

SAM HAIN presents
**CHARLIE
COCHRANE**

LESSONS IN
Trust

A Cambridge Fellows Mystery

He thought he knew who he was. Now he's a stranger to himself.

Cambridge Fellows Mysteries, Book 7

When Jonty Stewart and Orlando Coppersmith witness the suspicious death of a young man at the White City exhibition in London, they're keen to investigate—especially after the cause of death proves to be murder. But police Inspector Redknapp refuses to let them help, even after they stumble onto clues to the dead man's identity.

Orlando's own identity becomes the subject for speculation when, while mourning the death of his beloved grandmother, he learns that she kept secrets about her past. Desperate to discover the truth about his family, Orlando departs suddenly on a solo quest to track down his roots, leaving Jonty distraught.

While Jonty frantically tries to locate his lover, Orlando wonders if he'll be able to find his real family before he goes mad. After uncovering more leads to the White City case, they must decide whether to risk further involvement. Because if either of them dares try to solve the murder, Inspector Redknapp could expose their illicit—and illegal—love affair.

Warning: Contains sensual m/m lovemaking and hot men driving Lagondas.

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A Cambridge Fellows Mystery

Charlie Cochrane

Dedication

With thanks to my eldest daughter, who crammed enough early twentieth history into her poor old mother's head to make this story feasible, and the lady at the second-hand bookshop who found me an original programme for the Franco-British exhibition.

Chapter One

White City, London, 1908

"If you think I'm going up on that thing..." Orlando Coppersmith looked at the great metal creation. It seemed to reach up miles into the sky, higher than the Eiffel Tower or anything he'd ever seen. Even though the measurements, the beautifully accurate and logical measurements, meant it couldn't be as high as he perceived it was, his eyes wouldn't believe his brain.

"Why not?" Jonty Stewart's eyes were ablaze with awe and wonder. "Everyone goes on the Flip Flap."

"I'm not everyone." Orlando knew all about his lover's delight in bell towers, follies, any high places which gave panoramic views. "Anyway, you'll be sick." It was a feeble, inaccurate shot, inevitably missing its target.

"I'm never sick. Sorry." A wide grin crossed Jonty's handsome face, attracting the attention of two passing maidens. He raised his hat to them and carried on blithely, "I correct myself. I was once sick when some idiot took me on a helter-skelter two hours after a sporting dinner at St. Bride's, but that was when I was a mere stripling." No fellow of such an august Cambridge college was going to admit that he'd also been horribly ill just three years previously, after sledging with his nephew down a snow-covered hill. That was before he'd met Orlando and therefore both pre-historic and confidential.

"I'll be sick."

"Ah. Good point. I'll never forget the ferry crossing to Jersey." Jonty looked crestfallen, so disappointed at thwarted ambition that it knocked any argument out of Orlando's mind.

"Oh, blow it. Let's go on the thing then." It was worth suffering just to see the delight on his friend's face. "And if I'm sick I'll do it in your hat."

The Flip Flap. Everyone was talking about it, even the people who hadn't yet been to the Franco-British exhibition at the great White City which was the talk of the country. There were songs about it in the music halls and Ella Retford wasn't the only one singing "Take me on the Flip Flap". Jonty and Orlando had heard a group of youths warbling it just the day before as they'd been wandering down Regent Street. Even Jonty's father had been on the contraption, becoming so loquacious about his experience that Mrs. Stewart had been forced to *have words*. "I told your father, Jonathan," she'd addressed her youngest son so loudly over the telephone that Orlando had been able to hear from the other side of the hall, "that if he doesn't shut up, I'll be filing for divorce and naming the Flip Flap as co-respondent." Much to her

dismay that conversation had made Jonty decide he and his lover had to visit the White City as soon as possible to see for themselves.

Orlando had been reluctant despite Mr. Stewart's glowing reports. He'd seen Paris and been stunned by both the simpering *Mona Lisa* and the oddly masculine *Venus de Milo*. He'd strolled through Monte Carlo, as urbane a boulevardier as if he'd been born to the role, or at least a good imitation of one. Why should he want to see imitations of glory when he'd encountered the real thing? The unanswerable argument was that Jonty wanted to see these things and what Jonty wanted, he got. The dunderheads had gone home from the university, back to families who would be astounded by their brains even if Cambridge wasn't, and the long vac stretched ahead, full of promise. And a visit to the White City could incorporate a visit to the Stewarts' London home, which would brighten anyone's summer.

So they were here, in the Court of Honour, Orlando with his eyes as wide as a child's, taking in the sights. He was pleased the skies were slightly overcast, certain he would have been overwhelmed if the white buildings had been in full sunlight, dazzling against a piercing blue background. Dull white against hazy blue-grey made the whole thing manageable. It was still astounding. He knew it wasn't real, just a form of structural prestidigitation, wood and concrete and plaster creating a wonderful illusion of buildings which had stood since time immemorial. It wasn't the Louvre, or Sacre Coeur, but it was magnificent.

"Flip Flap it is, then I'm off to look at the jewellery." Orlando picked up his pace.

"Jewellery? Isn't that coming it a bit effete?" Jonty's blue eyes were alive with excitement. "I thought you'd be dragging me off to the Machinery Hall to look at the lift turbines or whatever it was Father was getting in such a state about."

"I'll get round to them eventually, but I think I'll be needing something a bit lighter and less taxing than mechanical contraptions after going up in that thing." Orlando pointed towards the Flip Flap, visions going through his mind of being dragged off to the scenic railway and any other pleasure rides Jonty could find before he'd be allowed a sniff of something like a nice noisy engine or a big gun.

"There's plenty of time to do it all. We can stay late tonight and see the lights then come back tomorrow and the next day. You'll be satiated." Jonty's walk was almost a series of dance steps, the obvious excitement he felt bubbling into all parts of his being. "Imagine that." He lowered his voice. "You, satiated. Wonders will never cease."

Wonders certainly didn't cease over the rest of the day. It would have been impossible for anyone to tread the paths and bridges of the White City and not feel all their senses being assaulted. The magnificence of the buildings, the press of people, the sheer volume of sights and sounds and information—it would have exhausted lesser men. But the fellows of St. Bride's were made of sterner stuff and no Palace of Fine Arts was going to defeat them nor any exhibition of education be allowed to bore them.

They stopped for a late lunch, glad to rest weary feet and take a break from endless exclamations of, "Have you seen that?" or "Isn't this amazing?"

“Mother will kill me, but I’ll have to side with Father.” Jonty placed an order for a chop, some new potatoes and a little salad—a light meal just in case the scenic railway was to be attempted again, but enough to sustain a man through an afternoon of seeing the sights. “It’s extraordinary. Like having the whole world in your back yard.”

“It’s certainly an interesting way of seeing things, even though I have to keep reminding myself it’s not authentic.” Orlando poured a reviving drink of water. He wasn’t going to risk alcohol in view of Jonty’s eagerness to be on the rides again.

“Even Father admits it’s all a bit unreal here, although he felt that was half the appeal. Like the theatre—you know that fairy can’t be flying across the stage but you suspend disbelief. It’s magical.” Jonty swept his arm around. “And, if we can get around all of it, there’ll be all sorts of places you can tick off your list for future holidays as you’ll have already ‘done them’.”

Orlando grinned at the shared joke. For years he’d been reluctant to travel farther than one of the outlying Cambridge colleges. “You mean I won’t have to be dragged to Australia if I visit their exhibition hall? That sounds splendid. I wish all travel could be as simple.” He settled into his chair in pleasurable anticipation of steak, new potatoes and peas, although whether the meat would be as good as that which Mrs. Ward, their housekeeper, regularly roused out from their butcher, he wasn’t sure. That was another thing about spreading one’s wings and taking to pastures new—you couldn’t guarantee the quality of the nosebags’ contents.

“You know what would make this even better? Seems sinful to want it, but...” Jonty shrugged.

“I know. I’d feel guilty if it came about, of course I would, although I wouldn’t complain.” A look passed between them, the years of closeness bringing about a form of communication that no longer needed words. They’d reached the point where looks and some sort of telepathy built of familiarity sufficed. “Been a long time.”

Murder. Mystery. Anything which presented a problem and let a man get his wits around solving it. The last time they’d had anything really worthy of their skills had been the autumn of 1907, and the year before that had been full of unexplained killings to be solved. Since then they’d barely got a sniff of a case, certainly not any they’d like to take on. There’d been a stream of correspondence addressed to Drs. Coppersmith and Stewart, Detectives, St. Bride’s College, Cambridge, which had galled Orlando and made the porters snigger. There had been times he’d been grateful for the notoriety produced by Mr. Stewart’s article in the *Times* about their sleuthing—it had helped in more than one case. But when the letters began to trickle in, asking for help in finding missing husbands or getting to the bottom of whether Granny really had been poisoned for her savings in 1873, he’d been increasingly annoyed.

They’d responded to them all with polite refusals—Jonty took charge of that, his lover not to be trusted in case he made some caustic remark in the process. One poor soul had written that they’d already been in contact with Mr. Holmes but to no avail and now they were turning from Baker Street to

Cambridge. Orlando had wanted to take the first train to Manchester, where this unfortunate correspondent lived, and upbraid him on his own doorstep. Whether he'd taken umbrage at being compared to the dreaded Sherlock or whether it was because he'd been turned to second, not first, Jonty wasn't sure, but he'd almost had to lock Orlando away to prevent him being a murderer himself rather than a catcher of them.

Other than that it had been a nice enough and highly productive time. Jonty had got his book on the sonnets proofread and published, and Orlando had been doing some excellent work both on Boolean algebra and for his grandmother's fund for brilliant but impoverished students. All worthwhile, all—along with teaching in college and doing further work on their cottage and garden—enough to keep them busy, although something had been lacking. And while it felt wrong to be actively hoping a corpse would somehow appear and the police would be so baffled they'd have to call the two amateurs in, Orlando was beginning to feel desperate, worried he'd never feel the thrill of that particular chase again.

Jonty could quite happily have gone another twelvemonth without a killer to catch, especially after the emotional traumas of the last few cases, but he hated to see his lover unhappy. Especially on such a glorious summer's day as this.

"Maybe they'll find my father dead at the foot of the scenic railway." Jonty took a swig of beer. "No, belay that, I'd hate to see the old chap go. Perhaps he could just be found beaten up—nothing too serious, nothing worse than the sort of thing you'd get from a nasty scrum—and you could solve who'd done the ghastly deed."

Orlando laid down his glass of water, rolled his eyes and gave his lover a withering look. "I suppose studying Shakespeare doesn't require an ability to think logically. There'd be nothing to investigate. If your father was found here in a state of disarray, the culprit would clearly be your mother, fed up with his obsession with the place. Like everyone would know it was me who'd done it, if you were found strangled with a pair of driving goggles."

"And why would you want to kill me, my dearest friend and colleague?" Jonty thought he could guess the answer, but it was fun riling his lover.

"Because of *it*. The great metal monster." Orlando looked as if murder really was about to be committed and Jonty was pleased to see the arrival of the waiter with their order. He deftly turned the conversation to other things, like whether rump was a tastier cut than sirloin and why vegetables always tasted better when they came out of your own garden. It was by far the safest route to take.

Fires stoked up for the work ahead, they started off around the exhibition again, admiring a picture here, sampling a glass of champagne there, buying a box of chocolates to take home for their hostess. Their enthusiasm never palled, even if there were no dead bodies in the offing. By the time the illuminations began to twinkle over the lake in the gloaming, Orlando was stifling yawns.

"Think we've done enough for today, old man." Jonty clapped him on the shoulder. "There's always tomorrow."

Orlando nodded. “Aye. I think I’ve had an ample sufficiency today. I need a good night’s sleep to ready myself for another dose.” He looked around, the lights’ reflections dancing in his dark eyes. “I’m so glad we came. Now for the journey home.” He drew himself up to his full height, as if about to face the executioner.

From the first time they’d met, nearly three years previously, Orlando had been prone to dramatic moments, rolling his eyes for emphasis and generally overacting when cross at something his lover or the dunderheads of students had done. When he’d had to mark a particularly useless set of algebra exercises, his eyes would almost disappear around the back of his head. He was at his most theatrical now.

“For goodness sake, it’ll be fine. Nice fresh air—better than being stuck with the hordes of humanity on the train.” Jonty tugged on his arm. “Come on, Mama will be waiting for us with coffee *and* port.”

“I’ll need both.” Orlando gave another roll of his eyes, shuddered and trudged towards the exit.

Any decent human beings would have arrived at the White City by underground railway, alighting from the Central London line at Wood Lane and joining the masses as they headed for the exhibition. But Jonty Stewart wasn’t, as Orlando often averred, a decent human being. He might have been an angel in a very effective disguise, or an overgrown cherub who’d lost his wings and his way, but in the matter of his uncivilised—as far as Orlando was concerned—humanity, he was unique. *They’d* arrived at the White City in a motor car, Jonty’s brand new Lagonda, or, as he told people interminably, his six-cylinder, twenty-horsepower Torpedo. It was black, sleek, shiny, beautiful, and Orlando hated it.

He knew it was stupid, feeling so jealous of a car, but jealous he was. Ever since it had arrived, Jonty had seemed to lavish huge amounts of praise and affection on it, affection which by rights belonged to Dr. O. Coppersmith alone. He polished and buffed it, soothed and caressed it. Orlando wouldn’t have been surprised if Jonty would have liked to spend his nights curled up in the thing, caressing its curves and lines in his dreams, as he often caressed his lover’s. For two months it had been polluting a small piece of hard standing at Forsythia Cottage, their little home up the Madingley Road, far enough from the dunderheads to make it a haven of peace and refinement.

At least it had been a haven until the metal monster had arrived, and there was still no sign of Jonty tiring of it and sending it off to the scrap yard or some other place where it deserved to be. If it hadn’t presented a risk to his lover’s life, Orlando would have been happy to see the Lagonda in a ditch, a twisted and tormented lump of steel or whatever Godforsaken stuff they used to make such things.

He had been forced out in it, of course, more than once—and once should have been enough for any man with a speck of decency about him. Now he’d been dragged through London in the monster, a city in which the natural way to travel was foot, horse-drawn cab or railway. And he was having to process back through the city to the Stewarts’ home, hiding his face in case he was seen by any eminent mathematicians from the capital’s seats of learning.

“Well, what did we think of it?” Richard Stewart must have been watching from the window, given the speed with which he’d opened the front door. Perhaps he’d even barged Hopkins the butler out of the way en route. The man was bouncing on his toes like a big schoolboy, just like Jonty did when excitement overcame him.

“Wonderful, Papa. Everything you said it would be and more.” Jonty took off his gloves and goggles, laying them on the little lacquered table where they might send out a siren call to his father. If Mr. Stewart wanted to convert his son to the glories of the Anglo-French exhibition, then his son wanted to reciprocate by getting him interested in motoring.

“You went on the Flip Flap?” Mr. Stewart’s eyes were aglow.

“Richard!” Mrs. Stewart’s voice cut through the air like a sabre through butter. “What are we not to mention in this house?”

“Tell me later,” Mr. Stewart whispered as his wife swept into the hall and scooped up her favourite boys.

Mrs. Stewart must have been stunning in her youth—the portraits on the stairs were evidence of it—and even in late middle age she was striking, silvery gold hair and blue eyes mirroring her son’s colouration. She and her husband still turned plenty of heads, not all of them mature.

Supper was excellent, as it always was when Jonty’s parents entertained: smoked salmon, lightly scrambled eggs, tiny tomatoes sweeter than honey, all washed down with champagne. As they ate, Orlando waxed lyrical about the sights they’d seen, allowed much more leeway to praise the exhibition than his almost-father-in-law was clearly allowed. But then he avoided all mention of a certain ride which took you up in the air and left your stomach on terra firma.

“And you’ll go back tomorrow?” Mrs. Stewart scooped up the last bit of her egg onto a piece of toast.

“Certainly. We’ve not covered the half of it, not properly, anyway.” Jonty wiped his mouth on the thick damask napkin. “Will you come with us?”

“I would love to, my dear, but there’s a meeting I must attend. My fund for unfortunate girls. Maybe another time?”

“Helena!” Mr. Stewart smote the table. “I’ve offered on four occasions to take you to the White City and every one of them you’ve refused to even consider.”

“That’s because you’re not Orlando, Papa. Mama wants him to squire her around the site so that all the other women will look and be jealous.” Jonty cast a sidelong glance at his mother, who was wearing an unusually demure expression. “Or is it the lure of the car?”

“It might be nice to be taken for a little drive...” Mrs. Stewart’s ears turned a delicate shade of pink. “It’s such a fine machine—very comfortable-looking and with such beautiful upholstery.”

“Oh, Mrs. Stewart, not you too.” Orlando would have put his head in his hands if such a gesture wouldn’t risk being told off for having his elbows on the table. “Is there no one in the world who isn’t smitten by these awful contraptions? Has everyone—” he was about to say *lost their sanity* but the vision of being strung up by his bootstraps from the Stewarts’ lintel forestalled him. “Has everyone got to be besotted with them?”

“I can’t say I see the appeal, Orlando.” Mr. Stewart raised his hand to silence any dissent from wife or son before he’d had his say. “I don’t mind a nice journey on a train or a steamship—there’s grandeur for you, and science in action, applied for the benefit of mankind. But automobiles...” His face looked like he’d found something unpleasant on his boot.

“Richard.” Mrs. Stewart didn’t raise her voice to the volume she normally applied to an argument. It was all the more chilling for its measured tone. “Jonathan has always been a forward-thinking young man, and I’d like to think myself a woman whose mind and spirit are younger than her contemporaries. I’d be delighted to embrace the twentieth century and go for a ride.”

“That’s the spirit, Mama. At the first mutually convenient moment I’ll make sure you get your heart’s desire. Not like some old fuddy-duddies I could mention.” Jonty looked sideways at his father. “And make sure you get Papa to buy you a suitable outfit. A nice coat and skirt, lightweight but warm, a new hat and a dashing scarf to tie said hat on would be a good start.”

“I’ll call in at the milliner’s on the way home from my meeting—the sooner I’m kitted out the better.” Mrs. Stewart looked more like a schoolgirl contemplating her first ball than a respectable grandmother. “Now, are there any rules I’ll have to know? Will I need to join the Automobile Association as you have?”

“How did you know about that?” Orlando had never before been quite so bold with his almost-mother-in-law but the situation was reaching crisis point.

“I inspected that handsome badge on the—is it called the grille, dear?”

“That’s right, Mama. But you won’t need to join, not as a passenger. I only became a member to...” Jonty hesitated, “...to be a responsible driver and learn about keeping the Lagonda in decent nick.”

Orlando could stand the half truths no longer. He appealed to Caesar, in the venerable form of Mr. Stewart. “Do you want to know why your son joined the Automobile Association? It’s nothing to do with being a considerate driver and it’s certainly nothing to do with maintaining that...that...monster. It’s so he can be warned about the police speed traps.”

“No, it isn’t.” Jonty’s reddened cheeks gave the instant lie to his words. “Well, not entirely. And you have to admit that would be useful, if we wanted a jaunt down to Brighton. You wouldn’t want me to be caught by the constabulary, would you, Papa? Wouldn’t do the old reputation any good. Now, what would you say to Brighton, Mama? Fancy a spot of sea air?”

“That sounds lovely.” Mrs. Stewart turned her head, as sharp as any schoolmistress to the hint of a snort. “I heard that, Orlando. Don’t you appreciate the seaside?”

Orlando snorted again. “I always welcome the sea air, but the proper way to get there is in a train. Somehow the combination of your son, the open road and *that machine* seems like pure chaos. I get a headache just thinking about it.” He adopted his best lecturing-to-the-dunderheads tones. “I can see it now. ‘My lords’—he’d have to be tried by them, no ordinary jury could cope with him—I strongly believe that Dr. Stewart should never be permitted around anything both mechanical and more complicated than a pocket watch. The threat to public safety is too great. I have done the calculations.” Orlando waved his napkin in lieu of the papers he’d have to exhibit in the House of Lords.

“Hear, hear.” Mr. Stewart, who was entitled to sit in the House of Lords but couldn’t be bothered to stoop so low, applauded.

“Please don’t encourage him, I’ve had weeks of this.” Jonty’s handsome face was screwed up in mock agony. “Still, if he doesn’t want to walk all the way tomorrow, he’ll have to swallow his pride—and his calculations—and get into the passenger seat.” A sly look crossed his face. “Maybe you could learn to drive, Orlando. It’s very logical, you know, almost a mathematical process. You’d take to it like a duck to water, just like you did with punting.”

“At least if I drove and you were just the passenger, there’d be less risk of killing the entire population of London.” Orlando drew himself up in his chair, changing his expression to the one he used for addressing particularly stupid undergraduates. “I wouldn’t need to fear any policemen as I wouldn’t be going too fast.”

“I don’t believe that for a moment. Not once you’d got the bit between your teeth. And don’t you think he’d look so handsome in a driving hat and goggles? Ow—no kicking.” Jonty rubbed his shin. “He kicked me under the table, Mama, just like Clarence used to do.”

“Then, like Clarence, he’ll have to go to bed.” Mrs. Stewart grinned. She’d sent them to bed before, even though both were nearly thirty at the time. And she considered neither of them too old for a whack on the backside. “Go on, off to bed. The pair of you. And separate rooms.”

“Your mother said separate rooms.” Orlando struggled into his nightgown, which seemed to be fighting back tonight. Perhaps it needed a kick and being sent upstairs, although upstairs from his room would mean it spending the night in the servants’ quarters.

He’d never have coped with such a bold remark being made to him a few years ago. Now he was either inured to other people—selected others—knowing about his relationship with Jonty, or he didn’t care. He still marvelled at the Stewarts being so understanding. His own parents would have sent him packing if they’d known that he and Jonty lay together, and not content with just a despatch to some far-flung part of the Empire, they’d have probably informed the police en route. The scandal could never have been borne, the Coppersmith name had to be protected.

Funny how the Stewart name, much more eminent, had managed to find itself untarnished, but then the Stewarts would never have reported their son for being in love. They'd even somehow managed to maintain, without actually lying, the belief amongst their social circle that Jonty would remain a confirmed bachelor only until the right girl came along. She was just taking a long time coming.

"I've only come in to say goodnight." Jonty draped himself over the fireside chair. "And to show you the bruise on my shin." He hitched up his trouser leg to reveal an elegant calf.

"That's dirt from the scenic railway. And you deserved a kick for the me-in-goggles remark. I suppose you imagine me doing all the hard work behind the wheel and yourself sitting there in the passenger seat, looking attractive in a long buff coat and some rakish hat." Orlando let out a sigh.

"Sitting and looking pretty is one of my most notable accomplishments." Jonty's sprawling posture confirmed his words—even just lazing in a chair looking insolent he was alluring. "I'll wear that blue scarf Mama gave me, the one which matches my eyes. I'll have to eschew goggles for the occasion as they'll obscure the natural beauty of my gaze." He sprang up, stabbing his lover in the chest with a particularly sharp finger. "And I heard that remark. You need to learn to whisper a little less loudly. I'll give you 'vanity, thy name is Stewart'. Don't you think I'd look dashing in my scarf and hat getup though? I'd say I'd turn quite a few heads—you would, too, in some smart cap set at a jaunty angle on those curls." Jonty ruffled the items concerned.

"I wouldn't let you out on the road, passenger or not, if you weren't wearing goggles. You'd get a piece of grit in your eye and make yourself blind."

"I'm glad you take such care of my health." Jonty slid his hand along his lover's arm. "Old softy."

"No such thing. I'm less concerned for your health than mine. If you ended up losing the sight of one eye, your mother would flay me alive." Orlando pressed his lover's hand, rubbing the flesh on the knuckles. "Seriously, get her to find you something in brass or some such outlandish material, whatever's the height of fashion among the nobility who drive these wretched things. But please look after yourself."

"Don't I always?" They took a long embrace, a goodnight kiss which turned into a series of kisses. "Separate beds tonight. A long time since we've done that."

"Maybe it's as well. If I want to have energy enough for the Flip Flap tomorrow." Orlando slapped his lover's backside and shooed him towards the door.

"The Flip Flap again? You're getting as bad as Papa." Jonty turned his lover's face to the light. "There are even times you look like the old man." He ruffled Orlando's hair. "More jungle here though, rather than desert wastes."

"My father had a fine head of hair. Right to the end." Orlando swallowed hard. There were times it didn't hurt to refer to his family, many of them since he'd met Jonty and learned to be happy, but this wasn't one of them. For some reason—maybe his lover's flippant remark, maybe being in a house so awash with joy—he couldn't help feeling melancholy at the memory of the Coppersmiths.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have been so frivolous.” Jonty took one last kiss. “See you in the morning.”

Orlando turned off the light and lay in bed, but sleep seemed very elusive tonight. His thoughts were filled with his mother and father, whom he’d loved and who’d not known how to love their son in return. And his grandmother, who’d been the light of his young life. And of a little boy who still didn’t really understand why there had been such a knot of pain, kept hidden, but clear in its effect, within the Coppersmith family.

Chapter Two

The Lagonda pulled up in a convenient spot for the White City—an inconvenient one as far as Orlando was concerned as it was amongst a whole swarm of metal monsters—and the two men emerged. There seemed to be as much dust and dirt on Jonty's face as there was on the road, so he seemed more like a chimney sweep than a university lecturer. When he took off his goggles, two perfectly clean circles around his eyes gave him the appearance of a panda in reverse.

"Come here." Orlando produced a handkerchief, made Jonty spit on it and wiped away the worst of the grime. "Even worse than yesterday. You'll need to find somewhere to spruce yourself up."

Jonty made the situation worse, rubbing a grubby gauntlet over his cheeks. "I have no idea how London can accumulate so much dirt per square yard."

"Perhaps this is an ideal time for performing research—you seem to be wearing most of it."

"I would like to know how you manage to keep yourself so clean." Jonty poked his lover's chest. "We've driven through what seemed to be some cross between a dust storm and a riot in a coal mine yet you remain as pristine white as the Court of Honour." It was true. If Orlando had been in his cricket flannels he could have leaned against the walls of the buildings and almost disappeared.

"It's probably my natural virtue. The dirt wouldn't dare attach itself to me."

Jonty snorted. "I think it'd be ashamed to associate with such vanity. Come on, let's get me cleaned and then we can hit the scenic railway again."

"That chap seems particularly enthralled by the experience, Orlando." Jonty pointed to a quiet corner of the Australian Building where a young man sat dozing on a high-backed wooden chair, his head resting on his frail-looking chest.

"Perhaps he had too much of the women's work as well." Orlando rolled his eyes. He and Jonty had been so depressed by the Palace of Women's Work—all very worthy stuff which Mrs. Stewart would have admired—they'd had to take refuge among the products and wonders (as the brochure described them) of Queensland.

"Or he's been to the Moet et Chandon pavilion." Jonty shrugged and fanned himself with the conveniently shaped brochure. "He looks like you, when you've had too many of the dunderheads' solutions to mark."

"I never sleep like that, Mr. Pot-calls-the-kettle-black. Unlike you, lying on the settee with your mouth open, pretending you're thinking about fair Rosalind or other boys playing women playing boys." Orlando shivered. "I worry about Shakespeare at times."

"Well, don't. He knew more about what constitutes classy entertainment than you do. Although I do wonder what was going on in his life when he was putting together that play about your namesake." Jonty lowered his voice. "It's very odd, the sexual ambiguity in both *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. And don't get me started on men called Antonio..."

Orlando was about to ask what the problem was with characters bearing that name but the impish grin in his friend's eye stopped him. That would be a question reserved for the parlour of Forsythia Cottage where no one could hear the explanation of whatever filthy thoughts Jonty was having. "He can't have gone to sleep of boredom."

"Who?"

"That chap in the hunting jacket, the one you pointed out. Have you forgotten already? Nobody could get bored with the White City unless they were a complete Philistine."

"Perhaps it was too much excitement—the sheer overwhelming of all the senses. I can understand how someone could be overcome here, and why my father has visited three times. So much to take in..." Jonty's eyes were aglow with his usual boyish excitement. "I sometimes feel a whole lifetime wouldn't be enough to appreciate it all."

Orlando sniffed. "Whatever it is that's sent that chap off, he'll need to wake up soon or he'll have a stiff neck."

"Now, that's experience talking. I remember you nodding off in your chair in the Senior Common Room after Dr. Panesar's birthday lunch." Jonty grinned like a mad thing. Such glorious memories. "You complained about a crick in your neck for a week afterwards."

"I wasn't sleeping. I was contemplating Cartesian geometry." Orlando's grin showed that even he didn't believe such a flagrant lie. "That was one of the best lunches I ever had—there's something about pies which make them a bit of a foretaste of heaven."

"Perhaps we should do the honours and wake him up. Or do you think he'd be so startled by having two hairy strangers rousing him he'd thump us one?"

"Or have a heart attack. Better leave Rip Van Winkle, the attendant's bound to sort him out if his friends haven't come to wake him first. That would be a shame, though." A cloud crossed Orlando's handsome face, making him seem more like the stern, forbidding creature of three years previously. In the boring, quiet days, pre-Jonty.

"What would?"

"Having no friends to come and wake you. Being here on your own." Orlando took off his hat and fanned himself. "To have no one to say 'isn't that amazing' to, or share the fun of the Flip Flap with."

"I suppose now you'll never stop telling people how much you enjoyed it." Jonty cuffed his lover's arm. "I take your point, though. No matter how wonderful something is, it palls when you haven't got someone you care for close at hand to share it. That's why eating alone is such a sad thing. Talking of which, it must be lunchtime."

Lunch proved a pleasant meal, as did afternoon tea a couple of hours later. It was a pair of satiated Cambridge dons, both in terms of food and of sights and sounds, who returned to the Lagonda and wended a weary and dusty route back to the Stewarts' home. Jonty had suggested a third visit, the next day, but it had been no more than a half-hearted proposal. They needed a rest before they'd really take in any more. Perhaps a return later in the year was in order, but for now they'd had a sufficiency of what the White City could offer.

"A few quiet days with your family, that's what the doctor would order. Some pleasant walks in the park and perhaps an evening or two playing bridge." Orlando yawned, placing his neatly gloved hand over his mouth before Jonty could tell him off for his lack of manners.

"You like to live the high life, don't you?" Jonty grinned, swinging the car neatly among the lines of cabs. "I daresay you're right, though. Too much excitement can pall."

They shook the dust off themselves all over the Stewarts' hall—luckily Jonty's mother wasn't there to upbraid them for making work for the servants. Mr. Stewart was, though, looking pleased with himself. "Come and get a glass of something cool. Don't worry about shifting your clothes, it's an evening of Helena's dispensation."

Orlando looked puzzled.

"Ah, Papa, we'll need to explain. I don't suppose he's ever heard it given its proper name." Jonty tapped his lover's arm. "Remember that Christmas we got sent to bed for playing out in the snow without our hats?"

"I'll never forget. It's etched in my memory along with the day your mother smacked me." Orlando made a movement as if he was going to rub his bottom, remembered where he was and straightened his jacket instead.

"Then you'll remember you were allowed down to supper in dressing gowns and pyjamas." Mr. Stewart grinned, his handsome face resembling his son's, despite the wrinkles. "Not the done thing at all, but sometimes allowed should the chatelaine of the house decree it."

"So no having to get changed for dinner tonight." Jonty yawned, stretching like a great marmalade cat. "Mama seems to have a supernatural ability to tell when her guests would really appreciate such kindness."

“I wish St. Bride’s would be as forward thinking. Many a hot summer’s evening I’ve sat sweltering in stiff collar and black gown, forcing down plum duff so the college cooks wouldn’t be offended at portions returned unwanted.” Orlando grimaced.

“I can’t imagine Bride’s being as radical as my wife. On very rare occasions, such as a prolonged period of subtropical weather, she has been known to demonstrate the ultimate in good sense by allowing the gentlemen of the family the honour of loosening their collars. Not hot enough for that tonight, though.” Mr. Stewart looked wistful. “Perhaps it’s just as well. We don’t want to shock Lavinia.”

“Is the old girl here, then?” Jonty’s smile grew even wider. He’d a great affection for his sister and almost as much for her long-suffering husband. “Ralph with her?” He’d not seen either of them since they’d moved, in accordance with Ralph’s new position at an important financial institution, from the wilds of east Sussex to a modern house near Green Park.

“He’s keeping a cold bottle of champagne company while Lavinia admires a new dress your mother’s acquired. We should go and help him.”

Jonty poured Ralph Broad a post-prandial glass of port, then sat in the chair opposite him. He thought, not for the first time, how well designed the Stewarts’ library at Thornton Place was, lending itself wonderfully to intimacies and confidences. He wasn’t looking forward to this interview, although he suspected that he would enjoy it even less if it were his sister Lavinia he had to talk to. At least she’d been whisked off by her mother almost as soon as the coffee had started to cool.

The summons for this tête-à-tête had come in the form of a whispered aside in the hall, a distraught-looking Ralph imploring Jonty to chat with him while the females of the family were off again admiring frocks and jewellery or anything else which would keep them distracted. It was a consultation which had been in the offing for a while and Orlando had made himself scarce as soon as he’d got wind of it, taking Mr. Stewart off for a game or two of billiards before they retired for the night. Jonty was hoping he’d be allowed a reasonably early night, but the intense look in his brother-in-law’s eye didn’t fill him with optimism.

“Ralph, we’ve known each other a long time, ever since you threw that dirty great frog at Lavinia when she was about twelve.” Jonty swirled his port in the glass, admiring the colour and wishing it was a magic potion which would help him through his ordeal. “I can’t remember a time she’s not been besotted with you, flying amphibians notwithstanding. Whatever is the matter between you now?”

“I shan’t lie to you, Jonty, and say ‘What matter?’, because you know us both too well. It’s the old story, the one which affects plenty of married couples—Lavinia is desperate to have a baby. All her married friends and relations have been blessed with issue while she remains bereft and getting, if you’ll

excuse me using the term about your sister, broody.” Ralph fiddled with his glass, the delicate crystal dwarfed by his sturdy hands.

“And do *you* want children? Is it that you’d rather not? I could understand that point of view, particularly given the potential risk to my sister.”

“That’s not it at all, Jonty. I’d love some of the little perishers under my feet. I could take them fishing and teach ’em to swim and get into all sorts of scrapes with them.” Ralph put his glass down and fiddled with his hands, instead. “But it isn’t going to be, is it? Not if the present status quo is maintained.”

Jonty smiled, embarrassed. He knew all about the legend of Lavinia and Ralph’s wedding night, of course, although he alone of his siblings was aware of the whole truth. He’d been trusted with the story by his mother, possibly on the grounds that, of all the brood, he had the broadest mind and the most common sense when it came to matters of the bedroom. It had become a key part of private Stewart folklore, the fact that Ralph Broad had swanned into the nuptial boudoir wearing only a dressing gown which he’d rather theatrically swept off to reveal himself in all his glory. Lavinia had got the shock of her life, never having seen a male in the nude before, the classical statuary she’d been exposed to having suffered, by and large, emasculating by some prudish collector.

And it had never occurred to her that what she saw of the stallion when he came to serve the mares might be somehow related to how a human male was constructed.

When Ralph had then suggested what he might be inclined to do with his wedding equipment she’d been horrified to the extent of locking herself in her dressing room, returning to her mother—in a cab and floods of tears—the next day. She’d been persuaded to return to her husband, once it had been explained that all males were so built and what Ralph had proposed was only natural, but what sort of relations had subsequently transpired between them, no one was entirely certain.

“Ralph, I know this is an extremely intimate question, although I think you would prefer I asked it, rather than Mama or Papa. I’m trying to help.”

Ralph swiftly nodded his assent. “Oh, rather. I think the world of your parents, Jonty, but the thought of discussing anything like this with them makes me feel quite queasy. I suppose, somehow, the fact that you don’t quite indulge in such things with women makes it easier to be frank with you. Oh.” Ralph turned crimson, looking as if he were about to choke. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...you and Orlando, of course, such a splendid couple. Better than many a man and wife I know.”

“Ralph—” Jonty grinned, not offended in the least, “—do shut up before you dig yourself such a hole you’ll never emerge from it. Now, I have to ask something that’s a bit delicate here. Have you actually consummated your marriage?”

A hint of something which might have been a tear appeared in Ralph’s eye and Jonty made a mental reconnaissance of the number of clean hankies he had available to share.

“No, Jonty, not really. We kiss and cuddle a bit and, well, I get excited and all that. Then she lets me sort of snuggle up to her until, well, until I get a bit of relief, you know. But she never touches me in any sort of...intimate...places, nor do I touch her.”

Jonty sighed. He really had no idea how he was going to make any of this any better. “She must have had a terrible shock seeing you on your wedding night, Ralph. I dare say she hadn’t seen a naked male since I was a baby and she helped me take my bath, and then she’d have been scarcely more than a toddler herself.”

“I know I made a real mess of things that night, springing out of the bathroom practically in my birthday suit, but for some silly reason I thought it might be romantic.” Ralph was pale, as dejected as Jonty had ever seen him. “I had no idea she would react in that way.”

“She was unprepared, Ralph. For all that my parents have been a wonderful help and support to every one of us, they didn’t tell any of their children the facts of life, you know. I suspect Lavinia was as innocent as a newborn babe.”

“One of the masters at school gave instruction to us boys—he used to take us in a little group and explain what should go on to make a baby. I thought that Lavinia would have been taught the same.” Ralph shook his head.

“I rather think Papa assumed we’d all do what he did.” Jonty topped up Ralph’s glass. “Before he married Mama, he went to see a doctor who explained all the anatomical doo-dahs, but more importantly gave him a few tips as to how he could make the lady he was with as happy as he would be himself. It must have worked a marvel on their wedding night as I know, from what Mama told me when all this came out, that she was in just as much ignorance as Lavinia had been and yet their honeymoon was the happiest time of her life.”

“Do women really enjoy *it*, Jonty? I always thought it was something they had to endure to benefit their husbands. And carry on humanity, of course.”

“Well, I don’t have any personal experience and I’ve never consulted an expert as Papa—who has amazing foresight—did. I have been told, by one of the witnesses in a case we investigated, that it can be rather uncomfortable and unpleasant for a girl, especially if it’s the first time.” Jonty lifted his glass and drank, in part to hide a sudden unpleasant memory he’d had of his own first time, when it had certainly been painful and beyond distressing. But then he’d been an extremely unwilling participant in the procedure. “I suppose Lavinia might have been talking to some of her friends who’d found the same and it could have made her even more frightened. Some women can be very spiteful. Have you considered adoption?”

“That would solve the children bit, but it doesn’t help with the rest, does it?”

“No. And I suppose that’s the real heart of the matter, isn’t it?” The clock in the hall struck eleven—this felt like it would be a long night. “It’s about my poor sister actually taking a pleasure in *things*.”

“You say women can enjoy it if the conditions were right? You think that possible?” The glimmer of hope—doubtless unexpected hope—in Ralph’s eye transformed his unhappy face.

Jonty smiled in fond remembrance of how wonderful going to bed with his first lover had turned out, how fantastic it was having sex with Orlando. “Of that I have no doubt, Ralph. Although how we get Lavinia to that blessed position I’m not entirely sure.”

Ralph was silent for what was for him a very long time, being a man as naturally loquacious as Jonty. In the end he put down his glass with a sigh. “Then I’m not sure there’s any hope. I don’t think I could talk to anyone else about this and I’m sure Lavinia wouldn’t talk, even to you. She’s immensely ashamed of the whole business.”

“I think you have to proceed with very small steps, Ralph. Perhaps she might let you be slightly more familiar if you explained that’s as far as it would go. One tiny step more this week, another the next and so on. Gradually build up her confidence.” Jonty could feel a blush creeping up his neck. He found it easy enough to discuss the unbridled lust in *Titus Andronicus* and the awful consequences for the hero’s daughter—another Lavinia, such an unfortunate choice of name—but discussing one’s own sister was agony.

“I could try it, Jonty. I’d rather try than leave things as they are, but I’ve no idea if it’ll work. I do love your sister so very much yet our relationship is lacking something essential at its very heart.” Ralph shook his brother-in-law’s hand and rose resignedly from his chair.

“Let me think about it. I might be granted some great inspiration before morning.” Jonty patted Ralph’s sagging shoulders. “We’ll sort it out, old man.”

“Hard work, was it?” Orlando was sitting on the fireside chair with a book perched on his knees when his lover slipped through the door en route to bed.

“Just a little.” Jonty drooped into the seat opposite and undid his shoes. “What’s that you’re reading?”

“Euclid.”

“I always said you live for nothing but pleasure.” Jonty leaned back in the chair with a sigh. “Poor Ralph. Seems pretty hopeless.”

