their regular few days of malingering got a terrible shock. Miss Peters couldn't be fooled by thermometers that had been heated on hot water bottles, nor would she tolerate such vague symptoms as nausea. She seemed able to estimate a temperature to half a degree merely by applying her hand to the patient's chest and her insistence that people stayed in bed, quietly, *with no excitement* had a most unnerving effect on all who weren't really ill.

It was just as well, otherwise the college facilities would have been overrun by those who fancied they had the flu and looked forward to being cosseted against Nurse Hatfield's bosom. Only the genuinely ill were admitted in the week that straddled November and December 1906, and even then extra beds were drafted in and Miss Peters' formidable array of friends were press-ganged to nurse the fallen. She and they were tireless, dealing with all sorts of needs day and night, always ready to mop a brow or try to cool a fevered body.

Nurse Hatfield would have been horrified to see lads with high temperatures being given tepid baths and gently swabbed in order to cool their bodies. *She* would have wrapped the things up to within an inch of their lives in order to sweat the disease out. Miss Peters was convinced that this was dangerous and always aimed to reduce the fever before she would pile on the blankets, but then she kept the sick bay warmer than the rightful chatelaine of the place would.

Only one lad was lost, a pale sickly young man who always struggled to fight off the smallest cold and for whom the fever had swept through his frame so quickly that he had just seemed to give up. Miss Peters had nursed him to the end, comforting and talking to him, although it was unlikely that he heard anything that was spoken. And while she prepared the body for the undertakers, the tears streamed from her eyes, as affected by this death as if the lad had been her own son. Perhaps such a young man might have been, had the sailor she set her heart on not been sunk with his ship off the Scilly Isles twenty-odd years back, in the worst storm for a century. She'd been happy enough since, looking after her brother and indulging in her own unofficial research (planarian worms in all their abundance and glory) but she'd have given it all up for just another few years with her Tom.

The epidemic, which had started with a trickle of sufferers just after Orlando entered the sick bay, peaked in late November and just as it began to truly subside, Jonty succumbed. Orlando found him, two mornings after the sweetshop visit, looking pale and sweaty, rather incoherent, his voice just a dry rasp. This in spite of his insistence the evening before that he was absolutely fine, something the increasing hoarseness in his voice gave the lie to.

Orlando immediately put down the bundle of Woodville Ward papers which he always seemed to be carrying these days

and went for Miss Peters, who was making the most of her last official day in charge.

“It’s definitely this flu, Dr. Coppersmith.” She looked into Jonty’s mouth and eyes, felt his chest and back, blanched at the heat produced there. “He needs to be over in sick bay. He can have his own room, we’re not seeing anything like the number of cases we were before. My girls will look after him.”

“I’m coming too, Miss Peters. You can put a camp bed up for me in his room or I’ll sleep in a chair, but I’ll be his nurse.” Orlando was amazed at the unusual note of authority that had crept into his voice. It was as if some quality deep in his soul, another product of the lost year, was making itself known.

The Master’s sister looked at Coppersmith with a penetrating eye. It seemed as if she might argue, but that was an illusion. “As you wish. I dare say that if he’s caught this wretched disease then you’ll start showing the symptoms too and it would be useful having the pair of you together.”

Orlando coloured and studied his shoes. He wasn’t sure he liked her implication but there were more important things to deal with, one of whom was sitting very quietly on the settee looking as if he was about to expire.

“Come on, Jonty, we need to get you along to sick bay. I’ll fetch your things later.”

Jonty didn’t seem to register that he was being spoken to and Orlando could only get him into the next court with the aid of two porters and a stretcher. By the time they came to put him into a bed, the man’s clothes were drenched with sweat.

“Sorry to be a nuisance.” Jonty suddenly spoke then fell silent, not uttering another sensible word for days.

Orlando gently peeled the clothes from his friend’s limp frame, realising for the first time what a weight of muscle he represented. The tie was easy of course, but the jacket and waistcoat proved a severe trial, as did anything else with arms,

like his shirt and vest. Orlando refused all offers of help from Miss Peters and her colleagues—no one but him would be allowed to touch that particular body, except to prop it up so that Orlando could strip the shirt off.

It shocked him to see Jonty's chest—it had such muscle tone, such lovely lines. Orlando desperately wanted to trace the contours with his hands, feel the smooth skin, rustle the hairs. Just to see if it would help him to remember, just to find out how happy it might make him feel. He had brought Jonty a pair of thin pyjamas but was reluctant to put the jacket on the patient just yet. Miss Peters had said that Stewart needed to cool down and that was a valid enough excuse to keep the skin bare and let Orlando's eyes feast.

He tenderly took off Jonty's shoes and socks, laying them aside neatly, as he'd done with all the garments he'd removed. He knew that he was deliberately delaying the moment of truth but it had to come. He undid the belt of Jonty's trousers and began to work on the buttons. *Did I do this for pleasure?* The movement seemed to be familiar, bringing back echoes of past times. *Did he do this for me?* The trousers were easier to remove than Orlando had feared and then he debated with himself about the underwear, which was silk, beautifully made, and must have cost a fortune. In the end he couldn't face removing it yet and simply laid a sheet over his friend's sweating torso and awaited instruction.

This he received in plenty over the next few days, both from the official ruler of the sick bay and her erstwhile replacement, between whom a sort of truce had been proclaimed for the first time in years. He learned how to cool down a fevered body, how to make his friend take in at least a minimum of liquid even though he was dreadfully unresponsive, how to administer the few potions that the doctor could provide to alleviate the symptoms of this awful disease.

There had been more squalid things to attend to, as well, which had called for great objectivity on Orlando's part. It had forced him to touch Jonty in intimate ways and the thought wouldn't go away that there must have been a lot of such contact between them in the past. Contact for more gratifying motives. It pained him that he'd still no recollection of what such things must have felt like.

His fondness for Stewart was growing immeasurably, to the point that he couldn't bear to be away from Jonty in his illness, only leaving the room for calls of nature and surreptitious visits to the porters' lodge. He kept his sleep to the minimum that Miss Peters, who tended him with almost as much care as he tended his friend, allowed him to get away with. He would rarely let anyone except the doctor touch Jonty and the thought of anyone else dealing with his most intimate needs was untenable. He'd bathed, washed and wiped as if his friend was a helpless babe.

As he performed these acts of service, he'd realised that Jonty didn't just possess a beautiful face, he was beautiful all over. Even what Orlando's mother had constantly referred to as one's "shameful parts" had proved to be attractive. It saddened him to think that he'd had it drummed into his head for so long that the body was a vile and wicked thing, the flesh something to be tamed and mortified if possible, the functions of reproduction dirty and shameful processes that should never even be alluded to.

Jonty naked was exquisite, like some marble effigy of a Greek god, especially so in the pallor of his illness. Orlando recalled some of the words of the wedding ceremony which he'd once read in the prayer book while bored during a sermon. "With my body I thee worship." If it was written there in the chapel, in black and white, then it couldn't be blasphemous for Orlando to want to pay homage at the temple Jonty represented.

The possibility of anything happening to his friend filled him with dread. This had to be more than a tentative romance, this had

to be the beginning (or reawakening) of true love. He held Jonty's hand as often as he could decently get away with, often lying in his own bed with arm outstretched so that he could maintain some degree of contact. And all the time he talked to his one-time lover, imploring him not to go where he couldn't follow, promising anything if he were only to regain consciousness and look into his eyes again. He even prayed, which was completely out of character, beseeching God to spare the life of the only person who had, in his experience, truly loved him. And asking to remember even just a minute of those—surely blessed—times.

A year ago, the possibility of a plagiaristic scoundrel getting his contemptible paws on papers concerning The Woodville Ward would have been as great a crisis as any Orlando could have imagined. "College honour, academic rigour" had been the creed he lived by, nothing more important to him than a beautiful thesis perfectly proved. Now, Owens could have all the coded letters, tied up in tinsel with a bow on top, if he could only have his friend well again.

The crisis came the third night that Jonty lay on the little bed that bound all Orlando's hopes and fears. His fever seemed to deepen and no amount of sponging could stop the sweating. Miss Peters had sat with them until the wee small hours, bringing drinks for both men, trying to coax the patient and his carer into taking at least a little water in.

"Tonight will see a resolution one way or another," she'd said with an honesty and simplicity that Orlando appreciated. The odd occasion when she was out of the room had seen him take the opportunity of grasping Jonty's hand, of whispering urgent pleas in his ear. Once he'd just leaned over and kissed his brow, demanding that he come back to him. On this occasion he hadn't let Jonty's hand out of his grasp even when Miss Peters returned to the room.

As the bells of Bride's chimed three o'clock, the fever broke and subsided, leaving Jonty's breathing clearer and easier than it had been these last few days. At last Orlando could be persuaded into his own bed for a well-earned rest.

Orlando still managed to be awake early enough to watch Jonty regain consciousness. He felt a knot in the base of his stomach as he realised that the first words would be, "Hello, Orlando. Lovely to see you," and was then proven correct.

The double joy of knowing that he still retained some memory, deeply buried somewhere, of an incredible twelve months and the fact that his special friend looked as if he might be making a recovery almost brought him to tears. But he was determined that Jonty wouldn't see him cry yet, and made do with ruffling the man's hair, upbraiding him for having worried them all so and saying that he would go and find a pot of tea.

They drank the brew in peace, the only interruption being Miss Peters bearing buttered toast, a thermometer and a broad grin. She was bold enough to pinch Jonty's cheek, calling him a silly goose, and offering Orlando a place on her team of amateur nurses.

After Jonty had eaten some toast, drunk some tea and demanded more of both, he asked for a full rundown of the last few days, posing question after question and barely sparing Orlando's blushes. "Bed bath, eh? That was a bit daring, even for you."

"Will you ever stop that mouth of yours? Anyone could hear you!"

"If I had a pound for every time you've used that expression or similar I'd be as rich as Croesus. People could quite easily hear and take no notice whatsoever if it weren't for the song and dance you make of things."

“Jonty Stewart, I haven’t nursed you for three days just to end up in a flaming row. If you won’t stop your mouth, I will.” Orlando leaned over from where he sat on the bed and pressed his lips to Jonty’s.

It wasn’t as clumsy as his first attempt at a kiss had been, back in January. In fact it was almost acceptable. Weak and strange as Jonty felt, he couldn’t resist lying back, pulling Orlando closer to kiss him passionately in return.

With apparent reluctance, Orlando broke the embrace and pulled away. “Sorry, Jonty. Shouldn’t have done that here. I should have waited. Couldn’t.”

“It doesn’t matter to me, Orlando, the sooner the better as far as I’m concerned. You have no idea how much I’ve missed kissing you.”

Orlando smiled, gently brushing his hand along Jonty’s arm. “Think I must have missed kissing you as well. Is it always as nice as this?”

Jonty laughed, regretting it straightaway when the activity ended in a coughing fit, something that made Orlando fuss over him like a mother hen. He got his breath back and flapped his friend away. “I’m fine. Honestly.”

“You need to take care. I shouldn’t have been making you frolic this early in your recovery.”

“Bit of frolicking is just what the doctor ordered, or if he didn’t, he should have done. Can’t think of any better way to improve my mental state.” He stopped, full of suspicion. “Have you been here all the time?”

Orlando nodded, rather shamefacedly.

“Well that was daft of you. You could have caught this yourself. I was laid out three days, you reckon? Nasty business.”

“It was, Jonty. Very nasty.” Orlando touched his friend’s arm again. “May I ask you something?”

“But of course, anything.”

“You must have been the first person I ever kissed.”

“As I understand it, yes, or so you told me. There may have been droves of them, I suppose, and you kept me in the dark.”

“Idiot. You can take it as read that you were. What I would like to know, and I assume that you’ve told me before but it’s lost to me now, was I the first person you kissed?”

Jonty considered for a moment. He remembered what wonderful consequences had occurred when he’d first discussed his previous love with Orlando. They could hardly repeat them here. “No, I’m afraid not, although it would have been quite nice to have been in the same boat. When I was first at Bride’s there was a boy called Richard Marsters. We were very close.” He watched Orlando colour, begin to study his hands, but pressed on. “He didn’t love me like you used to.” Jonty saw his friend’s face lift, look into his eyes. He had the distinct impression that the man was going to say something—*I still love you*, hopefully—but the scene was interrupted by Miss Peters, who had arrived to scoop up the breakfast things.

“I think you could do with another bed bath, young man.” She beamed at the fact that Jonty had managed so much to eat and drink and then positively smirked at his embarrassment. “Oh, it won’t be *me* doing the bathing. I’ll leave that to your very able nurse here. I’ll just go and get some warm water.” The two young men were left with a distinct cloud of awkwardness hanging over them.

“You don’t have to bath me, not if it would make things embarrassing. I could submit to the iron fist of Miss Peters.”

“No! No, it’s all right. I can manage.” Orlando studied his hands. “I’d like to. I didn’t mind at all looking after you.”

“I know that. You tended me in the aftermath of the first set of murders and it was pretty gruesome at the end. I would very much like you to help me now as I trust no one in the world as I trust you, not even Mama, although you mustn’t tell her that or

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she'll cuff me. I suspect that you've been worrying yourself sick these last few days and I don't blame you. I would have done the same myself if the situation had been reversed. I'll submit to you bathing me like a newborn infant, only I shan't cry or be sick."

"You'd better not be."

The hot water arrived, Miss Peters departed and the operation began. Jonty tried hard to avoid Orlando's gaze, simply enjoying the experience without wishing to discomfort his friend. Orlando had set to work in a brisk and efficient manner, mopping Jonty's back and chest, drying as he went, getting not a drop on the bed. Legs, arms, face, neck were also tackled, although he was beginning to slow down once every area bar one was almost done. With a noticeable sigh, he reached for Jonty's underwear, but was stopped by a hand. "I'll do that myself, old chap. Not ready for it yet, are we, either of us? Bit different when I was out for the count. You go and get yourself spruced up in the little bathroom they keep for well-behaved inmates."

Orlando went off, with a nod of the head, to soak and luxuriate. It was the first bath he'd taken for days, not having dared to waste any time away from Jonty while the man was so unwell. He spent all his time thinking about that first kiss, until Ariadne Peter's loud rap on the door and booming "If you stay in there any longer you'll dissolve!" brought him back to the present.

After drying and dressing hastily, he sped back to Jonty's room to find the little blighter fast asleep so, once he'd kissed the man's brow, he went off to check his post. At long last he felt that he could risk taking some time again for his college life.

En route from his pigeonhole to his rooms, he stopped in at the chapel, found it mercifully empty and said a silent prayer. *I know I don't believe so I guess this doesn't count, but he believes. Wanted to say I'm grateful.*



Two days later Nurse Hatfield, who had rightly reclaimed charge of the sick bay, allowed Jonty to be dismissed back to his own set of rooms. Orlando helped him pack his belongings, getting in the way and fussing far too much as usual, making sure that Jonty wore his coat *and* hat *and* scarf *and* gloves. He found an ally in the redoubtable college nurse, who insisted that Orlando was correct in his assertion that those who were recovering from the flu had to cover up every possible part of their bodies. Not an inch of skin should be exposed to the deadly East Anglian wind.

As they entered the set, the first snow of the winter fluttered tentatively against the window, the fire was burning bright, there were hothouse carnations giving a splash of colour, and Chelsea buns sat glistening on a china plate. Orlando had arranged it all, apart from the snow, although Jonty wouldn't have put it past him to have somehow wangled that. Very determined, Orlando could be. Jonty was carefully manoeuvred onto a cushion-lined corner of the sofa and his soul mate scurried off to the kitchen to produce a pot of tea.

"This is truly a foretaste of heaven, Orlando," Jonty's voice carried to the little kitchen. "Where you get what you want and it tastes as wonderful as when you just desired it. This was what I've wanted for what seems an age. My own rooms, my own fire."

*And my own lover falling in love with me again?* Orlando wondered, yet didn't dare say. He came in with the pot of tea, smiling affectionately. "You do like making grand speeches, don't you? You must win plenty of hearts with that silver tongue."

Jonty laughed. "Not every heart's been one that I wanted. Unlike now."

Orlando reached over and tapped his friend's hand. "I can't give you sweet words, Jonty. My skill's never lain in honeyed speech, so I can only tell you plainly that I like you very much and I'm so pleased you recovered. There's no logic to this, no rhyme or reason. But it's true."

“What now?” Jonty’s eyes were bright, sapphires sparkling in the light of both the fire and of what might be his own burgeoning desire.

“What now? Drink up your tea like a good boy and then you might get another kiss.” Orlando blushed. “Safer here than the sick bay.”

One kiss, a tender, shy effort, extended to a good half hour of kissing. It was nice to discover—rediscover—the joys of romantic interaction, finding out for the first time that mouths were not just for talking nor tongues for forming words. The first occasion that Jonty pressed his little cat’s tongue against Orlando’s lips was enough to make the man start, uncomfortable.

“It’s all right,” Jonty murmured, “it’s allowable to kiss like this, you know. Quite respectable people do it.”

Orlando had eventually opened his mouth and let Jonty’s tongue plunder his own. It was the strangest and most wonderful sensation, like one of Miss Peters’ beloved invertebrates had grown to enormous size and was exploring the inner reaches of his mouth. Only no sea slug or sea mouse could have tasted as sweet as Jonty’s tongue did. It really was a very odd thing that such a potentially disgusting manoeuvre could feel so marvellous.

Jonty broke the kiss, pulled back. “Can you hear that noise?”

Orlando was puzzled, straining his ears, but he was aware of nothing.

“I guess you can’t as it’s coming from your own bonce. You’re bloody well thinking about these kisses, aren’t you? Analysing what’s going on. Stop it now.” Jonty rubbed his knuckles over his friend’s head. “I’ve done this before when you’ve been an idiot and I’ll do it again if need be.”

Orlando blushed, sheepish as any Romney Marsh ewe. “How did you know? Am I that obvious?”

“To me you are, yes. I can read you like a book. And it’s a book I’m fonder of than *The Moonstone* or *Little Dorrit*, which is

saying something in both cases.” A sly little look crossed his face. “I also know what drives you mad.” He began to nibble Orlando’s ear, dabbing at it with his tongue. His friend squirmed and gasped and tried to somehow break free while keeping his ear firmly within Jonty’s grip. It was no use. Enfeebled as Jonty was after the flu he still had a powerful grasp and Orlando felt it best to just surrender.

They carried on, kisses to lips, ears and necks interspersed with tender little murmurings, all the time Orlando trying very hard not to think, until one particularly bold incursion of Jonty’s lips and tongue behind his ear seemed to take away all his power of rational thought. At last he could simply enjoy things.

The chiming of Jonty’s clock put a stop to the fun. “You’ve got to go, Orlando, look at the time.”

“Hmm?”

“That meeting you went on about for so long, earlier. Your first time conversing with other mad mathematicians since your fall, you really don’t want to miss it, do you?”

“I suppose not, but it’s just so nice here. Perhaps one more kiss?”

“Shall I throw you out bodily? Or call for a porter to come and remove you because you’re causing a nuisance? Go now, I need to rest.”

If appeals to his sense of university duty and threats of the porters had failed, Orlando couldn’t help but respond to the implication that he was jeopardising his friend’s health in remaining. He rose obediently, gave Jonty a final little peck on the cheek and departed in a rosy glow.

Upon arriving at the seminar room in which his fellow doctors of mathematics were already assembled, Orlando realised that he couldn’t remember one step of his journey there. His mind had been far away, in front of a fire in a little set of cosy rooms at St. Bride’s. As his distraction carried on throughout the meeting,

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he hoped his fellow dons would forgive him his quietude, simply assuming his head injury had made his taciturnity of a year and more ago reappear. With any luck, they'd have no idea that it wasn't sullenness or shyness that made him so remote. It was a pair of blue eyes and a wicked laugh.

## Chapter Seven

It had been an awful November, and December had started ill, but once Jonty was out of the college sick bay things began to look much brighter. Those who professed themselves weather-wise were convinced that there would be snow for Christmas. The air had a fresh and invigorating tingle to it.

They'd decided that as soon as Jonty was recovered enough—sufficient to face the succession of cabs and trains that would be involved in the journey from Cambridge to deepest Sussex—then they'd travel to the Stewart home for the festive season. Mrs. Stewart herself would have liked to be on hand to escort them, but it was likely to prove impossible so she had to delegate this responsibility to Orlando, for whom she'd written copious notes about the different stages of the journey, including such vital facts as where best to lunch *or stay overnight if need be*. Plus the very important message about making sure *you both wear your thickest vests*.

In her letters, she promised that the time at the Sussex home would be one of sheer convalescence for her beloved youngest son. She would cut all entertaining down to a minimum (something for which she was pleased to have an excuse), not just for Jonty's sake but for her beloved Richard, who was also recuperating from the flu. It was only the fact that her husband had been suffering simultaneously with her favourite child that had stopped her storming off to Cambridge the minute she'd received Orlando's first anxious phone call, a call made on the

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only occasion he'd left the sick bay during the first twenty-four hours of Jonty's illness. Her distress, obvious down the phone line, at not being able to tend to both the men she most adored had affected Orlando considerably. He'd reassured her that Jonty was receiving the best possible care, had carefully diminished the true extent of the threat to his life, promised faithfully to keep her updated every day, and been near to crying himself at hearing her fighting back the tears.

It had been with absolute elation that he'd run down to the porters' lodge the day of Jonty's recovery to ring the good news through to London, where the Stewarts were staying until Richard was fit enough to move. Mrs. Stewart had burst into tears yet again to hear that her boy was out of danger. She'd seen the state that her husband had been in, and had appreciated perfectly well the real risk. Three enormous bunches of flowers had arrived at St. Bride's the next day; one for the patient, one for Miss Peters and one for Orlando, each with a little note attached.

Jonty's message said simply, *Glad you're better. Don't frighten me like that again. Mama XXX*. The one for the lady with the lamp thanked her for her patience and kindness with *what must have been the worst patient you've ever had darken your doorstep*.

Orlando's had been slipped into his wallet for future reference, where it might have nestled against the little note that said *Idiot XXX* had Jonty not had the presence of mind to move it to his own wallet the day after Orlando's fall. This message said, *He's very lucky to have you. Look after him. Helena X*. Orlando reckoned that, unless more revelations were to come about the last year, it was the only letter he'd ever received from a lady, apart from his grandmother, and certainly the only one to definitely bear a kiss.

Orlando was beginning to feel pangs of guilt about his slackness on the Woodville Ward business. Very little had been

done on the case since Jonty had fallen ill, there being more important things to deal with, and Orlando was determined that he and Jonty should take the papers down to Sussex and try to plough through them there.