“Was this the conversation you’ve been dreading? The ‘Lavinia won’t let me make love to her and maybe you can help as you’re pretty unconventional in bed yourself’ discussion?”

“The very same.” Jonty ran his hands over tired eyes. “They don’t just not make love, they don’t seem to touch or pet or have anything more than a cuddle. It’s so sad.”

“It’s not just the pain she’ll be frightened of, it’s the penetration. The feeling that someone else is sharing your body and doing it for their own pleasure, with no guarantee that they care for yours.”

By the time Jonty had been whacked on the back twice and had a glass of water he'd recovered the ability to talk. "What sort of language is that to use? If that's what comes from reading Euclid I'll have to ban it." He picked up the book, shook it and shrugged. "Well, there's no smut in there so it must all come from out of your head."

"Of course it does, idiot. Don't you think I've thought about it?" Orlando moved to the bed, taking his lover with him. "I've known how Lavinia feels and it's not pleasant. It's about surrendering, losing control, all sorts of things which anyone with a bit of spirit might balk at."

"Yet you overcame it." Jonty stroked his lover's hand. "Wonderfully. I'm sure Ralph and Lavinia love each other as much as we do, so there must be hope. How did you work the oracle, back then? I've never fathomed what the change was, what overcame the fear."

"Nothing did. I was still frightened, but it was like...like a sailor in the line of English ships at Trafalgar. I knew I had to do my duty, no matter how scared I was, because it was the right and proper thing to do." He squeezed Jonty's hand. "For us."

"You are the most wonderful idiot in the whole of Christendom." Jonty nuzzled against Orlando's brow. "I'm not sure I can win round Lavinia with a Nelson-type pep-talk, though. Not sure I want to talk to her at all." A theatrical grimace spread over his handsome face.

"Well, I'm not going to." Orlando lay back on the bed, covering his face with the pillow.

"I should smother you while I have the chance." Jonty grabbed the pillow, then had what was possibly a heaven-sent inspiration. There'd been an occasion in his past when he'd prayed for an angel to come and deliver him from temptation; then his prayer had been answered in the form of a very unlikely angelic being. The deliverer had been a lady in her late forties, of no great beauty but formidable brains and an extremely incongruous tendency to giggle. "I've got an idea. If I can get Ralph to persuade Lavinia to come up to Cambridge with him for a few days, we could arrange dinner at High Table, organise some tennis and punting and make it a pleasant little holiday."

"And?"

"There's someone we could introduce her to, a lady who might just be able to get her to talk about such intimate things."

"Miss Peters." Orlando shot bolt upright. "I mean Mrs. Sheridan. I'll never get used to calling her that. Do you think she'd do it?"

"She's so awash with the milk of human kindness at the moment she'd refuse nothing." It was true. The Master of St. Bride's sister had found late-flowering love and its bright autumnal colours had mellowed her. "I bet she knows more than she lets on and if anyone can get some sense into Lavinia's noddle it'll be our Ariadne."

"She fancies you, of course."

Jonty nearly choked a second time. "I beg your pardon?"

“Miss Peters. Mrs. Sheridan. Has done since first she laid eyes on you, if I’m any judge. I’m glad she’s got her own version to cherish now.”

“I hardly think Dr. Sheridan is any version of me. Built more along your lines, although I hope you’re as handsome as he is in twenty years.” Jonty’s fingers found the line of Orlando’s jaw, normally smooth but at this time of the night beginning to feel like fine sandpaper. “Rationing the toffee pudding to once a week and cutting out the advocaat entirely should preserve you.” Jonty took his friend’s tie in his hand, gently caressing it. “You were born to wear the finest silk, Orlando. I’m so glad your wardrobe now reflects your true station in life.” He began to undo the knot, carefully sliding the material so it couldn’t snag.

“If you’re so impressed with my clothes, why do you always seem to be on a mission to rid me of them?”

“Because I have yet to decide whether I prefer you as a decently turned-out Edwardian gentleman or in your natural condition. Both are wonderful sights, yet I’m hard-pressed to say which is more delightful.”

Orlando blushed. “You do talk like someone in a Jane Austen novel.”

“You’ve never read any of her books so how could you possibly know? And anyway, all her gentlemen are far too well bred to say such stuff.”

“Meaning you aren’t?” Orlando slid his arm around his lover’s waist, making inroads along the way to freeing the shirt from the trouser band.

“I’m a desperate rogue, as well you know.” Jonty kissed his friend, gently and lovingly.

“You are the worst rogue in the kingdom—I’m surprised you’ve not been keelhauled or put in the stocks or... Oh Lord, I’m starting to sound like you!” Orlando pulled Jonty to him, kissing him hard and long. “Good, that should send all the blethering back to where it came from.”

“Orlando, I adore you. You’re a big, silly, bad-tempered camel but I worship the very desert you sail over. Come on, take me to your tent, oh Bedouin chief.”

“I wish you’d decide what I am—human, animal or some sort of red herring.” Orlando grinned then hugged Jonty close. “Whatever I am I’m very lucky.” He kissed his lover again, with great tenderness this time.

Jonty let his hand drift onto his lover’s chest. “Mama didn’t say separate beds tonight. *And* everyone will be fast asleep as they have a busy day tomorrow.”

“You are quite insatiable.” Orlando didn’t remove the hand. “Isn’t all the frolicking at Forsythia Cottage enough for you?”

“Ah. That doesn’t have the frisson of a strange bed, does it? I don’t know about you, but the White City’s got me all excited—either that or motoring has. I feel incredibly stimulated.”

“You don’t need to tell me that, it’s clear.” Orlando’s hand wriggled down, took hold of the evidence. “This exhibit would be enough to convict anyone in court. You could never plead innocence.”

“I wouldn’t even try. Extenuating circumstances. Under the influence of Coppersmith.” Jonty’s voice wavered so much it seemed impossible for him to continue his plea to the court. “Are you going to do anything profitable with that exhibit or just let its potential go to waste?”

“I could never be so profligate.” Orlando rolled his lover onto his back. “Waste not, want not. That was always the Coppersmith motto.” He made a start on buttons, braces, anything which stood in the way of contact with tantalising flesh. “And there’s not an inch of this to be squandered, tonight. Or any night.” He leaned down to kiss Jonty’s chest, the scant golden hairs tickling his face as he made his devotions.

“It seems an excellent motto.” Jonty waited for the kisses to start moving lower, glad his parents had given Orlando such a large bed, where things could be both comfortable and dignified.

“I never tire of this, you know. Each time is so familiar and yet like walking an unknown path again.”

“You talk such twaddle.” Orlando raised his head, laid a wet and toothsome kiss on his shoulder. “Twaddle.” Another mildly violent kiss, this time above the collarbone. “Twaddle.” One to the chest. “Twadd—”

“Stop it.” Jonty thrust his lover’s head away. “I shall be a mass of bruises in the morning. Then I’ll snitch to Mama and she’ll whack you one.”

“Why is it you revert to being a schoolboy every time we’re in your parents’ home? You’re a grown man and you act like you’re seven.” Orlando caressed his friend’s face. “It’s rather nice, actually. Never knew you then. I’d have loved you even though you were such a hooligan.”

“Want me to be a hooligan now? All wild and roving?” The excitement in Jonty’s voice could scarcely be contained. For all that they were both experienced now, usually able to control their passions and make things last far beyond where the end should have come, sometimes things moved faster than they could cope with. This was one of those times.

“Please.” Orlando liked to take his time, to bring things to the point where it was almost unbearable, but now he wanted to come and to be quick about it. “Now, Jonty. Take me now.”

He was taken. It was better than ever.

“Remember that chap, Orlando?” Jonty shook out the newspaper—it was promising to be an excellent morning. Ralph had agreed to the trip to Cambridge and had then decamped, with all the rest of the family, for a morning at a flower show which Mrs. Stewart was opening, leaving the two men in sole possession of the house. And all the morning papers, alongside an excellent pot of coffee. The sun streamed in through the library windows and all was well with the world.

“What chap? Is that any sort of a specific description to give a person?” Orlando frowned. “We see lots of chaps, every day.”

“And few of them as tetchy as you, thank goodness.” Jonty grinned. “Do you remember the chap in the chair at the White City yesterday, the one who looked like he was asleep? He was dead.”

“What?” Like an old war horse hearing the sound to charge, at the mention of death Orlando was out of his chair and looking over his lover’s shoulder at the *Times*.

“Terribly rude, reading over other people’s shoulders.” Jonty swished the paper shut. “I know that Alexander was supposed to let Hephaistion do it, but I’m not sure I should extend you the same privilege. You aren’t ‘Jonty, too’.”

“Pardon me?”

“There was some queen—probably along the lines of Mama and equally prone to making gaffs—who mistook Hephaistion for the king. Then Alexander came in the tent or wherever it was, the old girl saw her mistake and came over all peculiar. Very embarrassed. So he said, ‘Eh up, Mother, never mind...’”

“That’s rot. Alexander never had a Yorkshire accent.” Orlando shook his head.

“How do you know? He was a northerner, after all, and I bet he sounded outlandish to the queen. Anyway he pointed to Hephaistion and said, ‘Don’t worry, he is Alexander, too.’” Jonty took off his spectacles to polish them on a little silk cloth. “Which he was, of course, and you’re not. Not Jonty.”

“I suspect I share the shame privileges with you as Hephaistion did with old blondie, in the inner chamber at least. So I should get the same rights in the state rooms. Let me see the story. Please.”

“For the sheer effrontery of referring to the conqueror of half the known world as ‘blondie’, I think you’ve won the right.” Jonty opened up the page, carefully adjusting his spectacles before pointing to the little article at the side of the page. “Has to be the same chap, from the location—found on a chair in the corner of our old friend the haunt of kangaroo and kookaburra.”

“They suspect heart failure?” Orlando quickly scanned the article to get the salient points. “He looked a bit young for that.”

“That’s what I thought, although I did once know of a young lad—strapping bloke, very hale—who dropped down dead on the rugby field one day. It turned out he’d had a weak heart from childhood and it had taken all that time to make itself known.”

“That’s awful.” Orlando turned, suddenly wary. “Your heart’s sound, isn’t it? I mean, there’s no risk of you...”

“Sound as a bell, or so the doctor assures me every time Mama hauls us in for a regular checkup.” Jonty took off his glasses, using them as a useful tool to poke his lover. “I’m surprised she’s not been on to you to get the once-over. Very protective of her loved ones.”

“She’s dropped a none-too-subtle hint once or twice but that’s about all.” Orlando studied the article again. “Heart failure seems an awfully vague term. You don’t suppose it’s a euphemism for something else?” The glint in his eye spoke louder than any words would have done.

“You mean murder? I suppose at a pinch it might be.” Jonty tapped the newspaper. “Ian Halfpenny, of West Brompton. Very nice area, that—I think Ralph’s grandparents, the ones who begat the bishop, live there. Shame, though.” He folded the paper and laid it down with a sigh.

“Shame for Mr. Halfpenny, certainly.” Orlando narrowed his eyes. “But that’s not what you meant.”

“No, I meant it’s a shame for us, especially you. Even if it is murder, it’s very unlikely we’ll be allowed to get our paws on investigating it.”

Chapter Three

Whatever frustrations Orlando felt at not being allowed to poke his nose into murder had to be kept in check. He was the Stewarts' guest and couldn't be moping about all day wishing that he, as Jonty put it, could get out his deerstalker. Certainly not while they had important things like an evening at the theatre to be enjoying. It didn't stop him venting a bit of frustration to Mr. Stewart, who understood entirely about his plight. He was so sympathetic—and so demonstrative in his sympathy—that they nearly got booted out of their box, earning themselves a wiggling from Mrs. Stewart in the process.

Mr. Stewart had a pragmatic streak and connections, plenty of them, so it came as little surprise when Jonty and Orlando were summoned to meet Inspector Redknapp of the Metropolitan Police at the White City two days after they'd last been there.

Jonty didn't take his automobile this time, unsure whether turning up in it would create a favourable impression. "You never know with the constabulary. Some of them are so unenlightened they seem to hate anything which isn't horse-drawn."

Orlando raised an eyebrow but didn't comment, pleased to be spared the metal monster. His interest had been piqued by the summons although he wasn't getting his hopes up. It was most likely they were being consulted only as witnesses, and that probably because Mr. Stewart had been dropping a word or two in certain ears. Still, the police must have had suspicions, or else why would they want to talk to any witnesses at all?

He and Jonty lurked in the Court of Honour, feeling horribly conspicuous even among the crowds, until someone—evidently the man who was to meet them, given the official air he exuded—hove into view.

Inspector Redknapp was tall, slim, moustachioed and clearly in a bad mood. The way he offered his hand to be shaken looked remarkably like an insult, although his grip was firm. "Gentlemen—" that sounded like an insult, too, "—my colleagues in the Cambridge police said I should make myself known to you." If he'd actually used the words "bugger off" he couldn't have made his actual meaning clearer.

"Would that be Chief Inspector Wilson?" Jonty turned his hat in his hands, for once uncomfortable in the presence of the police.

"Aye, that's him. Chief Inspector Wilson, friend to the great and the good."

"The chief inspector..." Orlando began but his friend forestalled him.

“I’m pleased you’ve made Mr. Wilson’s acquaintance. He seems a shrewd man, highly respected.” Jonty fixed Redknapp with a keen look. “And one who’s got four pairs of ears, if he’s heard about this death so quickly.”

“He was informed, Dr. Stewart. Apparently your father was on the telephone to Cambridge as soon as he read about the dead body.”

Jonty stifled a groan. He loved his father, knew the man meant well—was probably trying to make Orlando happy by sniffing him out a case to test his wits on—but putting up the backs of the local constabulary wasn’t going to make any investigation, if there was one, any easier. Assuming they were asked in to an investigation, which seemed unlikely given Redknapp’s expression.

“What did Mr. Stewart say?” Orlando’s fingers drummed a tattoo on the brim of his hat as he fiddled with it.

“He told Inspector Wilson how you two had been at the White City when Mr. Halfpenny died and how you might even have seen the dead man, possibly just after the event.” Redknapp looked as if he didn’t believe a word of it.

“If Mr. Halfpenny was a youngish, rather lean man, wearing a nice but slightly worn suit and sitting as if asleep in the far right corner of the Australian building, then yes, we saw him. Two afternoons ago.” Jonty applied his best objective tone, especially as his friend looked as if he was about to explode.

“That would be him.” Inspector Redknapp sniffed loudly, clearly wishing it hadn’t been.

“So we’re to make a witness statement each?” Orlando’s voice spoke of anger contained. “About what we saw that afternoon?”

“We will require that from you, yes. I’ll get one of my constables to oblige presently.” Redknapp looked as if he had a large marble lodged halfway down his throat, which would neither ascend or descend.

“The *Times* said it was probably heart failure. This seems a lot of trouble to be going to for a natural death.” Jonty’s insouciant air wouldn’t have fooled a baby, let alone a policeman.

“The newspapers don’t know everything. And what they think they know they still get wrong.” Redknapp addressed the pavement. “It seems that Mr. Halfpenny was murdered. Poison.” Nothing about what sort of poison was going to be forthcoming.

Jonty ignored the “I told you so” look in his lover’s eye. “Thank you for clarifying the point. So witness statements would be required, naturally. Is that all you wanted us to come here for?” The habitual streak of mischief which ran through him had seized its moment. He’d guessed the cause of Redknapp’s discomfiture and wanted to get the last ounce of fun from it. “Did Mr. Wilson say anything else when you spoke to him?”

Redknapp’s voice was constrained, as if every word had to be forced out of his mouth, maybe with one of the wonderful engineering contraptions they’d seen in the machinery hall. “He said he’d worked with you on a couple of investigations...”

“Four, to be exact.” Orlando’s hands were twisting his hat brim as if it was Redknapp’s throat.

The inspector ignored him. “And he suggested—” Redknapp closed his eyes briefly and shuddered, “—I might consider asking you to work alongside us on this case.”

Jonty eventually broke the lengthy, painful silence following this remark. “You don’t seem to approve of the idea.”

“Approve? Dr. Stewart, I get bombarded with offers of so-called help. It’s not the fault of you amateurs, necessarily.”

Orlando bridled at the word amateur, his twisting fingers forming fists which looked like they were destined for the policeman’s face.

“It’s these stories about Sherlock bloo—wretched Holmes. Everyone wants to be a sleuth and show us poor dumb policemen how it’s done. Those wonderfully helpful members of the public come in with all their theories and deductions until I’m just about blue in the face.” Inspector Redknapp was working up a head of steam which wouldn’t have disgraced one of the machinery halls. “They get involved and mess up the case and generally make my life a nightmare. Then they’re cross when I don’t agree with their wonderful theorems about who committed the robbery in Pall Mall or who killed Lady Marmaduke’s terrier. I wish Conan Doyle would give it a rest. Blessed interfering busybodies.”

“The king didn’t regard us as ‘blessed interfering busybodies’ when he asked us in to tackle a case.” If Orlando thought that dropping an illustrious name was going to further his cause, he was wrong. Redknapp wasn’t impressed.

“Ah yes, the king.” He briefly bowed his head. “But His Majesty isn’t involved this time. I have a dead young man and I’ll need to be getting on with finding out who killed him.” He raised his hat. “I’d value your statements, gentlemen, and that’s as far as it goes. Inspector Wilson might have time for wet nursing, but I don’t.” He turned and moved off into the throng, which was probably as well because Orlando looked on the verge of committing murder himself.

“Swine.” Jonty voiced both their opinions. “I hope he gets himself in a total stew and has to come back cap in hand and then we’ll laugh in his face and say ‘no, thank you’.”

“Will we?” Far from being just cross, Orlando had a combative glint in his eye. “Mr. ‘you’re a pair of amateur nuisances’ Redknapp can’t stop us thinking, can he? Or falling into conversations with people. We’ll show him.”

“Are you sure? We’ve never acted without official sanction before, Orlando.” Jonty hastily corrected himself, wary of lying except when actually on a case. “With someone’s sanction, at least.”

“We have official sanction—Mr. Wilson wants us involved and that’s good enough for me. Isn’t it enough for you?”

They couldn’t investigate this killing off their own backs. No matter how much it would frustrate Orlando to be denied his bloodhound role, it would be the height of stupidity and they’d end up with at

least their knuckles rapped, if not worse. “Redknapp won’t like it. If he finds out we’ve been poking our noses in, he’ll go mad.” Jonty dropped his voice, shooing his friend off into one of the few quieter places to be found among the heaving mass of visitors. “I can imagine him hounding us, trying to find some petty way of getting his revenge.”

“The old threat of hard labour? It’s not a pleasant thought.” Orlando swallowed hard. “Still, we live under it all the time and as long as we’re not too idiotic, we could at least be constructive. He’d surely be grateful for some information, if we could root it out. As long as we don’t swan in and claim we’ve solved the crime for him. Then he would be down like a ton of bricks.”

“You like the idea, don’t you? You’re just like a little boy who’s been told not to touch something so he absolutely has to.” Jonty grinned. “So where do we start?”

Orlando’s eyes shone with the thrill of the chase, even if it was an illicit one. “With making our statements, like good little boys. And while we’re about it, we’ll winkle some information out of the poor unsuspecting constables.”

Jonty scrunched up his nose. “Inspector Redknapp might not be impressed by dropped names, but I’ve got one which will definitely help oil the wheels...”

If the name Richard Stewart worked wonders in circles both royal and official, mentioning his wife to a policeman brought an equally miraculous effect. They gave their statements and received in return Halfpenny’s address, information on his employment, a picture of what he looked like on the mortuary slab, details of the contents of his pockets and why the policemen thought he’d been killed.

Cowes Road wasn’t the smartest part of West Brompton, a street which was clinging on to respectability, or so reckoned the younger constable, whose sister was a maid there. Halfpenny appeared to work as a travelling salesman, but one of the classier varieties, dealing with items of silverware and often journeying to the continent. The picture they displayed of a sad-looking corpse left no doubt that it was the man Jonty and Orlando had seen, and forced a shudder through the pair. Not so much intimations of mortality but the cold, clinical way in which the shell of the man was depicted. This item was the only one which hadn’t emerged from the use of the magic words “Helena Stewart”, the policemen having been specifically instructed to double-check these two weren’t wasting Inspector Redknapp’s valuable time with a case of mistaken identity.

Halfpenny’s pockets had contained the usual ragbag of items which might have emerged from the turning out of any man’s clothes. Except Orlando’s, of course—he was neat to the point of absurdity, rarely carrying more than his wallet, a clean handkerchief and some keys. Jonty seemed to lug around half a drawer’s worth of oddments, several of which were edible.

The policemen said they’d found the dead man’s wallet, which contained his business card and had led to them putting a name to him. Handkerchiefs, a pen-knife, a notepad with a page torn out, a small propelling pencil and a bill for stationery which had Halfpenny’s address on it. Nothing remarkable or

terribly helpful, except for a postcard from a lady at the firm he worked for, who'd come to identify the body.

"Was he married?" It seemed the obvious question, although this time Orlando didn't get out his own notepad and pencil to take down the answer. He felt odd without the comfort of what had become an essential item in his sleuthing toolkit.

"Didn't appear to be. His address is a flat in a house split into apartments and he seems to have lived there alone. Highly thought of within his company, though—they were very upset to hear the news." The older policeman spoke in a measured way. "I suppose there's family somewhere—we hope to be able to trace them as soon as we can."

Jonty nodded. "They'll need to know, of course. Terrible business, murder."

"I hate it." The younger constable piped up. "Don't we lose enough young men doing their duty in the services?"

Orlando was puzzled at the incongruous observation and would have liked to pursue it, but the older policeman hushed his colleague. "Now don't get started on that. This will turn out to be the usual thing, sir. A woman who's been a bit free with her affections and a jealous husband who's determined to put an end to it one way or another. Or someone short of money who stood to make a bit of a gain with this chap out of the way. It's rarely a total stranger or some young hooligan doing the killing, no matter what certain of the newspapers say." He shuffled his papers together. "Thank you for your time, gentlemen. You've been very objective and sensible witnesses, not something I can say for everyone we have to deal with." He turned to Jonty. "And would it be too forward of me to extend my regards to your mother?"

When they were well clear of the little office where they'd been interviewed—and en route to some much-needed refreshment—Orlando could wait no longer, for fear he'd burst. "What is it about your mother that she inspires such devotion by name alone? Is all of London in awe of her?"

"No. Well, possibly yes, but not in this case. There was a policeman, about a year ago, who was shot by some young brigand who'd got his hands on a pistol and shouldn't have been trusted with anything more than a balloon. Luckily the officer didn't die, but he wasn't able to carry on with his work. Had a wife and children, to boot."

"And?" His lover's habit of leaving stories halfway through drove Orlando to distraction.

"And Mama got to work with her usual mixture of kindness and common sense. Found the man a job in an office, set up a little trust fund for the children to be educated or be apprenticed, has the wife round to tea once a month and they talk hats."

"Hats?"

"The woman used to be a milliner. She still does some special commissions for Mama's friends, which satisfies all round." Jonty eyed the crowds, as if to locate one of the woman's creations. "Hence the

regard by the police—Mama didn't settle for condescending charity. Nobody wants to be beholden or go cap in hand for funds, you know."

"I know." Orlando recalled the time after his father's death when the Coppersmiths had been continually short of money and his mother had refused all offers of help as they were beneath her dignity. Keeping her head held high in public had mattered more than other purely pragmatic things. "Your family should be displayed in Trafalgar Square or some other place as an example for everyone to aspire to."

"Don't tell them that. Mama would be there like a shot." Jonty slapped his lover's arm and steered him towards somewhere they could get a restorative glass of champagne.

The Stewarts' house was cool, even though the summer sun beat down fiercely outside. Well designed, well laid out, warm in winter and temperate in spring, it was a house in a hundred. And yet it was still primarily a home to be lived in and enjoyed rather than admired from a distance or praised for pristine furnishings which never had bottoms applied to them. Jonty loved the morning room overlooking the gardens and would stand for ages looking out at the dappled flower beds, admiring the audacity of the sparrows and thinking about very little. As he was doing now.

"There's a letter for Dr. Coppersmith, sir."

Hopkins the butler, who'd glided in noiselessly, held out the tray. It was unusual to have the post presented rather than being left out in the hall as normal, but the black border around this one, and the clear evidence of redirection from Cambridge, made explanation unnecessary. Jonty gave his thanks, picked up the letter, noted that—as expected—it was from Kent, and took it to the study. Orlando had been playing at codes with Mr. Stewart, introducing him to some new, obscure yet seemingly intriguing method he'd come across. But he was there no longer, having been called to the telephone.

Jonty met him in the hall. "Orlando, I'm so sorry, I fear..."

"My grandmother, she's dead." Orlando tentatively took the letter, as if afraid to open it.

"How did you know?" Jonty wondered whether the formidable Coppersmith logic had turned its mind to clairvoyance.

"Mr. MacBride, her solicitor, was on the telephone just now. Mrs. Ward had seen the letter and its postmark, come to the correct conclusion and got in touch with MacBride so he could ring me here. Very sensible woman, our housekeeper, to make sure I was contacted as soon as possible..."

"Sh." Jonty took his lover's arm, recognising his rambling as a sign of distress. "Whatever we need to do, we'll do it. Come on, it's all going to be well."

"I'm sorry." Orlando wrapped himself in his lover's embrace, tears flowing now, a steady stream which wouldn't be contained. "I loved her so much. She showed me more kindness than anyone else ever did until you came along."

"I know. She was a truly remarkable woman. And she loved you in return, more than she probably ever said." Jonty could feel his own tears forming but gulped them back; one of them needed to be strong. "No one could have been in a room with the pair of you and not realise how much you meant to each other." He led his lover into the morning room, where the staff mightn't be embarrassed by seeing the tears.

"I'm glad you got the chance to meet her." Orlando fumbled for his handkerchief, had one of Jonty's thrust into his hand, wiped his nose but didn't break free of his lover's grip. "She thought the world of you. Sang your praises in all her letters." The tears flowed once more. "Now who'll write to me?"

Jonty resisted the temptation to answer such a daft question—it was no more than the grief speaking. He'd given his third, and last clean, hankie to his lover when Mrs. Stewart appeared, sent by whatever strange sixth sense she possessed and bearing a pile of linen. "I shan't intrude." She thrust half a dozen handkerchiefs into her son's hand. "Just wanted to say that whatever's needed we'll help with, if you want us to. Richard insists that nothing could be too much trouble." She gently stroked the back of Orlando's head and slipped out again.

"Oh, Lord, so much to do." The call to practicality had put a sudden end to Orlando's tears. Whether she'd intended it or not, Mrs. Stewart had made the perfect intervention. "I should ring MacBride back, I wasn't terribly coherent before."

"He'll be used to it. And he'll have a list of what you need to deal with." Jonty caressed his lover's face. "Not that there'll be much in the way of business, I would guess—he and your grandmother struck me as a very matter-of-fact pair. It'll all be in excellent order."

"There's the funeral to be organised, though. I have no idea how or where to start." Orlando made a start on the next hankie.

"Well, that's an easy one to answer. With Papa, of course. He has experience of these things, and contacts everywhere. I bet if you went to the pole with Peary you'd meet an Eskimo who knows Papa and would offer you some seal blubber on the strength of it. Why don't you and him go down to Margate today and get things moving?" Jonty made a neat little pile of sodden linen. "You'd be much better off doing something, rather than just brooding here. And the sea air always does you good."

"You'll come down, too?" Orlando's eyes held a frightened look, one which his lover hadn't seen there in a long time.

"Of course, the day after tomorrow, when you've got things a bit straighter. Mama and me both, if you wish." Jonty squeezed his friend's hands, holding them to his heart. "You need to have a bit of time down there without me rattling around. To say goodbye to her memory properly."

Orlando nodded, placing hankie four on the pile and picking up hankie five. "You're very wise. Your father's son. Of course." He attempted a watery smile. "I'll go and find Mr. Stewart and ask him if he'll accompany me."

“I suspect he’s already asked Hopkins to organise packing him a case—on the quiet, of course, so he doesn’t appear presumptuous.” Jonty took a final squeeze of his lover’s hands then let him go.

When the door had closed, he walked to the window, looking out over the gardens in the square again. Flowers, trees, birds, children rolling a hoop along the grass, a delivery boy whistling tunelessly and probably about to cop it from one of the footmen when they caught him. Normal life going on, sights and sounds he’d normally delight in, a cloud over them now.

Grief was hard enough to bear, the loss of someone so close, but he could see his way through that. How on earth would he cope with sharing the great secret Grandmother Coppersmith had entrusted him with before her death? And how on earth would Orlando react when he heard it?

Chapter Four

When Jonty arrived in Kent he was pleased to find his lover in good spirits. The funeral had been arranged for the next day, Mr. Stewart having organised all the practicalities while MacBride invited as many friends of Mrs. Coppersmith as he could find. Orlando had set to tracking down the various maids and gardeners who'd worked for his grandmother over the years, convinced that she wouldn't have wanted her send-off—or the food and drink to be served afterwards—to be restricted to the well-to-do.

They'd dealt with the will and it had gone to probate. She'd left everything to her grandson, apart from what she'd entrusted to her little fund for poor but brilliant students. His inheritance wouldn't be a huge amount, even when the house and contents were sold, but it would be more money than Orlando had ever possessed. Or at least the most money prior to the time when Jonty had wangled him an income by selling off the jewellery he'd inherited from his own grandmother. Those diamonds and emeralds had been intended to grace Jonty's spouse so it was highly appropriate that they decorated Orlando's bank balance.

There'd been enough time after Jonty had settled into his hotel for the pair of them to take a pleasant stroll before supper, heading along the front to look at the boats, along by the water's edge for a while, then a stroll around the little town. Orlando seemed to have some definite end in mind and a secretive smile had been playing on his lips, quite out of keeping with the serious demeanour he'd borne ever since he'd first received his bad news.

"There's something I need to show you." Orlando took his lover's arm, dragging him along the road and standing him in front of a shop window. "Look."

Jonty didn't need any further instruction, it was clear what he'd been brought to see. The window belonged to a photographer, who was displaying examples of his wares—not a bad studio if the examples on show were truly representative. "Bless my soul. It's him, isn't it? Halfpenny?"

"Yes and no." Orlando fought back a grin, the first one Jonty had seen grace his face for what seemed an age. "It's the man we saw at the White City, I've no doubt of that."

There could be little uncertainty. Both men had a keen eye for a face and would have had a fair chance of recognising this man again. They'd observed him for long enough, gently mocking him as he appeared to sleep. And they'd had the added privilege of being shown that picture of the dead man, laid out and wearing the same clothes he'd worn when they'd seen him in life. Or, more correctly, in death. Redknapp had wanted to be sure his unwanted "amateur detectives" really were talking about the same person as he was, and Orlando had been offended at the time. Now it seemed like a stroke of luck.

“So why ‘yes and no’?” Jonty stared at the photo, wondering what secrets it hid.

“Because his name isn’t Halfpenny. Not according to the proprietor in here.” Orlando drew his lover away, whispering gleefully. “I saw the photo the day after we arrived. I’d come for a walk to clear my head while your father sorted out Mr. MacBride, and I almost walked past this place. I just caught it out of the corner of my eye.”

“You are so wonderfully melodramatic.” They strode down the street, not wishing to appear too interested. You couldn’t tell where Redknapp might have a spy lurking.

“Shall I proceed or will I shut up and you’ll have to guess the rest?”

“I probably can guess the rest but I mustn’t deprive myself of the fun of hearing you say it.” Jonty found a convenient bench and plonked himself down. “Please proceed.”

“If you’re not careful I’ll proceed to murder you.” Despite what he said, Orlando took his place on the seat. “I knew it was our man, so I called in, just on the off chance that they could tell me something. They still had the negative—the portrait was only taken about a few weeks ago and they keep these things for at least a year—but the name associated with it was Robshaw, not Halfpenny.”

“They couldn’t have got it wrong?” Jonty tried to temper the excitement he was feeling. This felt like the start of the chase, and he wasn’t sure they had any part in it. “Something like Halfpenny being the man sitting for the photo and another man paying for it for some reason?”

“No. The chap I spoke to had taken the portrait himself and remembered the sitter clearly, not only because the picture turned out so well. They’d had a long talk about Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson, and whether any man could really interpret so much from a few clues as Holmes claimed to.” Orlando snorted as he mentioned Sherlock Holmes. He had as little affection for the man as Redknapp did. “It might have been just a matter of days before his death.”

“Redknapp won’t like this, you know. He won’t like any of it.” Jonty grinned.

“He won’t have to be told about it—not yet, anyway. It might all turn out to be a mare’s nest.”

Jonty didn’t believe a word of it. “Did your photographer man by any wonderful chance have an address for this Robshaw chap, or whatever he was actually called? Perhaps he was neither Robshaw nor Halfpenny.”

“I didn’t ask about an address. Well, don’t look at me like that—how could I go poking my nose in when we’d been told so very incontrovertibly to steer clear?”

There was a look in Orlando’s eyes which gave the lie to his words; Jonty read it like a book. “So how *did* you get the address, then?”

“I told him—” a flush spread up Orlando’s face, “—that I believed the man in the window had been the same one who’d been paying attentions to my sister, unwanted on the family’s part if not on hers. That’s why I was checking the name he’d given, as we believed he’d been using a false one.”

“So this obliging photographer gave you Robshaw’s address, as well, all free and gratis?”

Orlando grinned through his blushes. “Absolutely. My conscience regarding Inspector Redknapp is clear.”

“In spite of the lies you told about your nonexistent sister?” Jonty slapped his knees with great enthusiasm. “You didn’t, by any wondrous chance, get a copy of the picture, as well?”

“No. It never occurred to me.” Orlando went white. “I’m afraid I’ve had rather a lot on my mind.”

Never occurred to him? This wasn’t like Orlando, no matter what was exercising his brain. “Not to fret, that’s easily remedied. I’ll call in and see him early tomorrow and get one ordered. Might prove useful. Now, will you tell me where this chap hails from or will I be made to guess?”

“Not West Brompton, for a start. Winchester.”

“Curiouser and curiouser. Why was he having his picture taken in Margate?”

“He was here on a short holiday, apparently—at least that has the ring of truth, even though you’d hardly regard this part of the coast as being the height of fashion or high living. I see no reason to doubt it, unless we find evidence to the contrary.” Orlando shrugged. “Perhaps Margate held special memories for him, as it does for me. But I’m not sure that’s important. The name is.”

“So what’s the plan? A nice trip down to Winchester? When we’ve finished here, I mean.” Jonty felt like an old but eager sailor hearing the call to beat to quarters.

“I think so.” Orlando rose and stretched before encouraging his lover to set off for the hotel and supper with his parents. “Although what awaits us there, who knows?”

“A second wife, maybe. Or I should say a first, if our friends in the constabulary were right and there was no household in West Brompton, just a solitary gentleman in his flat.” Jonty wrinkled his nose. “I hope we don’t end up having to break the awful news to some weeping woman with a toddler at her skirts who just thinks her husband’s been held up abroad somewhere with his job.”

Orlando shuddered. “Ye gods, I hadn’t thought of that. I’d just envisaged some sort of dirty dealing, the travelling abroad part of things being a useful cover for all sorts of intrigue. Nothing involving romance.”

“You amaze me. You really hadn’t considered a wife or mistress being located at this other address?” He thought that vestige of naïveté in his lover had long gone. “Actually, going to Winchester straight away might not be such a good idea. I think if there’s any chance he was leading a double life—Halfpenny in Middlesex, Robshaw in Hampshire, and who knows which, if either, was his proper name—then I’d like to find out more about the version which was said to be murdered. Before we go hunting the unknown variety, I mean.” His eagerness was being seasoned with an unnerving portion of disquiet. “Our experience might be limited, but murder so often seems to go hand in hand with passion. I don’t want to be laid out by the rolling pin of some irate woman in Hampshire who finds out we know she travelled up to town and murdered her errant husband.”

“You lost me at the first Hampshire.” Orlando’s frown was the one he usually kept for the dunderheads. “Let’s get this clear. We’ll make the big assumption—and don’t you dare tell my students I do such slovenly things—that this chap was really called Robshaw and has been living and working in London under an assumed name. How do you propose, given that we’ve been told not to touch, to find out anything about him? If we go snooping around where he lived or worked, we’ll soon be found out by Redknapp and his cronies.”

“Will we? Granted it wouldn’t be terribly wise if we try to search the dead man’s room, but we could ask some of the locals up in West Brompton if they knew him. Perhaps he frequented a local public house or chatted up the girl in the Post Office. And I know for a fact that Papa’s been on the case already. He and Hopkins have been going through all the silver and think they’ve found a teapot supplied by the firm Halfpenny worked for. It would be easy enough to go back to where we bought it and pretend to want a milk jug or something to match. There are so many people we could ask.”

“Ask what?”

“If they knew Halfpenny and if they had any suspicions about him. People love to gossip, especially if those people are female—they might give us a clue to whatever his great secret was.” Jonty lowered his voice. “Perhaps he kept a man in Winchester.”

“Dr. Stewart! Not everyone thinks like you do.” Orlando punched his lover’s arm. “I had in mind he might be involved in something like espionage, hence all the travelling. Look at all the trouble going on in India—what if it’s spreading over here and there are agents at work among us?”

It took a heavy whack to his back to get Jonty to stop laughing, and then he had a coughing spasm before he could talk coherently. “You have to stop letting Dr. Panesar buttonhole you in the Senior Common Room—with his tall tales he’s got half the fellows of St. Bride’s looking under their beds for assassins or fomenters of civil unrest. Trouble in India’s hardly likely to spread to West Brompton, is it? Or deepest, darkest Hampshire. This will prove to be the usual sordid affair, mark my words. A crime of passion or someone looking to make money. Come on, back to the hotel.”

The heat of the day had left a muggy evening, with the threat of a storm brewing somewhere. There was even the suggestion of thunder far out at sea, somewhere on the French coast perhaps, sounding like great guns in some distant battle. Jonty and Orlando reached the shelter of the hotel just as a few large tepid spots of rain hit the pavements and were getting themselves outside of a cold collation when the heavens opened in earnest.

The day of Mrs. Coppersmith’s funeral dawned bright and gleaming, the thunderstorm having cleared the air and leaving a world which sparkled like a diamond. It seemed a fitting day to send off the person who had brought a sparkle, if an occasional and temporary one, into her grandson’s life. The congregation

sang the hymns with gusto, Wesley much in evidence, with a touch of revivalist songs to raise the spirits. There were as many smiles as tears, as much laughter afterwards as there was solemnity, just as the woman had told her solicitor she wanted.

Orlando presided over the reception afterwards, making sure all his guests had the opportunity to speak to him, give their remembrance of his grandmother, and feel they'd had a special day. Mrs. Stewart acted as chatelaine in her usual impeccable manner, ensuring everyone was well oiled and foddered, while her son and husband charmed all in sight. One or two folk had queried the Stewarts' presence but MacBride had patiently explained how Mrs. Stewart had been Dr. Coppersmith's guardian since the time he was orphaned. He'd confided that this fact had always been kept secret to protect Orlando from the unwanted attentions of young ladies who might have sought a connection with such a notable family.

He wasn't aware that he was lying, having had the story directly from Mrs. Coppersmith when she'd updated her will to accommodate her little trust fund, or so he told everyone who was willing to listen. Jonty's admiration of the old woman's common sense continued to increase by leaps and bounds.

Eventually the guests drifted away, after shaking Orlando's hand and taking a final blow on their handkerchiefs. Mr. and Mrs. Stewart walked back to the hotel, leaving their lads alone to say a private farewell, one that hadn't been possible under the scrutiny of dozens of pairs of eyes.

"Isn't it handsome?" Jonty turned a crystal vase in his hands, admiring both the subtle colours and the way the light diffracted through it, rainbows appearing from nowhere and lighting the walls of the drawing room. "It looks Italian or something else which smacks of warm Mediterranean shores. Your grandmother had impeccable taste." He placed it on the table, took out his handkerchief and passed it to his lover, whose eyes were welling.

"Thank you." Orlando blew his nose. "I'm sorry. Being soppy again."

"No you're not. You have every right to cry—no point in keeping all those feelings pent up. You were very brave at the funeral, and afterwards—quite proper that it should all come out at some point." Jonty clapped his friend's shoulder, loath to risk any more intimate contact until he was sure all the mourners had left the vicinity. Some had been lingering in the street, chatting, even after the Stewarts had left. He turned his attention to an exotic glass bottle, one which suggested oriental markets, hints of eastern promise. "I wonder where she got this?"

"I have no idea." The tears were under control now, clearly to Orlando's relief. "Must try to keep the old stiff upper lip—Grandmother hated to see me upset." He touched the bottle. "She used to let me play with this as a child, so long as I was extra careful."

"Did you pretend to be Aladdin?" Jonty made a theatrical rubbing motion over the bottle's gilded surface. "If this was one of those magic bottles, we could summon up a genie and you could have the obligatory three wishes. What would you choose?"

He'd been trying to bring some cheer to the situation, as usual resorting to stupidity to bring his lover out of his dark moods, but this time he'd strayed further into the blackness. The length of time it took Orlando to muster a reply made that plain enough.

He eventually answered. "I wish above all things to know why my father killed himself. I wish I'd had the courage to ask my grandmother when she was still alive, but I didn't. I couldn't." He took the bottle from his lover's hands, caressing the glass as if he might see the answer there. "If only these artefacts could talk. Tell me all the secrets they've heard whispered in this house down the years."

"Perhaps your grandmother wouldn't have told you, even if she knew. I would imagine he had a happy childhood with such a mother—you've always told me that she was kind to you when you visited." Jonty bit his lip. He was playing for time, he knew it, and he'd have to make the truth known before they left the house.

"I believe my father's childhood was a very ordinary one, or so my grandmother told me. The usual stuff—school and holidays and bathing down in the sea. He never really spoke about it. At least I'm not aware that anything terrible happened to him while he was younger. Of course he always alleged I was spoiled rotten when I came here." Orlando glowed at the remembrance of the happiest days of his boyhood, the ones spent being taken for treats at Margate or Ramsgate and wandering along the beaches.

"That's a fairly universal complaint. Even my brother moans that his Thomas is being led astray every time he visits Sussex or London, and that child has a doddle of a time at home as well, indulged madly by his parents." Jonty paused, wondering how to turn the conversation where he wanted it to go. Or rather where it had to go—he'd no great enthusiasm for the task he'd been set. "Your father, he didn't have the opportunity to get to know *his* father, did he?"

"No, my paternal grandfather died when my grandmother was expecting their first child. Perhaps that made a difference." Orlando turned his gaze from the bottle to Jonty. "I don't remember telling you that."

"Your grandmother told me, when we came here to sort out that business with the fund she wanted to set up." Jonty's answer came out smoothly; he'd had it long prepared. "It might well have made a difference to him, if he'd had a man's steadying hand. I wonder what your grandfather was like."

"I have no idea. There are no portraits of him here—not like being at one of your homes where you can't turn a corner without some Stewart or Forster or Dewberry leering at you from a wall, all of them looking horribly familiar."

"I wonder why that was?" Jonty tried to sound insouciant. "Why your grandmother didn't keep a likeness of some sort?"

"I always assumed it was because she preferred landscapes or still lives. The house has plenty of those. Or maybe we couldn't afford to commission an artist." Orlando stopped. He'd known Jonty long enough to read him as clearly as a paper on imaginary numbers. "You know something about this as well, don't you? Would you be so kind as to share it with me?"

"I will, Orlando, with what's going to be a mixture of pleasure and regret. I haven't been allowed to up until now, having promised your grandmother it wouldn't be mentioned while she was alive. Please sit down." Jonty plonked himself on the sofa and drew his lover down beside him.

"Is it that bad, that I have to be seated to hear it?" Orlando's face, still pallid from the funeral, became paler.

"I don't think so, it's a common enough tale, although I'm not too sure how you'll react. You still have the capacity to surprise me. It'll certainly give you a bit of a shock and we don't want a repeat of the great faint you had on Jersey." Jonty swallowed hard, sat up straight as he'd been taught to do when dealing with important matters, and began. "Your grandmother wasn't a Coppersmith by marriage, just by birth alone. I'm sorry, but I have no delicate way of putting this. When she fell pregnant with your father, out of wedlock, the family disowned her. She was well provided for, as was the child, but it was made plain there was to be no contact maintained between her and her family. Your grandfather died before your father was born, but your grandmother wouldn't have married him even if he'd survived."

Orlando's naturally pale skin was now as white as the paper he wrote his beloved differential calculus on. "And do you know who these people were, the ones who treated my grandmother so disgracefully?"

Jonty was relieved to see that Orlando regarded his grandmother as being more sinned against than sinning, although the suppressed wave of anger unsettled him. "Nobility, that's all I was told, the line of a baron although that may have been gilding the lily. I daresay we could identify them easily enough, should the strain still be extant, as your surname is hardly common. Perhaps you're even related to those Coppersmiths of Herefordshire or Carmarthenshire, or wherever it was that Mama got it into her head you might come from. Now isn't that amazing? We both have a bit of the old blue blood in us, irrespective of which side of the blanket it came from."

Orlando was fighting back the tears; the revelation had unmanned him totally. He felt the insult to his grandmother deeply and at last had some sort of insight into how his father must have felt, never knowing where he'd really come from, who his own father was. No wonder the man had gone quietly mad. "Do you think my father knew? Had she told him?"

Jonty had taken his lover into his arms at the first hint of a tear and continued to rock him like a child. If anyone found them now, they'd have to lump it. "I have no idea. If he was half as intelligent and inquisitive as you, he'd have been bound to ask questions and perhaps when she deemed him old enough she might have told all. I can only imagine how that would have affected him. It's awful."

Orlando nodded. He was beyond words, so his lover simply held him close and let him wallow in his pain. Recent bereavement, the childhood years that still hurt him, the love he felt for his own father who'd never shown him any real affection in return. "I can't believe it. I know it must be true, neither of you would lie about something like this, but it doesn't seem possible."

“I know. It explains a lot, though, doesn’t it?” Jonty smoothed his lover’s hair, kissing away the few tears which had escaped. He wondered how many of those which Orlando had shed the last few days hadn’t been for Mrs. Coppersmith, but for his father and for himself.

“It does.” Orlando straightened, blew his nose again and appeared visibly to pull himself together. “And it leaves a lot of questions. I need to think about this, Jonty.” He rose, pulling his friend up with him. “Come on, time to go.” They walked through the hall, out of the door and onto the step. “We’ll come back tomorrow and finish off. There won’t be much I want to keep and most of that’s already packed up. Perhaps your mother will help me and the housekeeper with the rest.”

Jonty nodded. “It would be her delight, I’m sure. Well, not delight exactly, given the circumstances, but you get my drift.”

“I do.” Orlando briefly squeezed his lover’s arm. “Thank you.”

Parcelling up the last few things the next day seemed to take half of no time. Mrs. Stewart soon left her boys to it, insisting she and her husband would catch an earlier train, allowing Jonty and Orlando to follow at leisure. Progress soon slowed, not just because the taskmistress had gone. Orlando was demonstrating an increasing reluctance to leave the house. When he reached the point of it being the third time he’d “make one more check”, Jonty felt he’d had enough.

“Is there a problem and is there anything I can do to expedite this process?”

“No.” Orlando took a long look around his grandmother’s drawing room then heaved a great sigh. “Yesterday I was keen just to leave this all behind, but now we’ve come to the crux...” He swept his hand around in an eloquent gesture. He received a smile and an encouraging nod in reply. “I feel as if when I step outside that door, I’ll have lost her forever.”

“She’ll always be with you, Orlando, as Grandmamma Dewberry is always with me. There’ll be a song you’ll hear and you’ll think, ‘I remember her singing that to me,’ or you’ll see a particular shade and think, ‘She had a hat in that colour.’”

Jonty walked over to the desk, checked the drawers again. They were empty, his lover having made sure—after the revelations of the previous day—that he had every scrap of correspondence or paperwork he could get his hands on and had explored every nook and cranny where something might be hidden. Anything which might relate to the great unspoken secret of his ancestry. He’d even taken with him a little writing desk, which he’d assured Jonty had a hidden drawer somewhere, although neither of them had found it even after ten minutes of poking and prodding.

“I’ll go. Meet me in the garden.” Jonty slipped out into the hall and left his lover alone with his thoughts.

It seemed an age, although in reality it was only minutes, before Orlando came out the door, closing it firmly behind him and turning the key in the lock.

“Have you decided what you’ll do with all this?” Jonty looked up at the house, picking out the bedroom where Orlando had said he’d stayed as a child. Leaving this place, at this moment, felt like saying goodbye to the last vestige of the little boy who’d once been so happy here.

“Sell it.” Orlando’s voice was determined now, all hint of uncertainty gone. The edge had appeared as he’d shut the front door for the final time. “There’s nothing for me here anymore. I have what I want.” He indicated the trunk, which the cabman had already secured onto his vehicle. “And the memories, of course, they’re the important bits. The money can go into the fund she set up and make sure some other poor soul who’s not had a good start in life gets a helping hand.”

“She’d have appreciated that.” Jonty went to sit in the coach, leaving his lover to whisper one last goodbye. He didn’t interrupt his reverie until they were down the lane and well on their way to the station. “We’ll get a good night’s sleep tonight, back in the city where the owls and foxes won’t disturb us. Then we can head down to West Brompton tomorrow, if you want.”

Orlando nodded but his thoughts seemed far away.

“Aren’t you keen to be up and sleuthing, then? I’d have thought you’d have been itching to get one over Inspector Redknapp.”

It felt like hours before Jonty got his answer, Orlando deep in thought until they’d reached the station and needed to get a porter to deal with their baggage. Their only conversation dealt with the mundane details of travel until they were ensconced in their first-class carriage.

“I can’t set my mind to murder yet.” Orlando picked up the conversation as if nothing had interrupted it. “I want to, but it keeps turning back to what you told me. Suddenly the matter of who Mr. Robshaw really was seems less important than who I really am. I have to know.”

“What will you do?” Jonty didn’t need to elaborate on his question. He knew Orlando wasn’t going just to let this rest—the stakes were too high.

“I’d like to contact my family. These Glamorgan Coppersmiths or whoever it turns out are the ones who get the mention in Debrett’s. I want to know how they could have done it.” Orlando stared out of the window, eyes ablaze with suppressed anger.

“I wouldn’t be rushing into this, Orlando.” The train eased past a little station, a stream of smoke flitting past the window in the breeze. “For all you know the present family members know nothing about your grandmother or her baby. It’s unlikely your great-grandfather is alive and he may well have kept it secret from all the rest of them.”

“How could he? You can’t just pretend someone doesn’t exist, although I suppose that’s what he tried to do with Grandmother.” Orlando’s fisted hands beat a tattoo on the windowpane.

Jonty let some of the resentment subside before he attempted an answer. “You’d be surprised at what some of these families do. They might have said she ran away, or even pretended she’d gone abroad and died there. Don’t look so offended—not every family is as kind-hearted or as forgiving as mine. If you turn up on the doorstep opening the family closets and letting the skeletons fall out, you’ll not be made welcome. They’ll put the shutters up and you’ll never find the truth.”

“Are you suggesting I do nothing?” Orlando’s face was suffused with rage at the injustice his loved ones had suffered.

“Of course not. Just apply the sort of common sense we’ve learned to use in all our investigations.” Jonty leaned across the carriage and laid his hand on his lover’s arm. “Look, who do we know who’s an expert on the great families of England?”

“I assume the correct answer is your father and mother.” The harshness in Orlando’s voice softened a little.

“Of course it is. Why not let them do a little research of their own? Papa’s becoming quite a dab hand at it.” Jonty leaned back, just in case the guard came along the corridor. “They could find out what you’d be presented with, see what tales are still being told. It would be better than plunging in straight away and risking rejection. Wouldn’t it?”

Orlando thought long and hard, while his lover counted the clickety-clacks as they passed over the lengths of track. At last the answer came. “We’ll make it so, then, if you think your parents would agree. I—we—can tell them everything, as soon as we get to their house. You know, I couldn’t have told them last night.”

“I understand.” They sat in silence for a while, watching the Kent countryside streak past, as if *it* was moving and they were stationary spectators to a stream of oast houses and coppices. “They won’t bat an eyelid, you know. They’ll love you wherever you come from.” He lowered his voice, even though they were alone in the compartment. “As I do.”

“Thank you.” Orlando didn’t speak for another ten minutes, by which time he’d obviously cleared his mind and set it working along more usual lines. “Did you manage to order a copy of the photograph?”

Jonty shook his head. “Not as such. The place was shut for the day. I mean, what sort of respectable seaside photographer shuts in the middle of summer? Anyway, I left a note under the door, with ten bob, and asked him to send a copy to London post haste.”

“Excellent. Now, tomorrow—are you taking the silverware side or the local tobacconist’s?”

Chapter Five

The man behind the desk at Law's Silversmiths didn't remember selling the silver teapot to the Stewarts, but his ledgers did. This was an august establishment, one which looked like it had records going back to the days when King Alfred popped in to get a silver griddle not to burn cakes on. Mr. Parry was terribly sorry he couldn't find Jonty a milk jug to match the original piece.

"You see, Dr. Stewart, that exact style has been discontinued. The particular craftsman who worked exclusively on it lost his sight, I'm afraid." He spread his hands in apology. "We have other items of a similar style and quality..."

"Then show them to me, Mr. Parry, I've more than one commission today." Jonty spoke the literal truth as well as the figurative. He'd have been happy if he'd had to buy a milk jug, even though his family already possessed one. He still had a wedding present to buy for the erstwhile Miss Peters, now Mrs. Sheridan. Even if she'd be receiving it six months after the event, because she'd insisted at the time that she and Dr. Sheridan wanted nothing except everyone's good wishes. She'd had those a-plenty, but you couldn't pour a nice hot cup of coffee out of them. And if she ended up being cross over whatever piece of silverware Jonty couldn't avoid buying, better it came from here than a lesser supplier.

As he admired the delicately crafted pieces, Jonty began his other task. "Are these from Chappell and Cross as well?"

"They are." Mr. Parry smiled. "One of the best companies in the country for items of tableware, although I'm sad to see more of their items going abroad. I should wish the company well, expanding its horizons, but if it means we have to share this sort of thing..." He lifted a pair of serving spoons to the light, admiring the way they shone. "Such elegant lines, sir. Shame that these might end up in Austria or some other outlandish place."

"Now that's odd, Mr. Parry. I met someone the other day who said he worked for Chappell and Cross and he was en route to the continent, but I couldn't credit that such a company would be sending goods across the channel, so I didn't believe him. We almost got into an argument about it, I had such a bee in my bonnet. Now I won't have the chance to apologise."

"An easy mistake to make, sir." Parry's eyes lit up as Jonty hovered over an elegant, expensive coffeepot. "I'd never have expected the company to do such a thing, either."

"I suppose it was because this chap had such an odd name, it made me immediately suspicious of him. Halfpenny." Jonty turned the coffeepot then weighed it in his hands.

“That’s the man who used to visit here.” Parry nodded, then took the pot from Jonty’s grasp, probably because he was handling it in rather a cavalier fashion. “I’ve not seen him for a while. Now I know why. I suppose London’s not good enough for him so he’s off to Paris or Deauville or some such place.” Parry’s face clearly showed what he thought of such heathen destinations.

“I suspect he’s gone farther than that. There was something in the *Times* last week—he was found dead at the White City. Or at least a man with the same name was and the newspaper said he came from the same part of London as the man I met.” Jonty scrutinised Parry’s face but his reaction seemed genuine enough. Although what logic there was in regarding the shop manager as a suspect was a moot point.

“Oh, I am sorry to hear that. He was such a pleasant young man.” Parry lowered his voice. “Perhaps I’m speaking out of turn, but there’s a young lady here who was rather fond of him. I know they walked out once or twice although I understand it’s not been for a while. I don’t think she can have heard the news—there’s certainly no sign of it.” He tipped his head towards the side wall of the shop, the thin dividing line between the two parts of the Law’s empire. “She helps to sell the better items of jewellery our sister store deals with—some of the ladies prefer a woman to serve them, as do some of the gentlemen. She helps us out in here at busy times. We’re very pleased with her.”

“Oh dear. I wonder if we should break the news about Mr. Halfpenny to her?” Jonty tried hard to look suitably solemn, heartened by the keen look, soon masked, in Parry’s eye when he’d used the word *we*.

“If it wouldn’t be imposing upon you, Dr. Stewart, I’d be most grateful. I’d rather she heard it from a reliable source than from newspaper reports.” Parry’s face showed what he thought of the stories he read, even in something as respectable as the *Times*.

Miss Pearce, once she’d been called through from the other shop, made a favourable impression. Neatly and stylishly dressed, without any sort of ostentation, she oozed an air of respectability and professionalism. Mrs. Stewart might have described her as a modern woman and meant no insult by the term. “Mr. Parry, I believe you wanted to speak to me?”

“Indeed. I’m afraid we have some news which might be upsetting—perhaps you would like to take a seat?” He indicated a chair which was normally occupied by customers’ backsides.

“I never sit while I’m in the shop, Mr. Parry, and I’d rather not break the habit now.” The words were slightly officious yet were spoken with what was clearly good grace. Miss Pearce turned to Jonty. “Was there something you wanted to tell me, sir?”

“It’s about your friend Mr. Halfpenny.” Jonty tried to appear suitably solemn. “I’m afraid he’s...”

“He’s dead, sir. Yes, I read about it in the *Times*. Such a shame.” It may have been a shame, but Miss Pearce appeared relatively unaffected by it, leaving the males in her presence nonplussed.

“I feel rather an idiot.” He didn’t, although he had long ago realised that playing the fool on occasions was an effective tool. “It should have occurred to me that a sensible woman like you would be well informed.”

Miss Pearce smiled. “Actually it wasn’t me who found out. My father saw the story and showed me. There was no love lost between Ian—Mr. Halfpenny, I mean—and my family.”

“You won’t be offended if I say it was probably because they thought he wasn’t good enough for you? Parents rarely think anyone is a good enough partner for their offspring.” Jonty hid a secret smile at how much his own parents doted on Orlando.

“Not offended at all, sir—I’d worked that out for myself long ago. I haven’t seen Mr. Halfpenny in months. He was rather too fond of...” She abruptly stopped, a flush coming to her cheeks as she must have realised she was being a bit free and easy in front of one of her senior colleagues. “I’m sorry, Mr. Parry.”

“Not at all, my dear. It must have been a terrible shock.”

“It was, even though we were no longer close.”

Jonty ignored the part of his conscience which said that all lying was bad. “Miss Pearce, might I ask a delicate question? I came across Mr. Halfpenny in quite unusual circumstances.” That at least was true. “Not quite what I told you, Mr. Parry, but one has to be careful and establish one’s facts. I believe at the time he was contemplating making advances upon one of my cousins, a rather shy young lady.” A palpable lie, but he was becoming a dab hand at telling them convincingly when detection was involved. “I managed to intercede and enable her to escape his attentions but I’d hazard I could guess what upset you about his conduct.”

The twin spots of red blazing on Miss Pearce’s cheekbones told Jonty he’d struck gold. “Your cousin was lucky to escape his attentions. Mr. Halfpenny was a great charmer and I suspect he had a string of girls fawning on him.” She turned to Parry. “Please may I return to the shop? I’m afraid we’ve been rather busy today and I’d hate to leave my colleagues short-handed.”

She stood not on the permit of her going, leaving Jonty to mull over whether he’d go for the silver serving spoons or an elegant little cream jug.

So it was as they’d suspected. As Jonty sauntered home, cradling his parcel and thinking about whether Mrs. Sheridan would thump him for breaking her rule about presents, he felt extremely pleased at what he’d found out. Halfpenny was a man who liked the ladies, more than one of them at a time, which increased the likelihood of there being some poor girl still waiting for him to come home to Winchester.

He hoped Orlando had been as successful in his endeavours—the thought of how cross his lover would be if he’d drawn a blank made Jonty wrinkle his nose in delight. They’d been blessed with luck these last few days, good fortune with time and place which had been totally unexpected. First the photographer and now Miss Pearce. Jonty wondered whether Grandmother Coppersmith had already been pressed into the role of their guardian angel, the previous holders of the post having retired with nervous exhaustion, and was organising things so they could steal a march on Inspector Redknapp.

Maybe it was just coincidence, that wonderful way in which random events seemed to order themselves and in which Jonty took inordinate delight. If he was in a gathering of a dozen people he always asked about their dates of birth and was joyous when, half the time, two of them turned out to be the same. No matter that Orlando had explained the mathematics to him, the boring prosaic theory of probability that took all the magic away—he was quite prepared to ignore that and settle for the enchantment of what still seemed to him a highly unlikely sequence of events.

Coincidence or guardian angel, it had been a good few days' work.

Orlando was sharing the same sentiment, away to the west, down among the districts past the Natural History Museum and "into the wilderness". Or so Jonty had described the area and as usual had been lying, the little toad. Orlando had twice walked past the house where Halfpenny had rented a room. The road was neat enough, the properties well kept, and it was the sort of area where his mother would have loved to have lived, imagining herself to be among the highest quality neighbours. But she'd have been wrong in her estimate of this particular road—it just wasn't quite up to the fierce standard set by some of the streets Orlando had already walked past to reach it.

He'd thought about his mother a lot these last few days. Poor Mrs. Coppersmith—she'd have loved to see her son staying with titled gentry (even if they didn't use their titles) and occasionally hob-nobbing with royalty. She'd have been so proud of what he'd achieved, although he'd never have been able to tell her that he and Jonty were more than friends. She'd be turning in her grave to know what went on in the double beds at Forsythia Cottage.

And she'd be revolving like a top to know that her husband, the man she'd wished had a bit more class about him, had a streak of blue blood coursing his veins and never told her. Perhaps it was as well, so she couldn't remind an already saddened man about the grandeurs he'd been cut out from.

Orlando felt there was little to be gained by visiting the house itself, especially given the risk of there being police in the offing who might snitch on him to the officious Redknapp. He tried the local tobacconist, telling the assistant he was trying to locate an old acquaintance he believed lived in the area. Drawing a blank there, he was greeted with equally black looks at the newsagent, finally striking gold at the flower shop.

"Oh, I know Mr. Halfpenny." The lady at the flower shop must have been Mrs. Stewart's age and her smile was equally bright. The dancing light in her eyes showed she clearly didn't object to serving a nice young man or two. "Haven't seen him around for a while, though."

"Oh." Orlando tried to appear crestfallen. "I hope he hasn't moved."

"That I couldn't tell you. He used to have rooms in Cowes Road, number twenty-seven or twenty-nine I think, one of the ones in the stretch before you get to the church. That's where I'd start to look if I were

you.” The shop assistant arranged some greenery between red carnations, lifting one of the blooms to the light. “Funnily enough he used to be rather fond of these things. Or I suppose his lady friends were—I guess that’s who he bought them for.”

“Well, it wasn’t for any of his team-mates. He only bought us beer, after the rugby.” Orlando was pleased at the ease with which he could now dissemble. “Mind you, he always was one for the ladies. If you’ll excuse the expression.”

The assistant’s eyes twinkled. “My business would be a lot poorer if it wasn’t for the men with an eye for the fair sex.” She fiddled with some ribbon to keep the regimented blooms in place. “Actually, my business has been a bit poorer since your friend stopped popping in, not just financially. He always was a pleasant chap to pass the time of day with.”

“Very gregarious.” Orlando admired the carnations as if he’d never seen such prodigious blooms before. “The team misses his company, too. It all dated from when he started travelling abroad—that’s when we lost our star wing three quarter.” It was a reasonable story to tell; Halfpenny had been the right build for the position.

“Maybe that’s when he stopped coming to the shop. If he had some mademoiselle or senorita he was sweet on he’d hardly be sending them flowers all the way from here, would he?” The carnations were finished with and the matter of cards and addresses was being seen to. Soon a poor lad on a bicycle would no doubt be dispatched to deliver them to a wife or sweetheart or mother somewhere, taking his life into his hands weaving in and out of the metal monsters that seemed to be springing up like mushrooms.

“He never mentioned a particular young lady, did he? The lads at the club wouldn’t be surprised to see him appear with some olive-skinned beauty at his side.” Orlando admired some roses, the sort Jonty loved. “I’ll have half a dozen of these, please, when you’re ready. The bigger and blousier the better.”

“Ah, your young lady prefers the perfume to the neatness of the bud, does she?” The assistant nodded, clearly appreciating the preference. “These can wait a moment or two.” The carnations were abandoned in favour of their more aromatic relations. “I think there might have been an unusual name mentioned. One that sounded more fitted to the stage than the drawing rooms of London. Dolores or something like that.” A little nugget of memory evidently sparked in the florist’s brain. “She was fond of roses, too—I remember that now. Just like you, he said ‘I’ll have half a dozen of those pink ones, please. It’s her favourite colour. If she likes them, I’ll get another bunch.’ That must have been the last time I saw him because he never came back for any more.”

“Perhaps she didn’t like the colour, after all.” Orlando smiled, but his brain had begun to whirr at the thought of ladies with exotic names and a penchant for roses and how on earth he was ever going to track them down.

Jonty had gone from the silversmith's shop to the offices of the company Halfpenny represented. Chappell and Cross was based in the Midlands, a small factory of smiths and artisans turning out exquisite little articles. Most of these had almost sold themselves throughout the last century, being of such high quality, yet the more forward-thinking of its directors weren't sure that status quo would be maintained. The world was sure to change and they were going to need to change with it, setting their sights wider than the domestic market to the vastness of Europe.

Or so Jonty had found out the previous evening from his papa, who'd, as usual, learned it all from a friend at the club. Those old buffers didn't just prove more informative than the Encyclopaedia Britannica, they were also a means of furnishing an introduction.

"Excuse me." Jonty raised his hat to the not-so-young lady at the desk and smiled what he hoped was his most charming smile. "I'm not sure I've come to the right place." He stood, looking hopeful and praying for her maternal instincts to kick in.

"The right place for what?" The words were abrupt, but the secretary's smile was welcoming.

"Ah. Well. It's all a bit delicate and rather embarrassing. It involves a young lady. Not my young lady, I hasten to add, the niece of a friend of my father's. I say, this is getting complicated, isn't it?"

The woman behind the desk clearly was happy to deal with 'complicated' if it came in a personable form. "Perhaps you could take a seat and explain what it is we can help with, Mr...?"

"Dr. Stewart." Jonty lowered his bottom into a chair, placed his hat on his knees and tried to appear helpless. "I'm here on behalf of Colonel Vaughn, my father knows him through his club." That at least was true. The chap was about a hundred and ninety, deaf as a post and unlikely to hear anything about what was being said here, both figuratively and literally. "He has a niece." That was true as well. She was seventy if she was a day and the sprightliest woman of her age Jonty had ever known, if not a likely prey for Halfpenny's predatory insinuations. "She's had this chap making a nuisance of himself and the colonel has got it into his head the man might work for you. It could be another silversmith's, of course, but I agreed to humour the old bird and ask here first."

"It's possible he might do. I could check the name."

Jonty's spirits leapt and he was on the verge of saying "Halfpenny" when the lady continued, "Although I'm not sure I should if it might lead to any unpleasantness. I mean, we can't have the colonel coming down here with a horsewhip or something, can we?"

"Ah." Jonty got out his spectacles and started to polish them. It gave him time to think and was a useful backup weapon if his smile didn't work—females always started to get moony at the sight of him in glasses. "How very astute of you. That's why I'm here, at Papa's insistence. That's the very thing *he* doesn't want, either, his old pal getting arrested for assaulting men half his age. I'm making discreet enquiries and then we'll try to talk some sense into this Halfpenny chap before it gets beyond the point of no return."

“Halfpenny.” The hands which had hovered over the card holder came back to the secretary’s face. “If that’s Ian Halfpenny, the one who travels for us, then I’m afraid there won’t be any difficulties for you to avoid. He’s dead.”

“Oh.” Jonty tried to look both surprised and suitably sorry. “That’s a shame. I mean, for all that he’s obviously got into the colonel’s bad books, he can’t have been any great age. So sad when people don’t see out a good innings.”

“Indeed. It wasn’t long ago, either. The funeral was just last Thursday.” The secretary consulted the calendar. “Yes. Young Mr. Chappell represented us.” She took out a small handkerchief and blew her nose, probably more for effect than necessity. “I was about to make a pot of tea for Mr. Chappell—would you like a cup?”

“That would be more than welcome, Miss...”

“Miss Murray.” The secretary must have been almost the same age as Ariadne Sheridan, and Jonty clearly had the same blush-inducing effect on her.

“Miss Murray, I know that people tell one to take cool drinks in this hot weather, but there’s nothing quite as refreshing as tea.”

While she busied herself, Jonty flicked through some of the brochures which graced the reception area, although they gave him little relevant information apart from confirming the expansion of the business far into the depths of Europe. Nor did he get any help from what he could see on the walls or read—upside down—on the desk.

He took his tea with a grateful “Thank you”, all he’d said about the brew’s restorative and refreshing powers being the truth. “I suppose he was a young man, Mr. Halfpenny? I mean, I’d always assumed so, his being caught up with the colonel’s niece.”

“Oh yes, I believe he was in his late twenties. And it is sad to see such a young lad killed.”

“It was an accident then?”

“No, Dr. Stewart. It was murder. Isn’t that awful?” Miss Murray’s face showed that, despite what she said, she might have the same avidity for a gruesome death as Orlando did. “And I had to identify the body, as he had no close family.”

Jonty just stopped himself from saying “So it was you?”, coming out with “Terrible. Oh Lor” instead. He paused for dramatic effect. “I do hope he wasn’t killed by some irate father or uncle getting revenge on him for allegedly leading their young kinswoman astray.”

“That’s not the impression the police gave, although I suppose they gave very little away. They were here, you know, finding out all they could about him and asking all sorts of questions about where he’d been travelling to.” Miss Murray lowered her voice, casting a quick glance towards the door which must have connected to the other offices. “I got the impression that they were trying to see if he had some other link to one of the countries he visited. You hear such stories about espionage these days.”

"You do." Jonty sipped his tea, secretly hoping the police were being led up a blind alley, not least because he didn't want Orlando's pet theory about foreign unrest to gain any credence. "Although I can't believe this chap was involved with it. The colonel would certainly have horsewhipped him, out in the street, if he'd suspected that."

"One of the old school." Miss Murray's nose wrinkled in an indulgent smile. "It might have been women, though. He was always very charming the odd few times I met him and once I saw him out with a girl on his arm. I wonder if it was your colonel's niece?"

"What did she look like?" Jonty knew the answer wouldn't be wrinkled, grey haired and sprightly.

"Rather a nice girl—I'd say a cut above the usual shop girl or governess. Well dressed, dark haired I think, although it was hard to tell beneath the hat. And neatly turned out."

"Aha. That wouldn't be the niece, then. She's pale and extremely fair." Jonty tried to look knowing. "The plot thickens."

Miss Murray looked long and hard at her interlocutor before she spoke again. She was clearly trying to decide what Jonty's game was and whether he was such a fool as he appeared. "I have no idea what this is all about, but even if it starts with someone's niece, it doesn't end there. You want to know more about Mr. Halfpenny than you're asking and there's something I can tell you. He was looking for a new job, a month or so back. He came in and asked me whether one of the partners here would write him a reference. He said he was very happy doing what he did, but the time had come to move on and settle down."

"Those were the words he used? 'Settle down'?" Jonty's mind returned to the Winchester address and the mental image he'd built up of some poor woman waiting for the man she loved.

"Something along those lines. He left me with the impression he wanted a change, one for the better." Miss Murray's smile showed she'd clearly decided her visitor was trustworthy. "Maybe he wanted to extricate himself from the web of women he'd spun around himself."

"Ah." Jonty drained his cup, took up his hat and prepared to leave. "Now that's a web I'm not sure any fly would like to find himself trapped in."

"Jonathan." Mrs. Stewart's voice rang clear into the hall.

Jonty froze halfway down the stairs. The name filled him with horror—his mother only used it if he was in trouble or when something momentous happened, like when his own beloved grandmother had died. "What is it, Mama?" he called, trudging down the last few steps like a schoolboy in disgrace and entering the drawing room with his tail between his legs. "And please, whatever it is, don't play at breaking it to me gently. I haven't the heart at the moment. Straight at 'em."

"Orlando can't be a Coppersmith."

Jonty sat with such a thump that one of the cushions fell off the settee and he had to scramble it back again. "I beg your pardon?"

"Well, he might be one but not a Coppersmith with any sort of an illustrious family history. Your father and I have been most thorough." Although Mrs. Stewart spoke with confidence—she'd clearly checked her facts to the smallest degree—her voice revealed how painful she was finding the revelation.

Mr. Stewart came over from the hearth to sit on the other side of his youngest son. "It's true. The only Coppersmiths with a title are the Glamorgan ones, and Orlando's grandmother couldn't have been a member of the family. The ages and generations are all wrong for one thing—and a good friend of mine knows that clan extremely well. He says there's no hint of a scandal, even a couple of generations back, and he'd know about it if there was. He married one of their cousins and the pair of them have noses for shame like bloodhounds."

"Orlando will be devastated." They sat in silence, listening to the clock tick the slow minutes until Jonty could find the courage to speak again. "Why did Grandmother Coppersmith tell me such a cock-and-bull story, then?"

"Perhaps she didn't. Perhaps the essence of it is true—that she was rejected by her family—but she omitted to tell you she'd changed her name to avoid further scandal." Mrs. Stewart took her son's hand. "If ever there was a family fond of dark secrets, it's your Orlando's. Maybe that's why he has such a nose for an investigation."

Jonty's frown slowly turned to one of his smiles. "Mama, I think you've hit on it. Mrs. Coppersmith knew how fond her grandson is of a puzzle, something to get his wits going, and so she's given him the ultimate heirloom."

"Of course." Mr. Stewart slapped the settee and earned a stern look from his wife. "She wanted him to know the truth of his ancestry, but she also wanted him to have the pleasure of finding out for himself."

"If it is pleasure, Papa. This business has unsettled him dreadfully." Jonty gently caressed his mother's hand. "It's as well we have this Halfpenny murder to poke our noses into or he'd be eating himself up from inside."

"Go and fetch him." Mrs. Stewart spoke quietly, with great authority. "We'll explain what we've found out and help him plan his campaign."

"Have you got the detecting bug, too?" Jonty rose and set about his commission.

Orlando took the news calmly—he'd almost convinced himself that's exactly what they were going to find. Unknown to Jonty he'd already been doing some research of his own and had concluded the dates for the illustrious Welsh Coppersmiths just didn't fit.

"So where do I go from here?" He sat on the settee next to Mrs. Stewart, rubbing his forehead like a little boy puzzling over his letters. "We must assume the story my grandmother told Jonty is true, in all but the surname, so we have a narrative to link up to some family history." His hand came down and wiped his

eyes; he looked little more than a gangly child, lost and perplexed. “I didn’t find my father’s birth certificate among her papers, or anything else relevant for that matter, so I’ve no place to start.”

“He might not even have had a birth certificate.” Mr. Stewart looked troubled. “It wasn’t compulsory in those days, you know, and if there was—sorry to be blunt, Orlando—no father to list, your grandmother might not have bothered.”

“Then what can we do?” Orlando suddenly realised how the dunderheads must feel when faced with a question on a subject they had no knowledge of. A strange combination of helplessness and panic. “I’ve no idea where to go next, if the name is wrong. I’d assumed that tracking her family down would be the easy bit, much easier than trying to find who my grandfather was, although that might have been possible had we succeeded in the first step. It’ll be impossible now.”

“I won’t have such defeatist talk. If your great-grandfather held a noble rank, that would narrow the field down quite a bit.” Mrs. Stewart’s face looked as if she was addressing her grandchildren—on a day they were being particularly stupid, at that. “It’s not as if you have to search through every family in the land. And the fact of what happened to your grandmother should help us as well, people being very fond of tittle-tattle and more likely to remember things like that than prosaic stuff. It’s very difficult to hide a scandal, no matter how hard you try. I would start by bending the ear of some of your gossipy friends, Richard, and I’ll slip a word in Hopkins’s ear. Servants know everything and the word gets around among them.”

“You wouldn’t be offended if we tried to help?” Mr. Stewart lightly tapped Orlando’s arm.

“Not at all. You would be doing me a great service.” He cuffed his almost-father-in-law’s shoulder. “And we have a year for Grandmother’s birth, or at least can work one out from her birthday and my father’s age. That must help us somewhere along the line.” Orlando looked desperately tired. “There’s not just one mystery to solve, but two, and this last one possibly the most important we’ve ever faced. If we can’t work it out between us, nobody can.”

Chapter Six

Winchester hove into view among the hills, the cathedral looking just a bit disappointing from a distance. Jonty and Orlando could have taken a cab but opted for Shank's pony, enjoying the cool breeze of a day which wasn't as hot as its predecessors had been.

"Two hares to course, eh?" Jonty eyed his friend with circumspection. Orlando had been a bit quiet on the way down and, while he'd discussed some aspects of the case, he'd given them all short shrift. They'd centred on the likely provenance of the mysterious Dolores and whether she'd been the dark-haired girl Halfpenny had been seen with. Or if she'd be waiting for them here, at the address the man must have used for some sort of convenience.

"Aye." Possible discussion of the second hare was still being ignored. The revelations about the Coppersmith family might as well not have taken place.

"Where should we start with that one? No useful addresses falling out of the sky and into our laps." Suddenly ill at ease, Jonty sought to fill the awkward silence with his tumbling thoughts.

"Leave it, will you, Jonty?" Orlando's voice seemed distant and uncertain. The fact he couldn't face his lover settled the matter. "Please."

"I'm sorry. You seemed so keen yesterday, I..."

"I was keen yesterday. And then I lay in bed last night thinking that I had nowhere to start. It's fine for your father, bending everyone's ear, but it leaves me twiddling my thumbs." The tension in Orlando's shoulders was clear even through his jacket. "I can't go banging on the doors of every family in Debrett's asking if they perchance had happened to mislay one of their kin, maybe casting out a poor girl a couple of generations back. Even if I cross-referenced them all and tried to eliminate those where the dates don't work out, there'd be an unwieldy number left."

"Is there no further clue to be found? Nothing amongst all those papers you brought back from Kent?"

"Not as far as I can see. My grandmother was either too proud or too careful to leave anything that someone might have come across. Even MacBride knows nothing." Orlando sighed, dragging his hand along a set of railings in frustration. "I have no idea who I really am and it's starting to gnaw at me." He stopped, halting his lover with a touch to his arm. "I woke up this morning as low as I've felt in years. You know how I hate not being able to solve a problem, whether it's maths or murder. This one just seems to have no possible solution."

Jonty measured his response, resisting all temptation to plough in and potentially make things worse with platitudes, no matter how heartfelt they would have been. “There must be a solution. I’m not sure we can safely identify your father—your grandmother probably took that secret to her grave—but she was born into a family, that’s a simple fact whose existence can’t be disputed, a concrete reality like the centre of a maze. You look at the mass of hedges and wonder how you’ll ever get there, but you do in the end. It’s just working out the path.” He laid his hand on his lover’s arm. “And there’s no hurry, is there? We’ve all the time we want to explore dead ends or come back on ourselves.”

“I want to know now, Jonty.” The use of a Christian name in public, only usually allowed on holidays, indicated how distressed Orlando was. “I’ve told myself that we can research this mystery for as long as we wish—the rational, objective part of my brain understands that perfectly well. The subjective part says that I’ll go mad if I don’t get it sorted soon.” Orlando took another long sigh, one which seemed to come up from his shoes and course along his spine. “You know who you are. I’d always assumed I knew who I was. And now...” He turned out his palms in a gesture of confusion.

“You’re still my Orlando, no matter what your lineage. That can’t change.” Jonty smiled but his heart wasn’t in it. He’d never felt quite so worried about his best friend.

They found the house they wanted and not a moment too soon, given the awkward silence which had grown between them. It was pleasant, if not of absolute tip-top quality, in a nice enough street just northwest of the station. The whole road made an agreeable contrast, with the white house fronts gleaming in the sun, to the open space which lay opposite, a mass of different greens now that summer was in full bloom. The place they sought lay about halfway along the row, a well-kept property with spotless paintwork, the landlady being clearly a good and proud housekeeper. They already knew it was a boarding house, from the carefully careless enquiries Jonty had made at the local grocer’s shop en route, where the delivery boy had proved particularly informative.

“Come on then.” Jonty broke the quiet. “Let’s face Dolores or whoever the lady he’s got ensconced here will turn out to be.” They knocked at the door then raised their hats politely when it was opened by a timid-looking maid. “We’re here to make some enquiries about Mr. Robshaw.” Jonty smiled, amused to see how red the poor girl was turning.

“Oh. I’ll fetch Mrs. Lawson.” The maid turned straight on her heels and left the pair to fiddle with their hats on the doorstep.

Mrs. Lawson was clearly from the same mould as Mrs. Ward, a similar build, a similarly sensible set of clothes and an identically wary expression turning to a beaming smile when she saw her visitors and observed the elegant bows they made.