Jonty had readily agreed—if he was to be forbidden some of the usual festive amusements, then a little cerebral exercise would be most welcome. As much as he looked forward to being home again, and for all that he said regarding his mama, he'd missed her enormously while he had been ill. He kept muttering that it didn't seem like it would be a real Christmas without a proper Hogmanay ball and, although his mother had promised that the event would take place, it was to be a modified version with the minimum of dancing and frolicking. When Jonty had said he was determined to put some sort of spanner in those works, Orlando dreaded to think what the little toad had in mind.



Jonty sat looking at an essay yet not reading a word of it. A fortnight had passed since he'd succumbed to the flu and much of that time had been spent in rest and recuperation, sleep being something he seemed to need in endless quantities. Orlando had fussed over him, fetched and carried, all to his heart's content as was plainly shown on the man's face, and there had been plenty of signs of affection.

But Jonty couldn't help recalling the last time they'd stayed with the Stewarts, when there'd been very little in the way of delineation between his chambers and Orlando's. They'd been given adjoining rooms in the west wing of the castle then been left to their own devices, there being no other guests at the time. No one had bothered about the fact that only one of their beds was ever slept in, his mother having delegated a valet for their use who had every sympathy towards their inclinations and who'd

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carefully picked up Jonty's tie from Orlando's floor without comment or concern.

This time would be different. Jonty and Orlando had renewed their physical relationship, it was true, but it all seemed so very innocent compared to the previous summer. His thoughts ran, again and again, back to the previous January and his dear innocent Orlando, who'd found the simple acts of kissing and cuddling a complete revelation and as satisfying as anything. Orlando finding disgusting books in an undergraduate's room and getting into a terrible tizzy reading them. Orlando at last having the inner tiger unleashed and proving to be a wonderful lover—loyal, protective, passionate, fierce, tender, silly. The trigger had been jealousy, Orlando's envy of Jonty's first lover, although Jonty wasn't sure that catalyst would help this time, nor could he think of another which might work such wonders.

At least he now knew more about his lover than he had done the first time around, how his awful, unloving, repressive childhood had left him unprepared for love, especially sexual love. Orlando had always been told that sexual acts were unclean and despicable, even if the participants loved each other beyond all reckoning. Even if they were necessary to "continue the race", which were the only circumstances in which his parents had seemed to think intercourse was acceptable. Perhaps that knowledge would make the barriers easier to break down this time around. Jonty was encouraged that Orlando still demonstrated the emotional maturity he'd gained this last year—it hadn't been lost with his memories. There was a good chance that he only had to find the right key to release those passions once more. But if those passions *were* released again, would Orlando be able to cope just yet? Or ever?

Jonty felt like his head was going to split. There was so much uncertainty this time around, strangely more than there had been the first time, because now he knew what was at risk if he

didn't succeed—the very essence of his life. If Orlando turned and rejected him now, because he made too bold a pass, that archaeological expedition would seem the only reasonable alternative.

His thoughts were interrupted by a familiar knock and then a familiar nose poking around the door. “Fancy a bit of shopping? I’ve just spoken to Nurse Hatfield and she assures me that as long as you’re wrapped up well, a little fresh air won’t hurt.”

Jonty grinned. “If I hear the expression *wrap up and don’t forget your scarf* once more this winter I’ll go mad. I promise there won’t be a single piece of skin showing if I’m only allowed out of my prison.”

They went to the market, Jonty swathed in every piece of clothing Orlando had managed to get him to wear in order to guard against pneumonia or whatever other ills might be lurking in the East Anglian air. They visited their usual stalls and shops, stuffing their bags with purchases small enough to carry, arranging delivery of the others.

Jonty never went home without armfuls of presents to give to his family after church on Christmas morning and the giving didn’t stop at his nearest and dearest. Every servant in the house would receive something from the youngest son: luxurious soaps and ribbons for the housemaids, cigars for the footmen, not even the lowliest of the stable lads would be left out. The butler always had a bottle of port, the housekeeper a bottle of scent and the cook a romantic novel.

Orlando was amazed at the volume of goods being purchased and expressed his guilt that he wasn’t doing the same. Jonty insisted that his position in the house, youngest son, made this a traditional Stewart obligation, one that Orlando didn’t have to comply with, being a guest himself. He was exceedingly careful not to make any reference to the disparity in their incomes and resources. Orlando had inherited very little from his family,

his father's debts having accounted for much of what the man had left. The fact that Jonty was always flush with cash had rankled with him in the past year. They'd resolved the issue before, but Jonty would rather not have to deal with that particular matter now. If he'd ever assumed that things would be easy once he and Orlando were on kissing terms again, he'd forgotten too much of what had passed between them this past year.

They took afternoon tea, a large steaming pot accompanied by huge rum babas awash with cream, and watched the world pass the windows of their cafe. They had always enjoyed watching people, making up stories, outrageous or mundane, about what they were up to. By the time this new term had come, Orlando had become quite good at it, his tongue and inhibitions sufficiently loosened to be happy to join in Jonty's daftness.

It saddened Jonty that, when he tried a little game of it now, remarking of an elderly and very respectable couple, "They're on the way to see a retired naval gentleman who will provide them with most interesting tattoos," Orlando had simply answered, "Are they? However do you know?"

The rum babas compensated in part for his disappointment, bringing on a great tiredness, which Jonty saw off with a little nap on his sofa before hall. As he dozed, he entered a strange dream in which he was kissing Orlando, which was, as always, very nice. Then they started to get ready "to do their duty", as his coy lover used to refer to matters of the bed, so Jonty had lain back, eyes shut, and let Orlando get on with things.

To his horror, when he'd opened his eyes in the dream, he'd seen the face of someone quite different. He'd pushed the man away, shouting, "Stop it, you're not my Orlando!" but the other man had argued, showing Jonty that he was wearing Orlando's underclothes and tiepin, which was incongruously attached to his vest. He'd even indicated the scar on the back of his ankle where he'd been hit and snapped his tendon. So many circumstantial

indications to the contrary, yet it wasn't Jonty's sweetheart. He'd been so cross about the fact that he'd gone off to give a lecture on *Twelfth Night*, which, according to the logic of his dream world, had taken place in his sitting room and been a huge success. How his students coped with him wearing only his vest and pants was a mystery.

When Jonty got to the part of the lecture where he spoke of cross garters—only to discover that he was wearing the vile things—and was being chased by a gaggle of girls from Girton who had gate-crashed the lecture hall, he woke with a start.

Relieved that it had only been a dream, he stretched languorously then went in search of a small sherry, which he cradled in his hand and sipped while contemplating the fire. He hadn't had much of an inclination to think ever since the flu had floored him, except about Orlando, of course, but he'd been thinking about that man on and off every day for over a year.

Now another thought buzzed about his brain like a restless insect and just like its counterpart it was hard to pin down and swat. There was something in his dream which had been relevant to the Woodville Ward case, but he was jiggered if he could put his finger on it. *Perhaps if I try another half glass of Oloroso and sit down here, I can have the thing formulated.*



Back in his own set, Orlando had managed to decipher a few more of Shaa's letters, although he'd turned up little that was new. The story about planning his flight with Breton had been corroborated in one of them, even so far as establishing projected dates and times. Orlando began to wonder more about the role that Breton had played in this matter. Jonty wouldn't hear a word said against the man, but he must surely be considered as a suspect. What if they had argued over a woman—Orlando

supposed that such things happened—or fell out over the arrangements for their clandestine departure?

He set to work on the last message that he felt was based on a simple substitution. As he changed the indecipherable into a meaningful script his heart began to pound. Here was mention of a man called Stephen, who appeared to work at the college as a lesser steward and who was one of the people Shaa suspected of spying on him. This seemed as if it might be the man referred to in the other letters.

Orlando's mind started to fill with ideas. Had there been a confrontation between the two, resulting in Shaa's violent death and the disposal of his body? Had Stephen then taken himself off somewhere, hiding away until the hue and cry had died down, or more likely gone to ground with whoever had set him to spy on Shaa in the first place? And had Breton then waited at Lowestoft for his friend, eventually having to set out on his own? It seemed a desperately sad scenario.

Orlando knew he lacked empathy—or had before, there seemed to be a bit more fellow-feeling in him these days—so he recognised that it would be hard to imagine himself back in medieval times, to understand how the protagonists felt. Breton and Shaa had been close friends. Not, he now understood, in the same way as he and Jonty were friends, Breton must have missed Shaa, as Orlando would have yearned for Jonty if he'd been in their shoes. He wondered if Breton had felt torn between going to search for his companion or staying and taking up the berth on a ship that represented his greatest desire. The choice must have been agonising.

Perhaps the choice two weeks ago had been heartbreaking for Jonty. The decision between telling him everything or just leaving him to believe that their former relationship had only been platonic, then waiting to see whether it would develop in the same way the second time around. Orlando squirmed to think of how

he'd reacted, throwing up, such a childish thing to do, and how hurt Jonty must have been in the hour before he'd summoned up the nerve to go round and apologise. Jonty had never mentioned it of course, but listening to him in the bathroom must have made the man think that he was hated, and that was the last thing in the world to be true.

*At least I've been given the chance since to show him it wasn't so. It's strange, how something as awful as the flu could produce such splendid results. Jonty was at death's very portals, yet hardly twelve hours later we were kissing and blissfully happy. There's no logic to it.*

Orlando shook his head and wished, not for the first time, that he understood life like he understood algebra.



They met en route to hall, but couldn't take seats together at High Table, Jonty being whisked off by the chaplain. Orlando could see a particular glint in his friend's eye and it was maddening not to be able to find out the cause of it until they were together in the SCR.

"You look smug." Orlando was genuinely pleased to see Jonty give the impression of being so much more like his old self. His pre-flu self, to be accurate—he still didn't know what the Jonty of the previous year had been like. "In fact, I'd use the words unbearably smug. Would you like to reveal what cream you've got for yourself, little cat?"

"Oh, I've got a theory. A really thick, double-clotted-cream theory. Want to hear it?"

"Of course I do, you annoying creature." Orlando felt the hairs prickle on the back of his neck and wondered if he'd always felt this way when Jonty teased him. It was an incredibly pleasant sensation.

“It all revolves around a dream I had. That body in the well—how do we know it was Shaa?” Jonty’s eyes positively gleamed.

Orlando considered, then counted off the facts on his fingers. “Because of the timing, the jewellery and the broken arm. Fairly conclusive, I’d have thought.”

“Fairly circumstantial, I’d have said. You know, *I* don’t think it was him at all. What if someone put the jewellery on another person, broke his victim’s arm pre- or post-death and dumped him down the shaft on the principle that by the time the body was found, identification would be very difficult? And that evidence you hold so much store by would settle the case in the murderer’s favour. A nice little case of mistaken identity.” Jonty’s smug look became so self-satisfied that Orlando wondered if he’d spent the last year alternating between wanting to kiss this man and thump him.

“But who would have done something like that?” Orlando sat on his hands so he couldn’t be tempted to swat his friend.

“Can’t you work it out, Dr. Coppersmith? Is this one up for the lecturers in English? It was Charles Shaa, of course. So that he could do a runner.” And with that, Dr. Full-of-Himself sat back and cracked a particularly big, succulent-looking Brazil nut.

Orlando was stunned. It was so very obvious. Everyone had assumed, as they were supposed to, that the body had been Shaa’s and all the theories had been based on that simple fact, no matter how convoluted they had become in their development. If the body wasn’t that of the Woodville Ward, then all the theories needed to go out the window. “However did you come up with this?”

“I had a dream. It was about you, actually.”

Orlando looked skittishly around the SCR in case anyone had heard the scandalous remark. Jonty must have seen this but as usual took not the slightest notice. “Only it wasn’t really you, it

was some idiot wearing your clothes and that tie pin I bought you.”

“You bought me the tie pin? I never knew that.”

Jonty looked rather crestfallen. “Oh, I’d thought you’d have deduced that for yourself. Who else would buy you such things? Not my mother, she thinks onyx rather dull.”

Orlando snorted. “And this dream led to this deduction?”

“It did eventually, after a bit of thinking. I knew from the start that it linked to the case but it was only when I’d really thought about it that I twigged. There was no real proof of identity of the body.”

Orlando sat in silence for a minute or two, thinking things over. As a theory it had a lot going for it—certainly there was nothing he’d read in the documents about the case that contradicted it. Shaa appeared in his letters to be a man who was frightened and almost out of touch with reality, looking over his shoulder and seeing shadows that may not have had any substance to them. What if he’d decided that staging his own disappearance would free him from those who were spying on him? That theory might also explain why he’d not destroyed the coded letters—he must have wanted someone to know the truth at some point in the distant future. It all smacked of an unstable mind which seeks to hide its crime *and* have it made known at the same time. Charles Shaa had come across as intelligent, determined, full of energy and no pawn to authority. He might just have been cunning enough, desperate enough, to take things into his own hands. *His own hands*, now there was the rub. “Dr. Stewart, there’s just one little problem with your scenario. It’s well known that the Woodville Ward had suffered a break in his arm shortly before his disappearance. How could he, having sustained such an injury, manhandle a body down a well?”

Jonty considered, but not for long. “That’s an easy one. He’d have had help, Dr. Coppersmith, quite possibly Johan Breton as

they were thick as thieves. If not, any handy lad who came along would have done. So long as he'd do a bit of dirty work and keep his mouth shut afterwards for the right price. I bet Shaa wouldn't have soiled his hands with that task, though I wouldn't have put him above the killing itself. I've come to the conclusion that I don't like our foundress's protégé, and the thought of that arm being deliberately broken makes my blood run cold."

Orlando nodded his head slowly, weighing these new ideas. They weren't unreasonable. "So who do you think it was, the man who went into the well?"

"I've no idea. The first person who sprang to mind was Breton, but that's not a runner as he was too busy writing letters from Lowestoft then going off to sea, getting married and being buried in Swavesey. I found a picture of his tomb in an ancient book about the parish my old tutor here gave me that I'd stuffed away at the back of my bookcase. There was a story there, too—I must have read it years ago but it meant nothing then. Breton had been betrothed to a local girl before he went, but as usual the father objected, his daughter being too young and her suitor poor as a church mouse. Breton returned from sea rich enough to square the old man and sweep the girl off her feet. He set himself up as a merchant and lived a very prosperous life. The family memorial's an impressive one, Dr. Coppersmith, if the illustrations are anything to go by. No luck with him."

Orlando screwed up his brows and looked into the distance, as if he was trying to telescope the years and see directly into Elizabeth Hall and observe its goings-on. "Who else is there then, Dr. Stewart? It seems that we've no chance of clearing things up now, unless those other encrypted letters hide a wealth of clues. It could have been anyone shoved down the well."

"Not anyone. It would need to be a man of roughly the same height, build and age as Shaa, or it would be if he'd had any sense. He relied on the body not being found for a while and I

dare say that there'd be a fair amount of deterioration to the face in quite a short amount of time. But even if the features weren't identifiable, putting someone like my dear mama down the well in his place wouldn't have fooled anyone, not with any amount of jewellery."

"That would give us a start, but it still feels like an impossible task, even more than it did previously." Orlando caught sight of Lumley across the SCR, smiled, nodded and suddenly grinned. "Perhaps it's not quite so impossible. We know of one man who fits the bill, simply because of the timing. The chaplain's 'poor Stephen' as he called him, there's a young lad who went missing at the time. And Shaa seems to have had an almost paranoid fear of him. I bet you my salary for the whole of next year that it was Stephen down that well."

## Chapter Eight

The journey down from Cambridge was yet another eye-opener for Orlando, who was wondering whether he'd spend the next year in a state of continual surprise. First-class carriages and cabs all the way wasn't something he was used to, nor was the night in London occupying a suite in a hotel overlooking Park Lane. *And* a meal in a top-notch restaurant where the price of the wine alone had nearly made Orlando fall off his seat. He knew Jonty was always flush with funds but he'd no idea of such opulence being possible for the pair of them. They nearly came to blows over it, much as had happened in their previous courtship, Orlando insisting on paying part of his way and looking most offended when the offer was tactfully rejected.

Back in their suite, relaxing with a glass of port on a sumptuous sofa just made for dalliance, Orlando raised the topic yet again, much to Jonty's annoyance. He was feeling a bit belligerent, the tears beginning to well, both mainly due to still suffering from the aftereffects of the flu. The illness had hit him hard and, while he would never admit it, he found even the normal pace of life a bit tiring. It had brought him very low and made him, on occasions, rather emotional.

"Orlando," he explained for the umpteenth time, "I have more money than I know what to do with. I'm not boasting, it's just a fact, plain and simple. I don't want to donate it all to charity—Mama has already siphoned off quite enough of it to some good cause or other. I want to fritter it away on the things

that matter to me. You matter most to me and I want to spend it on us. We're not being profligate, truly, so your puritanical soul shouldn't feel offended."

"I don't feel guilty about all this eating and drinking. I know how much you fork out for good causes—Lumley has sung your praises often enough recently—so you deserve to stay somewhere as grand as this." Orlando swept his hand around the room, indicating delicate watercolours, little ornaments, thick rugs. The hotel suite was far more sumptuous than any of the rooms in the Coppersmiths' home. "I just feel uncomfortable that I don't pick up the tab as often as I should if we are equal."

"Sad fact is that we're not equal and never have been, even in terms of intellect, where you outstrip me by miles. We were born socially disparate. We were brought up as differently as chalk and cheese. There's bags of money and other assets my grandmother put in my direction, none of which are due to my particular merits."

Orlando coloured, began to bridle, but Jonty raised a hand. "These are simple truths, Orlando. You either accept them and live with them or there's simply no point in us even remaining friends. Our differences have enhanced our relationship, not detracted from it."

"I don't want your charity." Orlando still wouldn't be mollified. Of course he knew their backgrounds were worlds apart but he didn't like to be reminded of it.

"What I offer you isn't charity, it's a logical deployment of resources. Offered in love, pure and simple. Would you reject my affection?" Jonty could feel a hard lump in his throat, like he'd swallowed all his pride and it had stuck there.

Orlando blushed, shook his head, managed to stammer, "Of course not." He remained, head bowed, for several minutes, deep in thought. Jonty didn't interrupt him; he understood, more than any other person did, Orlando's need to consider, to rationalise, to

comprehend before proceeding. At last the man looked up. "I'll accept that we use your resources on one condition."

"And what is that?" Jonty felt the slightest shiver ascend his spine. What strange provisos might be whizzing around Orlando's brain?

"That you really do love me. I'll not argue with you about money again so long as that remains a fact." He looked ridiculously solemn for someone who was uttering such romantic words.

Resisting all temptation to giggle, Jonty gently reached for Orlando's hand, drew it down his own cheek, his neck, held it over his heart. "This has been yours for the last year. I won't take it back just because you've forgotten it was in your keeping. I'll keep it safe and sound until you're ready to claim it again."

"I'm ready now, Jonty." Orlando leaned in to kiss his friend tenderly. "Tell me just once."

"Tell you what?" Jonty's brain had become just slightly befuddled with wine, port and excessive emotion.

"That you love me. You must know, I must have told you, that not even my parents used to say that. Never. It's warmed my heart enormously the last few weeks to think that you might have used such words." The desperate longing for affection shone from Orlando's eyes. He looked so much like an abandoned child that Jonty couldn't gainsay him.

"Orlando, I love you much more than I can possibly express. I even used to read the sonnets to you to try to find the right way of expressing how deeply and truly and madly I adore you. 'Thy sweet love rememb'red such wealth brings, that then I scorn to change my state with kings' and all that.'" He ruffled Orlando's hair, which made the man look even more young and innocent, a sight that filled Jonty with the most romantic of thoughts. They had a suite for the night and, while there were two bedrooms, it

didn't take a lot to mess up one bed enough to give the illusion that it had been occupied for the duration. "Come, kiss me."

Their foreheads drew closer, touching gently, noses rubbing tenderly against each other, along cheeks, into hair. It was as if they wanted to postpone the congress of a kiss until it became impossible to resist. Jonty murmured affectionate words into Orlando's ear, loosened the studs on his collar, sighed languorously, became even more excited. He closed his eyes and drew in the scent of the other man, tasted his hair, the skin of his neck, felt soft flesh.

In the end he became desperate. Finding Orlando's mouth, he lost himself entirely. Such a sweet, soft flavour—lips opening and yielding to Jonty's gentle insistence—lips tasting of apples and port, succulent as the ripest fig.

"Orlando," he murmured tenderly into his erstwhile lover's ear, "do you want me to demonstrate the full extent of my affection? Hmm?"

Orlando, wide-eyed and in awe, nestled his head on his friend's shoulder. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

"No, I appreciate that. But you might, very soon. There's a lovely big bed in there and we could make the most of it for an hour or so." Jonty caressed the nape of his lover's neck. "I'll be a safe guide. We'll go nowhere we've not been before."

Orlando nodded, holding out his hand to be led.

The sheets, made of the finest linen and as fresh as daisies, were as delightful on Orlando's skin as the hands that roved over him. This was what he'd been imagining, wondering about, since that very first time they'd held hands after his fall. His guide had served him well, treading the start of the unknown path with sensitivity and kindness. They'd lain side by side on what seemed a vast bed, tenderly exchanging kisses and caresses until he'd broken the contact, wanting to gather his thoughts. Nestling in the crook of Jonty's arm, head on the man's chest, listening to the

strong heartbeat—a heart that he'd been assured pounded only for him. He felt he was going to burst from sheer delight that someone else could love him so much, want him so much.

It had started so delicately, Jonty taking off Orlando's shirt slowly and with much caressing. Orlando had felt rather embarrassed at the rather scrawny figure he presented compared to his friend, who'd already discarded his own shirt. But Jonty hadn't seemed to be disappointed. With a soft sigh which might just have contained the word *magnificent*, Jonty had reached out to draw his fingers down the smooth skin of Orlando's abdomen and stroke it tenderly. "Been so very long, Orlando."

They'd kissed, languorously and slowly, but with a fire, an urgency, that hadn't been present when they'd kissed before. Now Orlando could take a rest and savour all that he was feeling. The pounding of his heart, the strange burning in his stomach that he couldn't recall ever feeling before. "I do love you, Jonty." He breathed the words into his lover's skin, feeling the answering quiver against his cheek.

"Then come and kiss me again." Jonty drew his lover's head up better to plunder the man's mouth once more with his fierce, eager tongue.

Orlando could feel himself becoming lost, wonderfully so, in the wildness of their embraces. He turned Jonty onto his back, pressing him onto the bed and kissing him with more passion than he thought himself capable of. Nothing was going to come between them now, neither accident nor murderer. He'd forgotten illness.

A sudden paroxysm of coughing racked Jonty's body. Orlando immediately sprang apart from him and started to rub his friend's back. "Just like in sick bay." Orlando shook his head. "That journey's taken too much out of you and it was wrong to indulge so. I'm sorry." He concentrated on the rubbing, face

burning with the shame he felt at having caused his friend to become so distressed.