“Please come into the guests’ parlour.” She ushered them into a spotless hall and through to an equally spotless room, one fitted with neat, elegant furniture. “You’ll be wanting Mr. Robshaw?”

“Well, we were hoping to find out when he was last here.” Something in the tone of the landlady’s voice gave Jonty the clue that they were off kilter somewhere.

“He’s here now. You’re lucky to catch him—he’s soon to be away on business. I’ll just go and fetch him.” Mrs. Lawson made something which was almost a curtsey and left.

Orlando fiddled some more with his hat. “What does she mean, she’ll fetch him?”

“What she says. There’s a Mr. Robshaw living here and it’s clearly not the man we saw dead in the chair.” Jonty took off his spectacles and polished them on his handkerchief, delighting in the fact his mama wasn’t there to see him and tell him off for risking a scratch to the lenses. “As a mystery, this gets better and better.”

Mr. Robshaw was clearly alive, bounding through the door and shaking both visitors’ hands. “Gentlemen, please take a seat. Mrs. Lawson says you have some questions for me—may I ask what this is all about?”

“We have no idea what it’s about, to be honest. There’s a puzzle and we hoped you might be able to help us solve it.” Orlando produced the notebook in which he’d written down the name and address he’d been given in Kent. “We saw a picture in a photographer’s window in Margate. It was a face we recognised, but the name didn’t match the one we knew this chap by. These are the details the photographer was given by him.” He showed Robshaw his notes.

“Well, that’s my name and address, although I’ve never had my picture taken in Margate. I don’t think I’ve even been there.” Robshaw produced an elegant cigarette case, offered his guests one, had the offer declined then lit up his own. “Was this very recently taken?”

“A few weeks ago, we believe. Is there any significance in that?”

“There must be. I only moved here myself less than a month ago.” Robshaw shivered. “It’s a bit much, having some fellow going around impersonating one. Does your friend look that much like me?”

“He’s not our friend. And he’d barely pass for you, even in the dark with the light behind him.” Jonty considered. “He’d be about your height, but any resemblance ends there. More gaunt, I’d have said, with a sallower skin and darker hair.”

Robshaw gave what sounded like a sigh of relief. “Well, that’s something. At least he’s not trying to pass himself off as me among people who wouldn’t know me well enough to tell the difference.” He tapped out his ash into a little crystal ashtray. Mrs. Lawson appeared to keep a very particular establishment and her guests would have probably been out on their ears if they’d spilled any mess on the carpet. “What name do you know this chap by?”

“Halfpenny. Does that mean anything?” Jonty tipped his head to one side, as he’d done from childhood when he’d especially wanted to get an honest answer.

“Nothing that springs to mind. The name has a slightly familiar ring to it, but not one I could put my finger on.” Robshaw shrugged. “What does he do? Perhaps I’ve met him in my line of work.”

“He represented a firm of silversmiths—a highly respectable one, at that.” Orlando took a quick look around the room to see if he could find a comparable object to compare with the ones Halfpenny had sold, but drew an obvious blank. “His travels had recently taken him to the continent, or so we believe.”

“Maybe it is through work, then. I travel as well.” Robshaw reached into his inside pocket and drew out a business card, which he placed in Orlando’s hand. “Although in fine china, not silverware.”

“Maybe that’s why he chose to use your name—he knew of the similarity of employment.” Jonty took the card and scrutinised it, as if the answer to this mystery might be written small among the names and addresses it displayed. He slipped it into his pocket.

“Why don’t you just ask this Halfpenny why he’s doing it and what it’s all about?” Robshaw clearly thought he was stating the obvious, his face suggesting he wasn’t impressed with the acuity of his visitors.

“That’s the trouble. We can’t.” Orlando related the story of their seeing the dead man at the White City and how they’d given statements after the event. He didn’t mention anything about their altercation with Inspector Redknapp. “We were naturally interested to see the same man—and we’re sure it is the same man—in a photograph and were intrigued to find it in a shop so far from where he lived in London.”

“You haven’t got a copy of this picture I could look at?”

The oversight still grated with Orlando. “We’ve been unable so far to obtain one. But I can assure you we weren’t mistaken about either the name or the face.”

Jonty had noticed the sceptical look in Robshaw’s eye. “It sounds mad, I know, but my mama always said I was too inquisitive for my own good. We couldn’t resist going in and asking.” He hoped his papa wouldn’t find out how plausible a liar he was becoming. “It was astonishing to find the name and address they had were different to the ones that were reported in the *Times*, and the ones the police had investigated and found to be apparently correct.”

“Let me get this clear.” Robshaw stubbed out his cigarette. “This chap Halfpenny has been going around using my name and address and now he’s got himself murdered. Should I be worried about my safety? Do you think the killer meant to attack me?”

“We hadn’t considered that possibility before now.” Jonty felt cross, and a quick look at his lover showed he was angry, too. Like a pair of idiots, they’d never thought about that option. “To be honest, we never expected to find anyone here by the name of Robshaw. We’d assumed Halfpenny was the alias, not vice versa. We came here quite prepared to find some—you’ll excuse my bluntness—‘establishment’, with perhaps a young lady who was wondering why her Mr. Robshaw hadn’t come to visit her for a while. And not realising he was beyond all means of getting on a train down here.”

“That would have been awful.” There was no hint of sarcasm in Robshaw’s voice, yet the warm atmosphere seemed be dropping a degree or two in temperature with every passing moment.

"It's still pretty awful." Jonty rose, went to the window and stared at the street. "I'm sorry to have caused you any distress, Mr. Robshaw, but perhaps it's just as well we came. I think we need to tell the police everything we've learned, just in case you're in some form of danger."

"I think that would be very wise." Robshaw opened his cigarette case, seemed to think better of getting out another one, and then closed it with a resounding snap. "I'd also be grateful if you'd let me know anything else you turn up. This has been a bit unsettling, you know."

"I can imagine." Orlando stood up, ready to take his leave. "Would you like us to try and find out more about the connection between him and you?"

Jonty hid a grin at his friend's enthusiasm—he was obviously looking for an excuse to be legitimately involved in the case. Some commission he could gleefully wave in Redknapp's face.

"You'll forgive me, gentlemen, if I decline your offer." Robshaw's smile was indulgent and almost avuncular, despite the fact he was about the same age as the men he addressed. "I feel entirely confident in the police's abilities to work out what's going on and protect me if need be." He held the door to enable his visitors to leave. "Don't think I'm not grateful—I am. But this is something to leave to the professionals."

Orlando didn't calm down until they were ten minutes down the road and almost at the railway station. "Professionals? *Professionals*? That's twice in as many weeks we've been labelled as incompetent amateurs."

"Robshaw didn't call us incompetent." Jonty knew there was no point in arguing, Orlando wouldn't be listening to reason any time soon, although he had to say something to interrupt the flow of anger.

"No, not in as many words. But he implied it and so did Redknapp." Orlando took an uncharacteristic swipe at a set of railings which was doing nothing more offensive than being there. "We're not stupid, Dr. Stewart, and we're not inept. Apart from that first case we've been highly successful in identifying the culprit and solving the case, well ahead of the police at times."

Jonty felt a frisson of discomfort. Memories flooded back of the sloughs of despond Orlando could get into if he felt he was at risk of failure. Ones which had led him before now into doing stupid, irrational things. "Of course we have been. But people don't understand, do they? And it's a long time since there was the article in the *Times* to tell everyone how clever we are. It's all the White City and patriotic stories about the Olympics now." He briefly caressed his lover's shoulder. "Anyway, we've another puzzle to solve. How are we going to let Redknapp know what we've been up to? We've dug a bit too deep into this case to pretend that it's all been a coincidence, us finding out what we know."

"I've half a mind just to tell Redknapp the truth and to hell with the consequences. He can't stop us asking what we want of whom we want. It's not like we're breaking any law."

"Not with our investigating, no. But you know damn well what law we break almost every day." Jonty didn't like this belligerence. This wasn't his usual calm, sensible Orlando. This was reckless passion he'd only seen in confronting a murderer or during a passionate night in bed. Or on the rug in front of a

blazing fire. "I've said it before. If Redknapp wanted to he could break us. The end of our careers, our reputations, our good names."

"Reputation?" Orlando sighed, wearily. "You're right, as usual. We have to play this safe. Still, you're lucky to have a good name to lose, Dr. Stewart. My name's not even my own to begin with."

Jonty didn't attempt a reply. When Orlando was in this sort of mood it was best just to let him come out of it. Maybe a glass of Guinness when they were back in London might do the trick, if things hadn't gone too far. He wondered whether it would take some huge sacrifice, like a promise not to use the motor car for the rest of their stay. It was a pleasure he'd gladly forgo, if it meant his lover was happy.

As things turned out, the Guinness seemed to both mellow Orlando's mood and loosen his tongue a bit, but only regarding the Halfpenny case. "So we turn things on their heads again, Dr. Stewart."

"Not for the first time, eh? I think we should safely assume, in future cases, that our initial assumptions have to be reversed before we can make headway." Jonty got out his notebook, tapping at it as he made his points. "Question one on your paper. This Halfpenny, for reasons unknown, has recently been pretending to be Robshaw. Discuss."

"He was using an alias so he could carry on his espionage activities. He's probably been impersonating Robshaw for ages and changes his false address when Robshaw changes his. No, stop it, I was only joking." Orlando flapped away the notebook with which his lover was trying to beat him about the head. "He has—had a string of women and a second identity was useful in keeping the string as long and untwisted as possible."

"Hm. Maybe. He certainly seems to have been one for the ladies, perhaps here and abroad, and if he'd contemplated marrying them..." Jonty smote the table, apologised to the people at the table next door for the shower of drops he'd sent flying, then grinned. "What if he was a bigamist? Two names would be useful to acquire two wives."

Orlando thought for a moment, then smiled. "Now that's possible. We've not located them yet, but maybe we've not looked in the right places. And a wife who found her husband was already married might well have an excellent motive for getting rid of him." He scribbled in his own notebook. "Somerset House to look at the registers would be somewhere to start."

"I think, actually, the best place to start is making sure we've told Redknapp something. Tonight, preferably." It was a depressing thought, but this fence had to be taken, and soon. "We can say, in all honesty, that we saw the photograph when we were in Margate on entirely legitimate business."

"He might let us get away with that, although not the rest. None of that was accidental." Orlando peered into his glass, but the last dregs of Guinness couldn't help him apart from giving Dutch courage.

"Then we'll have to pray to God that he's got one of his guardian angels on hand to either soothe the inspector's savage breast or work some other miracle."

When they reached New Scotland Yard, the angel had clearly been at work again. Redknapp wasn't there, being too busy apprehending a jewel thief *in flagrante delicto* or whatever the larcenous equivalent was. Constable Fletcher, one of the sympathetic officers who'd taken their statements, was at the desk and was grateful for the information they had to give.

"I'm not sure if I should be saying this, but we've had so little to go on in this case, we'd be grateful for anything that would help." He called over the sergeant and explained what was going on, showing nothing except gratitude and respect for the two witnesses.

Sergeant Ross took over the interview. "He was clearly a bit of a boy, this Halfpenny—loads of women everywhere or so his landlady says. We've been having trouble locating them." He lowered his voice. "It strikes me as a bit peculiar, but there was no address book at his lodgings and no letters apart from the one in his pocket."

"Perhaps if he had a string of women, he had a string of aliases and addresses to go with them." Orlando eyed the sergeant fairly and squarely—this was a man he could do reasonable business with. "In his position I'd be inclined to keep addresses and the like in my head, just in case."

"My colleague has a point, probably born of experience. A great womaniser, Dr. Coppersmith." Jonty moved his leg out of the way sharpish in case a whack was forthcoming.

"You have no idea how many crimes come straight back to the family, sir. Passion's a terrible thing when it gets out of control." Ross shook his head, like a theatrical policeman in a play intended to improve the morals of the young. "I'd put my wages for the week on this being a case of bigamy, actual or common law."

"If there's anything we can do to..." Orlando didn't get to finish his sentence, their guardian angel obviously having gone off duty—or needing, once more, to lie down in a darkened cloud.

"I think I made it plain, gentlemen, that there was nothing more we required from you." Redknapp's voice would have carried across Waterloo station at its busiest, let alone over a bare few feet of room. "Sergeant Ross, Fletcher, please leave this to me."

The two policemen melted away, carrying their notes with them, perhaps to be produced when their inspector wasn't in such a foul temper.

"Mr. Redknapp, we had some information which we felt was relevant to the case. You wouldn't have wanted us to withhold it, would you?" Jonty had always believed in attack as being the best form of defence, especially on the rugby field. Or maybe it was a case of getting one's retaliation in first.

The police officer seemed lost for words but it was only a temporary condition. "No I wouldn't—that's your duty as a citizen to assist the police whenever you can. Would you care to share this information with me, rather than with one of my constables who has no jurisdiction over the case?"

“We’d have gladly done that had you been here.” Orlando drew himself up to his full height, topping Redknapp by a hand’s breadth. “We saw a photograph in a shop in Margate, a photograph of Halfpenny, but the name on the photo—” he neatly avoided saying how they’d acquired that, “—didn’t link up.”

“Have you been snooping around when I expressly forb—requested you not to do so?”

“Mr. Redknapp.” Jonty’s voice was low and dangerous. “We were in Margate to attend the funeral of Dr. Coppersmith’s grandmother and to deal with her affairs. Seeing the photograph was a mere act of fortune. Good fortune I would hope, if it helps you to solve a murder.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions.” Redknapp’s thin-lipped expression suggested he was having to force out every word. “And is this all? The fortuitous—” he clearly didn’t believe it was just coincidence, “—sighting of the photograph?”

“No, Inspector. There’s more.” Orlando cast a quick glance at his lover, forbidding him to chip in as yet. “I went into the shop and found there was an address with the name. Before you castigate me for that as well, I’d remind you that we had no easy way to contact you about this picture and for all we knew it might have gone by the time you were able to get down there.” It was a reasonable explanation, one Orlando had been preparing on the train. It served for the moment, at least.

“I won’t deny the sense in that. You’ll have given my officers the address, I take it?”

“Of course.” Orlando swallowed hard, steeling himself for the fence to come. “At the first available moment. We’d ascertained that it wasn’t a false one, in the interim. It would have been stupid, as you yourself told us when you took our statements, to have come here spouting a load of nonsense and leading you on a wild goose chase.” He looked forceful, defying the policeman to argue with such impeccable logic and end up contradicting his own instructions. “There is a Robshaw at the address, but it’s not the one in the picture. Your Mr. Halfpenny has been using an alias.” It was the sort of reasoning which would have floored Orlando’s dunderheads of students and, at first, he thought it had succeeded here.

“Dr. Coppersmith.” The words were spoken slowly, calmly and with great anger, repressed. “Any constable of mine could have gone to this man’s house, deduced he wasn’t Halfpenny and reported it back. I may not have had the benefit of a Cambridge education but I’m not so stupid that I couldn’t have worked out about Halfpenny’s alias for myself.”

“We didn’t want to waste your time, if we’d been mistaken in any way...” Jonty tailed off.

“Not waste my time? What on earth are you doing now, then? I’ll thank you for bringing the photo to our attention but I’ll also thank you not to go interfering in this case again. Wasn’t I clear enough the first time?” If steam had started emerging from Redknapp’s ears, no one present would have been surprised. “There is no room in the investigation of crime for amateurs, dilettante amateurs.”

“Did you hear what he called us?” Orlando hadn’t spoken the length of the street, striding away on his long legs with Jonty scurrying to catch up. Now his words sounded like shards of ice hurled into the night.

“How could I not hear? Mr. Robshaw would have heard down in Winchester. And it was tautology.” Jonty snatched his friend’s arm, just stopping him from colliding with a constable on patrol. “Steady on, old man. We’ve had enough to do with the law tonight.”

“Don’t I know it? Amateurs. That bloody word again.”

“Language, Dr. Coppersmith. You’re not on the rugby pitch now.” Jonty grasped for the arm again but was shaken away.

“Make light of it, if you want to. Everything’s a huge joke to you.” Orlando strode on even faster, in some direction that wasn’t the right one for the Stewarts’ house. He probably had no idea of where he was trying to get to.

“No, it isn’t. How dare you say that?” Jonty stopped. If Orlando wanted to go off in a strop like a seven-year-old then he was welcome to do so. *He* was going home for a glass of port. “I’ll tell my mother not to let Hopkins lock the door. You’ll want a bed for the night when you’ve stopped moping.” He turned on his heels, expecting to hear his lover follow suit, but Orlando’s footsteps, after a pause, carried on in the same direction, taking him God alone knew where.

Chapter Seven

The next morning Jonty opened the door to the dining room, saw that only his mother was in attendance and grinned. “Looks like I’ve beaten Orlando to it for once. I shall give him such stick when he comes down.” He moved across to the array of platters on the sideboard, looked under each cover, helped himself to eggs and bacon then sat next to his mother at the table.

“Shall I pour you a cup of tea, dear?” Mrs. Stewart was wearing one of her most elegant morning dresses, with hues dazzling enough to give anyone a headache if they’d come to the table slightly hung-over.

“Yes please, Mama. Then I can toast my victory at being first to the nosebag.” He could enjoy his success with a clear conscience, having heard Orlando come in half an hour after the rest of the family had gone to bed. No wonder the idiot was oversleeping—he must have walked miles.

“Vulgarity, dear. Please restrain yourself.” Mrs. Stewart’s smile gave the lie to her harsh words.

“Sorry. I just feel so very pleased with myself. He always beats me to meals. Dr. Prompt and all that. Morning, Papa.” Jonty looked up to greet his father.

“Good morning, troublemaker. Orlando not down for breakfast yet?” Mr. Stewart rubbed his chin. “I can’t remember the last time I was down to breakfast before him. Even in my own house.”

“Jonty was just revelling in a similar triumph.” Mrs. Stewart lifted her face to receive a kiss on the cheek. “Perhaps we should send someone up to check on him.” She looked unexpectedly anxious. “Maybe he’s been taken ill.”

“Since he had his morning tea?” Jonty felt suddenly uneasy. “Did the chambermaid happen to mention anything? No reports from below stairs?”

“Not that I’m aware of.” Mr. Stewart stopped in the middle of loading his plate. “Hopkins usually has the staff report to him, then makes some discreet remark if he feels concern about one of our guests.” He laid his plate carefully on the table. “Are you particularly worried about him?”

“I’m always worried if Orlando acts out of character. He’s a terrible creature of habit, as you know.” Jonty laid down his fork, an uneaten mouthful still loaded onto its tines. “He was in such a foul temper last night. I really think I should just go and...hurry him up.” He restrained himself from saying “check on him”. There was a horribly cold knot in the pit of his stomach that he wanted to ignore.

“Don’t fuss so much, he’s a grown man...” Mrs. Stewart’s voice followed her youngest son out of the door.

Jonty knew it was wrong to run on the stairs and, if he'd been twenty years younger, he'd have had six of the best for it. He might still get a whacking now if his mother caught him, but he didn't care. He had to get up to his friend's room as quickly as possible.

When he arrived there to find a little note pinned to the door, a note saying "No tea this morning, thank you, I don't wish to be disturbed," Jonty wasn't sure if that was a good sign or bad. He didn't even bother to knock on the door, bursting in and risking Orlando's wrath if the man had merely taken the opportunity to sleep in or had cut himself shaving or any of one hundred and fifty little things. But he hadn't overslept, as the bed was empty and he couldn't have cut himself shaving, as the most perfunctory examination showed that both razor and shaving brush—and all the other bits of paraphernalia that made up Orlando's toilette—were missing.

With the sickening sensation mounting, Jonty frantically searched the room, calling out his lover's name time and again although he knew it would prove useless. Almost everything was gone. Suitcase, clothes, shoes, the little book on algebra which had become a constant bedtime companion of late, all of them disappeared and not a sign of occupation left, not even a note. Just the trunk of things which had come back from Margate.

"Jonty, what is going on?" Both his parents appeared at the door. "We heard you shouting—has Orlando hurt himself?"

"He's not here, Mama." Jonty slumped onto the bed, hands between his knees. "He's packed up and left."

"I can't believe it." Mr. Stewart ran his hands through where his hair had once been while his wife sat next to her son and put her arm around him. "He's always been so sensible, what can have got into his brain?"

"It's this business with his family. He's taken it so hard." Jonty buried his head in his hands. "Then last night, that scene at the police station. I think it was the last straw."

"I heard him come back, late." Mr. Stewart leaned against the dresser, where Orlando's things had so lately lain. "But not go out again. It must have been mortal early for him not to have come across one of the maids."

"It isn't just this business with the police." Jonty curled into his mother's embrace, as he'd done down the years when at his lowest ebb. "That worry and confusion with his grandmother has unsettled him the most. Not just the grief, he could have coped with that. It's raised all sorts of unpleasant memories."

"You needn't tell us, if you think it would break his confidence." Mrs. Stewart spoke in a voice which took Jonty back to the nursery. Scraped knees and endless kindness. And more recent, more troubling, times.

The feel of his mother's hand stroking his hair, his father's patient expression; this was like when he'd had to confess his own nightmares of times at school. Of cold rooms, stormy nights and unwanted visitors.

If he'd faced that, he could face this. "You know his father killed himself, he told you that. I bet you didn't know Mr. Coppersmith cut his throat at the dinner table, in front of his wife and child. It nearly drove Orlando mad."

"Dear God..." Mr. Stewart came to the bed and slipped his arm round his son as well, the three of them in unison against a cruel world.

"It's taken him years to be able to talk about it and he's always wondered why it happened. His father had terribly dark days, you know, and it must have been due to this wretched business with his grandfather. It makes me so angry." Jonty's head shot up, fear replaced by the need to fight, to take vengeance on behalf of the man he loved so much. "Since she first told me the story I hoped it would turn out Mrs. Coppersmith's father was only adopted—that would seem fitting. I wouldn't be surprised if he was someone's by-blow, and that's why he was so harsh on his own daughter."

"They often are." Mrs. Stewart's tones were soft, measured, soothing. "People rail against that which they most fear or are most ashamed of within themselves. Don't try to find him, Jonty. Let him have some time and then he'll come back, successful or not."

"What if he isn't successful, Mama? What if he spends all the rest of his life trying to find this family who rejected his grandmother? He would. You know what he's like when he gets a bee in his bonnet." Jonty's hands shook again, even in his mother's firm, tender grip.

"You're making a huge assumption, you two." In the absence of Orlando, Mr. Stewart had to be the voice of reason. "He might have gone off to do something totally different, for all we know. He'd tell you off for being so intellectually woolly." He smiled. "And even if he has gone in search of his great-grandfather, we mustn't abandon him to fate, Helena. This might be the time when he needs us most."

"But we have no clues, either, Papa, no idea of where to go to find him and offer him help. If I went missing, Orlando would know to come here. He has no home to go to other than St. Bride's, and he won't be there, will he?"

They sat in silence, every sensible word already spoken, no point in platitudes or anything else which lessened the importance of the moment.

"He's not taken this." Mr. Stewart broke the calm with his voice of reason, again. Mrs. Coppersmith's little portable writing desk, the one which had stood on top of her bureau and been rescued from the house, still sat on the tallboy where Orlando had put it. "Surely that gives us hope? It seemed very important to him."

"It was, but I suspect it added to his frustrations. He said he believed there was a secret drawer in it somewhere although he couldn't find it, try as he might. That's why he left it behind, I'll bet." Jonty wasn't ready to indulge in anything like optimism just yet.

"Why on earth didn't he ask me? My uncle had one like this when I was a lad." Mr. Stewart searched his pockets without success then, much to his son's surprise, asked his wife for the loan of her brooch. Mrs.

Stewart acquiesced without question. “There’ll be something that looks like a tiny worm hole.” He turned the desk over in his hands. “This could be it. And if you stick in something like a pin, you...” A little drawer flew out, sending an envelope shooting to the floor.

“He’ll be so mad at you when he gets back.” Mrs. Stewart emphasised the *when*. “Clever clogs.”

Jonty stooped for the envelope. The designated recipient—Dr. O. Coppersmith—was clearly written in his grandmother’s hand.

“Will you open it? It might be the clue he needs.” Mr. Stewart stared at the little envelope, evidently hoping his eyes would develop the power of penetrating the paper.

“I couldn’t, Papa. Well maybe I could if his absence goes on too long, the mythical year and a day and all that.” Jonty turned the missive over, weighing it, assessing it, cursing it. “But not now. I have to deliver this into his hand, unopened.”

Mrs. Stewart forestalled any argument from her husband. “Hear, hear, my boy. Now, let’s get a cup of tea into you. Into us all. We’ve had quite a shock.”

Jonty had lost count of how many times he, or one of his family, had sought refuge in the teapot but this time it seemed inadequate. This felt like all four horsemen of the apocalypse had rode roughshod over him.

At least his father understood. “Nonsense, Helena. The boy needs a brandy.” He raised his hand to cut off any argument. “And I don’t care if the sun’s not over the yardarm. Needs must.”

It was a long day. Once the brandy had begun its restoring effect, the Stewart males had turned over Orlando’s room, looking for any clues to his state of mind. It was a wild goose chase, as they’d known from the start, but they’d had to do something constructive or else go mad. Mrs. Stewart had rung her ally, Mrs. Ward, Jonty’s housekeeper, but she’d not had any word, either. Mr. Stewart eventually went off to his club for lunch, to start the search for Orlando’s family name, although Mrs. Stewart broke with all precedence and sent her apologies for one of her important charity meetings. She was sure Jonty couldn’t be left alone, even if he just wanted to lie in his room and mope.

Afternoon tea proved a listless occasion, Mr. Stewart having set out several lines of enquiry but having had no return yet, and Jonty unable to settle. He’d laid out a hand of patience on the table, picking at the cards and trying not to think of Orlando playing bridge. Or of Orlando doing anything except coming home again.

“Sir...” Hopkins slipped into the room, the post tray in hand. “The telegram boy has just called.” He backed out, in his usual style, no doubt pretending that everything was going on as normal and the sorts of calamities which befell other households hadn’t visited the Stewarts’.

"It's for you, Jonty." Mr. Stewart handed over the little folded message, then moved to the window, suddenly finding the apple tree to be of inordinate interest.

The telegram remained folded in Jonty's hand; it shook almost uncontrollably. Maybe he'd never be able to open it, as he'd declined opening Mrs. Coppersmith's letter. He wasn't sure he'd ever be able to open another letter as long as he lived.

"What does it say?" Mrs. Stewart resisted the urge to rip it from her son's grip and see for herself.

"I daren't look, Mama. Just in case it says..." Jonty could barely continue. "Just in case it says 'goodbye, don't look for me'."

"Sit down and get this inside you." Mr. Stewart poured another large cup of tea, lading it with sugar. "Do you want me to read it?"

"No. I have to take this fence myself." Jonty forced out a smile. He unfolded the paper, reading the whole message several times before speaking. "He's safe." The relief in his own voice surprised him. "He says he's sorry, but he has to go and find out who he is. He's not unwell, he makes a point of saying he's in his right mind, the idiot, and that he'll return when he's solved his mystery. That's it."

"It's enough for the moment." Mrs. Stewart took the telegram, examining the words as if they might yield all sorts of clues to the feminine mind. "At least we know he's not gone mad or thrown himself off Westminster Bridge."

"Helena!" Mr. Stewart's voice would have blown Westminster Bridge down.

"I'm sorry, dear, but I can't have been the only one who wondered. It being in the family and all."

"Mother, please don't say that." Not Mama, Mother—a name Jonty only ever used when things were at their very worst. "I've had the same worries all day, images of Mr. Coppersmith and that wretched knife buzzing through my brain." A macabre backdrop to his every thought.

"My dearest boy, I didn't mean..." She took his hand again, stroking away the hurt and misunderstanding.

"I know you didn't. And it's as well you said it, perhaps, or we'd have all been thinking it and never daring speak up." Jonty returned the caress. "I'm luckier than I know to have such a family."

Mrs. Stewart blew her nose. "Poor Orlando, perhaps that's what he's searching for. It's all been such a desperate time for him and he's never been used to having people to *really* look after him. He probably has no idea how much we all love him."

"Oh he knows, Mama. At least his heart knows if not his head, or perhaps vice versa." Jonty almost smiled. "He's barely known you three years and that time has to overcome all those miserable years of his childhood. He's such a fool." He shook his head, unable to form any more words for the moment.

"You'd have gone with him, if he'd asked, wouldn't you?" Mr. Stewart laid his hand on his son's shoulder.

“Of course I would. I’d have done whatever was needed to help him find out the truth, even if all the rest had to go hang, St. Bride’s and all.” He stopped, almost dropping his cup and just retrieving it in time. “St. Bride’s. I’d almost forgotten.”

“You’d better get in touch with Dr. Peters straight away. Tell him the truth—he’s a good man and he’ll know what to do.” Mr. Stewart’s voice rang with natural authority. “And if he doesn’t know, that sister of his might have some ideas. You need an independent mind or two on the case.” He clearly had himself in mind for one of the independent thinkers.

“I’ll do that straight away.” Jonty stretched his hand to receive the telegram again. That would be going into his inside pocket and next to his heart, alongside Mrs. Coppersmith’s letter, both of them there for as long as it took.

“Where was that telegram sent from?” Mr. Stewart clearly wished he’d noted that for himself.

“The office at South Kensington. So we can’t even draw any conclusions about which point of the compass he’s heading in from the closest terminus to where he was.” Jonty grinned, despite the worry. “Anyway he’s the devious sort of beast who’d go and despatch something from near Paddington just so we wouldn’t suspect him of departing from Charing Cross.”

“I wish someone had invented some useful machine, rather than great noisy useless things like your motor car. Something which would relay a picture of Orlando directly to every hotel in the land so that they could apprehend him.” Mr. Stewart shook his head in disapproval of a generation which couldn’t set its sights on developing something for the good of society.

“I can’t ever imagine such a wonderful invention, Papa, but perhaps it’s something you could get your mind around. I can’t imagine you or Mama letting such a small thing as practicality get the better of you.” Jonty rose, heading for something Mr. Stewart did regard as a useful invention—the telephone. “Would you excuse me while I get going on my jobs?”

“Of course, my boy.” Mr. Stewart opened the door, whispering as his son passed by, “It will be fine, I promise.”

“I’m heartened by your optimism, Papa.” If only everything could be solved by such simple faith and good nature.

Mrs. Ward had been initially alarmed, her anxiety soon transforming itself into practicality and a promise to go off and root through Orlando’s study to see if she could locate anything which might give them a clue. She’d also offered a ray of hope.

“If I know Dr. Coppersmith at all, I’m sure he can’t stay away from Forsythia Cottage too long. All he truly values at heart is located here. There’s that bookcase full of his incomprehensible mathematical textbooks for a start.” She’d ended there, although Jonty knew what she was really referring to.

It took half an hour for Jonty to decide whether to contact St. Bride's. There was plenty of time before they had to take up college duties again and Orlando might well be back in the bosom of his loved ones by then, but Jonty couldn't face going back to Cambridge without his usual companion and everyone asking awkward questions. Dr. Peters would be discreet, and Jonty felt sure he'd understand.

Dr. Peters seemed to be even more paternally concerned than Mr. Stewart. "I'm only surprised Dr. Coppersmith hasn't done something similar sooner. I've not mentioned this before, Dr. Stewart, but I felt a similar episode had been brewing in late 1905. It passed over." The unstated implication was that Jonty's arrival and subsequent blossoming friendship with Orlando had forestalled it. "If anyone asks, send them to me and I'll say he's on government business."

Jonty had felt heartened enough to take a sherry before dinner. He wore the now crumpled suit he'd had on all day, an evening of Helena's dispensation having been declared because of the extreme circumstances. Somewhere between the third sip and the fourth the resources—sheer epinephrine or whatever physiological doodah it was—which had supported him since breakfast, deserted their posts. He was drained.

"Been a hard day, hasn't it?" Mr. Stewart's tones were even more careful and affectionate than normally.

"Papa, your capacity for understatement is legendary." Jonty stared at the carpet with unseeing eyes. "Can you find some kind words to tell me why Orlando should be haring off on such an absurd adventure?"

"Why does any of us do irrational things? The most sensible of men can act out of character when under duress—even your father has had his moments." Mrs. Stewart poured her son another small glass of sherry, the Oloroso he so favoured providing only minimal comfort this night.

"Like when Orlando made Papa try those experimental medicines?" Jonty managed a tired little smile. "I suppose so. Although this is uncharacteristic on all fronts. It makes no sense at all, even for my idiot boy, to disappear."

"You've forgotten that he's grieving, dear. It takes people in different ways and I wouldn't be surprised if this isn't just anguish for his grandmother coming out. He's focussing all his emotions into this great quest so that he can cope. I've always felt there was something of the fairy-tale prince about Orlando. Or do I mean Don Quixote?" Mrs. Stewart sighed, her elegant hands fiddling with the equally elegant jewels around her neck. "You know how deeply he takes things, how he lets it all bubble up inside him."

"If he'd only told me, I could have helped." The glass shook in Jonty's trembling hands. "It's as if he couldn't trust me." How many times had they said similar things today? And was it getting them anywhere?

Mrs. Stewart was too wise to argue immediately against her son. He too needed to pour out the grief at his own loss, albeit hopefully a temporary one. "He's not had to face anything like this since he met you.

Nothing that's hurt him so deep down. To lose his last close relative, then find out all about that dreadful business—I hope he finds his family and soon, because I shall thump the lot of them.”

“I think I'll go and thump Inspector Redknapp while I'm at it. That remark about amateurs definitely tipped the balance. Orlando can take a lot but not insults to his intellectual acumen.” Jonty took a strengthening draught of sherry. “Now, I'm not prepared to sit around talking anymore. We need a plan of action.”

“Go back to Cambridge.” Mr. Stewart laid his hand on his son's arm. “He's as likely to turn up there as here. If we hear any news we'll tell you straight away.” He paused, the tension in his voice evident. “And your mother would be grateful if you'd do the same for us. Even if it's just reporting about a telegram.”

Jonty knew it wasn't just his mother who'd be grateful. “I will, I promise.” They sat silent, in mutual understanding, Mr. Stewart's face reflecting his concern for his youngest son. “I think I'll ask Ralph and Lavinia to join me in a few days, Papa, if they're happy to up sticks from their new apartment. We've been planning to take them to St. Bride's—we'd intended to do it the week after next, when we went back, but a few days earlier won't hurt...” Jonty's words tailed off and silence fell between them again.

“That would be most wise. It might surprise you, your sister always giving off her air of competence and concern, but she's very fond of you. And of Orlando as well. She's far too sensible to make a song and dance about this business or to go fussing over you, yet I could tell she was worried sick, even over the telephone. Having the opportunity to look after her little brother in his hour of need would be something she'd relish.” Mr. Stewart smiled. “Keep your pecker up, old man. Leave him alone and he'll come home, dragging the truth of his ancestry behind him. He loves you too much not to.”

Jonty nodded, afraid to speak.

In the morning, as if to add insult to injury, the long-awaited photograph of Halfpenny impersonating Robshaw arrived. Two copies, just to rub it in. Jonty, who'd suffered such a bad night's sleep he could have sworn his reflection had aged twenty years, could hardly bear to look at them. Orlando's original oversight had been a clue to his fragile state of mind and he should have acted on it then, before things went so far. He stuffed one into the bottom of his suitcase, left the second with his father and took his leave.

The thought of going through the door of Forsythia Cottage scared him silly and not even the prospect of a nice drive up to Cambridge could hearten him. He'd been contemplating asking Dr. Peters if he could have a set of undergraduate rooms at St. Bride's, just for the time being, so that he didn't have to walk past Orlando's study or look at the empty place on the pillow where his head had lain.

But that seemed the coward's way out and somehow he had to share the discomfort which he assumed—hoped—Orlando was suffering. Anyway, it was impractical. Lavinia and Ralph had agreed to come up to Cambridge and it would have been niggardly to expect them to put up in a hotel when there was

room enough to spare in the cottage. They'd be company and keep Mrs. Ward occupied, if nothing else. And having to act the host would at least give him something to do. Otherwise he might just go mad.

Chapter Eight

Orlando looked at the wall of his hotel room. It wasn't the most salubrious place he'd ever stayed, nor was it the worst, and it would suffice for the first night away from...he struggled to find a suitable term, even in his brain, so took solace in maths. He had some money in his pocket, more in his bank and even the rough mental calculations he'd done suggested he could last a fair while before even sighting the pinch, let alone feeling it.

He looked at his notebook, at the letters he'd found among his grandmother's things and at the state of his hands, which had been scraped badly along a wall as he'd done his moonlit flit. None of them told him anything he didn't already know—he'd taken the first step in locating his family but the second step was speculative and the rest remained a mystery.

He had one lead, the church where his father had been baptised, according to family legend. He'd passed it several times when he'd been to the seaside to holiday with Mrs. Coppersmith—he'd always think of that as his grandmother's name even when he eventually found out what she really was called. The church of St. Giles by the Well, in a little village near Margate. He'd never been there but the spire had stuck out over the trees, proud and elegant, and his grandmother, who usually travelled up to Sittingbourne to bring him down, had told the tale.

Your father was baptised there and he howled the church down the minute the water touched his head.

If that turned out to be another unhelpful variation on the truth he wasn't sure what he was going to do. If it was one of the truths salted among the lies—and his father had never said anything to contradict the legend—then he might find something in the register, or some other record, to give him the start he needed. Orlando thought once more, as he'd done so much the last few days, about his father, the man he'd loved so much although he'd not been able to put a name to that emotion until he'd met Jonty.

He deliberately didn't think about Jonty. Or, rather, he wouldn't let himself think about Jonty. He'd sent the telegram, from a location which would give no clue to where he was now, and assuaged his conscience by an alpha particle or two's breadth. At least the Stewarts would know he hadn't thrown himself in the Thames or been run down by one of those wretched motor cars.

He was sure he'd done the right thing—he kept telling himself it had been, as if he were one of the dunderheads who would accept the veracity of something all the more for being told it repeatedly. He couldn't have taken Jonty with him, it wouldn't have been fair. He had no idea where he was going or for

how long and he couldn't put any sort of timescale on when they'd next see St. Bride's. The unhelpful little voice in his head kept telling him that Jonty wouldn't give two farthings for any of those considerations, that he'd go wherever Orlando wanted for as long as it took. Orlando ignored it. Repeatedly.

He looked from the desk, where he'd laid out his meagre papers, to the bed, which was neat and clean. And empty. He put his head in his hands and refused to think about Jonty.

By morning, after a night where he'd only slept through sheer exhaustion, Orlando had a clearer idea of what he should do, apart from not thinking about his lover. He would have to let someone know where he was, just in case there was some great emergency, which would mean swallowing all his pride and asking for help. Or if he needed to be found by a certain person playing the role of an extremely worried and cross knight on a white charger. Mrs. Sheridan couldn't be trusted with such confidences, her affection for Jonty being so strong she'd be running straight along the Madingley Road as soon as the first letter arrived. Mrs. Ward was the same and she had less far to run, which was as well considering she was three times the size of Ariadne Sheridan. Only one person fitted the bill—Orlando prayed he hadn't underestimated that individual's qualities.

He took breakfast, an unusually quiet breakfast compared to those he normally experienced, then set off in search of a cab to take him to the station. He felt quite pleased with himself, having just twice that morning turned to ask, "Do you think there's any chance we'll find something at St. Giles?" only to discover himself addressing vacancy. It was a better score than yesterday when he'd turned to look for Jonty at least a dozen times. But he wasn't going to think about Jonty. Or else he'd go mad.

He was expecting the church to be an anticlimax, maybe only a folly, like the steeple Mad Jack Fuller had built to fulfil a bet. Things had become so disjointed the last few days that he couldn't help suspect that any and everything might turn to dust in his hands. Like the plaster-and-wood "marble" of the White City, things he'd thought were real and lasting had crumbled into deceit and ruin.

But the church turned out to be real enough, and seemed to have been real enough since at least Norman if not Saxon times. He found the rectory without difficulty and, although the rector was out visiting, his wife offered Orlando a cup of tea and said she'd take him to find the verger, who'd be able to oblige in answering any queries.

The verger looked old enough to have remembered Mr. Coppersmith's christening but the name didn't ring any bells with him. Orlando apologised for his lack of definite dates and—in an uncharacteristic fit of candour—explained why the name might not be quite right, either. The verger had nodded solemnly and confided that the rector at the time had been an understanding soul and that the infant only having one

parent instead of the requisite two would have been ignored. In old Mr. Jackson's day there'd been some latitude in the use of the term *widow*.