Jonty tetchily shrugged the hands away. “It’s just the London air, Orlando, bit of a shock when you’re used to the sweet atmosphere of Cambridge. Please don’t fuss so.” He rose and took his shirt. “I’m off to the other bed. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Goodnight.” Orlando felt like a chastised spaniel that had no idea how it had offended its master. “I’m truly sorry.”

“I know you are, please don’t make a song and dance about it.” Jonty walked to the door, turned back and took his friend’s hand. “I’m sorry, that’s abominably rude of me. You’re right, it has been a long day and I am tired. But this—” he indicated the rumpled sheets on the bed, “—was lovely. As if the last few weeks hadn’t happened. Thank you.” He kissed Orlando’s brow then walked away again, this time really going to the other room.

Orlando watched him with regret. If he’d not had that wretched coughing fit, who knew how the evening might have ended? And would Jonty ever be well enough for anything more than a cuddle?



The slow train rarely halted at the Pheasantry unless there were Stewarts in residence at the Manor, as the house had been known for the last three hundred years. Then both up and down services would be regularly asked to make a stop for guests, staff or packages to alight or entrain. The honorary stationmaster, whose proper job was the managing of the signal box—two hundred yards down the route where the track split—would be notified by telegraph that he had business on hand at the platform. Then he would have to hare up the line and attend to it, leaving *the lad* in charge of his precious levers. Not that he minded much

as the Stewarts were great tippers, Mrs. in particular, who might be loud and imposing but had a heart made entirely of gold.

Christmas was usually a busy time, or had been before the Manor had been closed for renovations, but the reopening of the restored castle had brought the expectation that the festive season of 1906 would see a resumption of business on the stationmaster's platform. The twenty-first of December brought the first of many expected signals and then the alighting at the halt of one rather serious-looking young man and another instantly recognisable, somewhat cheerier, one.

"Dr. Stewart," the stationmaster cried, grabbing the man's bags. This seemed an unnecessary act as the footman from the Manor was on hand to attend to things, but everyone knew it was essential to the procuring of that tip. "Just like old times for us, having the great house occupied again for Christmas and New Year."

Jonty smiled and nodded. "Not entirely like old times, I hope. I think we've grown out of insisting that my brothers and I be allowed into your hallowed box to operate the signals mechanism."

The keeper of the box of delights laughed heartily. "You'd be very welcome any time if you still wanted to give it a go, sir. And any of Mrs. Stewart's other guests." He gestured his head towards Orlando. "As long as you remember..."

"Not to touch anything until told," Jonty finished off the sentence for him. "I do remember and we'll bear it in mind." He turned to Orlando. "How do you fancy getting to change the points for the fast down train, Dr. Coppersmith?"

If he had expected a look of disdain in response he was sorely disappointed. Orlando actually had a twinkle in his eye that spoke of great interest in being allowed into a signal box for an hour or two. The stationmaster had noticed the gleam too and bowed very politely, picking up Orlando's case in the process,

while fending off the eager footman for the privilege. Once money had been pressed firmly into the hand of this eager employee of the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway Company, the men were allowed to escape into the carriage that awaited them and set off.

“The Manor and lunch, Orlando—what more could any man need?”

Mrs. Stewart’s welcome was much as anticipated, all hugs and powder, the hearty handshake from Mr. Stewart less so. Orlando had speculated long and hard about this man. He’d seen his picture in Jonty’s room and knew him to be well built, tall and handsome even in late middle age. But it was the personality that fascinated him. What sort of a man must Richard Stewart be to have swept one of the most eligible ladies in the Home Counties well and truly off her feet? And what prodigy of nature could have sired a Jonty Stewart? All he knew in advance was that his friend’s father was a lord but chose not to use the title, for reasons that defied both social mores and logic. He was interested in bridge and the Ten Commandments, hobnobbed with royalty but regarded the king’s morals with disapproval. He still adored his wife after well over thirty years of marriage and tolerated the fact that his son had chosen not to find an acceptable spouse, choosing instead to fulfil his desire for men.

Orlando wasn’t sure whether any or all of these factors would show on his host’s face, but he was pleasantly surprised with his first impressions. Intelligence came across in spades, alongside a combination of solemnity and sensitivity. When he’d been favoured with a thicker thatch of hair and fewer wrinkles, Richard Stewart must have been regarded by the ladies as the catch of the season. He too, like his youngest son, suffered with a cough in the wake of illness, although both rightfully regarded themselves as lucky to have escaped the pneumonia which had

taken a number of folk who'd thought they'd successfully survived the flu.

The Manor amazed Orlando, too. How he could ever have felt at home—as Jonty reassured him he had—at a place which was half unfinished castle and half stately home, he wasn't sure. The scale of the edifice wasn't as great as St. Bride's and the era of construction more recent, but it was just as imposing, a great entrance which must have once held a portcullis leading into a grassy court. Three sides of this were bounded by Tudor buildings with Georgian additions, the fourth by a walled garden. If he hadn't been both besotted with and in awe of his hostess, he'd have bolted straight back to the station.

Mrs. Stewart bustled them all into the warmth of the drawing room then fussed and fretted over them all to her heart's content, her husband rolling his eyes when she couldn't see him do so and sharing wry smiles with his guests. In due course they were allowed to be left alone, at which point Richard Stewart immediately began to quiz the "lads", as he'd taken to referring to them, on something about which he was itching to have information. He was a St. Bride's man himself and naturally took an interest in the Woodville Ward case.

It was also said that Shaa had once stayed at the original building on the site of the Manor. That building was no longer standing, having been cleared when the castle was built, but its traces could be seen on the northern lawns. There was no documentary evidence of the visit, of course, just some local history that had been jotted down by a clergyman in the eighteenth century, the source of which was dubious.

Mr. Stewart was delighted the lads had thought to bring down all their documents, and his eyes lit up to learn of the encoded ones. He'd always had a soft spot for cryptograms, he confided, which made Jonty roll *his* eyes at the thought, no doubt,

of his father and his lover ensconcing themselves together over dry and dusty parchments.

As it turned out, they were all too tired and full of lunch in the afternoon to attempt anything more than a brief résumé of how the case stood, before the local rector and his wife arrived for a drink or two prior to dinner. This proved an interesting meal, the clergyman having a fund of funny stories that were matched blow for blow by his host.

Inevitably the case on which the fellows were working got mentioned, something which made the rector prick up his ears. He was a staunch Yorkist, not a red rose being allowed in his garden, not a book about the Tudors polluting his shelves. He could, however, just about square his conscience with visiting a home that had been founded under the benefaction of Henry VIII, especially when Mrs. Stewart, in whose gift was the living of the parish, had confessed to a smidgeon of York blood in her noble veins.

The rector had his own pet theories about the case and was fascinated to hear those that Orlando and Jonty had come across. The one about Richard of Gloucester enraged him, that which picked out Margaret Beaufort interested him enormously and the faux Shakespeare theorem made him hoot, especially as it was told by Orlando, with every note of outrage he'd felt about being gulled getting exaggerated in the telling.

"But are you any nearer to solving this puzzle?" Mr. Stewart tapped his fork on the table, earning him a sharp look from his wife. "I'd love to be able to claim some connection to the people who unravel once and for all the mystery that's eluded so many. Especially if it means keeping it out of the hands of *he whom I shan't mention.*"

"I beg your pardon?" Mystified, the rector looked from Mr. Stewart to his son.

“My father means a certain fellow of St. Bride’s who treacherously absconded to the college next door and is now regarded as a cross between Iago and Guy Fawkes. He’ll get access to all the new information if we don’t have this wrapped up by the start of term. It’s enough to drive a man insane.” Jonty dug into a potato as if it were Owens himself. “However, we’re making some headway, aren’t we, Dr. Coppersmith?”

“We think so.” Orlando smiled happily. Usually ill at ease in company, the welcome afforded him by his hosts, and having a subject to discuss on which he was confident, had made him positively garrulous. “It’s all Dr. Stewart’s suggestion, of course.” He inclined his head towards his friend, inviting him to continue and then wondering whether Jonty would be brave enough to raise the matter of his dream in mixed company.

“I suddenly had an idea—” Jonty waved his hand airily, “—that all the evidence we have as to the identity of the body in the well is circumstantial. The jewellery, the arm, the rough coincidence of dates. That’s the entirety of it. I’ve learned a thing or two over the last year about looking for real hard evidence and none of this convinces me.”

Orlando nodded. “The thing that has always worried me in this case is the matter of *qui bono*. No one obviously benefited from the murder of Shaa, except, as Jonty pointed out—and it was like a bolt of lightning illuminating the sky—Shaa himself. If he could pretend that he was dead, he could escape as easy as kiss my hand and live the life he’d always wanted to. We know another young man went missing at the time and I think it’s likely it was him in the well, although Jonty thinks the evidence on that is coincidental too.”

“So,” Richard Stewart intervened, with a note of glee in his voice, “those historians were barking up the wrong tree all the time? It’s not a matter of whodunit but whowasitdunto?”

“Exactly. And where did Shaa take himself off to afterwards?”

The company at table listened, fascinated. As Orlando and Jonty explained the theorem afresh it only served to settle in their minds that they’d got things the right way around in this case at last. Mrs. Stewart let the frivolity go on for a decent length then declared that as all of *her* gentlemen were still convalescent, there was to be no port or cigars, just an expedition for everyone to their blameless beds.



The next day was bitterly cold, so the “three invalids” as Mrs. Stewart called them weren’t allowed to venture their noses out of the door, Orlando and Jonty being made to use the passage through the cellars to reach the main part of the building from their bedchambers. The lady herself had domestic and parish business to attend to so they sought the sanctuary of the library, Orlando producing their dusty (now not quite so dusty given his constant poring over them) papers, for sharing.

Jonty took to the settee with a large cup which he frequently refilled with coffee and into which he dunked biscuits on a regular basis. He’d set himself the task of going through all the documents they possessed to establish whether there was any evidence, corroborative or contradictory, to the theory that it wasn’t Shaa in the well.

By the end of the exercise he could categorically state that he’d found nothing to challenge their ideas, not that he would have minded if he had. In that case the theory would have been changed in response; he wasn’t one for ignoring overwhelming evidence. To his satisfaction he’d even found one tiny little thing that might go in the idea’s favour.

In amongst all the reports about the body’s discovery was a single line saying the college chaplain of the time had expressed

doubts as to the eagerness with which the corpse had been identified. A small thing perhaps, but worth noting and something that had been ignored by everyone else.

Jonty shared this discovery with his co-investigators over lunch but their noses were so deeply ensconced in their coding theories that they couldn't be bothered to notice. Rather miffed, he set off to hunt down the book in which the local rector had spoken of the Woodville Ward's visit. If he was lucky then there might just be a clue to this mystery that could gain his lover's attention from those wretched codes.

His luck was in, in trumps. He found the book, he found the reference and he found much more. Not only had the Shaa family visited in the late fifteenth century, Queen Elizabeth herself had been to the Manor in the early sixteenth. The former visit was given short shrift but the latter, of much more importance, had been dealt with in detail. She'd travelled without the king, entertaining and being entertained very well. She'd given a speech which was reported in flowery detail, much of which must have been made up by the author of the work but which might just be based on a local oral history. If the account was truthful, the speech made clear reference to her distress at the disappearance of her beloved protégé.

Of more interest was a report of her conversation with the man who served as priest to the local parish. Elizabeth was said to have told him of a recurring dream she had of Charles Shaa meeting her—once in a garden, then in the Tower—and rather than asking for her help, always asking for her forgiveness of his sins. The priest had assured her it was evidence the man had indeed run off to sea. At least one scholar had known of this reference and used it to support some theory or other, yet none had sought to connect it with Shaa being the actual murderer rather than the victim. It wasn't evidence, of course, but it was a nice coincidence.

Jonty soon bored of his own researches and decided to report back on his findings, something which would allow him to indulge in a little innocent annoyance of the two men who meant the most to him in all the world, but he changed his mind when he saw that they appeared quite annoyed enough already. The last few encoded documents were proving impossible, despite Orlando trying many a method on them and Mr. Stewart introducing a few more, but a whole day's work had yielded nothing.

“What about this thing of Wheatstone's you were telling me about? Have you thought of trying that?” Jonty held up the documents to the light as if there might be some watermark that would elucidate all.

Orlando grabbed at them, landing a slap to the back of Jonty's hand in the process. “That would be of no use. And mind those papers, they're not to be made all dog-eared.”

“Why wouldn't it be of any use? Seems like a perfectly good way of keeping things hidden.” Jonty's nose had been well and truly put out of joint, not just because he'd been smacked, he quite liked that, but his lover ignoring him was beginning to rile.

“Ah, but Jonathan,” his father explained with great patience, “the system was only invented this last century. Shaa could have had no knowledge of it.”

“Don't see why not,” Jonty continued belligerently. He had a valid point he felt would give him one over on *mathematicians* and he was determined to make it. “If you look at how we lived here in the Dark Ages, you'd have no idea that the Romans had invented domestic plumbing and under-floor heating and brought it with them to this country. These things got forgotten about. It's just conceivable that Shaa or one of his colleagues invented something like your Playfair and it was lost in the interim.”

Orlando's eyes lit up. “You're absolutely right. Not just about Playfair, it could apply to any of the more recent coding

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systems that we think are new inventions. Mr. Stewart—” he turned to his host, “—I think we need to look at these documents afresh. It’s just as well you have such a prodigy of a son.” He beamed at Jonty, a look full of what could only be love and pride in equal measure and for the recipient of that look, everything had suddenly come all right, as it had not been since November the fourteenth.

## Chapter Nine

“Sod this for a game of cowboys!” Richard Stewart uttered what was quite a spectacular oath for him then quickly looked around in case his wife had happened to hear it.

Luckily, Mrs. Stewart had taken herself from the room, less than enamoured to be party to the craze for cryptography which had swept through her house since her son’s return. Even Jonathan was at it now, trying to make head or tail of the last few letters from the Woodville Ward, and it was driving the chatelaine insane.

“Still no luck, Papa?” Jonty had put his letter down and found a macaroon to stuff into his face.

“Not a sausage.” Stewart senior reached over and took a piece of Swiss roll, something of which he was inordinately fond. “I’ve tried four different sorts of methods and they’ve all drawn a blank. Even our resident genius is stumped.” He indicated Orlando, who had spread himself and his papers all over the floor, not even noticing the arrival of tea and cakes.

“No luck either, Orlando?”

“Bugger all, Jonty.” The reply indicated just how frustrated Orlando found himself.

“So what methods have you employed?” There was an insouciant air to Jonty’s voice that should have made his friend and father both wary but they were far too involved in their own projects to notice. Orlando began to make a complicated explanation about looking for patterns and comparing them to

those found in known codes, Mr. Stewart all the while chipping in about best fits and methodology.

“And no success with any of it?” Jonty had put another macaroon in his mouth and appeared to be hiding a little grin.

“Right.” Orlando got up from his pile of documents and made a beeline for his friend. “Out with it this minute. You’re up to something.” He looked at the sheets of paper Jonty held, a lovely sloping script betraying that they contained his workings out.

“Well, I thought I’d tackle things the other way round to you. Thought about that Wheatstone thing—”

“Playfair,” Mr. Stewart interposed.

“That as well. And it occurred to me that if the *I* and *J* had to be doubled up for coding then perhaps there mightn’t be that many *J*’s in the document. Which there weren’t.”

*Bugger it, thought Orlando, he’s absolutely right. And I should have spotted that straight away.*

“So I guessed it might be your Wheatstone grid thingy and tried a few code words, obvious ones like *Johan Breton*, and before you ask I *did* remove the repeating letters, but it was all to no avail.”

Orlando felt relieved. Much as he desired to get these wretched codes broken, the thought of Jonty doing it first was unbearable. “So you were as fruitless as we were?”

“Up to a point. Then I tried *Elizabeth* as the code word and, well, you know...” Jonty held up the top sheet of paper. “It just all became clear.”

Two hands shot out at the same instant to grab the document, ignoring Jonty’s squeak of “Don’t snatch”. Mr. Stewart and Orlando began to tussle in a rather undignified manner over who was to read it first.

“Would you mind, please?” Jonty at last managed to make himself listened to. “I spent ages doing that and if you’re going to

ruin it I'll thump both of you. Worse still, I'll tell Mama." The fighting came to an instantaneous end. "That's better. Now if you can be sensible, I'll read it to you."

Jonty adjusted his glasses. "*Tomorrow sees a resolution, one way or the other.*" Orlando shivered at the associations this phrase formed, memories of his lover's time in sick bay. "*Johan will help me, certain sure, and then we'll find freedom.*"

"This fits in well with your theory of Shaa committing the murder." Mr. Stewart nodded vigorously. "I've liked the idea from the start but we need good hard evidence."

Jonty continued with more of the same—references to spies, Shaa's growing sense of mistrust, unspecified plans for the morrow. "*He has serv'd his master well. I have seen one of the letters he endeavoured to send. Stephen fetched it for me.*"

"I wonder if that's Lumley's Stephen?" Orlando couldn't get the chaplain's words from his mind.

"*I warrant that he hop'd his code would hide his deceit; did he not realise that I make and break codes as other men might a clay pot? Do you know,*" said Jonty, "I've never liked Charles Shaa and the more we delve into this case the more my attitudes towards him harden."

There followed more about the Woodville Ward's estimates of his own capabilities. "*I have the means to make him appear to be me, presupposing I keep the body from discovery awhile. The matter of the arm needs attending to.*" Jonty shivered as he read this. "The thought of that deliberate break gnaws at me. And there's more. *Will Henry come looking for his agent as his lady will no doubt come and search for me, all tears and turmoil?*"

"The swine!" Mr. Stewart felt as much affection for his patroness as any good Bride's man should. "How could he be so callous?"

"And by Henry does he mean the king? Was there all along a House of Tudor slant on this?" Orlando's eyes lit up as layer

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upon layer of this case was peeled away. “Is that the end of it, Jonty?”

“No, there is just one final part. *By the time two nights have passed, Charles Shaa will appear to have left this earth and Isaac Gaveson will have taken his place on a ship from Lowestoft.*”

“Well, I’m blowned.” Orlando sat down with a marked thud. “I was sure it was Stephen down the well and now it looks like Gaveson was the agent who ended up dispatched.”

Richard shook his head. “It hardly seems possible.” He lifted up his copies of the remaining few letters yet to be deciphered. “I wonder if these will reveal as much as this other note has?”

Jonty grinned. “I think it’s more than possible. We still don’t know what happened to Stephen, nor where Shaa ended up.”

Orlando looked up suddenly. “You’re right. Not on a ship with Breton, under the name Gaveson or otherwise, or why would the man have written from Lowestoft? There’s a lot more to this tale to be discovered.”

Helena Stewart, entering the room just in time to hear this last point, groaned loudly and left again.



The night of the twenty-third of December a blizzard began with a great fork of blue lightning which rent the sky in two over the Stewarts’ country home. It was followed by a crash of thunder that sounded like a great broadside going off. The whole sky resembled some sea battle fought at night among fleets of particular vehemence in line of battle. Hail the size of pennies smashed down onto the ground, bouncing, leaping like cats on hot tiles, taking out the odd pane of glass in the hothouses and cloches. Then the snow came—huge flakes like lace curtains veiling the night, settling so quickly that within minutes it seemed the place had a carpet of white.

As the first clap of thunder had shaken the eaves, Orlando had innately known that he had to find Jonty. There hadn't been a storm such as this since he'd lost his memory and he had no clear recollection of why he should have to locate his friend, was just drawn to his room by some instinctive understanding. Jonty sat by the window; pale, shivering, staring at the flashes in the sky with unseeing eyes.

"Jonty." Orlando's voice was as soft as a cooing dove, hardly audible above the rumbles. "Jonty, it's me, your Orlando."

There was no response, except for Jonty cocking his head to one side as if he heard a noise but didn't know what had caused it. Orlando gently came over, took his hands, turned him around and sat him on the cushions that graced the deep windowsill. Cold air emanating from the glass fought the warmth the fire was still giving out, low as it had burned. It was cool to sit there yet not unpleasant.

"What unsettles you so much, Jonty?" Orlando had never asked this question. Even while he had his memory he'd assumed this strange reaction was linked to Jonty's experiences at school and he'd been scared then to reopen old wounds. He didn't have that knowledge now and was desperate to understand what was going on. "Is it the noise? Were you frightened by a cannon or something when you were younger?"

Jonty shook himself, as if casting off some foul dream; his eyes began to focus on the present again. "I'm sorry, Orlando, did you ask something?"

"I just wondered why you react to storms. Were you alarmed as a boy?"

"No, not that. Not at all." He shivered. "Come, I'm getting cold sitting here." He rose, took Orlando's hand. "Will you sit on the bed with me? The fire's warmth will reach us better there and we can snuggle down in the covers if you want."

Orlando nodded, letting himself be led once more, as he had at the hotel. They were both in silk pyjamas, warm enough to wear under the thick quilts and blankets that topped the four-poster beds, but insufficient for the cooling night air. Jonty offered to stoke up the fire but Orlando preferred the woollen warmth to hot air. He usually liked to sleep in a cold room, feeling the air pinch at his nose and ears while the rest of him luxuriated under the bedcovers. They sat under the topmost eiderdown, close although not touching each other.

“The time has come to enlighten you on one of the least pleasant aspects of my life.” Jonty reached over and took his friend’s hand. “When I was at school, just thirteen, I was taken from my bed by two of the older boys on a stormy night such as this one.”

Orlando nodded. He imagined that what would follow would be a tale of bullying and cruelty—similar things had happened at his school, although he knew little of them, being a day boy. The worst punishments had been doled out at night.

“They took me to their room and...and they used me. That first night one of them, then a few days later the other. Then nothing until the next term, when the same thing happened again. It went on for over a year, until they left.”

“Jonty, I know that I’m being stupid, more than stupid, but please explain to me what actually happened, if you can. I don’t understand.”

“Orlando, do you remember what I told you about the boy Trumper? How his problems all derived from being hurt and abused at school? They used him against his consent, for pleasure. Do you understand that?”

Orlando didn’t. He’d pretended to, when Jonty had first explained about the St. Bride’s murders, because his friend had been so insistent that he didn’t want to go into detail. And he’d pretended again, at the hotel, that he had some idea of where that

evening might have ended if Jonty hadn't suffered a fit of coughing. He still couldn't trust himself to speak.

"And that's how they used me, too. It was truly horrible and hurt like stink, you know, but it wasn't just about the pain and the bleeding. I felt dirty all over afterwards and had to keep washing myself, trying to scrub away the shame. I felt so very humiliated." Jonty studied his hands, held gently in Orlando's long, nimble ones.

"Did you never seek help from your brothers? Weren't you all at school together?" Orlando couldn't understand why this close-knit family hadn't pulled together to overcome the common foe.

"These boys were clever, Orlando. They waited until Clarence had left the school and took advantage of the fact that Sheridan was suffering from rheumatic fever so he had to be educated at home for a while. He ended up being a day boy near here as he was too weak to board again. So I was alone—I had no particularly close friends at that point." He shook his head, and Orlando was sure he was full of sadness and remorse for the little boy he'd been and the innocence that had been stolen from him.

"But couldn't you have talked to your housemaster? Wouldn't he have been duty bound to protect you?"

Jonty snorted. "He was used to turning a blind eye to it, Orlando. As I understand it I wasn't the first victim nor were those boys the first predators in his house. He was in cahoots with them, I suspect, probably watching it all going on, too scared to take part himself. Dear God, it's all so very sickening."

"And did you never tell your parents? Your mother..."

"Would have gladly taken a knitting needle to the brains of both of them, like Mrs. Tattersall did on Jersey. Indeed, Orlando, she would have reckoned that too good for them. No, I never told my parents until much later and then I swore them to silence. It would have caused a scandal to our family and I'm not sure that it

would in any way have made life easier for me. Those boys threatened that they'd say I made them do it, led them on, and Rhodes the housemaster would have backed them up, of that I'm sure. It was hopeless and I just had to wait for them to go."

"Weren't you frightened that your housemaster would have just urged someone else to come and torment you?"

"I'd begun to take action of my own, dearest. I was determined not just to be a victim. I'd started to fill out anyway—I'd been a skinny little runt at thirteen but by fifteen I'd begun to put on muscle, helped by taking up rugby and hanging around with the lads who did boxing. By the Christmas of the next year no one was likely to mess around with a boy built like me and through being such a magnificent scrum half I'd made good friends. I could call on them to help me if I got threatened and some of them were twice my size. Rhodes didn't risk finding a new pair of hounds to course me, although I often wondered if someone else suffered in my stead."

"Is this Rhodes man still alive? I'd love to find him." Orlando was surprised at how vengeful he felt.

"I bet you would, just like my father. He has those boys and their ringleader quite firmly in his sights, but at present I won't tell you their names. I don't want to lose you to the hangman's noose. Too precious by half." Jonty drew his fingers down Orlando's cheek. "And before you ask, my beloved housemaster left the school before I did so I'd have no idea where he is now. I don't think I even care anymore, only when it gets too *close*, like listening to that poor lad Trumper who suffered the same way. Or when it thunders." Jonty pulled back the covers, manoeuvred himself into the bed properly and snuggled down. "Want to stay the night, Orlando? Share this bed? Oh, don't blush, I just meant for us to sleep close and in comfort. No bodily contact intended if not required. Just friendship this night."

Orlando tried hard not to show his disappointment about the prospect of a sojourn in Jonty's bed with no more than a kiss between them. He'd hoped so much that this renewed invitation to his friend's couch would promise more, like the one in the hotel had before he'd spoiled things.

Jonty often said he could read his friend's face like a book. "I'm sorry, that must have sounded like the very worst kind of brush-off. I just assumed that you weren't ready for anything more than kisses yet. It seemed to take such a long time when we were first..."

Orlando smiled. "No, that's not it at all. It's been delightful, without doubt, since that first time you let me kiss you. Well, more than delightful, it's been phenomenal. I just believed that you didn't want me to be—" he frowned as he tried to work out how to express himself, wondering how he'd ever been able to say this the first time around, "—close, intimate, making love to you. Are those the right words?"

Jonty laughed, face aglow with anticipation, all appearance of fear gone. "They are indeed. Of course I want you to. I've never refused your affection, except after that poor young man took his life in my room. It took a while to get back onto an even keel then. Now's a different matter. Whatever you want tonight, I'll oblige."

"Truly? Even with that thunder still rolling around? After all those things you said about what happened to you?"

"Of course, you muffin. I know that it's you and that I'm entirely safe in your hands. Put out the light and we'll make do with the fire's glow; that would be rather nice."

Orlando obliged, taking a last look out the window in the process, astonished at how deep the snow already lay. "It'll be drifts by the morning, I'll warrant."

“I’ve no doubt. It’s just what we need, Orlando, a white Christmas. Can’t think of anything nicer. Except you taking off your pyjama jacket, of course.”

Orlando obliged in this as well, sitting on the bed and baring his chest. He no longer felt embarrassed at his lack of physique as it didn’t seem to bother his lover. *Lover*. He savoured the word in his mind as he had once savoured *friend*. “You’ll have to show me exactly what to do.” Orlando held Jonty’s other hand to his lips, spoke to his fingers.

“That depends on how far we take it, my love. Not too far tonight, I think. We don’t want another coughing fit and Mama running in here in her shift to give me the kiss of life.”

Orlando blanched. “Are you sure it’ll be all right?”

“Oh, she’ll never hear. They sleep half the court and many feet’s thickness of wall away.”

“I don’t mean your mother and her super-efficient hearing, I mean you. Are you well enough to indulge in anything more?”

“I’m going to give it a try, Orlando. I’m beginning to think it’s essential to my recovery.” Jonty grinned. “Don’t worry, the physical demands will be very small, we’ll just play with each other. It’s easy enough if you know how.”

“But that’s the problem. I’ve no idea at all what I’m supposed to be doing.” They’d come to the crux of things. Orlando’s worries about his friend, genuine as they were, had also acted as a smokescreen for his own anxieties.

“Well you were a quick learner last time, you didn’t need showing twice.” Jonty leaned over, drew his hand down his friend’s chest again, ventured a kiss.

Orlando responded magnificently, drawing Jonty down onto the bed, kissing and caressing any part of his lover’s frame that he could get his lips or hands on. This was pleasure indeed, and strangely enough he felt not the slightest pang of guilt. Orlando’s parents had drummed it into him that the body was a thing to be

tamed and kept mortified. That whatever a woman had to do in the marital bed, and they were never very forthcoming about the details of that, was a matter of her duty and there could be no gratification in it. At one point his mother had even said that men had “dirty habits they get into” and that a wife “had to grit her teeth and bear it”. What he was doing with Jonty made no sense when measured against those constraints. This wasn’t a duty, this was an act of adoration and no one had to grit their teeth here. Perhaps there were other more shameful things that would happen at some later point, to horrify him, but for now all was sweet and lovely. And rather disturbing in how good it made him feel.

Jonty seemed to know exactly when and where to touch, when to leave off stroking or caressing, when to start again. Orlando realised that this man held an enormous power over him—he could produce the most intense sensations by the simplest of touches and Orlando was as helpless as a babe in his arms. But he felt safe, that was the key. Not once was he frightened that Jonty might do anything to hurt or distress him, not even when Orlando felt peculiar, potent urges and a deep-rooted burning that seemed to threaten to engulf him.

A hand tugged gently at his pyjama cord. “Think these should come off as well.” Jonty’s voice was deep and unusually hoarse, and Orlando, no semblance of shyness left about his body, removed the offending items, as did his friend. When he’d thought of this before, trying to imagine what it would be like to make love, he’d imagined times of great elation—scoring the winning try, getting full marks on a paper that was said to be impossible—but none of these had come anywhere near the reality. His senses were swamped and he’d lost all ability to think rationally.

He feasted his eyes on Jonty’s frame, the gentle contours burnished by the firelight, and the sumptuousness was something he’d expected, as was the pleasure of touching his friend’s skin,

*Charlie Cochrane*

savouring the soft and responsive flesh. But he'd not anticipated how extraordinary their intimacy of contact would prove. How Jonty's taste, his fragrance—sweat, lavender soap, cologne—would be as exciting as the sight of him lying naked. How a single moan or whisper would provoke as much reaction as a kiss.

“What happens now, beloved?”

Jonty tenderly stroked his lover's hair. “What do you do when you have a big bag of mixed sweets?”

Orlando thought that the most stupid question he'd ever heard, although he answered all the same. “I leave the best ones for last.”

“That's just the same here. This is going to be like one of the juiciest, tastiest sweets in the whole shop. Or it would be if you'd stop laughing.”

Incongruously, madly, Orlando was possessed by a fit of the giggles. Whether it was a nervous reaction in such a tense situation or a response to Jonty's stupid pronouncement, he didn't know, but he couldn't control the laughter. “Are you always as idiotic as this when we're...?” Orlando couldn't think of a suitable word.

“Making love? Sometimes.” Jonty stroked his lover's cheek, his neck, his chest. “And at other times we're deadly serious. This is powerful stuff, Orlando.” He moved his hand lower, caressing his friend's abdomen. “Shakespeare knew it, but it might come as a surprise to a poor mathematician. One of the most potent driving forces in the world.”

His hand slid lower still and suddenly Orlando understood. This was extraordinary, a sensation unlike any other he'd experienced—a burning, tingling, aching feeling that spread all over, making him want to laugh and squirm at the same time.

“This is the best sweetie I've ever had.” Orlando could hear the hoarse tone in his own voice, wondered where on earth such a

timbre could come from. “And there’s not a piece of differential calculus I’d swap for it.”

“Now who’s an idiot?” Jonty kissed his lover fervently. “And this is nothing, Orlando, not compared to what’s to come, tonight or in the nights to follow. Hang on to your hat, my love, it’s time to do your duty.”

“Duty? I…” The words confused Orlando, this sudden talk of responsibility making him bridle.

“That’s what you called it, before. Making love was ‘doing your duty’.” Jonty gently traced the words on his lover’s chest.

“Did I think it an obligation, then?” The worried tone in Orlando’s voice made Jonty stop doodling.

“No. Oh dear God, no. It was never a case of something that had to be done to oblige me, if that’s what’s troubling you. No—” he began again to scribe words of love on his friend’s skin, “—not like my sister Lavinia and the constraints she feels to lie back and think of England. Not that she ever does, poor lamb. You called it that because you said it was the right thing to do, the correct way of expressing our love. It was our duty to our affection.”

“Ah.” Orlando understood now, more than he’d understood at any point the last few weeks. “Then teach me my duty, Jonty, I think I’ve forgotten it.”

And Jonty taught him, with as much patience as a mother might show a child learning to swim. Orlando took each new stroke tentatively and then with more confidence, his fear of the unknown being submerged beneath the waves of pleasure that were beginning to crash over him. It was slow progress, from the shallows of kisses and caresses to the depths of passion, when Jonty took him by a particularly intimate part of the anatomy and started to do the most incredible things. He knew by then he had to respond in kind, hard as it was to focus on anything other than his own rapture. They barely passed a word between them, just tender sighs and moans, and one or two quiet assurances of love.

The strange, stunning, delightful end came too soon and yet not soon enough, the whole sensation being paradoxical. It was satisfying, undoubtedly, messy—incredibly—and then they were left in a glow of affection that all the thunder in the world couldn't spoil.

“Jonty?”

“Hmm? What is it, Orlando? Not anything to do with numbers greater than infinity?”

“What are you blethering on about?” Orlando's head felt strangely fuzzy but he still understood his maths. Or at least some of the more obvious parts.

“When we first did this you had a dream afterwards that you'd won the Nobel Prize for mathematics because you'd found a whole series of numbers greater than infinity, you told me all about it. Not at the time, but months afterwards.” Jonty snuggled into the crook of his lover's arm.

“That's nonsense. There isn't a Nobel Prize for maths.” Orlando caressed the golden head that lay on him, wondering whether they always followed such an incredible explosion of ecstasy with peculiar conversations.

“Well we both know that, Dr. Coppersmith, but your dream didn't. Anyway, what was it you wanted to talk about?”

“You've been very patient with me, Jonty. Could you bear another stupid question?”

“None of your questions have been really stupid. There's so much you've lost and I'm glad to help find it again.” Jonty's fingers played with the one or two hairs he could find on Orlando's barren chest.

“What was it like before? Was it like this?” Orlando could feel his thoughts turning back to what they'd just done and even the mathematical part of his brain began to have naughty thoughts.

“Of course, just as rewarding. You were adorable, Orlando, sweet, shy, skittish and rather jealous. This has hardly been a re-run of the first time we did this. You’re so much more, hmm...I think the term is *grown up*. Whatever else you’ve lost, that maturity has remained—we’ve both recognised that.”

“But it wasn’t your first time, was it, before? Your first time willingly,” Orlando corrected himself, regretting his clumsiness as soon as the words were spoken.

Jonty sighed. “No, it’s my one regret that it was not. But perhaps if it hadn’t been for Richard Marsters I wouldn’t have made it through my time at St. Bride’s. I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need at all for you to be apologetic. You couldn’t very well say ‘I’m saving myself for someone I haven’t even met yet’.” They both shook their heads at the stupid notion of always living your life in case something better was around the corner. “Shame it couldn’t have been me instead of him, though, to help you through.”

“I’m not sure the Orlando Coppersmith of a year and a bit ago could have worked that wonder, let alone the one of nearly ten years past. Better we met when and where we did.”

Jonty kissed his lover kindheartedly, rolled off the bed to go and find his dressing gown, then wandered to the bathroom, leaving Orlando with some amazing thoughts, none of them mathematical. Except for the one about what the minimum interval between events could be in this case.

## Chapter Ten

The dawn seemed to break reluctantly, the rosy colour of the sky spreading unhurriedly from the horizon and developing into a glorious golden hue. The snow had stopped, now lying thick as five of Mrs. Stewart's best eiderdowns over the fields and woods, the trees bending and straining under the weight.

Orlando had woken early, wrapped himself in a fur coat he'd found hanging on the back of the door, and sat in one of the arrow-slit bays to watch the spectacle. There was something magical about the sight, the sun reflecting off the mist lying down in the river valley, deer seeking desperately for some vegetation that had escaped the onslaught of the weather, birds fluffed out and searching for warmth.

"The rising of the sun and the running of the deer, eh, Orlando?" Jonty was now awake and had dragged the quilt from the bed in order to enfold them both. "Whoever wrote that must have been very fond of England in winter."

"No one could look out at this and fail to be moved." Orlando took Jonty's hand, gently caressing it. "Wonderful that we can share it."

"Indeed. And the playing of the merry organ and sweet singing in the choir to look forward to as well." Jonty saw the less-than-happy anticipation in Orlando's face and laughed. "Ah well, at least there'll be snow for Christmas so you'll be able to enjoy the trudge to the church and back, even if you're too heathen to appreciate midnight service itself."

Orlando tried hard to grimace, but failed. “Actually, I’m in a glorious mood after last night and very little can dampen my spirits.” The sound of activity out in the courtyard suddenly brought him up with a round turn. “Jonty, the valet will be here with the tea at any moment. He could be in my room now and he’ll think I’ve gone off to the bathroom or something then he’ll come here instead and see the bed and—”

Jonty leaned in and stopped his mouth with a kiss, just as Orlando had done when Jonty had been recovering from the flu. “Please don’t fret so. It’s the same man who looked after us last summer. Mama chose him particularly. If he found the pair of us in bed he’d just leave both trays and bow politely.”

Orlando felt as if the world had turned upside down. “Your mother knows about us?”

“Of course she does. So does Papa. And as a result have you noticed anything but affection and respect from them? Well, Mama does rather treat us as if we’re still little boys of about seven and a half, but there’s no disapproval. We are totally accepted.”

Orlando couldn’t find the words to reply. He knew he must have been through all this before, perhaps more than once, but it was beyond his understanding that a set of parents could love their child so much as to accept with impunity that he broke the laws of the church and the king. “A star danced when you were born, Jonty. I don’t know who was more blessed, you in your parents or them in you.”

Jonty smiled contentedly. “You were never as poetic as this before, Orlando. If and when you get that memory of yours back, please don’t lose the flowery words.”

“I’ll try not to.” He reached for Jonty’s hand, dropping it abruptly when someone knocked on the door.

The manservant entered with a cheery “Good morning to you both, sir,” bearing two trays, which he placed on the table.

“Thank you, Macgregor.” Jonty rose from the sill and went over to pour the very welcome brew. “Tell the rest of the staff it’s much appreciated that you’re all still preparing this, given these inclement conditions, then trudging through the snow to deliver it to us.”

One of the oddities of the Manor’s construction was its partially finished state, cut off in development at the same time as its original owner’s head. The kitchens and servants’ quarters were in the main building, half the court—a very snowy court—away from the guest wing.

Macgregor inclined his head, “My pleasure, sir.” His accent was an incongruous mixture of Welsh and cockney that wasn’t in accord with his name. “But the mistress insisted that the passages through the cellars be kept well lit so that none of us need brave the weather.” He retreated quietly, leaving the men to their tea and a selection of small sugary biscuits, Mrs. Stewart also insisting that the poor convalescent lads should be built up.



Christmas Eve had started pleasantly although it soon brought bitter disappointments. The snow at the Manor may have been deep and crisp and even but it was a mere sprinkle compared to other parts of the country. A crackly telephone call informed Mrs. Stewart that her eldest son wouldn’t be able to travel down to join them for the holidays. Not only was the snow drifted six feet deep not a hundred yards from his door, but his eldest son (the one with the penchant for practical jokes, who liked nasty presents from his uncle Jonty) had been out in it at midnight, quite without parental permission, and broken his foot. This particular branch of the Stewarts was staying put for the present.

Sheridan was travelling to his wife’s family for the festive season, which left Lavinia, the sole girl in the brood. She lived near Brighton and had every intention of getting back to her

mama's for Christmas day or so she informed her in a call which ended abruptly when a fall of snow from a tree took the line down.

"It'll be a bit quiet without the grandchildren." Richard Stewart looked rather disappointed. He'd played with his own children and now took great delight in chasing Clarence's and Sheridan's little wombats around the house, pretending to be a crocodile. Lavinia had yet to produce progeny, although she'd had such an unfortunate time of it on her wedding night that Jonty was convinced she now slept in a chastity belt, which was harsh if quite probably true.

"We'll make the most of it, we always do. You could pretend to be a kangaroo and hop at Orlando."

Orlando looked aghast at this, the suggestion having been made by Mrs. Stewart as opposed to her son. It wasn't the only time that day the elder Stewarts surprised them. Just after luncheon, when the "lads" were approaching the drawing room in search of a pack of cards to play Chinese patience, Jonty suddenly put his fingers to his lips, beckoning for Orlando to come near without a sound.

The door was slightly ajar, enough for them to have a clear view of their host—with a sprig of mistletoe held high above his head—embracing their hostess. To the men's astonishment, the kisses they saw exchanged weren't at all what they expected from a pair of grandparents. These were the sort of kisses that young lovers shared, that *they* shared, deep and passionate, full of carnal joy and wonder. Embarrassed at intruding upon such a tender moment, a swift escape to the library was in order.

"Hot stuff, eh, Orlando? Didn't think they could still have it in them."

"Jonty!" Orlando still couldn't adjust to the freedom with which his lover referred to and addressed his parents. Such things would never have been done in the Coppersmith household.

“I bet they kissed like that the night he proposed.”

“It wasn’t the night of a thousand proposals, was it?” Orlando giggled like a silly schoolgirl, employing the term that they’d invented for the disastrous evening at the ball which Helena had described to them a month earlier.

“No, it was here, one New Year. The earl and countess, my maternal grandparents, were visiting and didn’t notice that their only daughter had slipped into the gardens with the son of the house. Terribly daring it was of Papa, eluding the chaperone and all.”

“Cold too, I’d have thought.”

“Ah—” Jonty’s eyes lit up with affection, “—they had their zeal for each other to keep them warm, of course. My father has always told us the words he used but I never understood them until that Sunday when Mama spilled the beans. I couldn’t work out why he felt the need to say ‘If I ask you to marry me, Helena, you won’t knock me out, will you?’”

“Not daft, your dad, is he?”

“No, and he’s a shrewd judge of character. That’s why he likes you so much. Mama has always been besotted from the first time you met, but father takes his time to come to a conclusion. He approves, be assured.”

Orlando, as always when embarrassed, studied his shoes. “I’m pleased,” he said at last, but the reaching of his hand to take a surreptitious squeeze of Jonty’s was interrupted by the young lovers who had vacated the drawing room in favour of the library as they needed liquid refreshment of a stimulating kind after their endeavours. They smiled shyly at their two favourite boys and Mr. Stewart slipped the twig of mistletoe he was still holding into Orlando’s hand, with a wink. “Go and chase the housemaids.”

Orlando felt his cheeks colouring, but managed to make a riposte. “We find the housemaids too fleet of foot so we’ll have to make do with the kitchen maids.”

Mrs. Stewart chuckled, appearing more and more like a schoolgirl. Orlando began to speculate whether Jonty had inherited his ability at kissing from his father, the end result being that the recipient was turned into a giggling, mushy heap.

“Now, Orlando, I have a question about these papers.” Mr. Stewart tried to change the conversation to his present favourite topic, but his wife raised her hand.

“Can’t we have one day in which there is no mention of the Woodville Ward? I’m heartily sick of the doings of the Tudors and the Yorks and goodness knows who else.” Mrs. Stewart appealed to Orlando, who could hardly resist the petition.

“Perhaps we could hold things in abeyance for a day or two. What do you say, Jonty?”

“Well, I’ll be so full of church tonight and goose tomorrow that you’ll get no sense from me anyway. Let’s call a moratorium until the twenty-seventh, shall we?” He saw his mother’s look of relief and mischievously added, “Then we can get Lavinia’s Ralph in on the game.”

Mrs. Stewart shuddered. “If you must, dear. I dare say the sooner these things are translated the sooner we’ll be done with it.”

Mr. Stewart reluctantly agreed, although he insisted on one last question. “What I can’t come to terms with is the cache of letters. I understand that Shaa wanted someone to know, at some point, everything he’d done, especially if he was sufficiently confident of being far away when the furore was raised. That smacks of conceit and self-satisfaction. But it’s the specifics, like how the variety of papers got into the hoard. Did Charles stash them away and if so why are there letters *to* Breton among them? Did someone else accumulate them for safekeeping, perhaps Breton himself?”

“That’s more than one question—” Mrs. Stewart held up her hand to stifle protest, “—and you won’t get any answer for two days.” She sighed happily. “Now who’ll play me at whist?”



Lavinia and Ralph Broad appeared just as the family was preparing to trudge through the snow, gloved and booted, to the midnight service. They’d spent the previous night near Chichester, having been convinced days ago from the sudden appearance of fieldfares in their garden that bad weather was on the way. They’d progressed to a friend’s house before the blizzard set in and had made the rest of the journey by a combination of horse, cart and shanks’ pony, carrying their own bags. Lavinia took after her mother in spirit and her father in intelligence, if not after either of them in a liking for carnal pleasures. They were sent in to be given hot drinks and excused attendance at church, something that wasn’t extended to Orlando, who had subtly offered to stay at home *in case*.

“I know church isn’t to your liking, young man, but one has to do one’s duty,” Mr. Stewart had adjured him. “Anyway,” he added in a whisper, “Jonty would be so disappointed if you didn’t come along.”

The object of their discussion was up ahead with his mother, holding her prayer book and laughing like a little boy on the way to the circus. Orlando merely nodded, not daring to answer his host’s remark in case he got choked up or said something too obvious. That last night in Jonty’s bed had been on his mind all day, being mulled over and savoured. He could feel his cheeks burning at the very thought of it and was pleased that the distance to the church would give him a chance to compose himself.