At least they had a Christian name to work with, and an unusual one at that, or at least unusual for twentieth-century times. Maybe lots of Victorian mothers wanted their boy called Fortitude.

"You think we should start in about 1848?" The verger lifted down the heavy tome, wiping off the dust of years and opening the register around the middle.

"Thereabouts, perhaps a year or so either way." Orlando scanned the open pages without success.

"Ah. Let's go back a bit then, sir. This is 1850." The verger expertly found the relevant section, navigating amongst entries which were still clear and beautifully preserved, the vestry being well aired and with no trace of damp. It was, all things considered, one of the better-kept churches Orlando had seen. "Here we are, sir."

Fortitude Orlando Coppersmith.

Orlando swallowed hard at the middle name. He'd clearly been christened after his father despite his mother swearing they'd called him after the hero of *As You Like It*. Another little secret being brought to the light. For a moment he wondered whether the man who'd led his grandmother astray had also been called Orlando or whether it was a family name from the distaff side. Whatever it was, it gave him a turn.

"October 21st, 1847, sir." The verger indicated the rest of the entry. "Would you like me to make a copy for you?"

"If you please." Orlando couldn't trust his hand not to shake so much he'd be blotting the paper. No mention of a father's name in the register, other than a smudged reference to a Mr. Coppersmith, clearly as fictitious as the Baron Coppersmith of his grandmother's story.

But now at least he had a baptism date, which would give a good indication of his father being a late summer or autumn baby. If what his grandmother told Jonty about her age when she'd left home was correct, she'd been born in 1829 or 1830. It was a start. "Have you by any chance, an idea of who these people were?" He pointed a trembling forefinger at the part of the register which listed the godparents as a Mr. and Mrs. Lever.

"I don't directly, sir, but there's always been Levers living up at the house by the mill. I'd be inclined to ask there to start with." The verger finished the copy, blotted it dry and presented it with a flourish.

"Thank you." Orlando placed it carefully in his notebook, then fumbled in his pocket. "Please would you take this as a mark of my gratitude." He tumbled a couple of half crowns into the verger's hand.

"Sir, I couldn't..."

"Please. To oblige the memory of my father. And this towards the upkeep of the church." He pressed a guinea into the man's hand this time.

The verger nodded. “As you please, sir. And may I wish you all the best with your quest, whatever it is?” The verger’s eyes were dark and bright, boring into Orlando’s and seeming to see there all sorts of things which he thought he’d kept hidden. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Orlando couldn’t answer, wishing—not for the first or the last time—he had beside him the person who would have handled this awkward little scene with such aplomb. The person he was determined not to think about.

There was only one house by the mill, a fine Georgian property, well maintained and with a neat garden in which a sturdy lad was hacking back brambles while a lady of about Mrs. Stewart’s age was talking to someone who might be the sturdy lad’s overseer in the gardening department. Snatched words floated over the lawn and out into the lane, but they all concerned the pruning of bushes rather than anything relevant to his cause.

All three people turned as soon as they heard the tread on the gravel path into the garden. “Mrs. Lever?” Orlando raised his hat and smiled sternly. It was an expression which he’d learned—in his brief time undercover as a dancing partner—worked wonders on respectable matrons.

“Yes. May I help you?” The lady had a deep, assured voice.

“I hope so. I’m trying to ascertain some information about my family—my father was baptised in the church here in 1847 and his godparents were called Lever. I was hoping you might...”

“That would be my mother and father-in-law, I suspect. Or so the dates suggest.” Mrs. Lever turned to the sturdy lad. “Albert, could you run into the house and ask Mrs. Forrest if she’d send out Rosalind with a pot of tea?” She turned back to Orlando. “As long as you’d be happy to take it here in the sunshine?”

“It would seem a sin to waste such a beautiful day.” Orlando was led to a terrace which overlooked the water meadows and found himself being settled into a comfortable chair. “Pardon me if the question is a painful one but are either of your parents-in-law still alive?”

“Old Dr. Lever died in the same year as the old queen, but Mama is still with us.” Mrs. Lever smiled with what seemed genuine affection. “Alas, her health isn’t what it was, nor is her memory. If only you’d come last summer, she was still bright as a button then. Now, well, now I’d take anything she tells you with a pinch of salt.”

“Is she here? May I speak with her? I have a whole packet of salt to hand.” Orlando fought hard to contain his excitement.

“She is, although she’s asleep just now. I’ll get the maid to rouse her in a while. First, may I ask a question which might be equally painful? What exactly has brought you to us?”

Orlando told his story again, each time the retelling becoming easier, especially when the hearer was as discreet and matronly as his hostess. The conversation moved on, over tea, to take in Cambridge—Dr. Lever was a St. Catharine’s man—and detection.

“I knew I recognised your name.” Mrs. Lever grinned. “From the *Times*. The real-life Sherlock Holmes. Only you haven’t got your Dr. Watson with you today.”

It was like a punch to the stomach. “No,” Orlando forced out, “Dr. Stewart has another case he’s working on, back in London.”

“I suppose your services are greatly in demand. Will you tell me about how you solved the Woodville Ward case? I’m sure the newspaper hid all the interesting bits.”

They finished their tea over a discussion of cryptography, Orlando grateful to bury himself in the details of his most celebrated case.

Mrs. Lever was small, white haired, wizened but with eyes as sharp as a pin. She sat in a small drawing room, in an upright chair, a rug over her legs despite the heat of the early afternoon. The room spoke of Victorian days, of former times fondly remembered. “It’s a pleasure to meet you at last.” She held out a frail hand for Orlando to kiss or shake. He settled for the former, which seemed to please the old girl greatly. “How can I help you with your enquiries?”

“It’s about your godchild, Fortitude Coppersmith. He was my father.” Orlando, guessing the lady might be hard of hearing, raised his voice as he’d heard his hostess do.

“Your father, you say?” Old Mrs. Lever winked her eye. “Ah yes, your *father*. He cried the church down at his baptism, poor mite. Well, I used to send him a book every Christmas and two shillings on his birthdays. Two pounds when he turned twenty-one.”

“I’m sure he appreciated your kindness. As my grandmother would have done.” At least one part of the family legend had been verified.

“Ah, your *grandmother*. She was such a beautiful girl, I think you rather remind me of her. Although that’s not possible, of course, is it?”

“Why?” Orlando wasn’t sure he was ready for any more revelations.

“Because her name was Coppersmith and your name is Holmes, isn’t it?” The old lady beamed brightly. “But I won’t reveal your secret outside this room.”

Young Mrs. Lever smiled wanly, as if to say, “I did warn you.”

Orlando swallowed his pride. “I’d be very grateful for that, Mrs. Lever, as would Dr. Watson. Now, can you tell me anything about Mrs. Coppersmith’s family, or her husband?” He was rapidly losing hope of anything turning up. It seemed more than likely that the old lady might suggest his grandmother had secretly been Irene Adler.

“Well, there wasn’t a husband. There was a father, but he’d died before Fortitude was born. That’s how we met her—my husband had attended his deathbed, in his capacity as the local doctor.”

Orlando sneaked a glance at young Mrs. Lever and received a nod of acknowledgement. Not all that the lady recounted was delusional, then. “She was there, at this man’s house?”

“Fortitude’s father had asked for her to come, right at the end, even though they were estranged by then. I believe he wanted her to marry him, to make Fortitude the right side of the blanket, but your grandmother stuck to her principles. The pope, you know.”

A glance at young Mrs. Lever brought only a shrug in reply. This story hadn’t been shared amongst the family so who could tell if any of it made sense? “Do you know his name, surname or Christian?” Orlando produced his notebook as it was probably expected of him. “Could it have been Orlando, like his son’s middle name?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t recall either of them. Potter? Johnston? Barker?” The old lady began to giggle. “I don’t think my memory’s what it was, Mr. Holmes. Sorry. *Dr. Copperfield*.”

Orlando wondered whether he should pat her hand. Jonty would have done. Jonty. He ploughed on. “Fortitude Coppersmith’s mother. She became a friend?”

“I’m not sure she had any friends, that’s why she chose us as godparents.” The authority of the remark came as a surprise. “My husband tended her, up to and including her confinement—she had a house in Herne Bay at the time but later she moved. We lost touch then. She may have gone to Rome.”

“And did she ever confide in you or your husband about what her family name really was? I’ve been assured that she wasn’t a Coppersmith by birth.”

“Then you’ve been assured correctly. That name came from a story in the *Catholic Herald*.” Old Mrs. Lever evidently didn’t notice her daughter-in-law rolling her eyes again. “By birth she was...”

Orlando thought he might just die waiting for the name to emerge. “Yes?” he asked, in harmony with young Mrs. Lever.

“Parkinson. Pattinson. Bergamasco. One of those. I think.” Old Mrs. Lever smiled, clearly pleased with her performance under Mr. Holmes’s questioning.

“Thank you.” Orlando rose and kissed the old lady’s hand again.

“Please give my regards to Dr. Watson, young man, and tell him not to marry that young Catholic girl.”

“I’m sorry if your time was wasted.” Mrs. Lever saw her visitor to the lane, clearly concerned. “Mama has had a bit of a bee in her bonnet about the Catholic Church this last year. You should be grateful she wasn’t talking about Prussian spies—she sees them in the shrubbery quite often.”

Orlando smiled. “She’s a delightful lady. And I don’t believe everything she said was meandering of the mind. I just need to sift out the wheat from the proverbial chaff.” And the facts from the figments of imagination. He’d report it all to Jonty when he got back and he’d be able to... Only there wouldn’t be any Jonty on hand to work the oracle, would there? Orlando bit his lip and bid his hostess goodbye.

You were right. This is the only way to do it. He’d made a decision, albeit a hurried one, to leave Jonty behind for the moment but it had to be the correct choice and he had to stick to it. The nauseous feeling which came along every time he thought of Jonty wasn’t settling as the hours passed. He could ignore the guilt, put that to the back of his mind behind a wall of theorising over his own origins, but the sick feeling couldn’t be as easily dismissed. And if he missed Jonty so much now, after a couple of days, what was it going to be like when a week had passed or maybe a month?

Orlando wouldn’t think about that, either. Tonight he’d write his daily letter and send it off to join the others, the testaments to his journey that lay in trusted hands. One day Jonty might be allowed to see them, but he couldn’t consider that just yet, it would cloud his thinking. Now he’d get himself down to Herne Bay and see if there was anything to be found there, especially if it concerned a name like Parkinson or Potter or any of the other ones Mrs. Lever had come up with.

Herne Bay was a disappointment. He found the church—the treacherous part of his brain told him how proud a certain person would be of all the times he was visiting churches without having an arm twisted behind him—and a floral festival being prepared. A bevy of flower ladies fawned over him and, while several of them remembered Dr. Lever, none of them remembered Mrs. Coppersmith. Why should they? Even the oldest of them would have been barely more than a slip of a lass at the time. Short of demanding he be allowed to come home and interrogate their maiden aunts, he was at a loss to know what to do.

In the end, Orlando abandoned logic and detection for standing looking at the sea, thinking of the happy times he’d shared on various Kent shorelines when he was a boy. Children were running on the beach, splashing in the waves, collecting stones and shells—all the sorts of things he’d enjoyed so much. He found a large dog whelk, holding it to his ear as he’d been taught so long ago, listening to the suspiration and dreaming of adventure. He’d found adventure a-plenty since then and a companion to share it with. The companion he wasn’t going to think about, not even now when the sky was the exact colour of Jonty’s eyes.

He should go and consult Debrett’s to see if any of the names linked up with noble families. If they did, he’d have to start delving into registers of births and baptisms. These were solid, sensible things to do, rather than moping like some soppy schoolgirl—the next logical steps along the road, no matter where it took him in the end.

Chapter Nine

Jonty could no more twiddle his thumbs than he could stop looking in at Orlando's room every morning, just in case the idiot had seen sense and slipped back into the cottage as silently as he'd slipped out of the Stewarts' home. But twiddling his thumbs seemed all there was in prospect. He had no university work to do—the pair of them had cleared their decks before their holiday in London—and he couldn't face pottering around the house, stirring up memories. The one thing he could attack was making some progress on the White City murder, although working out what he could do on that seemed as hopeless as working out how he could find Orlando.

He took little comfort at going down to St. Bride's—even the wit and wisdom of the great Dr. Panesar had begun to pall. For lack of anything else to do, Jonty went to High Table, a much-reduced High Table during the long vacation and one at which Dr. Panesar's pleasantries struggled to enliven the proceedings. Over coffee in the Senior Common Room he started to expand upon his theories about unrest in Europe, how there was a great black cloud forming on the horizon and no one in authority was prepared to acknowledge it.

Jonty was woolgathering, contemplating wandering up the Madingley Road in search of bats or glow-worms en route to his cottage and that big empty bed, when a certain name got his attention.

"It wouldn't surprise me if Dr. Coppersmith's government business isn't somehow involved in espionage." Panesar's eyes lit up.

"Code breaking, you mean?" Lumley, the chaplain, steepled his fingers in contemplation. "Perhaps. I find the explanation of his absence rather unsatisfactory, though." He turned to Jonty. "Much as it pains me to contradict Dr. Peters, would I be right in assuming that our mathematical colleague is conducting some sort of investigation?"

Jonty forced out a smile. "We both are. From different angles. When Dr. Coppersmith—" he was pleased to have got the name out without choking, "—and I were in London, we happened to be peripherally involved in the case of a young man who was found dead, very likely murdered, as he'd been poisoned. His name was Halfpenny."

Dr. Panesar looked sideways at Lumley and winked. He couldn't have made what he was thinking plainer if he'd actually said, "I don't think we believe the involvement could have been peripheral, do we, Chaplain?"

“Halfpenny?” Lumley looked thoughtful. “Unusual name. Young, did you say? My brother—well, I hardly like to confess this—once nearly horsewhipped a chap called Halfpenny. Would have done, had I not stopped him.”

Jonty almost vaulted out of his seat. “Chaplain, might I ask you to tell us the whole story? The name might be no more than coincidence, although from the very little we’ve found out about Halfpenny, he might well have been the sort of chap who found himself being horsewhipped, especially if there were women involved.”

“It could well be the same man, then. Hardly an edifying tale.” Lumley the chaplain blushed, his straw-coloured hair and ridiculously young-looking face giving him the appearance of one of his choirboys caught telling a music hall joke. “Are you sure you want me to repeat it?”

“I’d be very grateful.” Jonty got out his notepad and propelling pencil. Better look the part, even out of the detective’s native habitat.

“My elder brother has a young daughter. She was being courted by what he hoped was a respectable young man, if not one in the sort of profession which he might have hoped to see a future son-in-law employed in.”

“A travelling salesman?”

Lumley inclined his head. “I believe he termed himself as something slightly more impressive-sounding but that is essentially correct. Now, before you upbraid me for a lack of Christian charity, I must say that my brother, like myself, sees all men as equal in terms of their birth and their status. It is the way he lives his life on which he weighs a man’s worth.”

“I hope that all of us at St. Bride’s would concur with that sentiment. It’s the only proper way to go about things.” Jonty smiled a sideways grin at Dr. Panesar, who returned the compliment. Jonty’s father might have been a lord who didn’t deign to use his title but old Mr. Panesar had worked his passage to England on a steamship and fought his way into St. Andrews University on sheer determination and guts. No one was going to be allowed to assume that either of these men was more important than the other.

“Well, he opened the family’s doors to this Halfpenny, and while he didn’t encourage his attentions towards my niece, neither did he discourage them. Unfortunately, the man didn’t just journey in search of new markets in which to sell his company’s silverware. He...well, how shall I put this...” Lumley flushed now that the attention of all the Senior Common Room—only seven members this night but that was bad enough—was on him.

“He went in search of young ladies with whom to ply his wares?” Jonty restrained his grin. Poor Lumley—the twentieth century must be proving a sore trial to him.

“Very subtly put, Dr. Stewart. My brother saw this Halfpenny out with a lady, clearly not a female relative, despite her maturity, given the particular attentions he was paying her. Perhaps not even a *lady* given the nature of them.” Lumley exhaled loudly. “My niece was very upset, so upset that she was

threatening to join a closed order as, she said, life held no further joy for her. She always was rather prone to over-dramatisation.”

“When was this?”

“Perhaps a year ago, oh.” Lumley stopped, evidently realising the importance of what he’d been asked. “I see. I could simply say that, because of the timescale, it’s hardly likely to be relevant to your case but that wouldn’t be rigorous enough, would it?” He screwed up his face in thought. “My brother did threaten him, although it was more in anger than in reality. I can’t believe George has been harbouring resentment all this time and finally taken a belated revenge.”

“Your niece is quite recovered?” If she shared her uncle’s generally optimistic, if timid, constitution, that would seem likely.

“She is at present engaged to a most pleasant young man whose father played for the Gentlemen of England.” Lumley nodded to Dr. Panesar, who loved his cricket. “Altogether more suitable.”

“So she didn’t succumb to the temptation of the veil, only the bail?” Dr. Panesar chortled, never far from sharing one of his beloved bad jokes.

“Indeed. She’d recovered her composure after just a couple of days of feeling sorry for herself.” Lumley poured himself another coffee, while Jonty wondered if a certain other person would see sense after a few days of moping around. “Now, there is one thing—it may have no relevance to your investigation so I’ll emphasise that it’s strictly caveat emptor—that I remember. When George threatened this Halfpenny chap, apparently he just laughed it off and said, ‘I’ve had the horsewhip waved at me by better men than you, sir, and you’d have to go a long way to beat the impressive performance of the shop assistant’s father!’ It’s entered into family folklore.”

“Thank goodness it did, that could be very helpful indeed. Has your brother happened to mention anything about seeing the story in the newspapers?” Jonty had the excited feeling that often came when they were about to make a breakthrough. Only it wasn’t *they*, this time, which took the guilt off the gingerbread.

“He hasn’t because he can’t. Well, I suppose one can get copies of the *Times* in Nice, but he usually eschews all contact with the outside world when they take a holiday.” Lumley paled. “Perhaps I should be there to break the news to my niece on their return. I know that she’s had nothing to do with this young man in all that time, but still...”

“I think it would be doing her a kindness.” Jonty refrained from offering to come with him and take advantage of the opportunity for avuncular questioning—the time elapsed seemed too long for this affair to have had an impact on the case. Plenty of girls must have come and gone since then and maybe one of their fathers had a vial of poison rather than a whip. “Although perhaps we should establish whether this is the same chap. Coincidences can and do happen. My Halfpenny lived in the less salubrious end of West Brompton.”

“Indeed, we mustn’t jump to conclusions—what would Dr. Coppersmith say if he caught us being so slapdash? That sounds the right part of London, though.” Lumley nodded. “A crime of passion, I guess, Dr. Stewart. Nasty, very nasty.”

At which point Dr. Panesar suggested that they consider whether this Halfpenny had been using his travels abroad to cover dabbling in a little espionage. He found himself with five voices howling him down, his habit of linking everything to spying and civil unrest being his favourite occupation at present. The sixth voice remained silent as its owner slipped out and headed home.

It was lovely to have an excuse to go down to London again, even if Jonty had eschewed the pleasures of the automobile for the train. Somehow, without Orlando to needle every time he got behind the wheel, there wasn’t quite the pleasure in motoring. He watched the countryside flash past, well behaved and neat Cambridgeshire giving way to even more genteel Hertfordshire and then rough and ready Middlesex. He’d always loved railway journeys, even when forced to take them alone.

He wasn’t going to indulge in any pretence at Law’s Silversmiths, not this time. If Redknapp found out he’d been sticking his nose in, then Jonty would set his father on him, and anyone who dared take on Mr. Stewart in defence of his young would need his head examined. He’d decided to simply go in, ask for Miss Pearce and arrange to take her to lunch. It would cause a sensation in the shop, but he didn’t care about that either. The questioning could be done over a nice Dover sole or a rack of lamb.

Miss Pearce accepted the invitation without any sign of embarrassment—perhaps she was used to handsome sons of the nobility asking her to lunch or otherwise flattering her. No doubt she saw Jonty as a friend to be encouraged. He occupied himself during the hour he had spare before his guest’s lunch hour by wandering along to the National Gallery and peering at the less saucy of the Rubens offerings on view. He couldn’t face *The Fighting Temeraire*—it made him choke up at the best of times and this was hardly one of those. Any reflection upon past glories now ruined would be unwelcome. He slowly made his way through Trafalgar Square and along to his rendezvous.

Miss Pearce was prompt to the minute, if slightly flustered. “I’m so sorry I’m late, Dr. Stewart.” She held out a grey-gloved hand to be shaken. “A customer came in just as I was preparing to leave and I had to put business before pleasure.”

“Just as it should be.” Jonty bowed and escorted her up the steps to the hotel where he’d chosen to take lunch. It was one of the most respectable places in the capital, the sort of establishment where one took one’s sister or maiden aunt, and which shouted out “this girl can’t possibly be my mistress as only a cad would be seen here with one”.

He was offered a table by the window and reluctantly took it, hoping Orlando wouldn't spot him and be appalled. *Or maybe it would be as well if he saw me and came in to find out what sort of trouble I'd got myself into. Then I could tie the bugger to the seat until it was time to leave.*

"Dr. Stewart?"

"I'm so sorry, Miss Pearce, I was woolgathering. Awful habit."

"I was simply saying that time is rather at a premium for me. I'm sorry, it's just that we're slightly short-handed today..." If Miss Pearce was hoping the invitation would be extended to meeting for dinner that evening and then who knew what, she was going to be disappointed.

"Then I'll ask the waiter to make sure our food comes promptly." Jonty motioned for the waiter to attend them, placed their orders and, with all the charm he could muster—which was plenty—wondered if they could be served without delay. "And I'll come straight to the point with you as well, Miss Pearce. When I called at the shop that first time, I wasn't just in search of a piece of silverware. I was looking for some information about a case I'm involved with. The case concerning Ian Halfpenny's death." Jonty ignored the crestfallen look which flitted over his guest's face. "You do know that he was murdered?"

"Yes. I saw the story in the *Times*, just after you'd called into the shop. *The police now believe that foul play had been involved.*" She sniffed. "More than just *believed*. We had that Inspector Redknapp in the shop, following up Ian's business contacts, and Mr. Parry decided I should be paraded for him as being another sort of contact."

Jonty shook his head. "Then I'll apologise in advance if you find my questions uncomfortable, but I'm sure you'll be able to help me."

"I'll try my best, although I'm not sure what there is to elucidate. It's a long time since I last saw Ian." Miss Pearce seemed to find the tablecloth to be of enormous interest, whereas she'd previously concentrated on her host's face.

"That's part of what I'd like to clarify in my mind. You've not seen him for how long?" The arrival of an answer was interrupted by the arrival of their consommé.

"Four months or so." Miss Pearce sipped her soup demurely.

"But I'd be right in saying that your family are unaware that you met him again?" It was the sort of bow drawn at a venture that had a habit of hitting its mark.

"How did you know?" Miss Pearce raised her eyes again, staring straight at Jonty once more, shiftiness replaced by belligerence. "Who told you?"

"I heard that your father may have threatened him, although that would have been a year or more ago. The discrepancy of dates seems suggestive." Orlando was going to kill him when he heard of such fluffy logic, but Orlando wasn't going to find out. *Certainly not in the short term, more's the pity.* Jonty laid down his spoon, appetite temporarily displaced.

"Your reasoning would do Sherlock Holmes proud."

Jonty couldn't decide if Miss Pearce was being sarcastic but accepted the compliment with a nod of his head.

"I did see Ian again. He contacted me by letter, a very apologetic letter full of handsomely crafted contrition. He pleaded to have the opportunity of seeing me again. Perhaps it's the sort of thing he said to all his women, your cousin included."

"Ah, yes, that's something else I need to explain. I'm afraid my cousins are male, married or both." Jonty tried to look appealing; he wasn't sure that Miss Pearce wouldn't be tempted to empty her soup bowl over him.

"She was just another one of your subterfuges?" She shook her head and then gestured with her spoon. "In which case who are you acting for, in your investigation? I assumed it was for this poor cousin of yours, her being under suspicion or something. Or is it Inspector Redknapp who's asked you to come here?" She paled.

It was the question he'd dreaded, but Jonty had an answer ready. "No, not the excellent inspector. Our college chaplain is connected to the case—unlike me he actually does have a member of the family affected. I would love to put his mind at rest about what really happened." He smiled and let the waiter take his bowl.

"And can't the police do that?" If Miss Pearce was trying to put him off the trail, she was succeeding, and making him more than uncomfortable in the process.

"Of course, they are the experts. But you can guess what it's like—Mr. Lumley trusts St. Bride's men above all others and..." Jonty gestured airily, hoping that would take away the need for explanation and praying that Miss Pearce wouldn't go straight and snitch to Redknapp.

"The honour and pride of the college." Miss Pearce rolled her eyes and then smiled. "You can tell your Mr. Lumley that when last my father saw Halfpenny, the louse—excuse my language, Dr. Stewart, but the man was an absolute cad and sly with it—was still alive and I've given him no opportunity recently to renew hostilities. My father still believes he scared my unsuitable suitor off for good."

"What surprises me most is that you agreed to meet him again. You seem far too sensible to fall for the usual flannel." Jonty leaned back to let a salad be slid onto the table. A succulent-looking salad at that—he thought he might manage a mouthful.

"He was very clever in his use of words. I suppose that's what made him so successful as a salesman." Miss Pearce's chicken suffered a vicious attack from her knife, as if it were Halfpenny himself. "I don't think I believed he really was contrite, I don't think I'm that silly, but I was intrigued. I honestly wanted to see what he had to say for himself."

"And what did he say?"

“That he was going away, not just on a business trip, but for a longer time. He said he couldn’t tell me anything more.” Her brow crinkled. “It was like he was going away to war. Mind you, I didn’t believe a word of it.”

“Why was that? Apart from the impression I have that Halfpenny wasn’t generally very liberal with the truth?” Jonty put the thought that he was getting a bit stingy with the truth at the back of his mind. It was all in the cause of investigation.

“I think you’ve hit the nail on the head. I’d had plenty of examples of Ian lying to me—mainly about other women—and it had got to the point I’m not sure even he could tell the reality from the fiction he’d wound about himself.” Two sharp points of colour lit up Miss Pearce’s cheeks.

“This fictional world in which he lived, might it have included having a second identity?” Jonty spoke the words slowly, precisely. “We have evidence he was inclined to use another name and address when it suited him.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me at all. That last time he spoke he was making some veiled reference to things he was involved in, so veiled it made little sense. How he needed to move, because it wasn’t safe for him there. I thought it was another of his stories.” Miss Pearce stopped, eyes narrowed in thought. “Do you think he used these other names with his other women? Did some poor girl find he had a mistress or a bigamous wife on the side? They say that poison is a woman’s weapon.”

“How did you know he’d been poisoned?” Jonty spoke quietly; he didn’t want all the other diners knowing their business, especially as it had become so crucial. He soon became convinced that Miss Pearce was never going to answer him. Her attention was fixed on her food, none of which was being directed near her mouth. “Do the police know about your powers of second sight?”

“It isn’t second sight, Dr. Stewart, just the ability to read a newspaper. It was in the *Times*, in the follow-up to the original story.” She looked up, her gaze daring him to gainsay her.

“Now we both know that’s not true, don’t we? I may not read that hallowed paper from announcements through to back page, but my father does and he’s been keeping an eye out for me.” Jonty smiled. “No causes given for the White City murder.”

“Perhaps I got the newspaper wrong. It might have been the *Telegraph*...”

“Why don’t you just tell me the truth? I don’t for a moment imagine you killed Halfpenny,” Jonty lied—he’d got to the point he could believe almost anything of almost anybody, “and your candour might help to pinpoint the murderer.”

“My father told me.” She spoke in hardly more than a whisper. “He’d heard it from one of his acquaintances, who’d had it from someone working at the White City.”

“If it’s such an innocent set of circumstances, why did you spin such a tale about newspaper articles? These sort of things can be easily verified, you know, both ways.”

"I know, but what else was I to say to Inspector Redknapp? If the police follow the link back to Pa and his friend, then they might come across his horsewhipping threat—the friend knows all about it as well and he's just the sort to start shouting the odds if he felt under pressure." Miss Pearce wound her napkin around her fingers.

Redknapp would have pricked his ears up at it, as well. The gap between threat and execution wouldn't have bothered him and he'd have thought the chain of communication less likely than Mr. Pearce knowing poison had been used from firsthand experience. Assuming it hadn't actually been firsthand experience, of course. The light flicked on in Jonty's dimmer-than-usual noddle. "Did you think I was here on behalf of Redknapp, to butter you up and then get you to contradict your story?"

"At first." The cold, scared look in Miss Pearce's eye indicated she hadn't necessarily given up that idea. "Now I feel I can rely on you, but I still don't understand your motives. If the *Times* didn't ring true with you, the honour of the college doesn't ring true with me."

Jonty sighed, defeated. "Miss Pearce, would you believe me if I say it's a mixture of curiosity—my friend and I saw Halfpenny at the White City, dead in his chair, and we thought him only asleep—and the need to fill a gap I have at present in my life." The trembling in his perfidious voice surprised even him by its force.

Miss Pearce suddenly brightened. She was a pretty girl, but when she chose to smile she bordered on the beautiful. "Now that I can believe, completely. Thank you for being so honest with me."

Jonty inclined his head but didn't reply, not trusting his tongue not to run away and lay bare all his emotions.

"Is there anything else I can help with?"

Jonty wrestled his voice into line. "There is one more thing. Is there any chance you could put a name to some of these other women Halfpenny kept on a string? Particularly any exotic or perhaps more mature ones?"

Miss Pearce shook her head. "I'm afraid not. Are you thinking he paraded me before his four wives? Or were there five of them?"

"Four hundred wouldn't surprise me." Jonty grinned. They finished their meal in discussion of the wonders of the White City, carefully avoiding the matter of what they'd seen in the Australian pavilion.

Jonty eyed New Scotland Yard from the end of the street, wishing he possessed what he'd always alleged his mother had—the ability to see through brick walls—and therefore establish whether Redknapp was on the premises. His guardian angel surprised him by springing into motion again, as the inspector suddenly shot out of the door, took a long breath of air and headed along the pavement in Jonty's direction. A visit to the little tobacconist's shop close by suddenly became essential, Jonty emerging several minutes

later with a neatly wrapped package of cigars, one of which he'd promised himself as soon as his commission had been successfully completed. He watched Redknapp's form disappear into the distance and, with a smug grin, nipped along to his goal.

Sergeant Ross smiled over the desk as he recognised his visitor, a smile which rapidly turned to a frown as he must have remembered some order he'd been given. "Ah, Dr. Stewart, if you're here about the Halfpenny case, I must inform you that I am unable to give you any information." It sounded like a rehearsed speech, the sergeant reciting the words his inspector had drilled into him and reciting them with evident reluctance. "We have our enquiries well in hand and are exploring several avenues."

"I totally understand. I wouldn't ask you to do anything which would get you into trouble, even for my mother's sake." Jonty applied his innocent-seven-year-old face, just in case the words weren't enough.

"Ah. And how is Mrs. Stewart, sir?" The constraint in Ross's voice was tangible.

"She's blooming, Sergeant, full of the milk of human kindness." Jonty couldn't really enjoy Ross's evident discomfort. He knew exactly what skulduggery had been practiced by his mother and her hat-making, policeman-marrying friend, the visit the grateful milliner had made to this very building bearing cakes and singing the praises of her patroness. Easing his passage. "And I wouldn't presume on hanging on the coattails of the esteem in which she's held among your fellow policemen."

"Glad to hear it, sir." He may have been glad, but Ross clearly didn't believe a word of it.

"I'm just clarifying something I've already been told. When we gave our original statements, Dr. Coppersmith and I were told about the contents of Mr. Halfpenny's pockets. There was a postcard from someone, a friend who subsequently came to identify the body. We were told it was a Miss Murray—" oh, how easy it had become to lie, "—but I didn't dare write it down at the time and now I wanted to make sure. It's just I've run across her again in another context and I don't want to blot my copybook with the inspector."

"Ah." Ross was unmistakably wrestling with his conscience although Jonty wasn't sure which one of them was on *his* side. "I don't suppose it would hurt if I said you were correct, if you assure me that you won't go taking matters into your own hands again."

"I promise I shan't talk to this lady about the matter." It was a promise he could make in all honesty. "But it's as if the devil himself is trying to tempt me. Our chaplain up at St. Bride's has a niece who knew Halfpenny, another of his hapless female victims, and he was regaling us about the case. I had to bite my lip." It almost sounded convincing, enough to persuade the sergeant, at least.

"Glad to hear it." The sergeant visibly relaxed. "He liked the women, our Mr. Halfpenny—I would imagine you'd have a high chance of running across other people who knew him, if only by reputation. You keep that lip bitten, sir, if I may be so bold."

"I'll try my best, Sergeant Ross." Jonty grinned. "I feel sorry for Mr. Robshaw, having such a scoundrel going around using his name. I wonder how many poor girls think it's him they should be waiting for?"

"Ah, not *him*, sir, just his name and address got used as far as we can see. Mr. Robshaw was very put out about it although he had to admit there'd been no actual attempt to impersonate him and he'd not had any irate fathers beating at his door." Ross scratched his head. "I wonder why Halfpenny chose that particular alias?"

"Mr. Robshaw said he travelled as well, in fine china. It's just possible that Halfpenny came across his card and pocketed it on some occasion. Or copied his name and address from a hotel register. I would imagine it to be relatively easy to acquire another person's details should one be devious enough." Jonty looked out of the window as he spoke; no point in appearing too inquisitive at present. Although the fact that any copying of an address from a register had to be very recent suddenly jarred. This was surely no chance acquisition—it smacked of careful planning.

"It's a worrying business, Dr. Stewart. Bad enough using a man's name for chasing the ladies, if you'll excuse my frankness, but I can't help wondering if he was involved in espionage or the like. I understand that his travelling took him as far as Vienna and there's a lot of monkey business going on there."

Jonty wondered whether Dr. Panesar had been here, too, infecting everyone with the urge to see spies around every corner. This would come down to lust, not very pure and not very simple, rather than the ripples from the Austro-Hungarian Empire or whatever it was called. Geography and politics had never been his strong suit, but passion he understood, just as his beloved Shakespeare had. He dragged himself away from thoughts of the sonnets as he realised Ross was continuing on the theme.

"Do you know what I think, Dr. Stewart? I think this Halfpenny chap was frightened—I may be speaking out of turn but we've heard he was planning to go off somewhere." Ross leaned forward, lowering his voice. The spirit of Redknapp clearly still hung over the building even if his corporeal form had departed. "I think he was lining up another identity, trying it on for size, as it were, although whoever he was scared of got to him first, before he could make his escape."

"Poor chap." Jonty tried to appear as sympathetic as possible. None of this was news to him, but confirmation of his own opinions from an official source was gratifying, especially if there was more to follow.

"Aye. At least he didn't suffer too much. I can't tell you what was used to poison him, Dr. Stewart, you'll understand that. But if I say that my foxgloves were very handsome this year..." The sergeant winked. "And I'll add that our Mr. Halfpenny likely didn't have a very strong heart to start with."

Jonty nodded sagely, repressing a grin at the weak heart bit. For a chap with a dicky ticker, Halfpenny saw a lot of action. "That's more than enough information, Sergeant Ross. I don't want you getting into

trouble with your superiors for aiding a busybody like me.” He raised his hat, inclined his upper torso in a neat yet not ostentatious bow, and took his leave, pleased that he hadn’t actually committed a crime by lying to the police.

This information was going straight to his father who could go and work his charm on Miss Murray in order to worm something more out of her about Halfpenny, if there was anything left now Redknapp had worked the female witnesses over. The chance that the inspector had been too cocky to mine such a valuable source of information wasn’t considered. Not even a guardian angel could work such wonders.

Chapter Ten

Potter. No.

Barker. No.

Johnston. No, although there were *Johnsons* who had the appropriate titles—Orlando had run up against them during their last case. He really hoped he wasn't related to that particular family, despite the affection Mr. Stewart had for them.

He sat with a copy of Debrett's, working through all the names Mrs. Lever had given him, eliminating some and writing a question mark against others on his list. Any slight variation on the names was noted, too—he'd spent the day analysing every single entry and listing all that could possibly be the correct version of the surname Mrs. Lever was struggling to remember. A nagging voice (with an accent remarkably like Jonty's) whispered in his brain that he might as well just work through every titled family in the land, ancient ducal down to recently created knight. Orlando had the awful feeling that was exactly what he was going to end up doing.

Parkinson, Pattinson; there were a few promising leads among the P's. He'd even been tempted to go looking for a family called Holmes, given Mrs. Lever's insistence on calling him by the name, but that could wait until every other avenue had been explored. If he turned out to be a Holmes he might just kill himself.

What other little pieces of information could he piece together to fill in the puzzle of where he'd come from? *Fortitude*. Not just a quality he could do with bucketloads of at present—it was a sufficiently unusual name that if he came across another one on his investigative travels it must surely suggest a connection. There were plenty of fortitudes mentioned, but usually in combination with faith or fidelity or courage as part of a family crest. Some of the families were particularly eminent, although Orlando couldn't in his wildest dreams—and he'd had a few recently, nights of tossing and turning fitfully, slipping into early mornings of dozing and seeing vivid visions—imagine he was related to the Earl of Essex.

Tomorrow he would go to the public records office and see if he could make some more progress, hoping against hope that his grandmother's birth had been registered or that any of his listed families would have had a female child at about the right time.

Jonty passed his investigative commission to his father, not without a little reluctance. It meant he would keep his word to Redknapp—no one had banned Mr. Stewart from taking an interest in the case—but it added to his frustrations. “I’m convinced there’s nothing or nobody you can’t charm, Papa, birds from the trees included, so a mere landlady should be meat and drink to you.”

Mr. Stewart smiled indulgently. “I’m glad you have such confidence in me and I’ll try not to let the side down.” Jonty had given his father chapter and verse on all the news when he’d arrived at his parents’ home the evening before. It had been useful to have something to discuss which wasn’t the case of the mathematician’s moonlit flit. “I see the crux of this entirely. If your Halfpenny was pretending to be Robshaw, how did he get to know that he was moving to this place in Winchester and was he using the man’s previous address? We could do with dates and times.”

Jonty nodded. “It’s the part I can’t get my head around. All the rest is pretty straightforward, but this...” He shrugged. “Even if he was intending to bump Robshaw off and subsume his identity, the landlady isn’t blind. She’d know her tenant had changed appearance. Unless he meant to kill him earlier, of course, and take his place on the day Robshaw was due to move in. It all suggests he’d been keeping a close eye on his potential victim.”

“And ended up the victim himself.” Mr. Stewart tapped his “detecting” notebook, brought out especially for the occasion. “Maybe this landlady was in on things. She could be the woman of mature years with whom Halfpenny was being over familiar.”

“That’s far too speculative, Papa, Orlando will...” Jonty stopped himself and they both passed an uneasy moment in silence. “Are you happy to do this all alone? I wouldn’t want you being thumped over the head with a rolling pin or something.”

“Why should I be? I shall smile politely and be at my charming best. And if she turns out to be an accessory to the murder, I’ll protect myself with this.” Mr. Stewart waved his walking cane like a broadsword.

“Sorry, I’m being too suspicious.” Jonty sighed. “Now, you know what else you have to ask her about?”

“I’m not a fool, my lad. Nor so senile that I can’t recall a few simple things. Whether she’s ever heard mention of a chap called Halfpenny, perhaps enquiring after a room. Whether Mr. Robshaw says he’ll be away on business a lot and if he’s mentioned travelling to the continent, although I find that link a bit tenuous.” Mr. Stewart brandished the notebook. “I’ll take it all down and you can mark it afterwards for clarity of exposition.”

“I trust you’ll do better than my dunderheads. A disgrace to the name of St. Bride’s, some of them.” Jonty came to the door to see his father off, then set off for Lavinia’s to make the final arrangements for their trip back to Cambridge the next day. He had to be busy or else go mad.

Lavinia clearly felt sorry for him, if that compassion seemed to be tempered with distraction. They passed a pleasant lunchtime together, recalling childhood days when Ralph Broad's greatest pleasure had been flinging small slimy creatures at her in some misguided attempt to declare, even then, his undying love, and not mentioning Orlando at all. Jonty wondered whether everyone would treat him—at least for the foreseeable future—if he were made of glass.

He wandered home in time to take tea and cakes, his mother evidently of the opinion that the only thing which would help little boys in such a crisis was feeding them and keeping up their strength. When Mr. Stewart eventually came in, he gave his hat and cane to Hopkins with a huge self-satisfied grin then joined his wife and son for a small pre-prandial sherry.