Normally the lesson from Luke was read by the eldest son of the Stewart family—had been since time immemorial—but now, with Clarence’s absence, Richard had to find the rector and offer

Jonty's services instead. He'd have been happy to read out the nativity story himself, having done it when he was the eldest son, but felt it was more appropriate to maintain at least part of the tradition.

Jonty was delighted to concur in this, of course. The odd occasion when he'd been allowed to read a lesson here or in chapel at St. Bride's had been a treat, especially if it was an Old Testament one full of impossible names. The prospect of shepherds and angels and good news was charming.

The church was beautifully decorated, candles flickering among branches of holly and yew, a few Christmas roses lending a star-like quality to the displays. No hothouse flowers would be found here, just the normal things that Sussex could provide in winter. Readings were given, prayers said, a perfect sermon delivered, communion dispensed and gratefully received. Through it all there were carols, quiet and delicate or loud and joyous, ringing through the air as the bells had rung out wildly to call people to the service.

*Yea Lord we greet thee,  
born this happy morning.*

Jonty's light tenor soared along with the melody. He turned to Orlando and saw a sudden expression of delight cross his friend's face. For one brief, shining moment he wondered if Orlando had undergone a road-to-Damascus experience, suddenly finding a modicum of faith. When Orlando winked at him he realised that the explanation had to be more down-to-earth, especially as he seemed very agitated after the service, anxious to get him out of the church and in a position to talk.

"Jonty," he hissed as they passed through the lych gate, "that last carol."

"'Oh Come All Ye Faithful'? One of my favourites."

"I know." Orlando beamed. "I won ten bob off you about it last Christmas."

“No need to keep gloating about it.” Jonty stopped abruptly. “You’ve remembered!”

“I have. We’d been in chapel and I said there was something you liked to sing that didn’t rhyme at all. You wouldn’t believe me. And you paid the bet in half crowns.”

Stewart could have kissed him on the spot, but he restrained himself. “I knew it was all in there somewhere.” He tapped Orlando’s hat. “Just needed to access it somehow.” He caught sight of his mother. “Mama! Dr. Coppersmith has recollectd something from last Christmas. Isn’t that wonderful?”

“It calls for champagne at the very least, dear,” she agreed and, linking one arm with each young man, towed them home to find some of that enchanting brew.

Christmas lunch proved to be beyond magnificent. Such food, such drink, Orlando vowed he was going to expire from the sheer epicurean delight of it all. Jonty, whose tolerance for alcohol had taken a distinct knock during his illness, was aglow and insisted they take a walk down to the river to exorcise the aftereffects of overindulgence.

It was a strange, unsteady progress they made, hatted and booted, be-gloved and be-scarfed, their hostess insisting they weren’t to put themselves at the risk of a chill. The air was crisp, as was the snow that lay a foot thick and was accumulated in even deeper drifts where the wind had driven it. And most of the time they were careful not to step into anything too treacherous-looking.

The small oxbow pond which Jonty had paddled in as a child was now fit only for skating. The trees on the little island in the river were bent under the weight of snow, their branches strained almost to breaking point. “That’s where we used to play pillage.” Orlando had strode on ahead but Jonty was determined to show him the enchanting little island.

“You don’t like cribbage.” A voice emerged from the thicknesses of wool that Mrs. Stewart had wound around Orlando’s neck.

Jonty ran, rather unsteadily, grabbed his friend’s arm and pulled him back. “Not cribbage, pillage. What buccaneers do. You know, plunder, rapine—”

“I know what the term signifies, I just don’t see what you’re getting at.” Once faced with the cold air, Orlando had found that he was also slightly inebriated. He spoke carefully and with due dignity, no doubt unwilling to admit to his condition.

Jonty swept his hand in a grand gesture. “My brothers and I, we used to bring a little boat down and play at pirates.”

“And what, I shudder to ask, did that involve?”

Jonty warmed to his subject, speaking hastily and ignoring the slurring and hisses that ensued from his rather treasonous tongue. “Crossing over to the island and razing all the villages there.” He was struck by a glorious thought. “We could play, when we come next Easter. A bit too parky now, I think.”

“What would we do?” Orlando looked about as enthusiastic as if his friend had suggested something like catching rats in their teeth.

“Land on that island and leap about a bit with some of the swords from father’s study. We were never allowed to use them when I was smaller—it would be glorious to have the excuse to now.”

Orlando grimaced. “Oh joy.”

Jonty was struck by miching mallecho. “If you don’t like that idea, I’ve another. I could put you ashore, then I’d come back in the boat and I’d jump out and shout things like ‘Avast there, me proud lady’ and you’d run around flapping your arms and shrieking. You’d like that.” Jonty grinned encouragingly. He was tipsy and it all made perfect sense.

“Why can’t I be the pirate?” Orlando’s voice held just an edge of belligerence.

“Because you haven’t got the legs for it. And anyway I made up the game so I get the best part.” Jonty had passed the peak of inebriation, the last of the alcohol flowing through his system combining with the cold air to make him bold.

“Is running about all of a lather and squealing all that I get to do?” Orlando looked less than impressed.

“Well you could extemporise a bit. Say things like ‘Do not rob me of my maidenhead, I prithee, kind sir’.” Jonty giggled at the thought of his solemn friend uttering those sorts of phrases.

Orlando was horrified at Jonty using such words in public, in his cups or not. “And then what would you do?”

“I’d come and rob you of your maidenhead of course, Orlando. You are terribly obtuse at times.” Jonty stood, swaying somewhat, shaking his head at his friend’s inability to comprehend the way of things.

Orlando suddenly sniggered. “I guess you conned me into playing pirates last year, did you? Rob me of my maidenhead then?”

Jonty hooted. “Seem to remember you absolutely insisting that I take it. Just about dragging me to the bedroom. Positively carrying me through the door and—”

“I think I understand,” Orlando’s cheeks had turned bright red but not just because of the cold.

Jonty swept off his hat and produced an extravagant bow. “It would be an honour to repeat the performance, should that prove to be acceptable.”

Orlando bowed in return, then almost fell over as a something cold and wet hit the back of his neck. “You swine!”

Jonty had surreptitiously grabbed a handful of snow and lobbed it as Orlando bent over, and he was already preparing a further supply of missiles. Not to be outdone, his friend began to

do the same and the battle proper commenced, snowballs being fired off and hitting targets, new ones being prepared and launched with as much efficiency as might be seen on an old ship of the line laying into the French with broadside after broadside.

A voice like a hunting horn rang over the gardens. “Orlando! Jonathan! Whatever do you think you’re playing at? Come back here at once.”



“Where are the lads?” Mr. Stewart looked up from his book—a new Conan Doyle, *Sir Nigel*—which his wife had given him. “I fancied a game of canasta.”

“Your son and his friend are not available at present.” Mrs. Stewart picked up a piece of embroidery, attacking it in a meaningful manner.

“Disgraced themselves, did they?” Lavinia piped up. “I could hear you upbraiding them.”

“Gone off with their tails between their legs, then?” Mr. Stewart could imagine them sneaking off to the billiard room until their disgrace was forgotten.

“Indeed not.” Mrs. Stewart’s eyes blazed. “Playing at snowballs in the cold, and Jonty with no hat on. Well, if they wish to act like five-year-olds, they should be treated as such.”

“You didn’t spank them, did you?” Lavinia’s face lit up at thought.

“No. I’ve sent them to their beds with no arguments and no supper.”

“Lummy,” Ralph suddenly chipped in. “It must be deadly serious...”

## Chapter Eleven

Two hours later, Helena herself came to tell the lads they were eligible for parole, only to find her youngest son already ensconced in his pyjamas and dressing gown. As it was Christmas Day she offered him the privilege of coming down just as they were for an informal supper. They ventured over to Orlando's room to unearth him, also in his nightwear, fast asleep on his four-poster bed.

"Do you want me to wake him, Mama?" Jonty whispered as if they were two conspirators.

"No, let him be for a while, I'd welcome the opportunity of a chat." They pulled some old, yet serviceable, armchairs as close to the fire as was comfortable. "Do you feel you are quite recovered, Jonathan?"

"I think so, Mama. Still a bit of a cough, but only in the very coldest air. I just wish I could say the same for Sleeping Beauty's memory." He tipped his head towards Orlando, who looked as peaceful as an infant.

"It's been hard for you, hasn't it? I so wanted to be able to help you when it happened, but Richard said he's got to see it through himself. Very wise, your father. I'd have been in the way if I'd stormed up to Bride's and fussed over you both. Although you were very much in my thoughts and prayers."

Jonty reached over and patted his mother's hand. "I knew that and it meant so very much. And it's as well you didn't

come—two fierce women is enough for any college to put up with.”

“Still at each other’s throats?” Mrs. Stewart knew Cecily Hatfield and Ariadne Peters of old.

Jonty laughed contentedly. “A truce was later declared over the flu, but otherwise I think they’d happily throttle each other given an excuse.”

“Does he *know*?” Helena didn’t need to elaborate on her question, the meaning was clear.

Jonty sighed. “He does. It was a great shock and I really think I told him rather too early for him to understand. Got a bit carried away, you see. But he’s getting his mind around it now.” His thoughts flitted off to the night the snow came and he had the grace to blush.

“He loves you very much, you know. Never stopped phoning me when you were ill, dashing from the sick bay to the porters’ lodge and back, I’ll warrant, and almost every day from when you came round until you managed to venture out of college.”

“I didn’t know that.” Jonty was genuinely surprised. He was aware Orlando had rung his mother when her son had first been taken ill and then again to celebrate his recovery. For his friend to have kept in daily touch was not at all what he would have expected.

“Well, don’t tell him that I told you. He wanted to keep it secret, simply ask my advice on things.”

“What sort of things? If you’ve been conspiring behind my back I won’t be best pleased.” Jonty caressed his mother’s hand, the great affection he felt for her evident in every touch.

“Silly ha’pporth. He wanted to know what book was your favourite so he could read to you while you were stuck in that sick bay, and which were your preferred toiletries out of that bewildering selection you keep in the bathroom. Ordinary things

he'd have taken for granted before." She sighed. "Do they think he'll ever get all his memory back?"

"Oh the doctor is terribly noncommittal. 'Various factors involved. Full physical recovery likely. Memory state less predictable.' In other words he doesn't know and won't admit it." Jonty could feel the tears welling; he sniffed and scrabbled for his handkerchief.

"One thing's not changed. He still loves you very much, you know. You're the whole world to him and if he hadn't met you he'd have been stuck in that chair in St. Bride's until kingdom come. Rotting away and never growing up."

"And just how do you know all this? You seem even more sure of yourself than normal, Mama."

"Because he told me, back in August when you flitted through after your holiday. He so desperately wanted someone to know how he felt about you, someone who wouldn't judge him or be horrified at the fact that this isn't exactly orthodox."

Jonty sat silent for a full minute, something that rarely happened when he was in full flow. "Well, I'm jiggered. I would never have guessed in a million years."

"Don't you dare tell him. He'll have my guts for garters if he knows I've told all." They smiled conspiratorially and some roguish spark in his mother's eye made his grin transform into laughter. Quiet giggles at first, which couldn't be contained until the pair of them had dissolved into hysterics.

A grumpy voice from the bed brought an abrupt end to the mirth. "If I thought you were laughing about me I'd come over there and—" Orlando stopped, realising there wasn't just a familiar masculine chuckle, but a throaty feminine chortle in harmony with it. He sat bolt upright, drawing his dressing gown around himself. "I'm sorry I didn't realise—"

“That’s quite all right.” Mrs. Stewart beamed at her favourite guest. “We only came to get you for supper—there was no intention to disturb you.”

“Indeed, Orlando, although I suppose we’d have had to rouse you out at some point or father will have scoffed all the pickles by the time we get down there.” Jonty was just a little disappointed that his lover had been interrupted. He would have loved to have known exactly what Orlando would have “come over there and done”.

After allowing Orlando a minute or three to wake himself properly, they set off down the spiral stairways to the cellar passages that would bring them across to the main part of the house. Laughter and gaiety from the servants’ hall made them tread quietly, determined not to spoil one of the evenings when the staff were at liberty to let their hair down. They reached the dining room up another medieval stairway, much more cramped than the one the servants used, and found that Mr. Stewart had been considerate enough to leave an ample sufficiency of pickles, plenty even for his son to be happy with.

Cold meat, homemade vegetable pickle—the vegetables grown not two hundred yards away—fresh bread and mince pies. As far as Jonty was concerned there wasn’t a meal like it to be had in the whole of England. They ate and drank (only coffee for the younger gentlemen, Helena was most insistent) and chatted into the night, before a series of stifled yawns around the company seemed to indicate that bed was required.



“Boxing Day doesn’t feel right without the hunt.” Richard Stewart looked wistfully out the window onto the expanse of ground that by now should have been covered with horses, hounds and riders.

“Can’t very well manage in this snow, dear. It’d be halfway up the horses’ hocks, you know.” His wife patted his shoulder in a comforting manner.

“We nearly lost a horse in a drift by Lavant.” Ralph shook his head. “I can’t remember when this part of the country last saw such weather. Have to make our own entertainment today, I guess.”

Mr. Stewart dearly wished he could be getting out his paper and pencil to attack a letter or two but he’d given his wife his word regarding the Woodville Ward. Another day of the moratorium remained. The company played bridge and bezique, drank and ate, snoozed in chairs in front of the fire, got vaguely bored, until Ralph had the bright idea of suggesting an entertainment. “Perhaps you could favour us with some of your piano playing, Mrs. Stewart?”

“Only if you’ll sing, dear.”

Ralph had a fine tenor voice and handled the patter songs from Gilbert and Sullivan with dash and élan. It was a true pleasure when he deigned to perform.

“I remember,” Mr. Stewart suddenly said with a hint of real enthusiasm, “when I was a boy we’d all get together—upstairs and down—to put on an entertainment in the middle of winter. Usually in February when everything was a bit bleak and quiet, but there’s no reason we couldn’t do it tonight.”

His wife’s eyes sparkled at the sheer daring of it. “Go and enquire of Hopkins this very minute. I’m sure he’d round up enough of the staff to take part. And make sure he understands that there’s to be no formality or stuffiness, all of us pulling together in a crisis.”

Orlando wasn’t sure how this constituted a crisis, but Jonty carefully explained to him that the St. Stephen’s Day hunt was an enormous part of local life. It wasn’t just the gathering and the search for the fox, but the grand dance for the servants over at

Lord Mottisfont's that always followed it. Not just the Stewarts and their guests were making do this evening.

Richard didn't even get to take his idea below stairs. When he encountered Hopkins on the staircase it transpired the butler was on his way up to ask permission for the servants to put on their own little entertainment in their hall. The notion of combining with the household was a much appreciated one.

Ralph started it off, of course, his ability and confidence creating a marvellous atmosphere, one that made the contributions of lesser performers listened to with fond indulgence. Among the highlights were Hopkins reciting Kipling with passion and true patriotic pride followed by the cook producing a spirited rendition of "Come into the Garden, Maud". Lavinia and her father played a piano duet, while Jonty and one of the footmen sang "Hearts of Oak" as if their very lives depended on it.

Even Orlando joined in, telling a ghost story with such unexpected skill that, at one particularly chilling point, the parlour maid shrieked. The evening ended, most appropriately, with "Good King Wenceslas" and "God save the King", followed by sherry and mince pies and a happy meandering off to bedrooms.



Jonty knocked, didn't wait for an answer, stuck his head around the door. "Any room in your bed for a poor lonely sailor who could do with some comfort?"

"If there was one of them here, there might be, but seeing as it's you, I'm not so sure."

Jonty chuckled. From the first evening they'd met when Orlando had almost made a joke—almost, but not quite—Jonty had realised that this man just needed a prod or two to make his sense of humour, buried since childhood, bubble up to the surface. "I'll go back to my own if you want, there might be a sailor waiting there." A pillow collided with his head.

“Twit. Come on in before that draught from the door puts the fire out.”

“Need a hurricane to douse that.” Jonty nodded at the hearth, where a healthy blaze was chucking out warmth. “Aren’t you sweltering?”

“I am. I built it up partly in anticipation of your arrival as I don’t want to have to rely on hiding under the covers. I’d like to see all of you.” Orlando’s eyes burned as fiercely as the blaze, full of longing.

Jonty realised, with a huge leap of his heart, that Orlando’s inner tiger had at last been unleashed again and he didn’t want it tamed. “Better oblige then, hadn’t I?” He took off his dressing gown and pyjamas, springing onto and crawling over the bed to where his lover lay. He tugged at Orlando’s clothes. “Letting the side down here, aren’t we?”

Orlando looked solemn, a smouldering in his eyes making Jonty’s heart turn over again. “You take them off for me, if you’d please.”

“Of course.” Jonty could find no more adequate words to reply, not just to the request, but to the look in his lover’s eyes. He undid Orlando’s buttons one by one, caressing the smooth flesh as it was exposed. “Glad that you’re happy to keep the light on. Richard Marsters never was. He didn’t want me to see him naked or to look on me.” Jonty concentrated hard on the pyjama cord to hide the distress this memory still caused. He’d never understood why Richard had such an aversion to bare flesh.

“That’s stupid.” Orlando ran his hand down the fine lines of Jonty’s chest. “Like taking the statue of David and hiding it under a blanket.” He gently pushed Jonty onto the bed and drew lazy curves along his skin. “You’re perfect, you know, like some classical statue of Apollo. I thought that, when you were ill. You looked made of marble then.”

“I’m far from perfect, Orlando. I lack several inches in height and the muscles at the top of my arms are far too prominent. But if you wish to compare me to statuary then I am truly honoured. Now shut up and kiss me.”

Orlando leaned down and kissed him, slowly, voluptuously. “I do love you, Jonty. Were you to desire a repeat of two nights ago, I’d be more than happy to oblige.”

“I think you’ve already made that rather plain, sweetheart—that leonine look in your eye when I walked in made all words pointless.”

Jonty drew his lover down to kiss him time after time, hands roaming through his hair, carefully avoiding the scar where Orlando’s skull still remained tender. He pondered on the expectation that had built up within him over the day, the looks they’d exchanged, the brief touches and tender words, all perfectly acceptable in company, but each with a meaning of its own that only they knew. Every act this night had added to the expectation, the crossing of the hallway and knocking at the door producing as much of a frisson of excitement as disrobing and mounting the bed had done. Making love was as much about anticipating what was to come as enjoying what was in progress.

“I was so frightened this would never happen again.” Jonty’s hands roved freely, encountering no resistance, just a happy acquiescence to whatever he wanted to do.

“If you were a mathematician you’d not have had such doubts. A replication of circumstances is sure to bring about a duplication of results. If we fell in love the first time, we were bound to repeat the deed.”

Stewart luxuriated in Orlando’s pomposity, knowing that it simply showed the depths of the man’s feelings. “You should have written the sonnets. ‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day’ will sound like the rag-and-bone man’s call to my ears now.” He drew Orlando closer, stimulated by the feel of flesh on flesh,

breath on skin which was already overexcited. “I’m not sure I can hold out much longer. All getting a bit close, you know.”

“Well, if it were done, then ’twere well it were done quickly.” Orlando’s mouth twisted up into a shy smile.

Jonty’s heart melted at the phrase—quick, clever words which must have been learned for just such an occasion. Trust Orlando, adorable innocent Orlando, to hit straight at the heart of things. “Then make it so, please. ‘More is thy due than more than all can pay.’ I can’t ever repay you for the love you’ve shown me, or the happiness you’ve brought. All I have is this...” Jonty kissed his lover again and moved his hands to where they could best settle up accounts.

They lay together afterwards, gossiping and giggling, enjoying the wonderful familiarity with each other’s bodies they were reconstructing. “Think of it, Orlando. Tonight, above stairs, there will be three couples sharing beds. And I bet only one of them won’t be sharing the last favours in some form or other.”

“Jonty! Are you suggesting that your sister...?”

“No, I’m actually suggesting that my mama and papa will be canoodling tonight. They had a wild look in their eyes, the pair of them. I suspect that father’s brush with this flu has made mother realise anew how much he means to her and that she needs to take every opportunity of reminding him. It’ll be poor Ralph who’ll get nothing but a cuddle tonight.”

“How can you assume that? Doesn’t Lavinia like him?”

“Orlando, she’s crazy for him, but she had such a terrible shock on her wedding night, no idea how men were built or what the parts were designed to achieve. Came crying home to Mama, who’d neglected to tell her about things, rather like the countess my grandmother had neglected to tell her own only daughter. Although father would be a rather different kettle of fish, I guess, for a girl who knew little but was eager to learn.”

Orlando thought of the kindness and patience that Jonty had shown to him two nights before and realised that there was a wealth of empathy and consideration in the Stewart blood. If Mr. Stewart had been as tender and careful with his wife as Jonty had been with him... He stopped thinking such thoughts abruptly, horrified at the *News of the World* type speculation they were embroiling him in. "Are you staying the night?"

"I'm sorry, Orlando?"

"Will you spend the night in my bed or are you off to your own?"

"Well, if you'll have me, I'm *staying*, you great clot." Jonty rolled off the bed, fetched his favourite pyjamas and slid into them. The silk felt cool against his heated skin, another simple pleasure for which he was truly grateful, as he was for Orlando's arm that slipped around him as he snuggled down under the covers.

They didn't speak any further, content with the crackling of the fire and the rattling of the windows in the wind. There were no protestations of endless love or deathless devotion to each other alone. Such things weren't needed.



December the twenty-seventh and Richard Stewart was bouncing around the house like a puppy. The ban had been lifted and the Woodville Ward papers could be studied again. There were four of them at it now, Ralph adding his not inconsiderable brains to the task. Despite the fact that Mrs. Stewart had allowed no discussion of the case nor secret workings on the letters, she'd not been able to infiltrate her husband's brain and make him not *think* about it.

"And I've remembered a book I bought about the famous patrons of Swavesey church when I was a student. A privately published thing, little more than a pamphlet, but making reference

to the Breton family and their patriarch, Johan. I've been surreptitiously looking for it—don't you dare tell Helena—but to little avail."

The attentions of the four men turned from mince pies and cold cuts of meat to codes and letters, so effectively that by the middle of the afternoon they'd cracked another one. To Orlando's continued disappointment it was Ralph and Jonty working in tandem who succeeded.

Nothing new was revealed in this translation, although it appeared to support many of their theories. Predating the letter which Jonty had cracked a few days earlier, this one spoke of Gaveson being identified as the king's spy and Shaa's speculation that the man was being employed to gain incriminating evidence to disgrace him. It emphasised the need for the true story to be recorded, albeit in coded form, so that future generations might know the truth.