"You look like the cat that's got into the dairy, Richard." Mrs. Stewart inclined her cheek to be kissed. "Playing at detectives a success, was it?"

"One doesn't play at detectives, dear." Mr. Stewart winked at Jonty who returned a wink of his own, both making sure that Mrs. Stewart couldn't see. Neither of them was too old to get a slap.

"You did when those dreadful coded papers invaded the house." Mrs. Stewart's expression of distaste spoke more eloquently than an entire doctoral paper might have done. "I could have murdered the Woodville Ward myself."

"That was different. Just as important—the honour of the college no less—but not the case of a murderer at large. Not like this time." Mr. Stewart sat down, cradling his sherry and shaking his head. "This is serious stuff."

Jonty couldn't restrain himself a moment longer. "Papa, you're driving me mad here. What did you find out?"

"That this Robshaw is as hard to pin down as your Halfpenny, for a start, at least when he's off on business. He's barely been in Winchester since he moved in—he only recently started working for the china company and they're keeping him on his toes."

"There's a remarkable absence of people staying in one place in this case. Everyone's buzzing around like flies, even Lumley's brother." Jonty wrinkled his nose in disdain of such gadding about, especially when there was a case to be solved. "Lucky for us Robshaw was around when we visited Winchester or none of this might have come to light." Something buzzed at the back of his mind, like a small annoying fly which always eluded one's sight or grasp. "What about the other questions, then?"

Mr. Stewart consulted his notebook, earning himself a shake of the head from his wife. "Robshaw only moved into the house a few weeks ago, just before you saw him. All the business of taking up lodgings had been conducted by letter, in advance, so Halfpenny could have done it all and Mrs. Borthwick—that's the landlady—wouldn't have been any the wiser. The name didn't mean anything to her, by the way."

“You’re confusing yourself here, Papa. Why on earth would Halfpenny go making arrangements to move and then Robshaw take his place? More likely that Halfpenny knew Robshaw was moving and saw this as an opportunity to bring his plans to fruition, new address and new start, only his murderer got to him first.” This was good stuff, it all was coming together into a coherent picture. “I wonder if Robshaw really did know him and was unaware of it because Halfpenny was under yet another alias. And I wonder if Redknapp has been to Winchester yet?”

“He’s not seen Mrs. Borthwick, and I asked her direct. She said policemen had come from London to see Mr. Robshaw about a man who was impersonating him but I was the first person she’d had coming to her. She seemed rather pleased.” Mr. Stewart frowned, his face an ideal model for some sculptor who wanted a depiction called *Deep in Thought*. “It strikes me he’s been a touch negligent not to have mined such a source of useful information.”

“I hope it is useful, Papa. I couldn’t face another dead end or false trail.” Jonty wrinkled his nose. “And would you say she’s a candidate for any of Halfpenny’s mysterious women? I know it’s clutching at straws...”

“Clutching at thin air, my lad.” Mrs. Stewart waved her hand airily. “You’re so busy *cherchez-ing la femme* that you’re not considering all the possibilities. Have either of you wondered whether this Robshaw might be in league with your Halfpenny?”

“In league for what? I’m not sure bigamists or Lotharios or whatever Halfpenny was operate in gangs.” Maurice Panesar’s beloved espionage agents and fomenters of revolts did, though. Please God it wasn’t going to be connected with them. “I can just about imagine Miss Murray being responsible for the poisoning—it would create a favourable impression with the police if she turned up and identified the body, then she could quietly slip back to her office and be forgotten about. She hardly seemed to feel that passionately about him, though—not like Miss Pearce from the shop or Lumley’s niece.”

“They say poison’s a feminine weapon.” Mrs. Stewart twirled her sherry glass in fingers which were surprisingly delicate for a large woman. “And that’s another aspect you haven’t considered, isn’t it? I don’t suppose anyone sat him down and said, ‘Here’s some nice digitalis, Mr. Halfpenny,’ so how was it administered?”

“I have no idea and I daren’t ask the police to tell me. Stuffed inside half a dozen toffees to be ingested gradually as he went around the White City?” It was always the least important part, to Jonty, *how* it was done. Much more interesting to think of who and why. “That bit about a feminine weapon bothers me, though. I’ve been getting my mind around vengeful fathers—I even started working out if Lumley’s brother could have been at the White City before they set off for Nice—and completely neglected suspecting the distaff side of the case.”

They sat in silence, mulling over what the next step could be, Jonty grateful that neither of his parents had mentioned what all three of those present must have been thinking—that Orlando would probably have been able to provide some thread to guide them through this labyrinth of supposition and speculation.

“I wonder if we’re still looking at this the wrong way, you know.” Mr. Stewart ignored the black look he got from his wife at reopening the subject. “Maybe Robshaw really was the intended victim and Halfpenny, having picked him at random among his business contacts, chose the worst possible one. A case of wrong place, wrong name.”

“I’ve thought long and hard about that.” Better to think about something constructive than mope about Orlando all the time. “And there seems to be no logic to it. It’s Robshaw’s name to that photograph, but Halfpenny’s face. You surely can’t go around poisoning someone just on the strength of their name—as soon as you pressed the poisoned toffees or whatever it was into the man’s hand you’d know it wasn’t the real Robshaw.”

Mrs. Stewart raised her hand, like a referee stopping two prize-fighters. “Gentlemen, that’s enough. I’m up to my ears with toffees and Robshaws and who knows what else. Jonty goes back to Cambridge tomorrow, and I’d like to spend a few hours in his company without the thought of murder rearing its ugly head.” She linked his arm. “Tell me about those sonnets, dear, the early ones which cause all the trouble to prissy old schoolteachers. I’m meeting Lady Hoy on Thursday and I’d like to be able to spike her guns. She’s trying to persuade anyone daft enough to listen that they were written to a woman.”

“Of course, Mama.”

Jonty entered into the discussion as enthusiastically as he could, ignoring the waves of sadness lapping at his heart. These sonnets had a special place in his—and Orlando’s—affections. Next day he was going back to where they’d first met, almost to the exact spot, when he’d bring Ralph and Lavinia into the Senior Common Room as his guests. He’d let the pair of them sit in his and Orlando’s seats, that would be preferable to seeing the empty chair, another reminder of absence—as if he needed one—like the empty study and the empty right side of the bed. Maybe another day would bring another telegram.

What next day brought for Orlando was knuckles swelling up like a boxer’s. He stood in the street outside the Records Office cradling his hand and inwardly cursing his own stupidity. Frustrated at what he felt was his slipshod lack of progress he’d stormed from the building and taken a whack at the nearest thing, which luckily wasn’t a passerby but a brick wall.

The inner voice, Jonty’s voice of reason, whispered that he really was becoming a liability and he could do with someone to look after him. And if *he* couldn’t do it why didn’t he swallow his pride and throw himself on the mercy of Mrs. Stewart, who’d help him get to the bottom of this mystery, if not in no

time at all, then at least in comfort and with someone by his side to bind up his wounds when next he decided to punch a wall in frustration.

It was a tempting thought, the taste of pride lodged in one's throat, neither coming up nor going down, being a small price to pay against being loved, looked after, part of a family again. Family. He'd had one as a child but they seemed very distant now, incapable at the time of returning the love he desperately felt for them, or at least incapable of demonstrating it. His father had destroyed what passed for happiness, his final act—one which Orlando had viewed as almost self-indulgent—leaving his wife and son both on the brink of madness. Now he had a touch more sympathy for his father, the stigma of illegitimacy hanging over his head all his life.

He had another family though, one which loved him without reservation and without ever hiding it, and *he* was the one who'd destroyed that with his own self-indulgence. He couldn't afford to think about how distraught they were feeling; he couldn't be distracted from his mission.

Then there was a third family, one of which he knew nothing, one who would most likely reject him, cast him aside as they'd done his grandmother, but he was going to make sure they at least knew of *his* existence and acknowledged it, even if they wouldn't embrace it. And what then? Then he could return to Jonty on equal terms, no longer the social inferior, the poor little middle class boy among the titled and affluent.

The voice in his head, sounding like Mr. Stewart now, gently reminded him that none of the Stewarts had ever set out to make him feel worth anything less than they were. It was the Inspector Redknapps of this world who made you feel small with their sneering at amateurs. Jonty had always played down his noble connections rather than gloat over them.

Jonty.

Orlando looked at his grazed knuckles and wondered how anything in his life was ever going to come right again.

Two days later, Ariadne Sheridan was presiding over morning coffee at St. Bride's Master's Lodge. Ever since her brother had taken over the role of head of the college, she'd acted as chatelaine of the house, although it was a part she played rarely now, having her own house to run. She'd been Ariadne Peters for well over forty years, but had found love—and a husband—at an age when most women had ceased to think of such things. Still, she returned on occasions, not least to root out more of her stuff from the attic or poke among her brother's books or, like now, when her husband was off at a meeting about diapsid and anapsid skulls. And she found the lodge more suited to the commission she had to discharge than her own house.

She poured the tea and regarded her visitor carefully. Lavinia Broad had clearly been engineered into meeting her hostess at St. Bride's High Table two nights before, steered there by Jonty. The women had immediately struck up a friendship, not least because they had so many tales of Jonty's disreputable behaviour to swap. The company had got along very well, despite the continued sadness at Dr. Coppersmith's absence and the evident effects it was having on Jonty's spirits. She'd tried to keep the conversation well away from anything resembling maths or family secrets and had kept her evangelical tendencies towards mammal-like reptiles under control as her brother had warned her they weren't everyone's cup of tea.

Jonty, Ralph and Dr. Peters having gone off to force Dr. Panesar into making up a foursome for tennis, the ladies spoiled themselves with tea and cake and, so Ariadne hoped, a chance to indulge in a little sorting out of problems. It wasn't going to be the easiest of tasks, but she wouldn't balk at it. Not after Jonty had asked her so nicely and with such an embarrassed air. Not that she could deny Jonty anything at all at such a time.

"When is your anniversary?" Lavinia hadn't had the chance to meet Dr. Sheridan, although she'd had ample opportunity to study his photograph over her cup of tea.

"Our six months is today, believe it or not, so we'll have to wait until February to mark off a whole year." It had been one of the few times when St. Bride's had been alive with gossip, the winter of 1907 going into 1908, the unlikely news that Miss Peters was about to be married, and three months or so after her forty-ninth birthday at that, causing a huge sensation that rippled through the university.

"My brother said he was allowed to read one of the lessons. I wouldn't have trusted him—I'd have thought him likely to find an entirely unsuitable passage from The Song of Songs or something."

"He promised to be on his best behaviour and I made him well aware of the fact that I'd thump him if he wasn't." Ariadne grinned. "It was just a quiet little ceremony here in the chapel with dear old Lumley doing the honours. Lemuel gave me away and even dear Dr. Coppersmith and Dr. Panesar acted as ushers for the few guests we had." She considered the look of astonishment which Lavinia was trying politely to hide. "You must be surprised, naturally, at the fact that an old thing like me should have contemplated such a move, but I've been incredibly fortunate to have found love again so late in life." Fortunate was hardly the word; Ariadne felt like she'd stumbled across a whole string of pearls, each of great price. "You can be honest with me, I won't be offended."

"I'm sorry, was it so obvious?" Lavinia smiled sheepishly and visibly relaxed. "Ariadne, it's so nice to find a woman to whom I can talk forthrightly, without having to put up a wall of pretences. It's no wonder you get on so well with my scamp of a brother and his rather more serious friend. Oh, I shouldn't have mentioned him, should I? I'm afraid he's on my mind a lot at present."

"On all our minds, my dear." The awkward moment passed.

“I’ve always thought of love as being something that happens when you’re young. Debutantes and dances and the like.” There was a faraway look in Lavinia’s eye. “Those sorts of things used to seem so romantic.”

“I suppose love’s not traditionally regarded as something that can happen when one is knocked into by a man coming out of a tailor’s shop. Mad, isn’t it, yet I fell for Dr. Sheridan straight away. Your brother noticed I was like a giddy girl from the start, and egged me on into finding out about him and engineering a meeting. When I met this rather shy chap down at his college, I thought he was simply adorable.” Ariadne could feel her cheeks beginning to flush simply at the thought of her beloved Robert, more like a dizzy girl with her first crush than a respectable matron.

“Has he...” Lavinia was probably trying to find some subtle way of enquiring as to whether the groom was as mature as his bride, “...been at Cambridge long?”

“Ten years, and all that time I never ran into him. He was at Oxford before, taking a wife there in his early thirties, much to everyone’s amazement, as they thought he was a confirmed bachelor. But he fell deeply in love—she really was a lovely thing if her likeness is true. She died in childbirth and he couldn’t bear to remain in the city. Too many painful memories.” Ariadne drained her cup, swallowed hard and poured another. Tears weren’t needed at this point so she’d have to buck her ideas up.

“So he came here. And you eventually met. And now you’re married.” Lavinia smiled. “It’s lovely, like something Jane Austen might have written.”

“Indeed. Cupid apparently shot us full of arrows, and we had to follow our hearts’ way. And there is no risk of his losing me as he lost his first wife, Suzanne—not that I’m too old, not quite, but we’ve been very careful.” Ariadne knew she was impinging upon the boundaries of good taste, but she had her task to fulfil and wanted to move events forwards.

Lavinia shivered. “Better not to indulge at all. Nasty, filthy, brutish business.” She stopped, flushing red, clearly never having intended to say so much and from such a private part of her being. But the words had been said and couldn’t be reclaimed—she would just have to wait to see what transpired.

Ariadne allowed a quiet moment to pass then gently touched Lavinia’s arm. The ideal opportunity had come and she didn’t want to make a mess of things now. “Whatever makes you say that? Why should a husband and wife not seek to be naturally close to each other?”

“Because it’s just awful. I understand why it has to happen but it is the most disgusting process.” Lavinia closed her eyes; she really did look sickened.

“But can’t it be a mutual delight? A shared pleasure?”

“Pleasure?” Lavinia coloured even more. “No decent woman would take any pleasure from it. The best she can do is to lie back and do her duty by her husband and produce an heir for him.” She studied her hands and then cast a defiant look at her hostess.

Ariadne wondered whether she was being viewed as a still inexperienced old maid, one in need of protection from the disgraceful habits of men. Maybe Lavinia assumed that the care she and Robert had taken had been simple abstinence. “Lavinia, is this what you’ve found for yourself, from your own experience, or has someone told you these things?”

“Several of my friends have told me the same thing. They agree with me that...intercou—it’s all something men just have to do, part of their fallen animal nature.” The flame of defiance was beginning to gutter.

“And this is true of what you’ve found with your Ralph?” The question hung in the air, Lavinia holding Ariadne’s gaze for only a moment before studying her hands again.

When she eventually spoke, her voice was as quiet and fragile as a frightened child’s. “I have no experience of it with Ralph. Our union isn’t a proper one.” Like that same child, she spoke the words almost by rote, as if she barely understood them.

“Then let me tell you my point of view.” Ariadne poured another cup of tea for them both. “Robert isn’t my first love. There was another man, a naval officer, who I met when I was in my twenties. We fell in love one winter and then when he came home again on leave the next summer he asked me to marry him.”

“How lovely.” Lavinia seemed happier on this ground. Ariadne wondered whether she was only content to deal with tales of love which might just be fairy stories, rather than accounts of real emotions and raw, passionate bodies. Fairy stories only spoke of happy ever after, not what went on in the bedroom of those castles and cottages. “Did you agree?”

“I did. We arranged for it to take place the next time he was ashore. But something—I won’t be so pretentious as to call it a premonition—made me want to force matters. We arranged to spend a few days in a hotel before he went back to sea again. I wore a ring and we spent those days as man and wife.” Ariadne allowed the import of those words to sink in, everything it implied about what she and Tom had done. She knew that she was risking her guest storming out in disgust—a dirty weekend would hardly be what a woman like Lavinia would regard as respectable—but she hoped the pathos and inherent romance of the story would win over her visitor. When it was clear that there’d be no violent reaction, she carried on. “And it was just as well we spent that time together because Tom’s ship was lost with all hands not long after. Those days in the hotel turned out to be the happiest days of my life so far, and what happened in our bed was part of that.” Ariadne became silent—this was another crux in the conversation. If she acted without the utmost care, then Lavinia would call her a whore and storm from the room. If she spoke and her guest stayed then she’d probably be able to make some progress.

“You were happy in his bed?” Lavinia’s voice was hardly more than a whisper. “It was...nice?”

Ariadne sighed. “My dear, it was wonderful. I won’t pretend the first time wasn’t a bit uncomfortable, but apart from that every time was marvellous. I can’t even begin to describe how amazing.”

“Are you telling me the truth?” Lavinia sounded like a child again, but one with a note of hope in her voice now, rather than fear. “Did you really have as much pleasure as your Tom?”

“I am, I did, not a word of a lie. Now, I know that I was very lucky. Tom—we had absolutely no secrets so I know this is true—had never been with another woman, although he’d heard some of the other sailors talking aboard ship about what would make a woman happy. Filthy stuff, most folk would have called their conversation and I bet it was, you know. But he remembered little bits and applied them to our situation and the rest we just worked out ourselves.” Ariadne smiled in joyous remembrance. “It’s been like that with Robert, too, little steps along a journey to mutual happiness. It really isn’t hard to work out what you both like and what you don’t.”

“Ariadne.” Lavinia’s voice was soft and low but it seemed to echo loudly in the silence of the room. “I have never consummated my marriage. All these years and I have never let my husband...” She seemed to seek out any words that she might dare to use. “I have never let Ralph do what you and your Tom did. I had such a fright, you see, that first night. He was naked and I had no idea that men were made in such a peculiar way, and when he suggested what we had to do I simply locked myself in another room. I went home to Mama the next morning and she tried to get me to see sense and I returned to Ralph—I do love him so very much—but I still couldn’t let him...” The sudden, unexpected gush of words ceased, stifled back with a hastily swallowed sob.

“If you regard the whole thing as being *something you let your husband do*—under sufferance—rather than being a voyage of discovery you embark on together, then I’m afraid you might never be in a position to consummate your marriage. It’s not your duty or Ralph’s needs we’re talking about, it’s an expression of how much you love each other. A giving and taking and sharing of all that you have.”

“But how does one start?” Ariadne’s words had clearly put the faintest spark of hope into Lavinia’s head. “I do desperately want my marriage to be real, I’d love to have a child if we’ve not left things too late, and I thought I’d burned all my bridges. If there’s the very smallest possibility such things might come to pass, I want to take it.” She sat up straight, putting on, no doubt, her bravest face. “What can I say to Ralph?”

Ariadne resisted saying that this whole encounter had been Ralph’s idea in the first place, with a little help from the ever-resourceful Jonty. That wouldn’t be politic, now or perhaps ever. Not until there were two or three little Broads rattling around under Lavinia’s feet, anyway. “I think we need to look at down-to-earth practicalities. Men are hopeless at these things, their heads being full of romantic ideas and fluff—it’s up to us to plan a strategy.”

Lavinia nodded agreement, looking so much like Jonty at his pragmatic best that Ariadne had to hide a grin. They were both their father’s offspring deep down and would naturally like things to be sorted out sensibly. If only she could work such wonders for Lavinia’s brother’s problems while she was at it.

"I would think that you would need to build up to things slowly." Ariadne laid down her tea cup, folding her hands in her lap in case she was tempted to make any inappropriate gestures. "Start with kisses. You like kissing Ralph, I assume?"

"Oh, yes." Lavinia flushed. This was clearly something she enjoyed very much. "And I like to be hugged."

Ariadne stifled a smile as she imagined that last phrase had to be suffixed with *but only with all my clothes on*. "Then that's where you begin. Tell Ralph very clearly what you're about so that his hopes aren't raised too high." She hid a grin at the double entendre. "Once he understands the plan of campaign you can become a little more adventurous every time."

"Adventurous?" Lavinia bridled at the word.

"Oh, yes. Touching, caressing, all sorts of things." Ariadne sighed. "My dear, I'm not sure you realise that there's a wealth of activities lying between a kiss and a cuddle and, well, please forgive my bluntness, intercourse itself."

"Doesn't it have to be one or the other?" Hope shone again on Lavinia's face—so many wonderful things to comprehend.

"I think the best thing would be to go and find a nice practical model. I don't have a human body and that might be rather tasteless anyway. Even I'd be embarrassed." Ariadne giggled, delighted to see her guest break into a laugh as well, the tension ebbing from her face and leaving her looking more like a carefree girl than a married woman. "There's a rather nice stuffed lemur somewhere upstairs which will serve our purposes perfectly. I'll pretend I'm giving a general lecture on courtship in the lower primates which will hopefully spare both our blushes a bit. You can ask questions as we go along and I promise I won't giggle when I answer them." She was doing a poor job of stopping giggling now.

Lavinia nodded, producing a smile that proved she was a close relation of Jonty's in the way that it lit up the room. "Oh please. I'll pretend to be some very studious and serious girl from Girton, only I won't take notes. Someone might find them and then where would we be?"

"In jail for indecency."

"I'm so grateful." Lavinia stopped as they reached the door. "Can I do you a favour in return? Well, not for you exactly, for my brother."

"Of course." Helping poor Jonty now would be a favour to Ariadne as well, given the anguish she felt for him.

"I know where Orlando is." The words fell like a bomb between them, scattering away all conversation. "He's been writing to me every day, just so that if anything happens, someone knows where he can be found and what he's already worked out. I've been sworn not to tell the rest of the family. He clearly knows me better than I'd supposed—I'm the only one of the Stewarts who could keep such a promise, despite the torment of seeing my little brother so upset."

“Yet you wouldn’t count it as breaking your promise to tell me?” These two women had begun to understand each other very well.

“Exactly. And then you can tell Jonty.” Lavinia smiled, an image of her brother’s charming face suddenly appearing in hers. “I carry all of these letters in my bag with me, you know. One has to be prepared.”

“He really is tracking down his family, I hope? That’s what your brother has told mine—he had to give some explanation, of course, or else the board of St. Bride’s would be up in arms, holidays or not.” Ariadne shrugged.

“He is, and he seems to be taking in half of southern England on the way. He had some vital information he’d got hold of from an old lady, which he’s pursuing. Every bit of reasoning is being laid down in his communications and he sounds just like Sherlock Holmes—it’s rather aggravating.” Lavinia’s sniff showed her opinion of fictional detectives. “The last time I heard from him he was in Honiton, where he was going to try to locate the Patterson estate. He thinks they’re the family he’s looking for but he can’t verify anything until he sees them face to face. I suppose if my brother got a move on he might catch up with him, forestall him if need be.”

“Won’t the trail be cold by the time he gets there? You say ‘the last time’—surely that’s when you were still in London?”

“I’m my brother’s kin, Ariadne—I like to keep up to date.” Lavinia grinned. “I have a partner-in-crime in our housekeeper. I’ve rung her every day since we’ve been here and she reads me the latest missive. My notes may not be as comprehensive as Dr. Coppersmith’s but they’ll do.”

“Your brother will be down to the train station within minutes of me telling him.” Ariadne sighed. “Why must men be so very stupid? Might I, my dear, delay my lecture on lemurs by perhaps half an hour? I must give this news to Dr. Stewart straight away, although not before warning Mrs. Ward to have a bag packed and sent down here before the little beast can set off on the trail. Or he’ll not have a stitch of clean clothing to sustain him.”

Chapter Eleven

Jonty stood in the hallway of the Master's Lodge, holding the letters and notes in shaking hands, not knowing whether to read them or rip them into tiny pieces. He breathed deeply, trying to force his powers of logic to overcome his emotions. This was just what he should have expected from his lover, even if *he* hadn't been brave enough to look at the reports yet.

"It's been a very prudent thing for Dr. Coppersmith to do, given that he has no one on hand to help him should he get into difficulties. The absence of a daily letter to your sister would mean he needed rescuing." Ariadne addressed Jonty's shoes, seemingly unable to look him straight in the eye. Lavinia had mysteriously disappeared, apparently to look at a lemur.

It was a practical and level-headed stratagem and Jonty was going to murder him for it. Why couldn't Orlando have written straight to him, to put his mind at rest? There'd been a second telegram, this time to Forsythia Cottage, posted in central London and saying much the same as the first. *Investigations making some progress. I'll be back when I've reached the centre of the maze.* Now it turned out he'd been giving Lavinia chapter and verse, while Jonty got barely more than a sentence or two.

"I'll fetch you a sherry." Ariadne made a statement of fact, not an enquiry. She left Jonty alone with the treacherous missives for a while longer. The terrible decision about what to do when he first encountered Orlando again—embrace or murder—kept nagging him. No, murder would be pointless. Everyone would know he'd done it, although his father would probably plead that his poor son was driven to it. Orlando bloody Coppersmith would drive a guardian angel to hard drink.

Jonty found a glass being pressed into his hand. "Don't kill him straight away, Dr. Stewart." Ariadne represented the voice of reason. "Let him explain himself first and then you can make a measured judgement about whether to commit homicide."

When had Ariadne taken to reading his mind? Were his thoughts written so plain across his face that everyone could guess them? "I'll try to restrain myself, but what's even the most reasonable of men to do in such ridiculous circumstances?"

"Belt him one with a bunch of fives." Ariadne laughed her deep, manly chuckle. "He deserves at least a nice black eye for all the worry he's put you to, the toad. But not actual death. Much better to let him survive and bring this out to air on occasions, when he gets above himself again."

“I think I should send you to find him. You’d make him suffer much more than I’ll end up doing. He’ll smile and I’ll feel sorry for him and my fist will find itself unclenching.” Jonty knocked back his sherry. “You’d thump him one without a twinge of remorse.”

“I might just do that anyway, when you’ve brought him back here. Silly boy.”

Jonty wasn’t sure if he or Orlando was being called silly, or the pair of them. “And after I’ve thumped him one? What next?”

“Dr. Stewart, you’re in a worse state than I realised. Use your brains.” Ariadne took the glass from his trembling hands and gently clasped them in hers, something she’d never done in all the years they’d known each other. “You help him find that family of his. He’ll never rest until that’s accomplished, so take as long as you want.”

“He won’t, you’re right. Oh Lord, I’ll have to see your brother and explain things.”

“Don’t waste time on that. I’ll be at the lodge another couple of days while my husband is at that conference of his. I’ll square everything with Lemuel.” Ariadne let go her guest’s hands, with what seemed a degree of reluctance. “The pair of you come back to St. Bride’s happy and healthy and with your minds entirely focussed on college business and he’ll be happy.”

“You are no doubt right, as ever.” Jonty picked up his suitcase. “And remarkably farsighted to have thought of *this*. Mama always says that I’d collapse in a heap of unwashed clothes and unpaid bills if I didn’t have women about me to sort me out. She’s probably right.” He leaned over and kissed Ariadne’s cheek.

“Oh away with you, you’ll miss your train. Get yourself to the Blue Bell at Honiton, that’s all you need to know for now. Read the rest of the messages on the train that takes you there.”

It was late and starlit when he got into Honiton station but the horse which drew the cab could probably have found its way there in pitch darkness, or so its driver claimed.

“It’s our usual route, sir, up to the High Street. Old Bess could do it in her sleep at a pinch and I dare say she has some evenings when we’ve had a market day’s trade to deal with.” He twitched his rein and Bess obliged, taking them from station to hotel at an even, gentle pace.

It was exactly the sort of experience which Jonty usually relished, a journey out in the open under the stars, but tonight he was too tense to take any pleasure from it. What if he’d missed Orlando, if the long streak of a swine had gone off in search of some red herring or unmissable lead? Yes, he’d be able to get the latest news from Lavinia and he’d never be more than day or so behind, but that could translate into half the length of the country. He had to trust that the guardian angel who put significant photos into shops they walked past or made inspectors leave Scotland Yard at the opportune moment would look after him now.

Jonty paid off the cab driver when they reached the Blue Bell, although he declined any offers of help with his luggage. The train journey had seemed agonisingly slow, even though he'd used the fastest services, but now he was reluctant to take this final step, just in case his quarry had already bolted. Or was it just in case his quarry was there? He was still unsure what he'd do when he actually came face to face with his lover, especially if it was in a public place. Taking a long, deep breath, he braved the entrance and made enquiries about a room.

"Yes, sir, we have one available. A very nice one with a view to the garden." The host was jolly and avuncular, everything a host should be and everything Jonty would have appreciated in different circumstances. "If you'll just complete the register."

Jonty thought he was going to blot the whole page when he saw the name two above his. *Dr. O. Coppersmith, Forsythia Cottage, Madingley Road, Cambridge*. At least that was some positive sign; if Orlando had given his address as St. Bride's that might have suggested he'd no intention of returning home. To their home. Jonty managed to steady his hand and write his parents' Sussex address as his own. No point in encouraging unwanted questions.

"Will you be wanting a bite of supper?" His host beamed. "There's one or two other gentlemen taking a late meal. I'll have your bag sent up if you'd like to make yourself comfortable in the dining room."

A low growl in Jonty's stomach reminded him it was a long time since he'd had a decent nosebag. "I'd be very obliged to you, landlord." And with any luck Orlando might be one of those gentlemen—the toad couldn't make a scene or storm out in polite company.

Any resolution he'd got left departed as Jonty came to the threshold of the dining room. At a window table, back towards him, sat an unmistakable figure with a very familiar set of curls on his head, ones which were, as usual, resisting the efforts of brush or oil to control them. Jonty still couldn't decide whether to go up to him and kiss him, the other people present notwithstanding, or to take an axe and whack him over the head for having caused such heartache. In the end he could do neither, rooted to the spot with fear of doing or saying the wrong thing and having Orlando fling everything back in his face.

"Can I help you, sir?" A young waiter appeared at Jonty's side, increasing his panic. Orlando had ears like a hound and would pick up his voice even if he whispered and probably if he attempted some stupid accent. Unless he turned tail right this minute or pretended he was deaf and/or dumb, there would be no escape.

"I'd like the menu, please." He kept his voice as low as was humanly possible without appearing a complete idiot.

"And a table, sir?" The waiter clearly thought this guest had wandered in from some local lunatic asylum.

"I'll join my friend." Jonty gestured in the direction of Orlando's head. The waiter nodded and turned to fetch a menu, while Jonty was left to swallow hard, gather up all his courage and cross the room.

“Hello, old man.”

Orlando’s fabled hearing must have been having an off day. He’d evidently not registered his lover’s voice and when he was directly addressed he nearly vaulted from his chair, scattering his cutlery in the process.

“Butterfingers.” Jonty smiled, despite all the anger and fear he felt. “Let me get those for you.” They bent down at the same time, heads coming close to each other and faces almost touching. A full-blooded hug could hardly have felt as intimate.

“You.” Orlando’s expression was a mixture of distress, anger and what might just have been relief. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you, you great chump. It’s fine, thank you.” Jonty waved away the waiter’s professional concern at the dirtying of his knives and forks. “I’ll just have whatever my friend is having.”

“Two steak and kidney pies it is, sir.” The waiter eyed the cutlery with concern but resisted insisting on changing it. “Would you like anything to drink with them?”

Jonty took a quick glance at his lover’s glass, which seemed to contain nothing more than water. “I think a bottle of something red would be best. I’ll leave the choice to your discretion.” He watched the waiter’s departure, making sure he really had gone before carrying on the conversation with a still silent Orlando. “I thought we’d never get rid of him.”

“How did you find me? Through your Lavinia, I suppose?” Orlando was busy murdering a bread roll by pulling it into tiny pieces. “I thought I could trust her.”

“You could, entirely. But she was so grateful to Ariadne Sheridan—some life-changing advice dispensed, I suspect—that she couldn’t help telling her all. And Mrs. Sheridan told me.” Jonty tried to will his lover’s eyes to face his, although short of grabbing his head and yanking it upwards he was fighting a losing battle.

“I didn’t want to be found. Not yet.” Orlando’s gaze stayed fixed on the plateful of crumbs.

“I’m well aware of that fact, thank you very much.” Jonty wished the waiter would be a bit speedier with that red wine. A man needed fortifying at times like this, especially if he was struggling with warring factions. Love, relief, anger, murderous tendencies, he had them all. “But you have been found whether you like it or not and I won’t be losing you again until we’ve got this whole thing solved. The both of us.”

At last Orlando looked up. “You can’t do that. I have no idea how long this will take.”

“Then that’s precisely why I should be with you, not cooped up at home.” The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the wine, which proved surprisingly drinkable. In Jonty’s state, even methylated spirits might have seemed eminently drinkable. “And what have you done to your hand?” An ugly scrape, scabbed over but still angry and with an embellishment of bruising, lay across Orlando’s hand.

“I had an altercation with a wall. After a whole day of poring through records of births and marriages and getting absolutely nowhere I had to take my frustrations out on something.” A hint of a smile, one that

was being forcibly kept in check, flitted over Orlando's face. "You weren't to hand so it had to be the wall."

"Charming." The steak and kidney, hot and smelling delicious, made its presence felt from the other side of the room, tempting even Jonty's ailing taste buds. It smelled even better when it was on the table in front of them. "Have you had it attended to? It looks nasty."

"I can look after myself, thank you, I'm not a child." The first few mouthfuls were forced down in constrained silence. "I'm sorry, that was uncalled for. No, I didn't think it required attention—I've cleaned it up and it's not infected. Smarts a bit."

"Serves you right." Jonty's mercurial mood had flipped again, as if he couldn't control any of his emotions, the contrasting urge to raise a few bruises on Orlando's face to match the one on his hand fighting with the urge to take him upstairs and roger him stupid.

"Hm." Orlando seemed to have lost interest in his pie halfway through. He still had enthusiasm for the wine.

"So we're off somewhere, are we, in search of someone called Patterson?" Jonty laid down his own knife and fork, appetite dwindling again.

"We?" Orlando looked up sharply, then sighed. "I suppose we are. I'd better explain." He took his lover through the whole story, filling in the gaps the letters had left, fleshing out the bare bones of the story they'd provided. Jonty had plenty of questions, some a matter of clarification, some speculative and some not able to be answered.

"I can't quite square what you did to your hand and tomorrow's visit. If you'd made no progress..."

Orlando grimaced. "I haven't. I just had to get away from poring over papers and trying to make sense of interminable family trees." His embarrassment was plain. "I chose a family at random to visit. I didn't dare tell Lavinia and lose my reputation for logical thinking."

"My lips are sealed." Things must be bad for Orlando to act so out of character. Again. "Why the Pattersons?"

"I liked the name." Orlando couldn't stop blushing. "And it's the name among all those Mrs. Lever mentioned which fits best..."

He spread his hands, his lovely elegant hands. The hands which had sent Jonty into ecstasy so often. Jonty shivered in memory of what those hands had done at times. "Then we should see them, if only to eliminate them from our enquiries."

"Eliminate them? Dear God, Jonty." The use of his Christian name and the invocation of the God in whom Orlando didn't believe indicated the depth of his distress. "I'm not sure what I'll do if this proves to be a dead end. I had it so clear in my mind, the methodical elimination of all possibilities until I hit on the right one, but I failed at that, and now it comes to it I'm frightened of disappointment. It's not just a game or a puzzle to be solved. This is the very heart of me under scrutiny."

The last vestige of Jonty's anger slipped away; his lover was falling to pieces in front of him. He couldn't let it happen, not least because Orlando would never want his weakness to be seen in such a public place. "I know. But there are two of us to tackle things now, three if you include Papa. He's been putting out some subtle feelers for the gossip and he's eliminated just about everyone from baronets up. So the barony of your great-great-grandfather seems to have been another one of your grandmother's red herrings. I'm sorry."

"Maybe it's all lies, maybe this whole edifice is built on sand and there's no point to any of what I'm doing." Orlando briefly put his head in his hands, then looked about him. "I'm sorry, not the done thing."

"No, we don't want to shock the good citizens of Honiton." Jonty smiled, knowing that humour had often worked with his lover where rationalisation or sympathy had failed.

"True." Orlando managed a smile of his own. "Do you think you could bear to forego a pudding? I've rather lost my appetite and I'd value the chance to talk to you. Properly."

Jonty nodded. "A pot of coffee wouldn't go amiss. Maybe there's a little snug here or a corner of the lounge where we could be alone?"

"I'd prefer to take the pot of coffee in my room, if that would be acceptable?" From the shyness in Orlando's voice there was no indication that he regularly shared his bed and his body with the man he was addressing. "I could order it and then you might join me. To talk."

The coyness wasn't coquetry—they couldn't cast caution to the wind, especially at a moment like this which might end up in a romantic liaison or equally in a stand-up fight. Or in two years' hard labour, if the porter caught them. And there was still a big knot of distrust to untangle, despite the superficial resumption of civilised relations.

"Do just that. I haven't so much as unpacked a toothbrush or laid out my pyjamas to air. Let me get myself organised and then I'll come along." Jonty smiled and pushed aside his plate, not before he'd snaffled a last succulent piece of pie crust. He was going to need all the bolstering he could get to handle a small room and a large, if not reckoning, then holding to account.

By the time he tapped on Orlando's door, Jonty had not only laid out his necessary items for the night's stay, but spruced himself up to something approaching perfection. At least his lover could be reminded of what he'd so wilfully abandoned.

"Come in." The voice was businesslike, just in case anyone was passing in the corridor. "Ah, Dr. Stewart, the coffee's here, will you join me?"

"Thank you, Dr. Coppersmith." Jonty shut the door, removing the need for at least one layer of caution. "You look tired, old man."

"I feel it. Not been sleeping too well, really. Hardly been sleeping at all, to tell the truth." He didn't need to confess it—the rings under his eyes, apparent when they'd met over dinner, were now strangely prominent in the dimmer light of the bedroom. "Too much going on in my brain."

"I guessed as much, so I packed some of Maurice Panesar's knockout drops, the ones he keeps getting us to try. See you through to morning—you'll need all your acuity then. Brought you something else, too." His hand went to the inside pocket of his jacket. "Papa...oh." He'd forgotten the letter. He now had a clear memory of it lying, unopened and next to the little photograph of Halfpenny, on Orlando's desk, awaiting his return. In all the haste of receiving Ariadne Sheridan's message he'd not returned to Forsythia Cottage to retrieve it.

"Mr. Stewart what?" Orlando laid down his coffee cup.

"He got that little writing desk of your grandmother's to open. Stupid bloody thing had a little hole you had to poke a pin in. No, don't look so amazed, the old bird's not that clever, he'd seen the trick before. Out shot a drawer and out popped an envelope."

"What did the contents say?" The glint had returned to Orlando's eye.

"I have no idea. I didn't open it. I was leaving it for you—trouble is I really have left it. On your desk."

"Idiot." Orlando hit out with his bad hand, catching the side of the table and yelping in pain.

"You're going to have to control that temper." Jonty counted to ten, ignoring the fact he'd been called an idiot, ignoring his lover's obvious anger and ignoring the fact that he'd still really like to murder him with an axe. "Let me see that hand." The graze had opened again, oozing blood and fluid. Jonty applied his handkerchief, stemming the flow.

"Thank you. I'm sorry to have put you to so much trouble." Orlando's voice was trembling, full of a dozen different emotions. "I'm such a bloody fool."

"Of course you are." Jonty pressed the wound, just firmly enough to help the blood clot. "And yet I continue to love you, even when I think I'd prefer to murder you and make my life easier in one stroke." There was no reply needed or given. "This is going to sting like billy-oh and you need your sleep. Look, Dr. Panesar's potion—I know for a fact it knocks you out cold, let me go and fetch it."

"There's no need..." but Jonty was out of the room before his friend could finish the sentence. When he returned Orlando was still sitting, nursing his hand but looking a little happier. At least he managed a smile when Jonty re-entered the room. "I really don't think I'm going to need that. I'm sure I'll sleep better tonight. With you just down the corridor."

Their eyes met, a short tender glance passing between them, an echo of happier days. "That's as may be, but I'd be happier knowing you were getting a proper rest." And not able to make another middle-of-the-night departure. Jonty poured a little of the medicine into a coffee spoon. "Will you just take this for me?" He thrust the dose—hardly more than a thimbleful—at his friend.

"I'd rather not. I seem to remember it tastes ghastly." Orlando screwed his face up like a toddler, reminding Jonty of all the terrible things which he'd been threatened with when he was a child and wouldn't take whatever noxious brew his mother or nurse was trying to force into him. He resisted making use of them, not least because he was fairly certain "Then you'll have no pudding" wasn't going to cut any ice with his lover.

"Look at the state of you, Orlando. As if you've been dragged through a hedge sideways as well as backwards. If anyone needed a tonic, you do."

"Couldn't we just order a glass or two of port? Your mother always says that's a marvellous thing for when you're feeling run down." A spark of the old Orlando had begun to flash in the darkness. It was either a sign that rapprochement was in process or that he was reading his lover's mind and avoiding being chemically restrained for the night.