Ralph had received a full briefing on the case not long after breakfast and had put his finger straight on the crucial point. He raised it again now. "There are four men here, the *key players* we can call them, and I suspect that we can discard all the rest, certainly on the grounds of lack of evidence. Shaa, Breton, Gaveson, Stephen, four to start with and then just two. Breton on his boat off to start a new life and one body down a well, whom we can safely assume, wasn't Shaa. Unless we consider the possibility that this all went wrong and the intended victim became the murderer."

Orlando groaned. "I've certainly considered that possibility and if these letters produce nothing more then we must present it to Dr. Peters as an option. Although at least we could then put a possible name to the killer."

The others nodded, although if it turned out to be such a damp squib, they'd never live down the shame.

Ralph continued. “So we have two men we still can’t account for and we’ll assume that they’re Shaa and Stephen. Where do they go? It’s clear they effectively disappear and are recorded as missing but what happened to them? I can imagine that poor Stephen got tipped down a mineshaft or over a cliff by Shaa, who wouldn’t have wanted any stray witnesses to his misdemeanour left around to idly discuss it. Except it’s hard to lose a body permanently—you have to be either very clever or very lucky. Unless you tip your victim overboard in a weighted sack.”

They all went back to their studying, feeling unnaturally depressed until a great shout of triumph split the air, making three men start, dropping their papers and the fourth, the one making the noise, blush profusely. “I’m so sorry, it’s just that I seem to have got somewhere with my letter. Just the first line so far but it makes sense, so the rest must follow, if you’ll give me a while to finish it.” Richard Stewart was obviously trying very hard not to beam in his triumph.

“Shall we help, Mr. Stewart?” Orlando offered. “If you have the key word we could use it on our copies.”

Jonty drew him off to one side, ostensibly to look at his own endeavours on the one remaining letter which eluded all their efforts to translate it. “Kind of you to offer, old man, but Father could do with cracking one of these all on his own. He misses playing with the youngsters, you know. Could do with a bit of fun.”

Jonty could see that Orlando was desperately frustrated that, yet again, he’d been beaten to the decryption and he needed to appeal to his friend’s goodwill to overcome the disappointment. And the fact that Lent term seemed horribly close wasn’t helping anyone’s tempers. They made a point of concentrating on their own affairs until their host produced the completed manuscript. It was worth waiting for.

Charlie Cochrane

“*Damnation!*” Mr. Stewart began to read.

“Strong stuff, Papa, hope the ladies don’t join us if it gets any worse.” Jonty bore a conspiratorial grin.

His father smiled. “That’s the worst of it, assuming I’ve translated correctly. Not the end of the shocks, though. *Gaveson is gone and now what is to become of our plans? Stephen says that we will not see his return.*”

“Well, that’s our theories out the window, if it’s true.” Jonty felt more than confused. He listened while his father read out the details of Gaveson’s departure. The man had allegedly received a warning letter which made him panic, Stephen had seen him, looking scared out of his wits, carrying all his belongings and seeking to hire a horse. By the time Stephen had found Shaa to inform him, it was far too late.

*“He is gone; the spy has gone back to his master I’ll warrant, carrying all his deceit and spite with him.”*

“Oh hell!” Ralph would have kicked the dog if there’d been one present. “We had a nice little picture there and now it’s all up in the air again.”

Richard’s eyes shone brightly. “Ah, steady now, there’s more. Here, Orlando, you read it, you’ll appreciate it.”

*“Our plans are made and I’ll not see them chang’d. ’Tis too good an opportunity to miss. If not Isaac, then who will be Shaa in the well? Another man might serve the purpose as fitly... Does anyone want to guess the name we’re coming to here?”* Orlando looked horribly smug.

“It’s Stephen, isn’t it?” Jonty slammed his papers down on the table. “And I’m going to owe you a whole bloody year’s pay!”

## Chapter Twelve

“What’s that noise?” Orlando could hear a strange tapping outside, for which his poor, befuddled early morning brain couldn’t establish a cause.

Jonty, already awake but enjoying the sensations of lying in bed at ease and contented, turned his head to listen. “It’s the snow, it’s melting.” He drew the eiderdown from the bed, to his lover’s angry protestations, wrapped himself in it and went to the window to investigate. “It was much milder last night and now there’s a bit of drizzle too. Such a shame it’ll all be slush soon.”

A shame it might have been to see the smooth white blanket disappear, but it was very welcome to Jonty’s family. The phone line was soon reconnected and a gleeful Clarence informed his mother that they’d be down the next day, broken foot and all, assuming the weather didn’t produce another turnabout. And the inhabitants of the Manor, who had virtually been prisoners these last few days, were able to start getting out and about again.

The weather stayed clement, the winter sun a pale light in a sky the colour of Jonty’s eyes, and they took every opportunity to enjoy the local delights. He and Orlando took the carriage down to Chichester where, much to Jonty’s satisfaction, he was allowed to visit the cathedral to admire the fine spire and glass. Orlando was much more pleased in being able to replenish his store of bull’s-eyes, which had become dangerously low.

It proved a pleasant city, clearly demonstrating its Roman origins both in its shape and in the ruins that were rumoured to

litter the locality, although the sudden thaw had led to flooding near the streams—sandbags abounded to trip up the unwary.

If Stewart's treat was to admire pew and choir stall, then Orlando received his in being allowed to play with the levers in the signal box. Word had been sent down to the stationmaster that if his invitation was still open, then the lads would be delighted to take him up on it. They arrived in time for the early morning rush of trains, the pair of them bearing sausage rolls straight from the Manor's ovens and grins more suited to seven-year-olds than respectable fellows of a Cambridge college. Jonty, knowing that his lover's childhood hadn't included much play, encouraged him to take every opportunity to indulge in it now.

Orlando was like a little boy with the biggest train set in the world. He listened patiently to what seemed like hours of talk about timetables, fast services, slow trains, until the glorious moment when he was allowed to operate the signals and change the setting on the points. He seemed happier than Jonty remembered him being at any time—any time outside bed—since the previous summer. Orlando delayed their departure time and again, reluctant to leave the box of delights. Only when the stationmaster reassured him he'd an open invitation to come and play trains could he be prized from the levers.

These were idyllic days, as the whole of the time had been since first they arrived at the Manor. Jonty's strength recovered in leaps and bounds; Orlando's memories began to trickle back in dribs and drabs. He recalled all sorts of odd things, like his successful afternoon at the Derby and watching *Hamlet* at the theatre, but he still had no recollection of any intimate moments that he and Jonty had shared before his fall.

Jonty began to suspect that the head injury was just incidental to the amnesia and that the business had a distinctly psychological origin, although he was loathe to reveal his fear to either Orlando or any member of the medical profession. That

would run the risk of having to delve into the seemingly selective nature of the events that were recalled. Or, more to the point, those that refused to spring to mind.

Mr. Stewart at last found the little book he wanted about Swavesey and gave it triumphantly to Jonty, who promptly forgot all about it. The Woodville Ward's final letter eluded all efforts to make itself understood and the interest in that one remaining missive seemed to be fading somewhat, especially as the excitement about the Hogmanay ball began to mount.



New Year's Eve dawned clear and bright, the deer out in the fields finding plenty of greenery to browse upon and the household of the Manor discovering plenty of jobs to be done, upstairs and down. Hogmanay rig that hadn't seen the light of day for two years—the renovations having meant there was no such celebration for the welcoming in of 1906—had been already taken out of mothballs and aired. Still, *sgian dubhs* needed polishing, sporrans a good brushing and knees had to be made immaculately clean before they could be allowed to don the plaid.

The level of excitement crept up gradually, especially so in Orlando, who'd never seen his friend in the tartan and was rather unsettled by the whole idea. "What are you wearing under there?" He contemplated the vision in front of him with awe and trepidation.

Jonty swept his kilt up to reveal a splendid pair of silk drawers. "I'm quite decent, as you can see. Mama forbids any of us to wear the tartan as our forefathers did since Clarence rather blotted his copybook a few years back." He twirled, revelling in the freedom the plaid brought and the pleasing effects it was obviously having on his lover.

“Are you going to make me privy to this tale of disgrace or whatever it was to cause my friend to make such a strong decree?”

“Of course. It was the Hogmanay ball, and it had been a particularly rainy night, the floor was rather slippery and poor Clarence went arse over tip. The ladies didn’t know where to look—well, Miss Peters would have known just where to peek but the effect upon the good maidens of Sussex was devastating. Since then it’s been strictly underwear *de rigueur*. Mama has been known to check.” He grinned. “You can reassure her that I’ve been a good boy.”

“I shall tell her no such thing. I’ll say that you’ve discarded all undergarments and then she might make you stay in your room and not horse around.” Orlando was beside himself with worry. “You promise me you won’t do anything to make that cough start again? No dancing or larking about.”

Jonty frowned. “You’re as bad as Mama. There’s a piper to entertain us, she said—well, I don’t mind that but it’s at the expense of some of the dances, and most of the rest have been sacrificed to make way for the singing of traditional Scottish airs. I know that we’re of noble Gaelic descent but there’s a limit, you know.”

“Neither you nor your father has been well. You were both at death’s door, to tell the truth, and your poor mother doesn’t want to see either of you expiring in the middle of the Gay Gordons.”

Stewart snorted.

“Well you can grunt all you want. I suspect that you’re just peeved because your mama cottoned on to your little scheme.”

“And you’re getting yourself all worked up about those bloody letters. Don’t deny it, you’ve even been mumbling about them in your sleep.”

“I won’t have the documents going to Owens. I shan’t admit defeat.” Orlando was going to will the case to a successful conclusion just like—as he was convinced had happened—he’d willed the flu out of Jonty’s body.

“Now you listen to me. Tonight you’re not even going to think about it. I’ll know if you are and I’ll whip my kilt up in protest. Leave the codes and filters and who knows what behind for once.” Jonty put his hand to his lover’s cheek, drew his fingers down it. “Please.”

“Only—” Orlando turned his face into the caress, “—if you take care of yourself. And no more daft capers.”

“It wasn’t a daft caper. Those singers were quite happy to accept the merest trifle of a bribe to pretend they had laryngitis, and then we’d have had fewer Gaelic dirges and loads more reels and jigs.” He stopped, eyed his friend with the keenest scrutiny. Orlando felt as if he were some Napoleonic spy and Jonty were Nelson’s flag lieutenant. “It wasn’t you who let on, was it?”

“Not guilty, m’lud. I rather think it was your nephew—not the best idea to have been so forthcoming to him about your plans. He would have told his grandfather, upon whom he dotes entirely, and then the cat would be out of the bag.”

“Hardly sporting all round. Papa could have kept his trap shut and those singers could have done with the money, you know. There’s an element of social responsibility here after all.” Jonty adopted a pious look that wouldn’t have fooled anyone except the rector’s sister.

“You can rest easy. As I understand it they got a bigger bribe from your mother to sing than you’d offered them not to. Poetic justice, I’d say.”

“Well, it was worth a try—acted as a nice diversion, anyway.” Jonty fiddled with his sporran, obviously trying to keep a guilt-ridden smirk from his face.

“Diversion?”

“Yes, from the main attack. Mama will have dropped her guard now.” Jonty broke into a huge grin.

“And what—I’m not sure I want to know this, but I have to ask—are you planning?”

“Big secret, Orlando. You’ll find out—” Jonty consulted the clock, “—just after the piper finishes, I think. I solemnly swear it won’t make me cough. And are you going to dance?” He shook the folds out of his kilt.

This little movement made Orlando shiver—he wondered if it were being done to distract him from Jonty’s schemes. “I am indeed. With every lady in the household at least once.” He paused thoughtfully. “But no one else.”

“Have you ever read any Jane Austen? You do so make me think of her.”

“Not that I’m aware of. Is she a well-known author?”

Stewart slapped him hard on the shoulder. “Dr. Coppersmith, go and wash your mouth out with carbolic soap! She is a paragon of the writers’ trade, witty, erudite, well-spoken. Shame that more authors don’t take a leaf from her book.”

“And why should I remind you of the no-doubt fascinating characters that fill her pages?”

“There’s one in particular that struck a chord the first night we met. You seemed very proud and disdainful, as if you thought yourself above all the rest of us. Now don’t look so put out, I just said you *seemed* like that, not that you actually were. The man I have in mind took forever to admit to his paramour that he loved her, and then used such terms he was very lucky she didn’t black his eye. If he’d spoken like that to Mama she’d have knocked *him* out, too, filthy rich or not. Anyway he was rather particular who he danced with at a ball.”

“Sounds a nasty piece of work and I don’t think I want to read about him, thank you. I’ll stick to Dr. Watson—he doesn’t insult anyone and is never proud or haughty.”

Jonty smiled. “Stupid head. Dear Lord, I love you.” He risked a quick kiss and they went down to the hall, to take their oaths their underwear was as per instructions.

The ball was magnificent, the music of a standard that Orlando could only remember being equalled by some of the college choirs when it had been a notable year for singers. And while the purity of a boy’s soprano might seem a foretaste of heaven, soaring to angelic heights to touch the soul, the skirl of the pipes produced earthier sensations. He was having a wonderful evening, fulfilling his promise to dance with Lavinia, Helena and Clarence’s wife, Martha. Maybe he hadn’t been able to take the floor with the one person whom he would have wished to be hand in hand or arm in arm with, although he’d made up a four with him on more than one occasion. Such a bright smile and fleetness of foot to admire.

When the piper finished his repertoire with “The Londonderry Air”, the hairs on the back of Orlando’s neck were almost standing up and waving, it was so eerie, magnificent, stirring. Not, however, quite as strange as the spectacle that followed. Mrs. Stewart was completely horrified when a Jonty-paid-for snake charmer arrived in a Jonty-paid-for carriage and began to set up his Jonty-paid-for performance.

All her efforts to stop this entertainment were nipped in the bud when her husband positively capered with delight. He vowed he’d wanted to see this sort of thing since he was a lad and wasn’t going to be deprived of the opportunity now he’d got so close. The look of delight on his face was enough to soothe the savage beast that was arising in Mrs. Stewart’s soul and getting ready to maul her youngest son, despite his pleas that he hadn’t technically broken the injunction about too much dancing, that they all deserved a bit of fun having had a quiet Christmas and no hunt to enjoy and that he’d not seen father so happy for years. All of these

arguments were undeniable, but the youngest Stewart still counted himself lucky not to be sent to his bed again.

When the snake charmer had departed, cobra and all, Jonty took Orlando by the arm, finding a seat where they could admire the fine armorial bearings and weaponry that graced the walls of the hall in which they danced.

“Do you ever wish—” Jonty indicated the swords and shields that shone like great bronze stars against a wooden sky, “—that you’d lived at a time when you could have wielded one of these? I do sometimes regret that I never got to swing a *claidheamh mòr*.”

“I’ve no inclination to swipe one of those filthy great things around—if I could have been a warrior, I’d have elected to sail on one of those ships they had in Nelson’s day like that Admiral, what was his name? Exeter? Exmouth?”

“Exbury.”

“Him. The one who had the mad theory about the Ward. I think I’d have been happy to serve under him, striding about a deck, wind in my hair...”

“I knew you’d be ideal for a game of pirates—” Jonty grinned, fanning himself with a convenient gauntlet, “—but I’d no idea you harboured such an ambition. Not sure it was as romantic on board as you make it out to be though. Damned dangerous for one thing and probably boring much of the time. A strange mixture of ennui and peril.”

“I’ve no doubt it wasn’t all that it’s cracked up to be in the books I read as a child, but I’d have liked to have had my chance. With you at my side as my lieutenant of course.”

“You’d be captain then, would you?”

“Indeed. As you said yourself, I made up the game so I get the best part.” Orlando felt as if he was about to explode with joy. However had he survived in the days before this extraordinary

man came into his life? How could life have ever held any satisfaction or colour?

Jonty reached up and ruffled his unruly curls, ones that no amount of macassar oil could tame. “Come on, just two more dances then it’ll be ‘Auld Lang Syne’ and we’ll be allowed to slip away once you’ve first-footed. Unless you’ve forgotten your promise?”

Orlando shook his head. “I have not. I would never disoblige your mother in anything, unlike her youngest son...”



They sat on the stone windowsill of Jonty’s room, just as they’d done the night the snow came. It wasn’t so cold on this occasion and they were fully dressed, having come straight from saying goodnight to the guests. The night had drawn to a premature close for a Stewart Hogmanay ball but the delicate medical state of the host and his youngest son—rather exaggerated in the telling by the hostess—ensured that everyone had complied by arriving betimes and departing ditto.

Their fingers idly played with one another’s, drawing lines on backs of hands, caressing fingertips, touching and moving apart, finding each other again. They had neither lain nor slept together for days, Jonty having felt the aftereffects of the flu keenly once more and needing several good nights’ rest or else his mama would have banned him, like Cinderella, from the ball. He was determined that tonight wouldn’t be spent alone.

“Staying, Orlando?” He indicated the four-poster bed, its red velvet covers voluptuous and inviting.

“Are you up to it?”

“I am indeed. Much refreshed these last few nights and keen to make the most of my renewed vigour.” He leaned forward, resting his brow on his lover’s. “There’ll be no double beds back in college, might as well make the most of the facilities to hand.”

*Charlie Cochrane*

He rose from his seat, began to disrobe. “Are you going to sit there all night?”

“Jonty, I’ve a request to make of you.”

“Want me to be your valet again?” Jonty grinned. “More than happy to oblige.”

Orlando rose too, took his friend’s hand. “I want you to—I’ve no idea of the term I should use—couple with me? Make one flesh? Something about sharing favours, I think you said. *That.*” He blushed to the roots of his hair.

Jonty gently caressed his lover’s face. He’d been longing for this moment for what seemed an age but he couldn’t just, in his enthusiasm, assume that it was the right time. “Are you quite sure that you’re ready, Orlando? It’s an awfully big step—well, I feel so, even when both parties are willing participants.”

Orlando drew his lover close, like a hen sweeping its chick under its wings for love and protection. “I do wish I could somehow erase all the pain and sorrow of your past. Or strangle the people involved, which would be equally satisfying. But I can’t, so we’ll stick to us.” He clasped Jonty’s fingers tightly. “Did I like it, before? You know. *It.*”

“You adored it, Orlando. You used to say it was even better than calculus.”

“Then I can see no logical reason why we shouldn’t proceed.”

Jonty didn’t laugh at the ridiculous words. Orlando no doubt thought he was being romantic and it would be niggardly to make fun of his meagre offerings, not least because, when it came to matters of the bed, none of his contributions proved in any way insignificant.

Jonty had wondered what would happen if Orlando ever gained the slightest idea of how spectacular a lover he really was, whether he might embark on some great spree of seduction or

whether he would content himself with perfecting the art with him alone. He was assuming the latter, but you couldn't be too careful.

"Come on then, this starts as it always does, but the ending—the ending will be wonderful, Orlando. The pair of us united, bodies and souls." They moved over to the soft, luxurious bed, sliding back the covers and removing the highly unromantic warming pan. "Could do without that, eh?" Jonty made a start on his lover's shirt buttons.

A great shivering sigh seemed to course along Orlando's body as he was undressed and as he returned the compliment. He ranged himself next to Jonty, eager skin on eager skin, kissing and stroking, preparing for what had been promised.

Jonty remembered the first time they'd done this, in a hotel bed on an idyllic island, and how they'd collapsed into giggles at the sheer, outlandish nature of what they were about to do. For all that sex was a wonderful thing to share, it had its ridiculous aspects, which it didn't do to dwell on or nothing would end up happening in anyone's bed.

Jonty was consideration itself, mixing gentleness with searing passion, tender caresses with strong, rough embraces and kisses. Taking and giving pleasure were doled out in equal measure, a constant check being made that Orlando was comfortable with what was happening. Strange to be experiencing *the first time* when it was in reality the umpteenth, but Jonty worked it to his advantage. He knew what Orlando liked, what made the man moan or squirm, plead or lose control. And if his lover didn't quite have that sophistication of knowledge to apply yet, it was still exhilarating to be touched by someone whom you knew intimately well but had that first congress to relive once more.

"Please." Orlando's voice was deep and earthy, his usual refinement of tone lost in desire and excitement. "Now, please."

How could Jonty ever refuse him at such a time? “Of course. Now, just...” With gentle movements and indications, he showed Orlando what to do, guiding and encouraging until physical union was achieved. At which point they both lost the inclination to do anything except savour anew, experience again. Saving this new memory, to replace the lost ones.

Orlando lay awake, unable and unwilling to succumb to sleep. Jonty lay contentedly at his side, even breathing indicating his deep slumber. Whatever Orlando had expected becoming one flesh to be, it hadn't been anything equal parts unsettling and wonderful as this had proved. He wasn't sure what Lavinia's problem was, but had she a husband as sensitive as Jonty Stewart, she'd have no lingering fears of the marriage bed. This hadn't been some act of gratification, indulged in for no other reason than the physical pleasure it gave. It had been a true joining together of hearts and souls.

Kisses there had been in plenty, ample caresses and touches, and a union which went beyond all expectation or hope. The previous times they'd slept together had been lovely but this was dazzling beyond all compare. Orlando snuggled against his best friend—colleague, lover, pole star, pearl beyond price—and tried hard to think of nothing, not to analyse, not to rationalise, just to enjoy. And as he desperately tried to clear his mind, the more it filled with thoughts—buzzing, whirling ideas—until he could bear it no longer.

He rose, going in search of a glass of water. As he poured it, the teeming thoughts dissipated and suddenly became a lucid stream of memory. Out of the blue he could pin down all the events of the last summer—his previous visit here, their holiday, what Mrs. Tattersall looked like, the incident with the honey buzzards and a chap called Bentley, Ainslie, something like that. He dropped the glass and dashed to the bed.

“Jonty, Jonty.” He shook his lover, with a bit more force than usual. When the man slept it was like rousing Drake himself to beat his drum, a fact that Orlando could recall perfectly now. “Please, Jonty, I’ve remembered.”

The key word seemed to reach deep into the man’s subconscious. “Eh, what’s that, Orlando?”

“I can remember last summer. Our holiday, all sorts of things that happened before and since.” Tears welled, overflowing down Orlando’s cheeks—Jonty gently wiped them dry with the corner of the quilt.

“I always believed that you would. Must be as much of a shock as losing them.”

“It is, but it’s such a pleasant shock. I just need to get things ordered in my mind once more.”

“Come and lie here and we’ll talk things through. I can help you put it all in place and then you can sleep. Everything’s fine now, absolutely fine.”



The first day of 1907 may have heralded many a new beginning, but for the occupants of the library, things carried on in much the same way as they had this last fortnight. Code words, grids, pairings, patterns, pieces of paper covered with what seemed to be hieroglyphics and a tense feeling in the air that time was running out.

“Orlando.” Jonty came over to where his friend sat, as elbow-deep in scrawls and scribbles as any of them were at this point. “Have you noticed anything odd about this letter?”

“What, apart from the fact that it’s totally indecipherable?”