"You can have three glasses and a plate of cheese and biscuits if you'll just take this. For my health's sake, at least, if not for yours." Jonty lightly tapped his lover's hand and noticed how much his own was shaking.

"Yours? How can my imbibing this vile bilge water help you?" The old Orlando was well and truly back again and was asking for a whacking.

"Because if you don't, Mama will know, all the way from London—she has telepathic powers, I'm convinced of it—and she'll throttle me. She's been desperately worried, Orlando, and when I found you looking so pale—" Jonty stroked his lover's colourless cheek, "—all I could think of was what she'd say. And that she'd be insisting you be dosed up with something or other. She's convinced you've spent all this time not eating properly and sleeping rough under hedges." It seemed so much easier to joke and to describe someone else's feelings. He hadn't dared touch on his own, yet.

"Did she really think that? I didn't mean to have her anxious about me, not for the world."

"Wouldn't have had Mama anxious? What about me, then?" Jonty slammed the little spoon down, sending brown droplets flying. "I've been worried sick every waking moment, from the time I realised you'd gone. Didn't you worry about how I felt?"

"I let you know how I was." It was a feeble attempt at self-justification and the fact Orlando's gaze had been directed towards his feet indicated he knew how feeble it was.

"Oh yes, a couple of telegrams telling us you'd be back at some point or another. No telephone calls, nothing to reassure me that you actually *would* be coming back and hadn't just done a runner because you hated me. Or hated the car. Or something equally annoying." Jonty's solicitude was swiftly souring, the wave of anger which had been building up these last few weeks rushing over him.

"You knew I'd be back. You must have known." Orlando swallowed hard, keeping his eyes fixed to the ground, afraid of what he'd read in his lover's face.

“Must I? All I had was a couple of telegrams. ‘I need to know who I am.’ Very well, Orlando, I can understand that, but didn’t you ever consider taking me with you on your journey of discovery? I thought—” the anger was turning to heartbreak, “—I thought we were supposed to be partners. In everything.”

“We are. I never meant to leave you permanently. I’d have come back when I finished the task.” It must have sounded a meagre thing even to the man who said it.

“But I didn’t know how long that was going to be, did I? It was worse than you being dead. No, I mean it.” Jonty shifted his gaze so he wouldn’t have to look at the combined shock and pain in his lover’s eyes. “The not knowing drove me mad.”

“I’m so sorry. So sorry.”

Jonty kept his eyes cast down, sure that Orlando would retreat into his shell again, the little world of misery he’d woven about himself. Instead, he felt cold hands on his shoulders and then a kiss on his head. It was probably the most contact they dared risk—chambermaids could breeze in unannounced if the mood took them—and it unmanned Jonty completely. “You big chump. I love you so much and you’re such an idiot.” He reached up, briefly caressed Orlando’s head then touched his hand. “Well, we’re together again now, and unless you want me to bind you hand and foot for the rest of your life you’re going to have to swear never to do such an idiotic thing ever again.”

“I promise. I don’t think I could ever again endure the sort of misery I’ve gone through these last few days.” Orlando looked defeated. “I’ll take some of that medicine, and then we can face this Patterson fellow tomorrow.”

Chapter Twelve

There appeared to be an awful lot of wall to the Patterson estate and every yard of it seemed to lie between Jonty and Orlando and the gatehouse, if there even was such a place. Orlando felt they must have traversed three and a quarter of the four sides before they suddenly stumbled on the entrance, set back from the road and almost impossible to spot unless you were in front of it. The big house could just be seen, tantalising glimpses through the trees, as if the Pattersons wanted to hide themselves from view of the world.

It would have been easy to read too much into that apparent desire for concealment, to imagine it was linked to hiding away dark family secrets. Orlando wasn't going to raise his hopes too high.

"Sir Edward Patterson might not even know about your grandmother." Jonty strode along at his friend's side, quiet determination signalled by his every movement.

Orlando looked sidelong at his lover. *How on earth could I have been so stupid as to leave him behind? How would I have faced this challenge on my own?* He shook himself, as if to shake off the guilty thoughts. "I kept my letter to Sir Edward deliberately vague—an enquiry about the Patterson family history and their connection to Oxford University. I just hope he's here today."

Jonty stopped, spinning on his heels. "You *hope* he's here? Don't you have a firm appointment?"

"No." Orlando started walking again, keeping his eyes fixed on the path. "I said I would be travelling and so he couldn't easily contact me. I would take my chances..."

"Stop this minute." Jonty caught his lover's arm. "So, for all we know we'll get there and Sir Edward will have gone off travelling to the continent like everyone in the White City case seems to be doing. Have you lost every shred of logic you possessed?"

"I couldn't sit in London waiting for a reply. I would have gone absolutely insane." Orlando faced his friend. "You have no idea what this not knowing is like."

"I do know." Jonty's voice was quiet, almost menacing. "Those evenings at school, wondering if *tonight* was going to be another one of *those* nights." He shivered. "I know what it's like to be sitting, helpless, in a haze of insecurity. That's why you should have had me with you—I'm the only one who really understands."

Orlando couldn't have spoken, even if he'd been able to think of anything to say. Silence proved the best course anyway, Jonty's natural loquaciousness always keen to fill the vacuum.

“Still, if we’re going to discuss the manifold ways in which you’re an idiot we’ll spend the rest of our lives rooted here.” Jonty walked on. “We’ll assume Sir Edward is present and agrees to see us. You mention your grandmother and he’s stunned, yet it may not be all bad. No one might have told him he had an aunt—he might even be grateful to find out about her.”

“And to find out about my father? At least there should be no issues about me being a putative heir—there are plenty of Pattersons who would stand to inherit before me.” Orlando took a swipe at a branch.

“Your not being the long-lost heir come to disenfranchise everyone should make it easier. Assuming it’s the right family.” Jonty stopped again. They’d come in full view of the house now, the late summer sun glinting off pristine paintwork and brightly polished windows. “It’s an awfully big assumption.”

“I don’t think that’s what I wanted to hear at this point.” Orlando fought the impulse to turn straight around and go home. Suddenly Forsythia Cottage was the one place on earth he wanted to be. “Come on, we’ve got to know, one way or the other.”

The butler who opened the door was neither supercilious nor welcoming. Yes, a letter had arrived, or so he’d been informed by Sir Edward, who’d made a particular point of mentioning it. Yes, Dr. Coppersmith was expected, the butler had been instructed to show him into the study should he turn up at the door making his enquiries into the Patterson family history. Yes, Sir Edward would be down presently.

The butler left to fetch his master while Orlando scanned the study for possible clues.

“I’m not sure what you could expect to find, after all this time.” Jonty contented himself with admiring some fine hunting prints on the wall by the fireplace.

“Something which rings a bell, I suppose.” Any further answer was forestalled by the arrival of Sir Edward himself, a well-built, avuncular gentleman, sandy hair running to grey but still with a hint of flame to it. “Sir Edward, thank you for seeing us.” Orlando held out his hand to be shaken, as did Jonty.

“My pleasure, Dr. Coppersmith. And this is...ah, could this be Dr. Stewart?” Sir Edward beamed. “I read the *Times*, you know.”

The articles about their sleuthing had proved useful on occasions but today they felt like a blessed nuisance. “I am, indeed. Although I’d beg you not to think this is in connection with a professional matter. We’re not on a case at present. Well, we are, but this isn’t it.”

Orlando was pleased when Jonty shut up. It hardly presented the right image, his blethering on. “Sir Edward, I’m making enquiries on a rather delicate matter. The grandmother of one of the scholars at Cranmer College, Oxford might have been a Patterson but there seems to have been a rift between the lady concerned and her father, who bore the family title. An irrevocable rift which led to their continued estrangement. She died recently and it’s fallen to me to try and establish her true provenance. We know her father was titled, and that she left his house in disgrace.”

Sir Edward nodded. “When would this have been?”

“She would have been born around 1830 and was, if you’ll excuse my bluntness, disowned some seventeen or eighteen years later.” Orlando left the rest unsaid. It would be fairly obvious to anyone with the power of reasoning to work out why she’d been thrown out.

“I may be mistaken, but I think you’re looking in the wrong place. Come and see this.” Sir Edward led them to a desk in a corner of the room, where a large leather-bound book, lovingly preserved, took pride of place. “The family Bible, as you’ll have guessed. All the generations of our family, and its closest branches, can be found here.” He carefully opened the cover to reveal on the frontispiece a beautifully worked family tree, different handwriting down the generations recording the births and deaths, names and dates inscribed with care down the page and onto the back of the cover itself. “We can look together, make a double and triple check, but I believe there are no female births within five or so years of the right time.”

There weren’t. The nearest was 1825, an Emma Patterson, although her subsequent history was full—marriage, births and death all laid out in lines, numbers and letters. And no signs of erasures or amendments to hide a poor girl who’d been obliterated from memory.

“I’m sorry you’ve had a wild goose chase.” Sir Edward seemed genuinely apologetic.

The silent arrival of the butler with coffee and biscuits did little to lighten Orlando’s disappointment. “I appreciate your help. At least we can eliminate this line of enquiry.”

Sir Edward closed the Bible. “This lady might still have been Patterson, another branch of our family, although her father’s title would go by the board then. What name did she actually use, may I ask?”

Orlando stared into his cup, steadying shaking hands. “Coppersmith.” He could hardly say the word.

“Ah.” Sir Edward spoke kindly. “Take a seat, please, gentlemen. And, if it wouldn’t be an intrusion, I’d be honoured to hear your story.”

Orlando looked down into the little river, the one which ran through the Patterson estate and emerged the other side sparkling with life, running and tinkling between stones and under the bridge. An idyllic sight, or it would have been if his heart had been up to appreciating it. Jonty’s hands were just within the periphery of his gaze—strong, reliable hands, indicative of a strong reliable personality. No matter what the rest of the world seemed to do, Jonty Stewart wouldn’t let you down.

“Penny for those thoughts of yours?” It was a strong, steady voice, too.

“I was just thinking that I’m glad you came along with me. If not, I might have been tempted to jump in here.” The river looked enticing, the seductive coolness of the water on a day which was becoming increasingly sultry and sticky. “Such a disappointment.”

“I know.” Jonty briefly laid his hand on his lover’s arm. “Still, he was a true gentleman about it. He didn’t throw us off his property because we’d come along casting aspersions about the reputation of his family.”

"It would have been an honour to be related to him." Orlando considered thumping the stone parapet of the bridge but thought better of it. His hand still wasn't right. "Back to the drawing board, I suppose."

"No." Jonty's voice was quiet, yet it carried a weight of decision within it.

"No? What do you mean, 'no'?" If Orlando felt like arguing, his get-up-and-go wouldn't allow him. All the fight had gone.

"No more drawing board, at least not for the moment. We *will* solve this mystery, Orlando, I'm sure of it, but for now, you're coming back to London for a day or so's recuperation before we go back to Cambridge." Jonty held up his hand to prevent any interruption. "It's entirely logical. We can open that letter and see if it gives us the final piece to the puzzle. Even if it doesn't, it might provide a good enough clue, assuming you have the acumen to deal with it. You can't think properly unless you get yourself back into prime condition."

"You make me sound like a prize bull." Orlando began to laugh, the first time he'd done so in what seemed weeks.

"I wish you wouldn't say that." Jonty suddenly found the river to be of enormous interest. "Prize bull. Makes me think of Sussex and seeing one being led down the lane to service the cows." He lowered his voice. "Makes me think of that big double bed in Sussex and what we did there."

"I've missed that. I've missed you." They stood in silence, gazing at the river again.

"Well, we can't do it at the Blue Bell and I'm not even contemplating going into the woods—someone's in there shooting pigeons and I don't want to end up with a backside full of shot." Jonty ran his hand along his lover's sleeve. "Maybe in London. Definitely in Cambridge."

"Then that's the best argument I can see for going back there." Orlando drew himself up straight. "You can tell me about what you've discovered in the White City case. I'm sorry I wouldn't listen this morning. My mind is clearer now."

"It won't be once I've filled it full of the latest nonsense." They stood a while longer, admiring the river, making the most of a summer which would soon be waning.

"It would be most pleasurable to wipe Redknapp's eye one way or another, but you don't sound hopeful." Orlando felt as if his gaze was clearing, like waking on a dark morning and the world slowly appearing before him and making sense. All his thoughts had been among his long-lost family, to the exclusion of all else, trivial or important. Now he was finding his way back, step by step, and finding it was good.

"I'm not hopeful, except in that vague way I always get when we're close to solving a case. As if I had the clue at the back of my mind, hidden away in some little nook, and it's just a matter of poking around and finding it."

Orlando laid his hand briefly on his lover's. "We'll find it together, like we'll find everything in future."

“Orlando Coppersmith!” A voice like one of the bulls of Bashan out on a spree emerged from the hallway of the Stewarts’ London home even before the front door was opened.

Jonty grinned. “Mama must have been watching from the upstairs windows. Hopkins won’t be happy if she’s usurped his role in opening the—” The butler was clearly going to be furious then, because Mrs. Stewart threw open the door, flung her arms around Orlando and squeezed him as tightly as if he’d been her own flesh and blood, returned after two years up some river in the densest jungle.

“You’ve had us so worried, you naughty boy.” Mrs. Stewart practically dragged Orlando into the house, Jonty wondering all the time whether she’d pin his lover down on the settee and force cake and tea down his gullet.

“I’m sorry, I was foolish.” Orlando didn’t attempt to escape from the embrace, though; Mrs. Stewart meant too much to him.

“Papa not here to shower us with rose petals?” Jonty let Hopkins take his case and perform other duties befitting his position as rightful keeper of the door.

“He’s out investigating again.” Mrs. Stewart kept a firm grasp on Orlando’s arm, in case he attempted another sudden escape. “He got some notion into his head and has taken the opportunity of going to beard the lion in his den. Or was it a lioness? Now.” She fixed Orlando with a penetrating glance. “We’ll be having no more of this nonsense, will we?”

“I doubt it. He’s seen the error of his ways.” Jonty wondered if Orlando would ever be able to give such a promise—certainly not before the great mystery of his heritage was solved.

“Promise me you won’t go off on any more harebrained quests.” Mrs. Stewart’s grip remained firm. “I’m sure that letter, the one my idiot son left on your desk of all places, holds the key. Once you’ve read, marked and inwardly digested it, then you can come to some rational decision about your next step.”

Orlando heaved a great sigh and visibly relaxed. “I promise. And I have to say, Mrs. Stewart, I’d welcome you helping with my supervisions or lectures at any time you choose. That’s exactly how I have to talk to my dunderheads of students.”

“Then more fool you for not taking your own advice.” Mrs. Stewart lessened her vice-like grip. He’d promised and his word would be sacred.

“Thank you, Mama. I’ve extracted the same promise from Orlando but he wouldn’t dare lie to you.” Jonty eased himself into his favourite armchair. “I’d love a cup of—” Miraculously, Hopkins eased the door open before the sentence was finished, bearing a huge pot of tea and copious quantities of Orlando’s favourite cakes.

“Mr. Stewart is just coming down the street, madam. I’ve taken the liberty of allowing Button to attend to the door.”

“Thank you, Hopkins, on both counts. My goodness, Button will be feeling like the cat that’s got the cream.” Mrs. Stewart leaned forwards to pour from the pot as the butler departed, no doubt to conjure up another cup. “Richard, your timing is immaculate. Look who’s here.”

“Sit down, my boy.” Mr. Stewart dispensed with formality, shaking Orlando’s hand as he still sat on the settee, and then cuffing his shoulder. “Good to see you. And to see that teapot—I’m gasping.”

“Have mine, Papa.” Jonty brought over a steaming cup of tea. “Poor Hopkins’s telepathy must have failed if he hadn’t realised you were within a hundred yards of the house when he—” Jonty was interrupted by Hopkins again, this time bearing the fourth cup. “Now, did you have any luck?”

“Jonathan, must we have sleuthing at a time like this? Orlando’s only just stepped through the door.” Mrs. Stewart renewed her clutch on his arm.

“Actually, Mrs. Stewart—” the prodigal almost-son-in-law had at last found his tongue, “—I’d love to hear what Mr. Stewart has found out. This case needs solving too.”

“I’m glad to see you’ve not forgotten all your priorities.” Mr. Stewart nodded, firmly. “I’d been thinking about the distaff side, as you put it and I wondered whether talking to your Miss Murray might shed any light on things.”

“She’s not *my* Miss Murray, but I take the point, Papa.”

“The lady who identified the body? The one who reminded you of Miss Peters, sorry, Mrs. Sheridan.” Orlando had, of course, got straight to the nub of things.

“I can’t get used to her married name either, my boy.” Mr. Stewart brought over his cup to be refilled. “The very same and that’s what set me on the trail. Late-flowering love and all that.”

“Aha.” Jonty slapped his thigh, then received another smack next to the first, from his mother, for coarseness. “And was she the mature lady Halfpenny had been seen with?”

“Not that she’d admit to at first. It took an awful lot of wheedling over lunch and a lie—Helena, I’d like my apology recorded now and taken into account—to make her admit to it.”

“What did you tell this lady that requires an admission of guilt, Richard?” Mrs. Stewart sounded stern but her eyes twinkled. “You weren’t making indelicate suggestions?”

Mr. Stewart smiled. “I suggested we’d been commissioned to look into the case, on behalf of a Mr. Robshaw. On behalf of his sister, who’d been receiving unwanted attentions.”

“I fear that’s becoming an overworked excuse, even in Halfpenny’s case.” Someone would surely smell a rat, soon—how many nieces and cousins could Halfpenny have had time to run after, for a start? Jonty shook his head. “Still, you say it did the trick. Did she appear suitably upset at his death or did she confess on the spot?”

“Neither, you scamp. She said he’d been forcing his attentions on her, too, and that she’d resorted to boxing his ears on more than one occasion. Yet, she said she still liked him, right up to the end. She certainly seemed to be telling the truth, although it’s always difficult to tell if one’s reading into a face what

one wants to see there.” Mr. Stewart laid down his cup and patted his wife’s hand. “Not everyone is as transparently honest as you, my love.”

“I wonder if his need to get away was anything to do with Miss Murray’s unwanted affections towards him?” Orlando rose, moving over to the window to take in the view as the afternoon sunlight painted the trees gold. “So often in the past we’ve found we were looking at a case back to front. Why not now?”

“Why not indeed? Nothing in my interview with her would contradict it.” Jonty joined his friend, looking out over his shoulder, as close as they might be and not offend anyone’s proprieties. “She certainly became wary of my questioning.”

“I don’t suppose you asked if our dear friend Inspector Redknapp had been back to visit her?” Orlando wrinkled his nose as he gave the rank and name. It was so alluring, Jonty regretted they’d not gone straight back to Cambridge and their own bed.

“She said she hadn’t seen any policemen since she’d identified the body. I think Mr. Redknapp’s slipped up there.” Mr. Stewart drew his hand over his pate. “And in case you have any doubts that it’s the same man, a double or some such thing, I showed her the photograph and she swears that’s Halfpenny.”

“The name Robshaw meant nothing to her?” Orlando’s hand briefly rubbed against his lover’s, the merest intimation of delights to come. “Halfpenny hadn’t mentioned him?”

“Not as far as I can tell. It’s frustrating, isn’t it? Still, she said she’d come back to us if she thought of anything else which would help. I suggested she write to you at St. Bride’s.”

“I don’t hold out much hope.” Orlando was evidently still dispirited. Mr. Stewart’s mention of frustration couldn’t have helped. “I wonder why she’d bring any information to us in preference to the police.”

“Perhaps she’s equally unimpressed with them as we are.” Jonty contemplated dunking his last piece of cake in his tea but suspected his mother could slap his leg even at this extended range. “Although, I wonder if—”

“That’s it. No more detective talk.” Mrs. Stewart rapped the table with her teaspoon. “*I* wonder something and I won’t wait a moment more to find out. Tell us about *your* investigations, Orlando, and let’s see if we can’t make a bit more sense of those.”

It felt good, going through the door to Forsythia Cottage the next day, a great sense of relief at being safe and sound at home again. Orlando looked afresh at all the familiar sights—the shining brass of the door handle, the gleaming wood on the banisters—appreciating them more than ever. This was home, this was where he belonged, no matter where he’d come from.

Jonty closed the door behind them. “Mrs. Ward, Mrs. Ward, the prodigal’s returned.”

"She's not here." Orlando picked up a note from the cabinet where the telephone stood. "It seems she's gone to visit a sick friend and has left a ham, pickles and salad in the larder for us."

"I'm sorry there's no fatted calf gracing the table."

"To tell the truth I'm rather pleased she isn't here to greet us. I'm convinced she'll nail me to the wall by my earlobes to prevent a repeat of this last escapade." Funny how he could make light of it now, even though it still remained as something of a sore point between them.

"She'd have every right." Jonty grinned. "And what's so fascinating about those stairs that you keep eyeing them? They're not going to do—if you'll excuse the pun—a runner."

"I was just thinking that, as Mrs. Ward's out and it's been so long..."

"Ah, another point-at-the-bed-and-grunt moment." Jonty slipped off his jacket and hung it on the hall stand. "Why not? It *has* been far too long." He slipped his arms around his lover's waist. "I love you, Orlando. You're a complete idiot but you're my idiot."

Orlando didn't reply in words. A kiss was what was needed, a full-blooded fiery kiss, not like the pecks they'd exchanged in London. Raw, but wet, full of passion, tongues probing and exploring, a hot and passionate kiss. "Can't manage much longer, want you right now, Jonty."

That much must have been clear—he was hard, desperate, breathing fast.

"Steady on or we won't make it to the bedroom and it's still broad daylight out there." Jonty grinned, climbing the stairs backwards and pulling his lover with him.

"You can't see the top landing from the road, so it's only the thought of Mrs. Ward coming back unannounced which is stopping me bending you over the banisters." They'd reached the top of the stairs now, Orlando caressing his lover's backside in lieu of doing anything else to it at present. Arrival at a double bed couldn't come soon enough. "My room, it's closer."

"Just as well Mrs. Ward's kept it well aired. Oh..." Jonty gasped as Orlando's hand made its way round to the front of his trousers, caressing and squeezing where Jonty was just as excited as him. "Could you let me at least get my clothes off?"

"Just the lower half then. I don't think I could endure all that fiddling about with the rest of the stuff." Orlando undid his own flies, fingers fumbling as haste and desire fought against co-ordination. By the time he'd got everything off from the waist down, including a desperate fight with his shoelaces, Jonty was already lying on the bed, legs apart, an amused smile on his face and a tin of Vaseline in his hand.

"If you can't get undressed without making a mess of things, however are you going to manage making love to me?" Jonty smiled, reaching out his free hand. "Do you want me to get you ready?"

Orlando could only manage a nod in reply, surrendering to Jonty's tender ministrations. He needed all his energy concentrated on making sure he didn't spoil the match with a premature shot at goal. "Thank you." He let himself be pulled onto the bed, their two bodies falling effortlessly into familiar positions. "Now?"

“Now, yes.” Jonty nestled his head into the crook of his lover’s neck, moaning and murmuring at each push, each stroke. “I’ve missed this so much.”

“Turnabout later,” Orlando whispered into Jonty’s hair. “Need to have it both ways.”

“I know. Only right.” Jonty’s voice was hoarse, tense, both of them so close now. No more words were spared, not until they’d both come.

Their coupling might have been quick, but they lingered in bed afterwards, holding and touching, as if afraid that pulling apart would signal another separation. The afternoon was muggy and it was pleasant to lie in the dappled light filtering through the magnolia tree outside Orlando’s window, everything bar shirts discarded and those open now.

“The light playing on your skin...” Jonty traced the edges of the leaves as their shadows danced over his lover’s stomach.

“What about it?” Orlando felt wrapped up in happiness, a cocoon of joy about him which had resisted all attempts—his attempts—to break it.

“It’s beautiful, but it’s odd. I know every inch of this body, by sight or touch or taste, yet this light makes it unfamiliar. Wonderful.” Jonty’s hand inched lower, to where the shadows danced over the part of Orlando which had been inside *him*. “I wonder if Mrs. Ward will be away a while longer?”

“She can stay away until tomorrow but you won’t be getting an encore. At least not yet. You’ve worn me out.” Orlando ruffled his lover’s hair. “I promised turnabout but I did say *later*.”

“You’re getting old. Time was, when we first moved here, when you’d have been the one demanding a repeat performance in double-quick time.” Jonty took his hand away, went back to doodling on his lover’s chest. “You look like you’re made of some fine stippled marble.”

“Alas, it’s all flesh and blood, and flesh which is losing its stamina according to you.” Orlando sighed. “The sun makes your hair glow as if it were spun gold, but it’s just an illusion. A lovely one, but an illusion none the less.”

“Funny how we always seem to be looking at illusions, isn’t it? Started at the White City, all plaster and whitewash pretending to be marbled grandeur or genteel fantasies of poverty. I mean, those Irish village girls were no more authentic than the Court of Honour. You look at things and see what you want to see, not the reality.” Jonty sighed.

They lay in stillness, the peace broken only by the whispering of the leaves in the tree and the tapping of a twig against the window. Jonty suddenly thumped his lover’s chest.

“Ow. Leave off.”

“Sorry, I’ve just been a genius. What I mean is, is there a chance we got the wrong end of the stick about your grandmother?”

“Which stick?” Orlando groaned. “I feel I’m in a forest of sticks at present and I never get the right end of any of them.”

“Poor old confused Mrs. Lever. You’ve been chasing Pattersons and Parkinsons and who knows what else. Suppose that was the bit she got wrong? Suppose what really mattered was the bit about the Catholic Church?” Jonty took his lover’s hand. “It would make an awful lot of sense if those swines who cast your grandmother out were Catholic—the honour of the faith as well as the honour of the baron.”

“I thought your father said there couldn’t be a baron involved?” Orlando rubbed his chest. He was going to have a bruise the size of a penny there and he just hoped it was worth it.

“Maybe we’ve been looking in the wrong place. We’ve kept our search to the British Isles.” Jonty turned his lover’s face in the late afternoon sunshine. “I’ve always felt there was a hint of the Mediterranean about your wonderfully olive skin, especially when it’s caught the sun.”

“Don’t be stupid, it’s—” Orlando stopped, like Archimedes with a whole new theorem to expound. “There was an Italian-sounding name among the list Mrs. Lever gave me and I ignored it. My grandmother spoke perfect Italian—I once heard her practice it on an ice-cream seller. She told me she’d had an Italian governess, but what if that was another one of our illusions?”

“An English governess for an Italian nobleman’s daughter?” Jonty leaned up, gave his lover a hearty kiss and leapt from the bed. “Only one way to find out. Open that letter. Come on.”

“I’m not going down to the study until the pair of us are respectable. I suppose Mrs. Ward has seen a bare chest or even a bare backside before but she’ll have a heart attack if she sees the state of your shirt.”

“Ah. Better get this in the soak, then. Yours too.” Jonty peeled his shirt off, making Orlando reconsider—but only for a moment—whether turnabout later could actually be turnabout now. “Been a lovely interlude, Orlando, but a terribly messy one. I sometimes think Lavinia has a point.”

Orlando, looking now as neat as a new pin, stood holding the letter, turning it in his fingers as Jonty had turned the telegram what now seemed a lifetime ago. “I still don’t really understand why you didn’t open this at the time.”

“How could I? I felt like our guardian angel—you do remember that we have one, he or she must be exhausted after these last few weeks, I bet they have a rota now—”

“Will you ever get to the point?” Orlando grinned.

“I felt I was being entrusted with something which I could only deliver into your hands, as if your grandmother was giving me another great commission. It’s addressed to you and you alone.” Jonty spread his hands, unable to give any objective evidence for what he felt so strongly. “Seeing as I made rather a hash of the first commission, you getting so upset and all that, I couldn’t afford to get it wrong this time.” He traced the edge of the envelope. “Hidden away for her favourite boy to find.”

Orlando stood another few seconds in thought then suddenly grabbed the paper knife and deftly slit the envelope. “Read it with me. You deserve the honour, the trouble this has put you through.”

My dearest boy...

"See, I said it had to be you to open it." Jonty laid his arm across his lover's shoulders.

You have found this, and in that act alone confirmed all my expectations of your intelligence.

"I can't claim that, Jonty. Your father worked the oracle."

"Hush. You made a point of keeping the little desk, otherwise it would have been sold by now. Read on."

Perhaps you have worked out the rest, although the clues I gave you are not the easiest to read. I wish I'd had the courage to tell you all this face to face, but I haven't; not after seeing what the knowledge did to your father. I hope it doesn't affect you the same way.

"Dear God..." Jonty tightened his grip.

At least you have Jonty to look after you. You're very fortunate in that, my boy. I should have told you that face to face, as well. Don't expect to find out anything in this letter about your grandfather. I was led astray by someone who did not deserve his good name and was certainly unworthy of his grandson.

They read on in silence, the story unfolding much as Jonty had imagined it in his moment of blinding revelation, except that her family—indeed Italian—had moved to England to escape the insurrections associated with the unification of their homeland. There was no address given, but that wouldn't matter now, they had something more precious. A name.

"Baron Francisco Artigiano del Rame. Your elusive great-great-grandfather." Jonty took off his spectacles and polished them.

"Have we an Italian dictionary anywhere? I'd love to know what the name means." Orlando laid down the letter with shaking hands.

"I think I have one. Hold on." When Jonty returned, his lover had moved to the window, looking out into the garden with eyes which must have been seeing Kent, not Cambridgeshire. "Will you...?" He proffered the book.

"No, I'd prefer if you would."

Jonty thumbed through a couple of entries, checking and double checking. "Well I'm blown."

"What's this?" Orlando turned, his face full of fear at new twists and turns to this perplexing puzzle.

"The best bit of all, as far as I'm concerned. *Rame*—it's a sort of metal and *artigiano* is a craftsman, an artisan." Jonty put his hand on his lover's shoulder. "Look. Your grandmother didn't ever lie to us. There *was* a baron. And you *are* a Coppersmith."

Chapter Thirteen

“We had tea here that day you first met your Robert.” Jonty had chosen a window table in the little teashop, so he and his guest could watch the world go past them. “A lot of water under the bridge since then.”

“You’ve always had a great capacity for understatement.” Ariadne Sheridan cradled her cup, the white linen summer gloves adding an air of elegance to her workmanlike hands. “All’s well now, though. Dr. Coppersmith returned to the fold.”

Jonty nodded. “And we even have a possible address for his family, as well. Papa’s been on the scent as fitting the experienced bloodhound he’s become.”

“Dr. Coppersmith’s prepared for rejection?” Ariadne always spoke bluntly.

“He is. There’s no expectation of a fatted calf in the oven or a ring being put on his finger. Whatever the outcome, his mind will be at rest.” Jonty sighed, fiddling with his teaspoon. “As far as it will ever be at rest.” He remembered his manners, sat up straight and smiled. “I forgot to thank you for helping Lavinia. At least, I assume your advice worked—I had an enigmatic note.”

“So did I, from Ralph. And a great, flamboyant array of flowers. Robert was convinced he had a rival for my affections.” Ariadne chuckled, her deep masculine laugh ringing out through the café. “He even asked where he could find this cad and wipe the smarmy smile from his face.”

“He was joking, I hope?”

“Of course he was. We trust each other implicitly, although it was a bit awkward explaining what I’d done to earn such a floral tribute.” Ariadne leaned closer. “When I said Ralph’s wife might object to his being thumped he said he wasn’t just a scoundrel but an adulterer to boot and threatened to thrash him. I haven’t laughed so much in ages.”

“He probably thought it was that swine Owens, your old admirer from the college next door.”

“Him? I wouldn’t need Robert to deal with him. I’d just give Owens another kick between the forsythias.” The *tête-à-tête* dissolved into giggles and chortles until it earned a disapproving look from the people at the next table. “I should have sent you flowers, too, both you and my sister. For being the vehicles by which I had my problems solved.”

“Stuff and nonsense. Suffice to say seeing the words ‘You have made us both very happy’ in Ralph’s note made me overjoyed. Likewise to see some colour in your cheeks and a smile back on your face is

reward enough for anyone.” Ariadne’s eyes began to well and she was offered an elegant masculine handkerchief borne in an equally elegant masculine hand.

“It’s all show with you, Ariadne Peters-that-was.” Jonty shook his head at her attempted return of the hankie. “I wonder if your husband or brother knows your secret. You pretend to be so hard and bluestocking but inside you’re just a big soppy schoolgirl.”

Jonty stopped into St. Bride’s for the post on his way back to Forsythia Cottage, not that there tended to be much out of term, but someone might be wanting advice on a supposed suspicious death, which would be useful for riling Orlando. *Things must be getting better if I feel like riling him again.*

“Something’s just come for you, Dr. Stewart.” Summerbee the porter was a picture of efficiency, clearly enjoying the last weeks of freedom before the dunderheads invaded again.

“Thank you.” Jonty studied the letter, not recognising the hand, before opening it. “Ah. Right. Mr. Summerbee, if I were to scribble a note for Dr. Coppersmith, could you accost some poor helpless errand boy and force him to take it up to Forsythia Cottage?”

“Of course I can. I’ll take it myself if all else fails. Not detecting business, if I can be so bold?” The St. Bride’s porters could swagger over plenty of their colleagues—no other college had its own Holmes and Watson.

“It is indeed. I could telephone, but I don’t think he’s at home yet and Mrs. Ward has gone to the seaside or some such frivolity.” Jonty took the paper and pencil offered him and produced a page of reasonably legible notes. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

Orlando almost danced down the garden path—life was rosy again, as it hadn’t been in what seemed an age. They were home, his grandmother had proved as reliable as ever and Jonty was beautiful, as beautiful as the pink, blousy roses which adorned the trellis by their front door. *Blousy roses.* His mind went back to the little florist’s shop in West Brompton, to the case which had lost all importance in the face of much weightier matters. If only he could wipe Redknapp’s eye over that he’d be the happiest man on earth. The sight of the metal monster, standing slightly forlorn on the hard standing, reminded him that not everything was wonderful, but even the Lagonda couldn’t spoil his mood.

As he opened the door, he found the note on the mat.

I’ve had a message from Robshaw saying he has information about Halfpenny which he must impart, urgently, before he goes off again on business. Not to Redknapp—it seems he’s met the man and trusts him

as little as we do. He's up at Waterbeach meeting a private customer so I'm going to catch the train up and meet him there. The place is called Hales Hall, if you want to get down to the station and follow me. If not, I'll give you all the gen when I get back.

Orlando fought his consternation at not having been present when a vital clue came to light—he'd learn all about it later, once Jonty came back from meeting Robshaw, but it wasn't like being there. To soothe his soul, he wandered into the kitchen to liberate a cake, now that the rightful occupant wasn't present. A pile of mending lay neatly on the table, all ready to be done the next morning—it had been the same in the Coppersmith household, where mending was a necessity, rather than something the housekeeper felt was appropriate, Mrs. Ward not believing in wanton waste.

Orlando had a sudden clear memory of his mother sewing his name into his school clothes. Coppersmith. She'd complained enough about the number of letters, wishing they'd been called something easier like Hall or Jones. However would she have coped with Artigiano del Rame? That was the sort of name which would look very impressive, printed on the board at the bottom of the staircase in St. Bride's where he kept his room. It would confuse the dunderheads, of course, and Dr. Panesar would tease him unmercifully for going around incognito, like Robshaw as Halfpenny.

No, that was the wrong way round—Halfpenny had pretended to be Robshaw. It must have been the *real* Halfpenny who'd been killed because Miss Murray had identified him, and she'd worked with him for years, apart from anything else which had gone on between them. A nice, sensible woman, Jonty had said, reminiscent of Ariadne Sheridan. Orlando wondered if she'd had as much of a crush on Halfpenny as Mrs. Sheridan had on Jonty and whether she'd have been just as obliging in her kindness. Mrs. Sheridan would certainly do anything, within legality and propriety, for Jonty.

Orlando had never really believed St. Paul saw a light on the road to Damascus, no matter what Lumley preached in chapel or Jonty argued over supper. Yet, sitting in the kitchen of a small cottage he suddenly had an equally startling revelation. What if they'd looked at this upside down again, like he'd done with Mrs. Lever's testimony?

All sorts of little things in this case had been bewildering, like why there was said to be no address book or anything else personal in Halfpenny's rooms in West Brompton, despite the cloud of women around him. And the whole business about the picture in Margate. Orlando could think of an explanation which fitted it all and if he was right, then he needed to get to Waterbeach about ten minutes ago.

There wasn't time to get down to the station and get the train with Jonty. Orlando knew the timetable on this line off by heart, because of years spent, when first in Cambridge, visiting a retired Oxford professor in Waterbeach to discuss integral calculus, before the poor man succumbed to pneumonia. It would be an age before the next one and that would be too late, perhaps. He could find a cab, and take that

to Waterbeach, but there was no guarantee the whole process would be any quicker than waiting for the next train.

He looked out of the window, despairing at ever being able to get to Jonty, praying that his logic was at fault and this would just prove to be an innocent man giving them a clue, although he knew in his heart of hearts that couldn't be so. The metal monster caught his eye, mocking him with its elegant lines and gleaming bodywork. *If only you could drive me, you could be at his side—see what comes of being so awkward?*

Orlando laid his head against the glass, weighing the odds. He'd seen Jonty drive that car dozens of times, cringing and moaning at his side all the while—how hard could it be to gain mastery of the wretched thing? Surely a man with any brains and a bit of common sense could manage it? If he could just get the stupid thing going, he'd be laughing; he certainly knew the way by road, having cycled up there on balmy summer evenings long ago. Unless some miserable swine had come and changed all the short cuts, he could be in Waterbeach in no time.

Mind made up, he shot out of the door, coming to a halt beside his old adversary and eyeing it with defiance. "I've always hated you, but I'm not too proud to beg. Get me there in one piece in time to save Jonty if he needs saving, and I'll never insult you again. I'll even clean you sometimes and polish your brass or chrome or whatever it is. Just start and don't stop until he's safe."

"It won't start just by talking to it." Mrs. Ward's voice came over the hedge. "There's a starting handle for one thing."

"I know there is, I've wanted to take it to the thing's engine before now. I think I know how to drive this to Waterbeach—I have to if I'm to help Dr. Stewart, but..." Orlando wasn't going to admit that his hubris was failing him. He'd watched Jonty drive, yes, but he'd always avoided the business of getting the thing cranked up.

"If you're worried about starting the engine, you needn't. I've done this for Dr. Stewart plenty of times." Mrs. Ward bustled through the gate. "My old employer was one of the first men in England to possess an automobile and he taught me all about it."

Orlando made a mental note to put five pounds in the poor box, come Sunday, in gratitude for the guardian angel—or coincidence—who had saved his bacon yet again.

Hales Hall was easy for Jonty to find—the stationmaster had given him clear instructions and hadn't seemed surprised at his interest in finding the place. When he walked up the lane and found the sign which showed the property for sale, that made sense. Perhaps plenty of potential buyers or lessees had passed through the station's portals, and passed straight back again, given the slightly decrepit appearance of the

place. Maybe he'd got the name wrong—Robshaw couldn't be visiting a customer for his fine china at this house.

"Dr. Stewart." As if naming him had made him appear, Robshaw emerged from the driveway, smiling and bearing his briefcase. "Thank you for agreeing to see me here. So much easier than your coming down to London." He parked himself on the low stone wall that abutted the road, took off his hat and fanned himself with it.

"Closer to home, anyway." Jonty tipped his head towards the house. "I can't imagine you were successful here."

"Wild goose chase." Robshaw put down his briefcase and kicked at some gravel about his feet. "Someone's played a trick on me good and proper. I got a message that a gentleman at Hales Hall wanted to look at some patterns for a set of china for his nephew's wedding present and when I got here I found the place deserted."

"I wonder whether they wanted to get you here or get you away from Winchester?" Jonty sat on the wall, more confused than ever.

"Or maybe they just wanted to make mischief, like that Halfpenny fellow." Robshaw took a cigarette case from his pocket, offered Jonty one and then lit up. "That's what I wanted to see you about. I've had someone from his firm get in touch with me—I believe your father was asking questions of her."

"Miss Murray?" The distaff side of the case rearing its head again, although how the lady could have located Robshaw was a mystery. Jonty hoped his father hadn't been speaking out of turn.

"The very same." Robshaw opened his briefcase and produced a hip flask, which he placed on the grass, out of the sun. "She was extremely distressed about this Halfpenny man. She believes he was involved with some underhand business, well, I hardly like to say treason, Dr. Stewart, but espionage of some sort, carrying information to and from the continent along with his silver samples."