As Orlando smiled, Jonty noticed how tired he suddenly looked. He wasn’t sure whether it was the aftereffects of the amorous night before, the shock of finding a whole stack of memories returning, or the intense desire to get this last piece of

code cracked before they departed bright and early on the morrow. Back to Cambridge, to admit defeat and yield the day to Owens.

Jonty shook his head, not unkindly. "There are no *j*'s."

"Yes, we know that. It could make it likely to be Playfair. Only we've been days trying to find the code word, working back and forth and we've not had a sniff of luck."

"There are no *v*'s either."

"What?"

"No *v*'s, not one of them. I got bored trying to think of some outlandish word to plug in and try out so I began to do daft things."

"Like what?"

"Well I was counting the number of each letter. I drew a blank for *j* as I guessed I would, but I didn't expect to do the same for *v*." The other two men had put down their work and were listening intently. "Could *v* double up with another letter, like *w* or *u*? Would that work?"

"No," Ralph chipped in immediately. "You need twenty five letters for a five-by-five grid and assuming that *i* and *j* have already doubled, then you've only got twenty-four."

"Does it have to be a five-by-five grid?" Richard Stewart hovered like a particularly hungry kestrel who thinks he's spotted a mouse among the barley and seeks confirmation.

"For Playfair, yes." Orlando seemed more excited than Jonty had ever seen him, out of a bed, that was. "But it doesn't have to be Playfair. A four-by-six grid would work as well." He picked up yet another sheet of paper. "Look." He began to set out an example of how such a thing might be done.

"It would as well." Mr. Stewart slapped his son's back. "Well it seems like we need to get back to the key words again."

A double groan made all the men turn around. Mrs. Stewart and her daughter, hopeful that their menfolk had given up on

these codes forever, had arrived bearing a bottle of champagne. At the merest mention of key words they turned tail, taking the bottle off somewhere they could be alone and quiet with it. Jonty swore afterwards that the words *papers*, *stick* and *backside* had been distinctly audible from some female voice in the corridor.

It was Orlando who solved it, although not without a little cheating. He'd almost given up when he observed Ralph thrashing out a grid with the code word Johan Breton. The name seemed so apt it amazed him that it didn't work, until he purloined the idea and turned the grid over, six-by-four rather than four-by-six. The first few intelligible words emerged within minutes. "I've done it," he said, with surprising calm given how worked up they all were.

The effect on the rest of the room couldn't have been more devastating had he shouted at the top of his voice.

Jonty looked up, a glorious smile spreading over his face, making him resemble one of the ecstatic cherubs that were to be found adorning the more fanciful parts of the local church. "You're a seven days' wonder, Orlando, truly. And does it tell us all?"

"Seems like it." He felt rather drawn and nervous, as he always did at the end of a case when only the last few threads were left to be drawn together.

"Well, don't keep us in suspense. People have wanted to know the truth for years. Read it out, man." It was all Mr. Stewart could do to stop himself reaching over and tearing the paper from Orlando's hands.

Orlando began to read, slowly and carefully, letting the import of each sentence sink in before he went on to the next. The letter spoke of betrayal, jealousy and anger; of the sole person one relied on letting one down. The picture became clearer as the listeners heard the confession about what had transpired. "*Out of the blue he alone prov'd to be a worthy helper. Man is fickle,*

Charlie Cochrane

*more so even than woman. Except my lady, she has always been constant, despite the picture she presents to the world. I'll cleave to her always, even if she seems to be another's. But he cannot have her now."*

Jonty took a sharp intake of breath at this. He'd started to have an inkling of the true tale as soon as this last letter was being read and the next line corroborated it.

*"The details changed; yet the outcome has remain'd. My steps were ordained, as I have always sworn they were. Charles Shaa is now dead and I must plot my new course."*

There was more, of course, enough to answer most of their questions, and when Orlando finished reading the four men sat quietly, taking in all that they'd heard. "I think it's just about conclusive, assuming the Woodville Ward wrote this note—and it seems to be in his hand—that we have a solution."

Jonty concurred. "Wraps things up nicely, gentlemen. We're clear now whodunit and whoitwasdunto." He smiled at his father.

Ralph resembled a cat that had been locked in the dairy. "And while we're still short of establishing the whereabouts of two of the four, we can conclusively identify the body in the well."

"Indeed." Orlando was tired but content. "And we know where Charles Shaa is, don't we?"

## Chapter Thirteen

“Orlando, there are a few things I never returned to you.”

They were back in Cambridge, both looking forward to the prospect of returning to work, the anticipation of which no amount of potential encounters with dunderheads could spoil. They’d been taking breakfast up in Jonty’s set when he produced a wooden box, which turned out to be an old sea chest that one of his great-great-great uncles had used when he was a midshipman. This splendid object now served a multitude of storage uses under Jonty’s bed. Inside was an Aladdin’s cave of delights, all carefully wrapped in tissue or silk.

“I took some of these from your room that evening after you’d taken your tumble. Didn’t want to risk you finding them just out of the blue.”

Orlando remembered with a shiver just what had happened when he’d been given an inkling about the exact state of their prior relationship. He was grateful, although not surprised, that Jonty had the wit and sensitivity to have taken away some of the more obvious clues. “Thank you,” he said simply, fingering through the eclectic collection.

There were a surprising number of notes and letters, for almost all of which he recalled the provenance—the letter from Helena which had come to Jersey, several notes from Jonty, including the scrap of paper that just said *Idiot XXX*, although one item puzzled him. “I don’t remember this.” He held up a scrap of paper that just said *Tell him*.

“Ah,” said Jonty, “you won’t remember that. It’s from Mama to me. She slipped it into my hand that day she came to lunch, just after your memory loss. She was insistent that I let you know that we’d been more than friends—it was one of the things that prompted me into such precipitate action regarding, well, *certain revelations*. Thought I’d made a pig’s ear of it, but it turned out all right in the end.” He looked up at his lover. “Didn’t it?”

“*All right* is the understatement of the year.” Orlando smiled and organised his treasures into their proper places, all now remembered. He’d already found the spare key to Jonty’s room and re-affixed it to his own key ring, then came at last to a handsome photograph in a silver frame. It was of the pair of them, taken in a studio in London, at Easter, 1906. It was nothing incriminating to look at from the front, but on the back it bore a message of such an unambiguous nature that no one could have read it and been in any doubt that Jonty adored his friend. “I wondered where that had got to, when I went into my set last evening. Thought I’d mislaid it. It’ll go straight back on the wall.”

“Don’t you like the rugger team I replaced it with?” Jonty grinned.

“Do you know, I suspected all along that something was wrong. The mark on the wall behind that other picture made it plain that a different one had hung there before.”

Jonty ruffled his lover’s curls. “Such a genius for detection...”

Orlando had a sudden recollection. “Did you read any of those letters—the ones from your mother to me, I mean?”

“Of course I didn’t. I just assumed that they were all potentially explosive, Mama being so fond of you and liable to get a bit maudlin when she writes.” He raised an eyebrow, assumed his best inquisitor’s face and continued, “What did those letters contain that you’re so eager for me not to see?”

Orlando swallowed hard. “If I told you, your dear mama would spifflicate me. Suffice to say it shows credit only to yourself and her but must remain a secret.” He smiled with self-satisfaction. “Nice to have things I know and you don’t, for once, after the best part of two months always being the one who knew nothing.”

“We’ve found out an awful lot these last few weeks, haven’t we? Not just about ourselves.” Jonty held up the Woodville Ward papers. “Today’s the day we make it all official.”

“How much of a surprise do you think it will prove in the end? Do you think the Master had any idea?”

“Not in the least, nor his sister—for once her heightened perceptions won’t have got to the crux of things. It’ll be a treat to see their faces.”

Orlando smiled. “It will indeed. Another treat to round off the holidays.”



The little graveyard at Swavesey was cold but not unpleasant. The slush had completely melted away, leaving no indication except the bent and snapped branches that there had been three feet of snow just a week or so before. The party stood around the small monument that marked the final resting place of *Johan Breton, merchant, and his beloved wife*, a Georgian Breton’s inscription replacing the now much-eroded original.

Jonty’s cheeks glowed in the cold air, but not unhealthily; Orlando was keeping a close eye on him to ensure that all traces of illness had finally gone. Dr. Peters wore a thick fur-lined coat and his sister one that bore its fur on the outside. All of them were hatted and gloved, like any sensible soul should be for an East Anglian winter.

“Dr. Coppersmith,” the Master began, “you promised us if we came here we would be given the solution, as you gentlemen

understand it, to the Woodville Ward's disappearance. I don't see any evidence of it in a draughty burial ground."

Jonty pointed to the monument. "It's under your feet, sir. Or rather, he is. The Woodville Ward."

Ariadne Peters caught the drift first. "He's buried here? In another man's grave?"

"Indeed." Orlando touched the memorial, the words first written there now illegible. "Johan Breton doesn't lie here with his wife; Charles Shaa does."

"Then who was down that well? And what becomes of all those high-blown theories?" The icy breath reflected the frostiness of the words the Master spoke.

"They disappear like so much smoke in the wind. Breton was down the well and Shaa put him there, with the aid, we believe, of a man called Stephen who also subsequently vanished. I would lay good money that he's in some other cistern awaiting discovery."

"That's the last thing I would have believed." Peters looked from one man to the other. "You have proof?"

"Some. Perhaps we could repair to the local hostelry and explore it." Jonty airily waved towards the little pub along the lane. After one last long look at the grave, the party made its way there, ordered hot food and hotter drinks, then found a large table near the fire.

"The translations are all made and have each been checked by Dr. Stewart's brother-in-law." Orlando had brought the documents with him in a neat cardboard file, tied up with ribbon. He offered to bring them out at intervals to illustrate their points, although Dr. Peters insisted that no such verification was needed. If Coppersmith said something, he no doubt had the evidence to back it up. "It's a story of paranoia to begin with."

Jonty took up the tale. "Shaa had become convinced that he was being spied upon, possibly by a man called Stephen who

worked at Elizabeth Hall. It turns out that he was correct, but not in his attribution of the culprit—a student called Isaac Gaveson, at least we think he was a fellow student, was watching him on behalf of the king.”

“Not King Richard’s followers?” Ariadne Peters was determined to have her idol’s name cleared once and for all.

“No,” Orlando assured her, “not Richard, but his great rival. What the motive could be would be a matter of speculation at this point and therefore out of our remit.”

Peters smiled ruefully, his still-handsome face softening and mellowing. Plenty a female head turned when the Master of Bride’s was in high humour and the mellow light from the fire enhanced his fine profile. “So we may have solved one riddle but we’ll have given those who speculate another one or two to dabble in.”

“Indeed, sir.” Jonty smiled as the hot toddies arrived. There was a tale to tell and they required something to help them through the tribulation. “Shaa had hatched a plan to rid himself both of Elizabeth Hall and his nemesis at the same time. He would kill Gaveson and put his body down the disused well. He’d drape it in his own jewellery and break its arm—with Breton’s help—ensuring that if the body was found it would be assumed to be Shaa. That would give him time to escape and begin a new life at sea, alongside his devoted friend Johan Breton.”

“And did he not care for the tears of his patroness? Could he have been so callous as to not have left her a word?” The Master was as fierce in his affection for Elizabeth as Richard Stewart had proved to be.

“Our impression is that the Woodville Ward, fond as he was of women, had little time for the queen. We did think at one point that he referred to her as *my lady* in his letters but our opinion on that has changed.” The Master looked puzzled, but Jonty didn’t see fit to enlighten him yet.

“Some of the key questions we needed to answer were why these letters had been coded, why they had been kept, how ones addressed to Breton had appeared among them.” Orlando finished his toddy, putting down the glass on the oaken table with theatrical emphasis. “We believe, based on what Shaa himself wrote, that he wanted someone in the future to know what had befallen him.”

“Befallen *him*?” Miss Peters seemed shocked. “He was a cold-blooded murderer, Dr. Coppersmith, what did he feel had caused him trouble?”

“He felt he was the victim all through. Unable to do what his heart desired, being spied and reported on, feeling as if his steps were being planned outside of his accord. He saw his plan to murder Gaveson as a means of escape and even then he was cheated. Gaveson had been given warning of what was afoot and fled.”

“Then who was in the well?”

“We believe it’s the same man who warned Gaveson, the one who’s name Shaa took, Johan Breton himself.” Jonty sighed. He’d grown attached to this nebulous figure and was saddened at what had befallen him, the real victim in this tragedy. He motioned for another round of drinks. “Apparently Breton had cold feet and made sure that Gaveson had plenty of notice of the threat to his life. He and Shaa had a row over it and came to blows. Breton was loathe to fight his friend, given that the man was himself possessed of a broken arm, and no doubt held off. Shaa knocked him out—I guess that no skull bones were broken in that process so the injury didn’t show up later—and while Breton was unconscious, our dear Woodville Ward smothered him.”

“And how did he get the body in the well?” Peters, like his sister, asked few questions, but each hit at a key point.

“Stephen helped him. We know all this because Shaa left a final—well, not quite final—letter that detailed much of it.” Orlando tapped the file. “He’d wanted to pass Gaveson’s body off as his own, then he’d decided on Stephen, but when Breton wouldn’t kill him either and subsequently confessed to alerting the spy, Shaa snapped.”

“This Stephen. What happened to him?”

“Disappeared. We suspect he went with Shaa to Lowestoft, perhaps as his servant, and probably took a tumble overboard at the dark of the moon. Shaa assumed Johan Breton’s identity lock, stock and barrel. He was even clever enough to write a letter, ostensibly from Breton to himself, asking why Shaa hadn’t turned up to board ship.”

The Master closed the tips of his fingers together, almost as if he was in prayer. “That would explain why the cache of documents included those addressed to Breton. If Shaa took over his life, then he’d have had access to anything Johan had kept. When he returned from sea and saw that his ruse had succeeded, he could have assembled whatever he wanted to leave for posterity and have the stuff hidden away, perhaps when the lodge was altered.”

Miss Peters frowned. “I can’t help feeling that there’s something badly amiss here. Let’s assume that the Woodville Ward and his friend were broadly similar in age and build. That would account for him being a possible match once the body was found, and Shaa was very lucky that event didn’t occur for such a long time. Let us also assume that the master of the ship he sailed in didn’t realise he’d been duped, perhaps he had not met the men, or only one of them. But surely he couldn’t have taken in Breton’s sweetheart or her father? Even after ten years away, they must have noticed?”

“We both have something to say on that score and I’ll take the father. We know very little about Mr. Paget except for the

story about not wanting his daughter to marry a poor suitor. We don't know whether he had a physical reason for not recognising Shaa—he may have had poor sight, he might have had a poor memory. Whatever it was, his daughter's claim that this was Breton himself, now returned from sea with a sackful of money, should have settled the matter. We might also infer that his newfound wealth came from something bordering on piracy, or from speculation using the resources that Shaa possessed. As to identity, no man would expect his daughter to lie, would he?" Orlando tried to give the impression that he knew all about men and their daughters.

"As for Mistress Paget," Stewart took up the tale, "I suspect that Shaa had his eye on her for a long time. There was something in one of the first letters which Orlando deciphered that said *Were I not to survive this winter, I would have my lady know the troubles I have borne*. We assumed, as anyone would have, that his lady was Elizabeth of York but from what he said about the queen in his later missives, we presume that he didn't mean her. I would claim that he meant the local girl, who now lies at his side."

Ariadne Peters was still not satisfied. "Dr. Coppersmith, Dr. Stewart, you've disappointed me. You promised that all your theorising would be based on facts, as hard evidence as you could get at this remove. And so your explanation started but this last part has been full of words like *assume, infer, claim*. Historians' terms." She was flushed, although whether from her second hot toddy or her annoyance at a lack of an adequate resolution none of those present were sure.

"My dear." Her brother patted her arm. "You're being rather unfair."

"No," said Orlando, smiling enigmatically, "Miss Peters is, as always, absolutely right. While we have Shaa's testimony to the murder, we have no definitive proof that what we'd speculated

about the Pagets was correct. Or I should say we hadn't, until yesterday, when we came across a real jewel of a find."

Jonty reached into his pocket for a stiff little envelope, which he opened with great care. "I brought this from home—father accumulated all sorts of old tat when he was an undergraduate. It's a book about various families from Swavesey and speaks with reverence about the patriarch of the Bretons, one Johan, the first of his family to make money or achieve prestige. It states clearly enough that he was said to have been troubled with pain in his arm all his life, *from a break he suffered weeks before he put to sea, but which he struggled with regardless, determined to pull his weight aboard ship*. I suspect that last bit is rather over-egging the pudding, although the point about the arm is significant."

"I'll concede that." Miss Peters' face had lost its rosy hue and was returning to its normal freckled-even-in-winter appearance. Soup had arrived, steaming and aromatic, guaranteed to help improve everyone's temper.

"There's more, you know." Orlando carefully opened the little tome, revealing a small fragment of parchment. "It's rather stupid. We set out to solve this case on logic alone—analysis of evidence, breaking of codes, refusing to enter into idle speculation. And we ended up with the certainty of our case relying on something entirely serendipitous." He indicated the scrap of vellum. "Would you like to read it?"

Ariadne Peters chuckled. "I've not brought my spectacles, so all I'll see are blurs and squiggles. Perhaps Lemuel will oblige?"

The Master took the book, noted its thick padded covers and made sure not to actually touch its precious content. "It's a family tree. Where did it come from?"

"The inside of the cover had a few frayed stitches which had worked even looser on the journey back here, and we noticed this paper had been folded and put inside the lining and then, I guess,

*Charlie Cochrane*

sewn back up again. We rang Papa this morning and he could only say that he was unaware of it. He'd not noticed anything in all the years he'd had it, although I suspect he'd not looked at the book since he was up at Bride's."

Miss Peters was bouncing with excitement. "Whose family tree? Tell all now."

"Johan Breton and his issue's." Dr. Peters read on slowly. "It says at the top Johan Breton married Eleanor Paget in 1508 and that they had five children, fifteen, I think, grandchildren and—" he began to count, "—twenty seven, no tw—"

"Stop teasing. None of that is significant—tell me what is."

"Under Eleanor Paget it says *my mother* and under Johan Breton it says in very small letters, you'd need a microscope to see them, dear, *the Woodville Ward*."



"Dr. Stewart, do you have a moment?" Miss Peters was looking flushed from the cold, despite her thick furs. Winter was returning with a vengeance and this day was degrees colder than the one two days back when they had stood at a draughty graveside. Bride's college might have thick walls, but the wind seemed to be able to cut straight through them.

"I do indeed, several should you need them."

"Perhaps you would come and take a cup of tea in the lodge?"

They walked across the court and through the huge oaken door that separated the sanctum of the Master of St. Bride's from the hoi polloi. The housekeeper produced, at seemingly a moment's notice, a steaming pot, which implied that the meeting hadn't been as spontaneous as Jonty's hostess was trying to suggest.

"Dr. Stewart, I won't mince my words. I've seen the enormous affection you and Dr. Coppersmith have for each other

and I believe it's more than just friendship. If I've got this wrong, then please tell me now and I won't continue. But let me first assure you that I'm not going to make any judgements upon you. I wish everyone to find the sort of love I believe you've attained with our mathematical genius, although I suspect I've missed *my* chance on that front." She smiled kindly and offered a stunned Jonty a slice of Battenburg cake. "Time was a young sailor caught my eye, although he died weathering the Lizard in a gale and I've not been inclined to give my heart again."

"Thank you." Jonty took the sweetmeat with eagerness, he being particularly fond of marzipan and because taking a bite would give him a moment to think. How many more revelations were there to be? "I won't lie to you, Miss Peters. We are much closer than the normal bounds of propriety should allow and I've long suspected that you knew this already." He grinned. "Do you know I said as much to Orlando the day he took his tumble down the stairs? It rather shocked him."

"I hope it wasn't the cause of his fall?"

"No, indeed, be assured of that. Does your brother know?"

Ariadne laughed her earthy, masculine laugh. "Lemuel regards your friendship as a model of manly comradeship. I suspect that you'd have to molest Dr. Coppersmith in broad daylight to penetrate his consciousness on that point."

"That gives me great relief—I wouldn't want to think we were *that* obvious. Was there something you wished to raise, apart from just confirming my suspicions?"

"I wanted to offer some advice, if that wouldn't be inappropriate, and my particular thanks, something I couldn't do with Lemuel present."

"My mother gives me guidance endlessly and I'm always happy to receive some more." Jonty was curious as to just what this unusual woman would have to say. He hoped she wasn't going to advise that he should always wear his vest.

“You should get a house, you and Dr. Coppersmith, somewhere out of the college environs where you can have some privacy. I could even find you a sympathetic housekeeper. Oh, have you scalded yourself?”

“No, nothing crucial affected.” Jonty managed a rather forced grin and mopped at his trousers, which were awash with tea. “It was just such a shock. That’s exactly what I suggested to Dr. Coppersmith the day he came a cropper. Perhaps the shock of the proposition was what made him fall.”

Miss Peters resisted all temptation to help Dr. Stewart with the swabbing. “And does the possibility remain a viable one? There are plenty of properties which will come available over the next few months, I’m sure.”

“I’ve not discussed it with him again just yet. I felt we needed to regain our equilibrium first. Needed an even keel.”

“Very wise. He’s always been a delicate flower, our Dr. C, requiring gentle nurturing.” She smiled maternally, re-filling her guest’s cup. “You might have to tackle this rather gently, too. I wanted to offer my gratitude for having solved the case before *he* got a chance to attempt it. Not that *he* would have been so gifted as to have managed it, not without pretending he’d solved the codes and producing all sorts of rubbish.”

“Miss Peters.” Jonty laid his hand on his hostess’s arm, steadying its shaking. “Whatever is the matter?”

“Promise me you’ll never tell my brother, but I have more to hold against that ogre Owens than theft or plagiarism or even his being a historian. He—” Miss Peters blushed fiercely, “—tried to take advantage of me one evening out in the Fellows’ Garden.”

“The swine.” Jonty meant it. If Miss Peters wanted to give her heart to a one-legged sailor or whoever the mysterious lad was she’d fallen for, that was her business, but unwanted advances were another matter altogether. “What did you do?”

“I boxed his ears. And when that didn’t cool his ardour I—I hardly like to say—I kicked him.”

“Where?”

“In between those two little forsythia bushes. I rather suspect it was a contributory factor to his leaving.” Miss Peters began to laugh, her deep manly laugh bubbling up and driving away her distress.

“Beatrice. Rosalind. Fair Rosaline. You’re a match for any of them.” Jonty rose, gave his hostess a hearty kiss on the cheek. “If you suggest a cottage, I’d better take heed.”

“Well, as and when you’re ready to proceed, don’t forget my offer of help will stand open. As long as you don’t think that I’m being a busybody.” Miss Peters returned the kiss.

“I’d never think that.”

“In which case there’s no more to be said. Will you take some more cake?”



“Dr. Stewart. Do you have a moment?” Orlando’s formal tones, always adopted when they were out in the college together, rang across the court.

“Of course, but not for cake and tea. I’m rather replete on that front.”

“A small sherry could be managed, I suppose?” Orlando grinned.

“There’s always room for one of those.” They wandered over to his set, Jonty being quickly settled into a chair, sherry glass in hand.

“I’ve been thinking about that house up the Madingley Road.” Orlando stopped, shook his head. “Now what did you want to go and do that for? Your trousers already look like they’ve had a good soaking. What have you been up to?”

“Only taking tea with Miss Peters and she gave me just the sort of shock that you did. I spilled the best part of a cup in my lap, although thank goodness nothing vital was affected. Haven’t had a chance to change and now my nethers have received a libation of Amontillado.”

“Shall I mop them better?”

“Think you’ve got your wires crossed there, Orlando. Mop them dry or kiss them better? Which did you mean?” Jonty grinned like an imp, a grin which implied that if he didn’t have time for more cake, he had time to ‘do his duty’.

Orlando ignored the look, for the moment. “What could Miss Peters have said that was so shocking it made you do that?”

“Talked about us getting a house, of course. See, it’s made you spill your sherry, too. Not just that, Orlando, she made an offer to find us a housekeeper who’d be the model of discretion.”

Orlando groaned. “Are we that obvious? Does the whole SCR know?”

“Not according to our friend Ariadne. The last thing she said was to reassure me that she’s probably the only person in Bride’s aware that we are more than friends. And I think she’s right, it would probably take either a woman or someone of similar inclination to ourselves to read anything into our relationship. So, as my old nanny used to say, dinna fash yoursel.” They sat in silence for a long moment. “What made you think of this house, now?”

“I’ve been reflecting on the time in Sussex. The bliss of the double bed.”

“Oh, so a carnal motive.” Jonty grinned.

“Not at all, merely a logistical one.” Orlando began a mumbled explanation.

“Speak up, Orlando.”

“That single bed of mine seems far too large and empty when I’m on my own, yet when you’re in it I hardly have any

room to turn over.” He picked miniscule flecks of fluff from his trousers.

Jonty resisted all the temptation he felt to make rude remarks about turning over in bed as he could recognise that his lover was in deadly earnest and was making a heartfelt plea the only way he knew how, relying on some strange variety of logic. “I’ll make enquiries tomorrow. The sooner we can buy somewhere the better, eh?”

Orlando nodded and drew him into his arms, letting him bury his little snubbed nose on his shoulder. He felt Jonty’s hands worm themselves under his jacket, caress the silk at the back of his waistcoat, insinuate themselves under there too and begin to wriggle across the cloth of his shirt. Perhaps it was the prelude to something much nicer than sherry.

There was a sudden sharp snap of elastic springing back into place.

“Ow!”

Jonty gave a huge, deeply satisfied sigh. “I do love it when you wear braces, Orlando.”

## About the Author

Charlie Cochrane's ideal day would be a morning walking along a beach, an afternoon spent watching rugby, and a church service in the evening, with her husband and daughters tagging along, naturally. She loves reading, theatre, good food and watching sport, especially rugby. She started writing relatively late in life but draws on all the experiences she's hoarded up to try to give a depth and richness to her stories.

To learn more about Charlie Cochrane, please visit her website [www.charliecochrane.co.uk](http://www.charliecochrane.co.uk). Send an email to Charlie at [cochrane.charlie2@googlemail.com](mailto:cochrane.charlie2@googlemail.com) or join in the fun with other readers and writers of gay historical romance at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/SpeakItsName>.

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*Love might cast out fear, if only Orlando would let it*

## Lessons in Desire

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*A Cambridge Fellows Mystery book*

After solving a series of college murders, Jonty Stewart needs a break. A holiday on the beautiful Channel Island of Jersey seems ideal, if only he can persuade Orlando Coppersmith to leave the security of St Bride's college and come with him.

Orlando is a quiet man who prefers academic life to venturing out into the world. Within the confines of their rooms at the university, it's easy to hide the fact that he and Jonty are far more than friends. But the desire to spend more time alone with the man he loves is an impossible lure to resist.

When a brutal murder occurs at the hotel where they're staying, the two young men are once more drawn into an investigation. The race to catch the killer gets complicated by the victim's son, Ainslie, who seems to find Orlando too attractive to resist. Can Jonty and Orlando keep Ainslie at bay, keep their affair clandestine, and solve the crime?

*Warning: Contains sensual m/m lovemaking and handsome young men in (and out of) Edwardian bathing costumes.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Lessons in Desire:*

"Do you still want *Jerusalem* at your funeral, Dr. Coppersmith?" Jonty began to gently rub his friend's back as the poor man clung to the ship's rail, green to the gills and desperately trying to fathom out whether he would feel better if he were sick again or not.

“I no longer care, Dr. Stewart. I think that I would prefer to die with the minimum of fuss, plus the maximum of expediency. I have enjoyed these last nine months, though I’m greatly afraid that I won’t survive the journey.” Orlando finished his speech with dignity, then sped off to the toilet to vomit again.

Jonty smiled sympathetically. He’d admitted he felt a bit guilty about bringing his friend on this trip, but how was he to have any idea that Coppersmith would suffer quite so much from sea-sickness? Orlando hadn’t even known it himself, having been on nothing more adventurous than the paddle steamer out of Ramsgate. There were at least two hours of the voyage left before they could feel decent, solid ground under their feet again. Then there was the awful prospect of having to do the journey all over again, back to Southampton, in a fortnight’s time.

The nightmare of the crossing eventually ended, all the passengers reaching terra firma with much thanks. Coppersmith felt tempted to kneel down and kiss the very solid earth beneath his feet at the quay. Plenty of carriages were waiting for custom, so they were soon riding around the wide bay to St. Aubin’s, able at last to admire the innocuous looking waters which had managed to wreak such havoc on a delicate digestive tract.

Orlando felt recovered enough to smile when he saw their hotel. It was everything that the rather overblown brochure had promised and more besides. Their bags were whisked away with just the right amount of efficient deference, the reception clerk was welcoming without being unctuous. Even the suite, once Coppersmith was entirely convinced that it was quite normal for friends of the same sex to take sets of rooms together, was pronounced to be above reproach.

They hadn’t long begun to unpack before Stewart suggested that it was time to find a small sherry or some such before dinner. He assured his friend it would be entirely the right medicine to enable Coppersmith to recover his appetite so that he could tackle

at least some of the delights that they'd spied on the hotel menu. Orlando was rather affronted, wanting everything to have found its proper place before they ventured out, but Jonty insisted, so colors were struck. Coppersmith changed into his dinner jacket, newly purchased on Stewart's orders, as the old one looked more suited to the stalls at the music hall. Properly attired, they went down to the bar.

The dining room was full, mainly married couples of various ages, from the bashful newlyweds who sat in the corner blushing at every remark that was made to them, to the elderly couple—all wrinkles and bright smiles—who sat at a table directly opposite the two Cambridge fellows. They had taken a great shine to the two young men as they'd chatted with them over pre-dinner drinks, insisting that they reminded them of their sons at a similar age. They seemed greatly impressed with Stewart's smile, his obvious good breeding and Coppersmith's gravity, beautiful manners. They made up a four for bridge in the sun lounge after dinner, proving excellent company, the lady in particular having an impish sense of humor. She chatted away to Jonty, the pair of them giggling like two schoolboys, despite her being old enough, just, to be his grandmother.

There were some families at dinner; two had brought their grown up daughters with them. Both girls were exceedingly plain and seemed rather smitten with the two young men, if blushes or girlish sighs were anything to go by. The only other unmarried couple present was a man perhaps three or four years older than Stewart, accompanied by what could only have been his father, given the strong family resemblance. The younger was a handsome chap whose dark curly hair framed deep blue eyes. Not that the two fellows of St. Bride's had eyes for anyone else, but one couldn't help noticing these things. They also couldn't help noticing the palpable tension that existed between the two men, shown in the strained politeness they showed to each other, the

inability to keep eye contact between them. They had formed their own bridge four with another married couple, although they were obviously not having half the enjoyment that Coppersmith and his friend were.

Jonty was fascinated. He kept a surreptitious eye on them all evening, then bent Orlando's ear, back in their suite, over what might be going on.

"That young man's not happy to be here, Orlando. I think his father has made him come, while he'd rather be at home with his sweetheart, not entertaining a surly old curmudgeon." He turned to face the surly young curmudgeon who was struggling to arrange, into some sort of acceptable order, the mass of items that Stewart had strewn everywhere in an attempt to unpack.

"Nothing to do with us, Jonty." Coppersmith picked up the tie he'd worn for the journey, finding somewhere to put it carefully away.

"Aren't you even a little bit curious? This is such an opportunity of meeting new people, the sort of folk we might never meet at college. Like that delightful old couple; she certainly had the measure even of you at cards, Dr. Coppersmith." Stewart yawned, stretching like a great ginger cat. "This is going to be such a delightful holiday. The hotel is perfect, the food is excellent, I have great hopes for the company and you look less green than you did this morning. Such a lovely color in your cheeks now." He drew his hand down his lover's face, across his lips. It was the first time they'd touched with any degree of intimacy since they'd left St. Bride's. The caress made Orlando shudder afresh, as if they were touching for the first time. "We may have two bedrooms, Dr. Coppersmith, but do we really need to use them both? It'd be easy enough to slip across before the early morning tea arrives, if we set your alarm clock."

Orlando looked up, determined to refuse. He was still feeling exceedingly skittish about staying in a suite of rooms with his

lover. Sharing a bed was beyond any imagining although, ironically, the item in question was a glorious double bed such as he'd dreamed, on many an occasion, of sleeping with Stewart in. "I'm not sure that I feel sufficiently recovered from the journey to want to do anything *except* sleep, Jonty." He studied his hands, awkwardly.

"That would be fine, Orlando. I'm as happy to simply slumber next to you as anything else. There are plenty of other days for romance; we could just be fond friends tonight, or pretend to be that old couple we played cards with. Still very much in love yet beyond the thralls of passion." Jonty gently touched his friend's hand.

Coppersmith felt as if a spider was crawling down the back of his neck, and his discomfiture must have been plain. "What if we slept apart, just for tonight?" They had reached the crux of why Orlando had been so keen not to come on holiday. He was frightened of taking their relationship outside the college walls, displaying it to the world. Within the ivy clad, male dominated locality of St. Bride's, it had been easy to maintain a friendship which was more than close without raising a suspicious eyebrow. He'd spent very little time with Jonty out of Cambridge, apart from a visit or two to London, where they'd stayed in the relatively safe environs of the Stewart family home. To be with the man in a strange place was to put himself at risk of making a demonstration of his affection by an unguarded look or touch. Any footman could walk through the streets of town in his bowler-hatted Sunday best, hand in hand with a parlor maid. A pair of dons could never be allowed such freedom. Not in Cambridge and certainly not on Jersey.

Stewart slammed down the toothbrush he'd been unpacking. "Oh, you can go to sleep in the bath if you want to! I haven't the heart to put up with this nonsense. I'm going to sleep in my own bed, in my own soft pyjamas, with my own book. If you change

your mind and decide to join me, make sure you knock, because I might just have found other company.” He spun on his heels, entering his bedroom with a slam of the door that caused the windows to shake.

Orlando contemplated opening the door again to give his friend a piece of his mind, but didn't want to end up in a full blown row in a public building. He also contemplated going in and giving Stewart the most comprehensive kissing he'd ever received. That was decided against, as it was probably exactly what the little swine wanted, so must be avoided at all costs. Even at the cost of a miserable night alone. Eventually, after tidying everything to his own immaculate standards, he trudged his weary way into his bedroom and readied himself for sleep.

## Eye of the Storm

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It's the Winter of 1802 and the long war between England and France has entered a fragile truce. But the lives of Commander William Marshall and Lieutenant David Archer, have become more complicated than ever.

As a Commander, Will is accustomed to making tough decisions. Can he give an order that will surely put his Davy in harm's way? He almost lost his lover to a bullet once before and he fears losing him now, yet duty calls.

Davy is tormented by doubt. Will walked away before, trying to end their relationship for Davy's own safety. Can he trust Will again—not only to stay with him, but to believe that their love is worth the risks?

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Eye of the Storm:*

“If you could come below, sir?” Davy asked blandly.

Marshall frowned. “Can it wait until the change of watch?”

His lover raised an eyebrow. “Captain Marshall, do you intend to rest at the end of this watch?”

He sighed. “Um...”

“My point precisely. Will, you can't avoid me indefinitely, this vessel's not big enough. I don't understand what it is that's bothering you. Was it something I said?”

“Of course not.”

“What have I done, then?”

“Nothing!”

“All right.” Davy's blue eyes were inscrutable as the sea. “There's nothing wrong, I've given no offense, but you haven't

been coming into the cabin until long after I'm asleep, and you're up and gone before I wake. What am I to think?"

Marshall glanced around anxiously.

"There's no one in earshot, Will, you can trust me for that!"

He didn't know what to say. "I've had things on my mind..." Which was an understatement. All his resolution had deserted him after their escape; every time he had meant to approach Davy with a view to making love, he had been distracted by one thing or another, or one of the crew required his attention. Was he losing his nerve?"

"Come below. Please?"

He sighed again. "Very well." He called to Barrow, gave him the helm, and followed Davy below to their shared cabin.

He was half-expecting to be pounced upon, was actually hoping for it; instead, Davy slipped the door-latch shut and faced him, his eyes troubled. "Will, what is wrong?"

"There's nothing wrong."

"I see." He ran a hand through his short, thick cap of hair. "No, I don't see. It's been over a month since you've shown any interest in what used to be a favorite activity; I thought there must be a reason. If I've done nothing, and nothing else is wrong..." He bit his lip, an old nervous habit that told Marshall the airy tone was a sham, and went on, "Shall I assume you've just lost interest? Should I—" He turned away, tugging at the line that held his cot suspended on his side of the tiny cabin they shared. "Would you prefer that I leave the Mermaid when we return to Portsmouth?"

The question struck Marshall like a blow. "What? No! Of course not!"

"Then, for God's sake, Will, talk to me!" His voice was low, but all the more intense for that. "I received news in the last mail-packet, when we turned the French delegation over to Sir Percy.

Good news, I thought, but until I know your mind on this I'm no longer certain."

"What news?"

Davy shook his head. "Not until you tell me this: is it your wish that I stay with you when you return to regular duty in the Navy?"

He opened his mouth to say "Of course," and a hammer-blow of memory stopped him, the horror of seeing Davy carried belowdecks with a spreading red stain on his white waistcoat, the week of dread as they sailed back to Kingston, and the double loss—first when he thought Davy had died, and then again after he'd healed, but duty took Marshall back to sea alone.

"How do you keep away the fear?"

Will had always been aware of his own mortality, but the constant expectation of his own death had allowed him to appear fearless. This, though—the razor-sharp knowledge that Davy might die—somehow that was even more frightening. Dying, especially a quick death, held little terror compared to the pain of going on alone.

Davy's question had no simple answer. And even though Marshall was Captain of the Mermaid, that was one decision he had no right to make unilaterally. He hated the thought of having to choose. "Do you want to stay?"

In answer, Davy put a hand on either side of his face and pulled him into a kiss. Marshall was so cold from his long day on deck that his body was drawn to the warmth as much as anything. The closeness, the taste of Davy's mouth, woke a longing that he thought he had mastered, and he took his lover into his arms. *A month! Had it really been that long?*

When they stopped for breath, Davy said, "In case you didn't understand, that was 'yes.'" He extricated himself from the embrace, dropped into a careless slouch on the storage locker that served as a bench along the stern. It was a wanton slouch; it was a

posture that said, *Come alongside, I'm prepared to be boarded.*  
“But only if I'm wanted.”

*Orlando didn't think he had a heart, until he lost it*

## Lessons in Love

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*A Cambridge Fellows Mystery book*

*St. Bride's College, Cambridge, England, 1905*

Jonty Stewart is handsome and outgoing with blood as blue as his eyes. When he takes up a teaching post at the college where he studied, he acts as a catalyst for change within the archaic institution. He also has a catalytic effect on Orlando Coppersmith.

Orlando, a brilliant, introverted mathematician with little experience of life outside the college walls, strikes up an alliance with the dynamic Jonty and soon finds himself having feelings he's never experienced before. Before long their friendship blossoms into more than either man had hoped and they enter into a clandestine relationship.

Their romance is complicated when a series of murders is discovered within St. Bride's. All of the victims have one thing in common, a penchant for men. While acting as the eyes and ears for the police, a mixture of logic and luck leads them to a confrontation with the murderer...can they survive it?

*Warning: Contains sensual m/m lovemaking and men in punts*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Lessons in Love:*

Jonty didn't see Orlando again until they took sherry together in the Senior Common Room before dinner. The room was abuzz with talk—despite the Master's best efforts, the details of the circumstances concerning Morcar's death had begun to become common knowledge and there was even a disquieting

rumor that a note had been found that was somehow connected to the crime.

Wilson and Cohen had been straight to see Dr. Peters with the letter and had subsequently been asking questions of all the fellows, questions not just concerning the keys to the Fellows' Gate. The police were rapidly forming the view that the assailant had come from and remained within St. Bride's, something that would bring even more distress to the Master. But even he wouldn't be able to deny that it was highly unlikely for a stranger to have evaded the notice of the porters or have scaled any of the gates or walls.

Lumley, the chaplain, seemed particularly hurt that the police had subjected him to such an arduous examination. "The things they asked me, Dr. Coppersmith, about whether I'd any personal knowledge of that unfortunate young man, they stopped barely short of asking me if I'd heard the boy's confession at any point. Then to ask whether I had any particular insight into religious mania, was aware of any in St. Bride's, or had come across any such thing before. And some of the things they hinted were going on within the environs of this university—I like to think that I'm fairly well acquainted with the world, but I was certainly horrified and you would have been, too!"

Jonty successfully repressed a snigger. He'd known the chaplain during his earlier time at the college and well acquainted with the world the man was not. As for what went on within the 'environs'—Stewart could have told him things that would have made his eyeballs jump out of their sockets and rotate.

The indignation among the fellows gradually diminished during an excellent dinner, helped by some rather good college hock. By the time that they took coffee and fruit in the SCR, the topics of conversation had generally returned to planarian worms, the nature of electrons and other mundane items such as were suitable for men of learning to entertain themselves with.

“And what have you been up to today, Coppersmith?” The two rightful backsides occupied the two chairs in the corner this evening. Orlando had inspected the upholstery of his very closely, Jonty wondering all the while whether he was looking to see if a very small female had hidden herself under the antimacassar.

He’d been worrying about Orlando pretty well continuously since they’d separated the previous night. Having agreed that he’d accompany the two students to the Police station, Stewart had at last persuaded them to leave and he wanted the opportunity of making sure that this latest blow hadn’t overwhelmed his friend. But Coppersmith had been icily calm, dealing with the shock by retreating into himself. They’d said goodnight and parted, as if nothing of significance had happened between them. Jonty was frightened that nothing of significance would ever happen between them again.

He tried the light-hearted approach. “You’ve got a rather smug look trying to escape from under your usual frown. You may be able to fool the rest of the college but I’ve come to know you too well—you have a secret.”

Coppersmith lowered his voice and leant over confidentially. “Inspector Wilson visited me today; he had a particular request to make.” Orlando looked around furtively, as if to ensure that they weren’t being overheard, but the other fellows were talking about parthenogenesis, which was a bit racy and kept them all occupied. “He asked whether I, we, could use our knowledge of St. Bride’s to help in the investigation.”

Stewart wrinkled his little nose. “Did he actually mean that we should use our eyes and ears to spy upon our fellow college members? Well, don’t look so shocked. Wilson and Cohen are very astute men and I wouldn’t for a moment put it past them to want to gain access to inside information. And they’re not going to get it from the chaplain, are they?”

Coppersmith smirked then quickly hid it. “I think that a little private investigation may have been the intended result. I’ve been trying to oblige them.” He looked exceedingly self-satisfied and Stewart could barely restrain himself from thumping him. Or kissing him. Either would have done.

“I think that I should deliberately not ask you what you mean by that, just to punish you.”

Coppersmith snorted, “I’d tell you anyway, irrespective of whether you pretended not to want to be told. I know you rather well, too.” Their eyes met briefly, then passed on to safer sights—the reality of what had nearly happened the last two evenings was too raw between them. They had been so close to sharing their affection and the repeated interruptions had led to awkwardness. “I’ve been searching my memories of the past six years to find if there’s been anything at St. Bride’s that might relate to this matter.”

“And is there something?” Stewart looked like an eager hound that had just caught the merest hint of the scent.

“Nothing whatsoever.”

“Oh.” Jonty’s disappointment was displayed all over his handsome face. He’d been sure that his brilliant friend was going to make some revelation that would easily lead to the solution of this case. He felt rather cheated.

“But that tells us something in itself, Dr. Stewart. It probably means that the culprit, assuming the police are right in believing that he is from within the college and I agree with them there, must be a relative newcomer.” He fixed his friend with an unconvincingly fierce gaze. “It’s not you, is it?”

Jonty looked rather shocked, not at the accusation but at the fact that his friend had suddenly taken to making almost frivolous remarks. *Perhaps the last two evenings are having a positive effect upon him.* Encouraged, he snorted and mustered a reply. “Dr. Coppersmith, I’m one of the few people with an impeccable

alibi, having been in your company the whole evening. But I think that you've made a presumption too far in your deductions. You might still be looking for someone who has been here a while; people do suddenly change and manifest strange behavior, perhaps as a result of some trauma or great upheaval in their lives. You might do so, if I ever got the chance to kiss you properly."

Orlando froze, eyeing the company as if worried they'd been overheard. All must have seemed safe, so he hissed, "Watch what you say, Stewart. There are too many eyes peering into the doings of St. Bride's for you to risk the chance of our activities being too closely scrutinized."

Jonty felt his hackles rising, "Didn't seem to bother you last night, Dr. Coppersmith, when it was all *may I kiss you, Jonty?* Dare say it would have been *may I come into your bed, Jonty?* if we hadn't been interrupted." The silence following this remark was louder than gun-fire. Stewart realized, too late, far too late, that he'd said far too much. It was his own thoughts that had turned to that small bed last night; he suspected Orlando hadn't even let a carnal thought cross his mind. Not last night, not ever.

Coppersmith now sat unmoving, looking at his friend with horror. Suddenly rising, he swept from the Senior Common Room, his gown moving behind him like the great tail of some large, angry, black dog. The fellows stared after him in amazement, then exchanged knowing looks with one another.

Jonty guessed that his colleagues were discussing him and his friend—*a quarrel, it had to happen one day with a man such as Coppersmith, it's a wonder that Stewart has prevented it happening up to now.* He took a dignified departure but couldn't return to his rooms as too many painful memories lay there, so decided to take a turn about the town. *How could I have been so idiotic?*

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