Jonty restrained a groan. If it turned out they'd been playing *cherchez la femme* when they should have been looking for one of those spies so beloved of Dr. Panesar, he might give up investigation for good. "Did you believe her?"

Robshaw shrugged, bending to pick up the hip flask and cradling it thoughtfully. "She seemed plausible, and she appeared to have my interests at heart. Apparently I knew this chap all along, but under the name Davis, not Halfpenny—we became acquainted a few months ago when we spent a couple of days in the same hotel in Caen. He'd been trailing me since then, as I'd told him I was looking to move and to change jobs. He'd seen his chance and had been waiting for the opportune moment when a switch could be made. He'd planned to take my place, apparently." Robshaw shivered, unscrewing and refastening the cap of his flask. "Someone got to him first and she's worried they'll come after me."

"Someone he'd crossed in the espionage world?" It sounded plausible. Jonty's head spun, trying to gather all this new information and hang it on the line of reasoning he'd constructed.

“That’s what Miss Murray implied. She seemed very cut up about it. Rather sad when a mature woman takes a fancy to a younger man.” A rustle in the shrubbery caught both their attentions, Robshaw spinning around as if struck. “Come out, whoever you are!” He leapt up and over to the bush, startling nothing more alarming than a pheasant. “I’m sorry, Dr. Stewart.” He sat down again, hands shaking. “This business has got me in a terrible state. I thought I might have been trailed here—I wouldn’t trust that Murray woman at all.”

The logic of the last remark, if there was any, was lost on Jonty, but he’d got used to men thinking illogically of late. It would drive any man mad to feel he’d been marked out for larceny on his identity—by default that would imply losing his life as well as his name. Yet the plan had backfired and Halfpenny was the one who was dead.

“...upside down.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Robshaw, I was woolgathering. Could you repeat that?”

Robshaw unscrewed the cap of his flask but couldn’t get his hands steady enough to drink from it. “I said I feel like my life’s turning upside down and I can’t understand it at all.” He offered the flask. “I think we could both do with a snifter.”

Upside down. Jonty took the flask, and turned it in his hands.

Driving the Lagonda wasn’t quite as easy as he’d anticipated, but the roads were quiet and Orlando was too concerned about what was going on with Jonty to worry about the odd bump or badly taken corner. He reached the outskirts of Waterbeach with enormous gratitude that he was still in one piece and pulled in—almost elegantly—to ask a lad on a bicycle where Hales Hall was. To find out it was only a couple of furlongs down the next lane to the left was a relief, although hearing that the property was set back from the road and hadn’t been occupied since spring was worrying.

He got the car going again, easing through the junction and up the winding lane, all the time trying not to think about smashing Robshaw’s head open with the starting handle if he’d led Jonty into a trap. Robshaw, who probably wasn’t even Robshaw to start with, who’d poisoned—or got Miss Murray to poison—some poor unsuspecting chap just because time and opportunity were right.

Robshaw, who’d just come into sight, was sitting on a wall and at this very moment offering Jonty a drink of something.

Orlando leaned out to scream, “No, don’t” as he picked up speed and made a beeline for the entrance to the driveway. Robshaw leapt up, looking wildly at the car, then bolted up the drive towards the empty house. Orlando swerved around his astonished lover and yelled, “Put that flask down, Jonty!” before speeding along the gravel. He hoped his quarry wouldn’t head off over the lawn when they reached it. The

Lagonda wouldn't be up to such terrain and he wouldn't trust his Achilles' tendon over the bumps and hollows.

"Robshaw!" Jonty's voice sounded from down the drive, followed by the crack of a gun.

The Lagonda screeched to a halt, as did Robshaw, who leapt like a hare then started off again. He was fast, but Orlando was faster, as long as his ankle held out.

"Stop, the pair of you." Jonty had produced a gun from somewhere and was clearly not afraid to use it.

The fraction of a second it took Robshaw to look over his shoulder let Orlando snatch his coattail, tap his heel and bring him down in an exemplary rugby tackle.

"Where did you get that?" Orlando, breathing hard and sitting on his quarry's back, couldn't quite believe he wasn't hallucinating.

"In his briefcase. He clearly came prepared." Jonty held his sides—outside of the rugby season neither of them were at their peak of fitness. "In case whatever he had in the flask didn't work." He nudged Robshaw's side with the toe of his boot. "Essence of foxglove for me, too? Or just something to knock me out while you shot me?"

There was no answer, as Robshaw had passed out.

"I never thought I'd say I was glad you had that Lagonda, but I'm having to confess it now." Orlando gave his lover a huge bear hug, almost squashing the breath from him. The rope which Jonty had insisted should be kept in the back of the motor car—for some mysterious purpose—had been utilised to tie their prisoner to the gate.

"Your timing was immaculate. Shame your phizog isn't." Orlando's face was a mass of smudges, like an overgrown chimney sweep's boy. An alluring one at that. Jonty took out his handkerchief and made an effort at cleaning it, a reversal of the usual roles. "I wonder why he brought the gun and didn't rely on poison again."

"Probably because you wouldn't have trusted him like Halfpenny did. Or maybe he didn't want to make a connection obvious." Orlando went pale. "If I'd been him I'd have knocked you out then hidden your body away in the depth of the shrubbery."

Jonty shivered, even in the warmth of the sun. "He spoke about things being upside down, and suddenly it all made sense. It was one of those revelations—came into my brain like Mama was telling me a fact when I was being particularly obtuse." The spit wash halted. "Does that make sense?"

"That makes entire sense, because the same thing happened to me." Orlando had the last little mark removed from his face. "Like so many times in the past, we'd been looking at things arsey-farsey. This

man—I won't say Robshaw as we know that's the chap who's dead—was Halfpenny, the man with the harem."

"And the spying." Jonty was pleased to see he still had a surprise to spring.

"Spying?"

"Possibly. Dear God, I have no idea whether any of it's the truth." Jonty sat down on the wall, picking up the flask to carefully replace the cap. "Whatever he was running from, he'd planned to make a new life."

"And Miss Murray must have been on hand to help him." Orlando shivered. "How many devious women are we going to come across in our career? I'm not sure I'll trust any of them again. Unless I'm related to them."

"There's still more to be unpicked here, but I'm happy to let the proper authorities unpick it." Jonty briefly caressed his lover's arm—Robshaw was struggling too much with his bonds to notice. "I'm not sure what impresses me more, your powers of deduction or you getting here in the motor car. We need to find a policeman, you know. And he can take our statements and get him into custody." He tipped his head towards the gate. "I have the letter asking me to meet him here so we can face Redknapp with a clear conscience, should it come to that."

"If our guardian angel is on duty she'll make sure that's a pleasure we can avoid."

"Were you intending to stand here in the dark?" Orlando slipped into his lover's bedroom to find him looking out onto the gloaming, not even a candle against the blackness of a rapidly falling late-summer's night.

"I was. The bats are out and you know how much I love them." Jonty leaned back into Orlando's embrace as his arms wound around his waist. "And not being illuminated has other benefits, too." He slipped his hands down to brush the front of his lover's pants. "Don't just love the bats. Love you."

It had been another long day, after the excitement of the one before. Redknapp had appeared, still fuming with them, taking the most detailed of statements and refusing to give anything like thanks or credit where it was due. Neither of them cared, anymore; the last few weeks had put a lot of things into their proper perspective.

Orlando kissed the back of his lover's neck. "It's a long time since we did our duty without some shadow hanging over us. Have you the energy for it?"

"After our grilling by Redknapp?" Jonty turned in Orlando's arms, returning the kiss with interest. "That's all done and dusted now and a nice tumble would restore me to my usual good humour."

"Tumble?" Orlando made a start on Jonty's shirt buttons. "I'll roll you in that bed until you don't know what day of the week it is. It's all been too quick these last few times, but there's no hurry now."

“We’ll make it last as long as you can manage. Test the old Coppersmith self-control.” Jonty was having problems with his own self-control. He’d become so good at calming himself, at restraining the urge to come, even when he was inside Orlando or Orlando was in him. It had taken a lot of practice and had been worth the effort, although now he felt like a beginner again. He took a long, deep breath. “Take it slowly. Just kiss me, for now.”

They started slow, no more than a press or two of lips, breaking apart and meeting again, building on intensity. Chaste kisses gave way to hot ones—wet kisses, wild and wonderful kisses, long and languorous and so electrifying. Kisses on his lips, neck, back, chest, anywhere Orlando’s lips could get themselves to.

“It would be easier if you took this stuff off.” This was more like the old Orlando, desperate to have naked flesh on naked flesh.

Jonty was already barefoot, in anticipation of the likely outcome of the evening. Strange to think back to the first time he’d stripped for his lover, so long ago it seemed now, and how obsessed he’d been about not being seen in only his socks. Jonty going about shoeless had almost become a signal between them that romance might be in the air. He slipped off his trousers and drawers while Orlando did the same, grey shapes in the dim light, a glimpse of chest or thigh or buttocks as the thin stream of moonlight caught them.

“Well met by moonlight, proud Orlando.” Jonty drew his hand down the length of his lover’s body, forehead to groin.

“You talk such twaddle.” Orlando pulled Jonty onto the bed, halting all talk for the next few minutes.

Slow and steady was proving the ideal way to win this race. Orlando’s fingers on Jonty’s flesh, agile, nimble fingers, did ridiculously exciting things, but not so exciting that Jonty couldn’t keep himself in check. He could prolong this as long as they wanted, tonight, making love as the moonlight moved across the bed, along the floor and up the wall. It would be quite a while until he felt the need to say, “Orlando, would you be so kind as to make me ready?” In between there’d be kisses, bites, caresses and times of lying relaxing, willing their flesh not to discharge prematurely.

“What are you thinking?” Orlando’s head came up from where he was suckling at his lover’s breast.

“Of all the things the next half hour will hold.” Jonty began to work through his mental list of pleasures, acting them out in reality, the inventory of delight. It culminated with his fingers moving inside his lover, doing what he was still forbidding Orlando to do to him. When he became desperate, he relented, letting Orlando prepare him, allowing him to couple and uncouple, dragging each moment out until they could neither of them bear to wait any longer.

“Now, Jonty, let me do it now.” Orlando’s forehead against his lover’s, pressing hard and desperately. “I can’t hold on.”

“You don’t need to.” Jonty pressed himself close against his lover’s chest, holding tight as they both passed the point of no return, the sweet road into ecstasy. They stayed united afterwards, slowly calming

down, hearts pounding and slowing. “Don’t go away again. Please,” Jonty whispered against his lover’s sweat-sodden neck.

“I won’t. I promise.”

The house where the Baron Artigiano del Rame lived was well proportioned and the gardens beautifully laid out, or at least they appeared to be from the walk up the drive. A big, expansive drive this time, no trees to obscure the view of or from the house. The only hint of Italianate architecture was a summerhouse by the lake—everything else spoke of English tradition, an estate acquired by cold cash rather than inheritance or king’s disposition. It was all well kept, proof of an estate which was capably maintained and thriving in an era when some were just starting to run to seed.

It should have been impressive but it wasn’t.

“I feel I should be enthusing as much as you did when you first saw the Old Manor, but I can’t. It’s a lovely place, the house and gardens are extremely impressive, and yet there’s something missing.” Jonty seemed pleased they’d left the carriage at the lodge gates. The long walk up the drive gave them time to gather thoughts and reconsider their plan of campaign. They’d an appointment this time, the request for an interview—to discuss family history—handled in a businesslike manner which gave no clue about the likely warmth of their reception.

“It lacks a soul.” Orlando was tempted to stop but he pressed on—if he halted now he’d never get going again. “As you say, it’s lovely to look at yet there’s no atmosphere. It isn’t like your family homes, Jonty, where the love seems to have pervaded every blade of grass or brick in the walls.”

“Maybe you’ll ignite that spark of atmosphere, one way or the other. He’ll welcome you with open arms, the rift will be healed and the soul will return. Or he’ll have nothing to do with you and the atmosphere will be dust and ashes forever more. His choice, life or death.”

“Like a murderer’s,” Orlando whispered. Strange, the continued parallels between the puzzles he’d chosen in his life—unscrambling the elegant mysteries contained within mathematics, solving criminal mysteries simply for the thrill of the chase, and the great puzzle which had needed solution for the sake of his sanity.

Jonty laid his hand on his lover’s arm. “I know it’s upsetting, but we must be polite and resolute if he rejects you. I’ve always believed that if we expect the worst then whatever we find must be better.”

He made perfect sense, as usual; Jonty was his parents’ son just as Orlando was the offspring of his. It explained so much.

“All I want is for him to tell me I’ve found the right place. I have no claim on it, I want no claim to it. I simply need to know that I’ve found where my family came from.” Orlando paused for a while under a towering oak. “These trees might have seen them all come and go, once they’d arrived in England. My

grandmother would have collected acorns here, or conkers under the horse-chestnut trees we just passed. She taught me to play conkers, you know—she'd visit us every September and we'd go searching for the biggest chestnuts together. She even knew the best ways to harden them up."

"That doesn't surprise me. She had such spirit, Orlando, and such understanding." Jonty moved his hand from arm to shoulder. "I'm sure she knew how things stand between us—I'm not sure she approved per se, but she recognised the difference it had made to her favourite boy." He took a long breath of air, the scent of trees and newly cut grass borne on the breeze. "Perhaps when she left, the heart of this place went with her. And the baron's a widower, so the place lacks a woman's touch. His heir won't be here?"

"Not if your father got his information correct." They knew all about the successor to the title—that had been one of Mr. Stewart's pieces of detection, too. He was up in Edinburgh, studying medicine and staying there in the holidays, helping poor children.

"I'd like to meet him, if only to compare him to you—you're almost the same age." Jonty picked up a long stem of grass, fiddling with it restlessly. "As Mama so elegantly put it, 'Plenty of brains among the Coppersmiths and plenty of compassion too, should you look for it.' She'd love to arrange some grand meeting of the families as she feels you're really a Stewart, now."

"I'd need another year to work up the courage for that."

They reached the door, which was opened even before they'd touched the impressive-looking knocker. An elegantly suited footman motioned for them to enter the hall, where a tall, well-dressed, smiling figure awaited them, with his arms outstretched for either a handshake or embrace. Jonty couldn't help find something familiar about the man.

"Dr. Coppersmith, I'm delighted to meet you. I had great hopes when I saw your name in your letter, and now I see you, they are greater still. Antonio Artigiano del Rame at your service." He offered his hand, but Orlando seemed rooted to the spot.

"Please excuse my friend's surprise, Baron, we've come here on an important and delicate errand." Jonty wondered how long he could keep making excuses. "Steady on..." He caught Orlando's arm as he staggered and almost fell.

"Dr. Coppersmith, are you unwell? Come, let us go to the morning room. Bridges, coffee, if you please."

"I'll be fine, thank you. I'm sorry to have been so stupid, and so impolite." Orlando shook the baron's hand. "A coffee would be most welcome—this has been rather a shock."

Jonty caught his host's eye, a look of surprise and incomprehension passing between them. "Enlighten us, please, Dr. Coppersmith." He kept a firm grip on his lover's arm.

"Baron..."

"Antonio, please. We are family, or at least I assume we are."

“We must be.” Orlando smiled, a strange mixture of happiness and sadness etched on his face. “You are the image of my father, sir. If you let me tell you my story, then you’ll understand.”

The morning room captured the rays of the sun before it turned around the corner of the house and headed for the drawing room. The subtle green shades reminded Jonty of the seaside, of holidays and happy times. Orlando still looked pale but was regaining his colour, thanks to a comfortable chair, a cup of good coffee and his host’s kind words.

“Before you tell me your story, may I ask what the initial *O* stands for, Dr. Coppersmith?”

“Orlando. Please call me that.” He managed another smile.

“Aha. I had hoped for that, too. It was my great-great-grandfather’s name, *our* ancestor. You see, I know some of the story already.” The baron settled back in his chair. “Tell me it all, from your side.”

“Your aunt, my grandmother, died this summer...” Orlando began the story, a neat resume of a complicated tale, often rehearsed and polished for just such a moment, from Jonty’s commission to Mr. Stewart’s location of the Artigiano del Rame family.

The baron listened intently, asking for clarification on a few points, taking in all that he was told. “There is more, though? Your father...” He indicated the hallway, as if they might have forgotten what happened there.

“My father killed himself when I was barely more than a boy. He was never a well man, not in his mind, and I’m convinced that it was this—” Orlando spread his hands, an eloquent gesture to take in the house and the secrets it had hidden, “—which had unsettled him. When I saw you, I felt like I saw a ghost.”

“I am sorry.” The baron clearly meant what he said. “I wish this had been resolved by generations past. I only became aware of the story earlier this year, when my old nursemaid passed away. She left a letter telling me that I had an aunt, of whom no-one was allowed to speak. She’d heard the story herself from the other staff—the servants’ hall is always the most reliable source of information, is it not? It set me off on a quest.”

Jonty hid his grin in his coffee cup. Whatever genes had slithered through the family ensured their possessors looked and spoke alike and shared the same passion for detection. No wonder Orlando was looking more at ease as each moment passed—Mrs. Stewart might like to think she’d acquired him, but he was a Coppersmith through and through. Or an Artigiano del Rame, to be exact.

The baron continued. “I had got as far as deducing that I was looking for a Coppersmith, and having eliminated the Glamorgan ones, I was casting my net farther afield. At which point I got your letter—if the name had not been decisive, the face was. Like looking in the mirror at my young self, or at a portrait of my grandfather.” The baron rose. “Maybe you’d like to see one of them? And the rest of your family?”

Orlando’s delight at the words “your family” shone out of every pore. “If you’d be so kind.” He turned to Jonty. “Dr. Stewart, I’ve seen your ancestral portraits many times. Would you accompany me to see mine?”

Jonty nodded. It was as well not to speak or he might embarrass himself with a high-pitched emotional squeak. He tagged along as the baron illustrated the family history through a series of portraits and artefacts, picture after picture of men bearing the same distinctively handsome nose as his lover, women with Mrs. Coppersmith's determined gaze.

"Back in Italy, where did the family come from?" Orlando stood admiring a landscape, a depiction of the ancestral home.

The baron began to extol the virtues of their old home in Tuscany, a small estate originally which had grown under wise handling. Jonty—who'd visited the area as a child and had been less than enamoured—drifted off to admire a family group. Orlando's great-grandfather, the villain of the piece, was depicted with his own children. Two boys, one of whom would be Antonio's father, but no little girl. The composition of the group portrait was odd, the children to one side and the father by a tree on the extreme left. No sign of the baroness, either.

"Ah." The baron's voice was sad. "You'll have guessed what happened here, Dr. Stewart?"

"I can make a fairly solid assumption." Jonty cast a quick glance at his lover, but Orlando seemed so happy that even this couldn't puncture his balloon of contentment, surely. He'd probably worked it out for himself, anyway. "Mrs. Coppersmith, your aunt, has been cut out of this painting. That's why the grouping doesn't work."

The baron nodded. "I suppose it is not the lot of a man to apologise for the sins of his ancestors, but in this case it is appropriate. I find it particularly cruel that he sought to cut off your grandmother when our own family's fame is built on...well, let us call them unusual lines."

Jonty and Orlando exchanged a brief glance. This was better than any murder mystery they'd ever been involved with.

"It would seem niggardly to be asking you for more information when you've already blessed me in abundance, but can you tell me anything about my grandfather?" Orlando looked at the mutilated portrait as if he was trying to envisage its original form.

"Alas, no. At least not at present." The baron's eyes shone. "But if we put together our resources—intellectual and material—who's to say we can't solve even that mystery? Come, I have another portrait to show you." He led the way to what was clearly his own dressing room, where a single picture hung on the wall. A sketch, very old, of a stunningly handsome young man, bearing what looked like a hammer in his hand. "This is the first baron. He was given the title, and a small parcel of land, for, let us say, services rendered."

"To the king of Italy?" Jonty had heard many a story like this; it wasn't unusual, despite what the baron had said.

“Ah, no. To the queen. The king wasn’t able to, um, satisfy her requirements, although he loved her dearly. This man, Arturo the copper craftsman, could and did. All the family know the story and most of us take it with an appropriate degree of gratitude. My grandfather...” The baron shrugged. It had all been said.

“Thank you.” Orlando took a long look at his prodigious ancestor. “You have been most kind in sharing all this with me. With us.”

“You are family. It is my duty and my privilege.” The baron bowed. “And I have something for you, to take away. I hope you will keep in touch with us, as my son would be delighted to meet you. I spend the winter with him, up in our little house in Scotland, among the mountains which make me think of home. You would be most welcome to come and join us.” He nodded, as if the matter was settled. “Look at this and think of your family.” He opened a drawer in a little desk, taking out a small velvet pouch. He slipped the contents into Orlando’s hand.

“Grandmother.” The exquisite miniature showed a girl in her early teens, dark haired and beautiful, with wide, adventurous eyes. “Look, Dr. Stewart.”

“My old nurse left it for me. I’m still not sure how she obtained it, all other memories of my aunt having been lost.”

The three of them stood in silence, feeling the strong gaze emerging from the little portrait.

“I believe, Antonio,” Orlando said, eyes still firmly fixed on the miniature, “that this part of my quest is at an end.”

“That train is running late.” Jonty gazed up the line from the platform, looking as if he were willing the errand machine to arrive. “If we had the Lagonda we’d have been well on the way home by now.”

Orlando ignored the remark. He may have forgiven the metal monster, but logic and some simple maths could prove that it would still be quicker travelling by train. *And long may that happy situation prevail.*

“Will we have to have the name changed on the board down at St. Bride’s?” Jonty clearly wouldn’t be ignored. “Dr. Artigiano del Rame?”

“No, much as you might like to taunt me about my fancy ancestry. A Coppersmith I am, have clearly always been, and will remain.”

“Excellent. Coppersmith and Stewart, the detecting fellows. It has a certain cachet about it. Artigiano del Rame and Stewart doesn’t quite work.”

“Indeed.” Orlando got out the miniature again for one last glance before boarding the train, which had at last appeared far off.

“I just hope you don’t decide to emulate your illustrious ancestor. Don’t let any desperate ladies tempt you.” Jonty nudged his lover.

Orlando lowered his voice. "You're the only one I'll let tempt me. And the payment's not a burden."
"Oh no." Jonty threw his head back and laughed. "The payment's the best part of all."

Epilogue

Dear Dr. Stewart,

“No mention of you, Orlando. He clearly believes you’re a nuisance.”

I feel obliged to let you know what has happened in this case.

“I bet he doesn’t, Jonty. I bet someone like Chief Inspector Wilson made him. I bet every word he wrote was torture.”

Your coming across that picture of the real Robshaw in Margate was a stroke of luck, or else we might never have got to the bottom of things before Halfpenny eluded us again. He’d switched identities once and there’s evidence he was ready to do it again if need be, maybe with the aid of some other poor lonely soul he’d befriended and who trusted in him. But without the aid of his lady friend, Miss Murray, this time.

“You should have gone to see her, Orlando. I bet you’d have charmed the truth out of her right away.”

“I don’t believe I’d have succeeded where your father couldn’t. Blimey.”

“Language!”

“Looks like Redknapp did, though.”

Miss Murray has been more than co-operative, especially when we informed her that Halfpenny would have likely bolted again had he succeeded with his plans at Waterbeach. There’s another woman in the case.

“Maybe that’s the elusive Dolores. Adjust your spectacles, Jonty, and read the rest.”

The part which had caused most trouble was how Robshaw was poisoned. I thought we’d have to await a confession, but hell hath no fury and all that. That hip flask you were offered has been used before; he brought it with him to the White City where he’d offered to treat Robshaw to a day out, the man still being on holiday. It must have been laced with poison. They both took a reviving swig from it somewhere quiet after they’d been on the Flip Flap, but Halfpenny only pretended to drink, as I suppose he’d have done with you, Dr. Stewart.

“Very clever.” Orlando couldn’t help admiring the details. “If he’d been taken ill before his murderer got away, Halfpenny could have blamed it on the excitement of the ride.”

We’ve located Robshaw’s family or what’s left of it. There’s just his grandmother and she’s losing her faculties. He must have told Halfpenny that, too, so he’d have known there’d be no one to report their

missing son or brother when he suddenly disappeared. It was all clearly premeditated; Robshaw was already ensconcing himself in Winchester while Halfpenny was in Margate.

“Redknapp could have had the grace to say that we’d already worked all of that out for him, Mrs. Borthwick not having seen her prospective lodger and all that. It makes me sick.”

“This whole business makes me feel quite sick, Orlando. The sheer cold-bloodedness...”

It is still unclear what he was running from. Miss Murray firmly believes it was another espionage agent, but neither the Admiralty nor the War Office seems to know anything about it. Or they say they don’t. I suppose we might never know.

“I’m sticking with the women angle, or else Dr. Panesar will have a field day. Maybe Miss Murray was the worst of the lot.”

I feel obliged to thank you for your input...

“I bet he spent ages trying to think of a word which wasn’t *help*.”

...and hope you’ll forgive me if I say I hope our paths don’t cross again.

Yours sincerely,

Inspector F. Redknapp

“Forgive him? If our paths cross again I’ll run him over in the Lagonda.”

“Orlando, that’s *my* motor car...”

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 at www.charliecochrane.co.uk. You are welcome to send an email to Charlie at cochrane.charlie2@gmail.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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Lessons in Temptation
Lessons in Seduction

This time, one touch could destroy everything...

Lessons in Seduction

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Cambridge Fellows Mysteries, Book 6

The suspected murder of the king's ex-mistress is Cambridge dons Orlando Coppersmith and Jonty Stewart's most prestigious case yet. And the most challenging, since clues are as hard to come by as the killer's possible motive.

At the hotel where the body was found, Orlando goes undercover as a professional dancing partner while Jonty checks in as a guest. It helps the investigation, but it also means limiting their communication to glances across the dance floor. It's sheer agony.

A series of anonymous letters warns the sleuths they'll be sorry if they don't drop the investigation. When another murder follows, Jonty is convinced their involvement might have caused the victim's death. Yet they can't stop, for this second killing brings to light a wealth of hidden secrets.

For Orlando, the letters pose a more personal threat. He worries that someone will blow his cover and discover their own deepest secret... The intimate relationship he enjoys with Jonty could not only get them thrown out of Cambridge, but arrested for indecency.

Warning: Contains sensual m/m lovemaking and hot men in black tie and tails.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Lessons in Seduction:

"What are you up to? Put me down, you'll do your knees in." Orlando couldn't decide whether to struggle or if that would make matters worse. They'd barely climbed the tiny stairs of the equally tiny cottage when Jonty dived down, grabbed his waist and took him in a sort of fireman's lift. They were now haring off to the bedroom.

"Ug. Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr." Jonty threw his lover on the bed—not a moment too soon because not only did his knees hurt but he'd temporarily run out of caveman noises as well.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Orlando lay in an attractive heap, watching Jonty thrust his chest forwards and beat it with his fists.

"Uggamugga. Don't laugh—I'm trying to be all wild and dominating and you're supposed to be either cowering and pleading for mercy or swooning in my arms. Either would do but laughter will not."

"I'm sorry to be such a disappointment. Would it suffice for me to lie back and let you have your wicked way with me?"

"That would be more than adequate, or—as we troglodytes put it—oogahmoogah. You could struggle a little bit but only a token amount or else it gets unpleasant." Jonty drew back, made a bound for the bed

and bounced onto it next to Orlando, then took a slightly softer spring to land on top of him. “Umgamunga.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? And aren’t you cavemen a little short on original dialogue? Everything sounds the same. How would they know if you wanted a romantic encounter or were just trying to find your way to the nearest rhino hunt?”

“They would have used a lot more gestures than I do. Anyway you’re supposed to be looking at least a little timid, or in thrall to my manliness. Could you decide which and then attempt it. Hm?” Jonty removed his jacket, quickly slipping off his uncavemanlike cufflinks and tie.

“As I am always in thrall to your intense masculinity I’ll opt for the former, then.” Orlando thrust his hands under his lover’s armpits, ticking without mercy.

“That’s not fair—hardly within the spirit of a *bit* of resistance. Anyone would think you didn’t want me to seduce you.”

“Perhaps I don’t.” Orlando tried to look convincing.

“Rot!” Jonty extricated his lover’s hands; it wasn’t difficult, Orlando only playing at hard to get. “Come here, you big daft pudding.” He pressed him onto the bed, madly grabbing at buttons and buttonholes.

“If you’re not a bit more gentle, you’ll have most of those off and Mrs. Ward will go mad. You had a hard enough time explaining away the last lot of bodice ripping you did.”

“Never ripped a bodice in my life.” Jonty attacked the maddening little fly buttons.

“Don’t prevaricate, you know what I mean. Oi! Gently does it.” Orlando didn’t want his clothing assaulted in quite such a violent fashion and was afraid that the fly buttons would start springing off in all directions. They’d never be able to explain that to Mrs. W. She had only just believed—or pretended to believe—the nonsense about the shirt and the door jamb.

“We cavemen are never gentle—rough by visage and by nature.”

“You cavemen will be doing without if you can’t learn a few rudimentary Cro-Magnon manners.” Orlando drew Jonty close and kissed him roughly, unable to resist the primitively driven pile of muscle pinning him down.

“That’s more like it. Kisses are meat, drink and antlers to us cavemen.” Jonty returned the kiss with interest and finally managed—in the process—to get Orlando’s shirt open and his vest up to his collarbones. “Now that’s hardly a Neanderthal chest. Thou art veritably a smooth man, whereas we—” he finished unbuttoning his own shirt and drew up his vest, “—troglodytes are a hairy men.”

“That’s not proper grammar.”

“We hunters of the great mastodon sneer at grammar. We eat our meat raw and take our pleasures at will.” Jonty dived for his lover’s chest and began to pepper it with kisses and the odd bite.

“If you’re hungry for some raw meat I’m sure Mrs. W has some sausages in the larder.”

“We pursuers of the great brown bear spit on sausages. Only fit for children and toothless grannies. We like our meat straight off the hoof.” Jonty nibbled his friend’s shoulder, having managed to expose that much of the *smooth man*.

At this point Orlando decided he’d had quite enough and didn’t want to be on the menu, so flipped his lover over onto his back and pinned his arms down. “Dinner is fighting back, I’m afraid. It might be nice to be nibbled by you but you’re getting perilously close to where any marks will be visible and I suppose you’ve forgotten that I’m dancing tonight. I don’t want to appear with bites up my neck, thank you. Or do troglodytes sneer at dancing, too?”

“They do but I don’t.” Jonty sighed languidly and let himself go limp. “Fed up with being all Attila the Hun. Far too exhausting. If you’d fancy a nice naughty time with a slightly tired Kildare Fellow in Tudor literature then he’d be more than willing to oblige.”

“That would suit me very well.” Orlando didn’t have much work left to get his “pursuer of the brown bear” entirely undressed. The magnificent hairy chest and smooth thighs, the delicate curves of the hip bones, were enough to drive anyone wild with desire, although he didn’t need any such stimulus. Jonty in shirt sleeves and braces bent over a hoe in the garden was just as exciting; Orlando wondered if he’d spend his whole life catching a glimpse of his lover, having inappropriate thoughts and having to wait for the right moment to put them into action.

“Come on.” Orlando ran his fingers down his lover’s breastbone, outlining the ribs and letting them wend their way through the concave hollows down to the edge of his pelvis. Strong bones, encased in strong muscles. Tracing their curves was a delight, exploring the nooks and crannies of Jonty’s frame was as powerful an aphrodisiac as any man so inclined might want. The smooth skin of his thighs led round to the softer skin on his buttocks, skin which hadn’t suffered in rucks on rugby pitches. Orlando sighed. “Extraordinary.”

“What is? My magnificent body? Taken you a while to realise, then.” Jonty’s hands and lips were making explorations of their own, finding those parts of Orlando’s flesh which drove him mad when they were caressed or kissed. The small of his back, the little depression above his collarbone, the back of his arm, between his legs.

“I’ve always thought you had a wonderful body, although why I should tell you so astounds me. You’re vain enough already. I was just thinking how tender your skin is—like a baby’s.” Orlando caressed the downy flesh around his lover’s navel, the immaculate hide which curved over his abdomen. “Why isn’t this like a battlefield from all that diving under forwards’ feet you insist on doing?”

“I’d say because the angels watch over me, but that’s a lie. Luck, simply luck.” Jonty traced the ugly red scar on his lover’s thigh where a stray boot had made a mess of it during some ugly match. “Medals of honour, these things. To be treasured.”

“Then you should have your fair share, for me to admire.” Orlando’s hands moved towards the other parts which earned his admiration, both for beauty and prowess. Strange how the innate absurdity of the human frame could be so wonderfully employed and look so beautiful when seen through the eyes of love.

“Turn or turnabout?”

Orlando knew what the question meant. Maybe all pairs of lovers had their codes, secret ways of making desires known which anyone could hear and be none the wiser. He wouldn’t speculate—the matters of his own bedroom were enough for any man. “Turn, please, unless cavemen sneer at that, too.”

“Cavemen can go hang themselves.”

He followed all the rules...until one man showed him a dozen ways to break them.

An Improper Holiday

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As second son to an earl, Ian Stanton has always done the proper thing. Obeyed his elders, studied diligently, and dutifully accepted the commission his father purchased for him in the Fifty-Second Infantry Division. The one glaring, shameful, marvelous exception: Nicholas Chatham, heir to the Marquess of Carleigh.

Before Ian took his position in His Majesty's army, he and Nicky consummated two years of physical and emotional discovery. Their inexperience created painful consequences that led Ian to the conviction that their unnatural desires were never meant to be indulged.

Five years later, wounded in body and plagued by memories of what happened between them, Ian is sent to carry out his older brother's plans for a political alliance with Nicky's father. Their sister Charlotte is the bargaining piece.

Nicky never believed that what he and Ian felt for each other was wrong and he has a plan to make things right. Getting Ian to Carleigh is but the first step. Now Nicky has only twelve nights to convince Ian that happiness is not the price of honor and duty, but its reward.

Warning: Just thinking about reading this book in 1814 could get you hanged, so the men in this book who enjoy m/m interaction of an intimately penetrative nature are in a hell of a lot of trouble.

Enjoy the following excerpt for An Improper Holiday:

When at last the door opened, Ian spun 'round to be relieved of his coat, sufficiently irritated by Simmons' delayed arrival to forgo his usual greeting.

Perhaps the fellow had been overindulging in whatever libations were being offered to celebrate the day in the servants' hall because the valet was clumsy rather than deft, struggling just to ease the coat from Ian's shoulders.

"And I shall be retiring, Simmons."

Instead of the expected "Very good, sir," the man left his arms pinned behind his back and brushed his fingers beneath Ian's cravat. The unanticipated contact awakened Ian's skin, his flesh alight with delightful ripples of sensation.

"What the devil?"

He would have turned to face the man, but Simmons stepped closer, hands moving to remove the starched tie while pressing his hips intimately against Ian's arse.

The shock and terror in his gut, even the pain of his confined shoulders, could not dampen the rush of arousal evoked by the touch, by the strength of another man's embrace.

“Simmons. I must ask that you remember yourself.” Ian twisted free, retreating to place a wall at his vulnerable back, but his all-too-vulnerable front was exposed to—Nicky.

The identity of his assailant did little to mitigate Ian’s dismay.

“Are you mad?” Ian struggled with his coat, anger lending him sufficient strength to tear one of the sleeves from the body.

Nicky locked the door and removed his own coat. “It is Boxing Day, after all. Simmons has the evening off, as do almost all of the servants. Surely you would not deprive the man of his well-earned holiday.”

“It is not Boxing Day for another hour,” Ian asserted as the solemn toll of the chapel bell made him a liar. He flung his torn coat to the floor.

Nicky’s cravat parted company with his shirt, revealing a neck still defined with the strong tendons Ian had once traced with his tongue. Quelling thoughts of other flesh his mouth longed to revisit grew more impossible with each piece of clothing Nicky dropped onto the Aubusson rug.

“What are you doing?”

“I am preparing for bed. That bed.” Nicky indicated the four-poster in the center of the room.

“Is the castle so crowded the son of the house has been turned out of his rooms?”

“If it pleases you to think so.” Nicky straightened, torso bared to Ian’s gaze.

Firelight gilded Nicky’s skin, gleaming on the fine hairs of his breast, drawing Ian’s eye to the waist of Nicky’s breeches where the hair thickened and darkened. The garnet on his signet ring flashed as Nicky’s hands moved to those buttons.

Ian shut his eyes. “No.”

“No?” The amusement in Nicky’s voice had Ian looking again, forgetting what imminent danger had prompted his action. But Nicky only bent to remove his shoes and stockings, gifting Ian with the sight of the firm curve of his backside under the tight kerseymere breeches.

Nicky brought his hands to rest above his hips, fingers disappearing under the waistband. “Is it truly no or is that what the good soldier, the dutiful second son, feels compelled to say?”

Ian’s throat burned as it tightened, but he could not look away.

“Whom do you seek to save with your denial, me or you?” Nicky persisted. He stepped closer, but made no move to touch Ian. “Why are we to be denied pleasure when you must know how precious and brief life is?”

“The risk of—”

“You threw yourself against a wall of French rifles in service to your father’s idea of honor. Can you not permit yourself something your own honor knows is right? How can it be wrong when we both desire it?” Nicky shoved his breeches down and stepped free, the proof of his desire standing proud and hard.

As swiftly as snow falling off a steep roof, Ian's body dropped into a pit of raw need. He made a last effort to find any handhold which might keep him from the abyss.

"I do want..." *you* "...this, but only what we did before. We cannot, I will not..." He tried making a gesture to communicate the specific deed.

"Bugger me?" Nicky grinned. "Fuck me?"

Despite Ian's shock, the coarseness of Nicky's words brought a faster beat of blood to Ian's prick. That unabated grin suggested Nicky knew damned well what effect he had wrought. His next step brought Nicky close enough to try the truth with his hand. Fingers traced the outline of Ian's prick beneath a layer of wool and linen, a light pressure that offered nothing beyond exquisite torment. A quick hard rub against the crown, dragging the linen across the damp skin until heat pulsed from the tip, the touch as unerringly accurate as Ian's own.

Pleasure stole his breath as surely as a fist to the stomach. Sucking the air through his teeth, he reached a hand to Nicky's shoulder, hips tipping into the caress.

Nicky leaned forward until his breath moved against Ian's ear. "While I find your concern utterly charming, what makes you believe you could take my arse if I didn't allow it?"

Ignoring the wail of protest from his prick and balls, Ian transferred his grasp to Nicky's wrist to still the motion of his palm. "I am well aware that many now consider me less a man, but with all your protestations, I would have thought—"

Nicky laughed. "Christ, Ian, try not to be more of an ass than the good Lord intended you to be. You couldn't best me even when you had four inches and two-stone advantage."

"I've never had two stones on you, you country-fed beast." The retort came unbidden to his lips, their long habit of verbal sparring impossible to amend.

"By God, how I've missed you." Nicky chuckled and yanked Ian's cravat free.

Ian felt his own lips curve in answer. There had always been so much laughter between them. For years, that absence cut as keenly as the loss of Nicky's touch.

Shoving away bolster and counterpane, Nicky flung himself onto the bed. "Now. Kindly divest yourself of those clothes and get up here before I am forced to seek other amusements."

Nicky arranged himself in a gloriously naked display, familiar laugh and cornflower-blue eyes at odds with the strangeness of a body more heavily muscled, more thickly pelted, but no less enthralling than the one that had filled Ian's dreams as he slept in tents on the edges of battlefields. Longing clawed deeper hollows than all those years of denial, until again Ian was deprived of sufficient breath.

Such was the assault wrought on his senses by Nicky's sprawl across the mattress that Ian had stripped away waistcoat and shirt and unfastened his breeches before Nicky's last words attached themselves to a meaning. The haze of lust clouding Ian's mind took on a red veil of anger.

"Other amusements?"

Nicky sighed and leaned forward, taking Ian by the arm. "I swear to provide you with a detailed history of the past five years in writing and affix the bloody Carleigh seal to my testimony. But if I don't have you right now, one of us will end up dead."

Nicky pulled him with a force too gentle to be compelling, but it was easier by far to let Nicky drag Ian onto the bed than to make the decision himself.

Nicky rolled, trapping Ian beneath, the press of hard warm skin such a shock Ian had to close his eyes against the sensation. When he opened them, there was Nicky, the achingly familiar blue eyes and full lips all Ian could hope of heaven "Which of us?"

"Does it matter?" Nicky rocked against him.

Ian thought again of Aristophanes and Phaedrus and their tales of separated lovers. Of Achilles' terrible grief for Patroclus. "No."

Nicky kissed the word from his mouth in a gentle press of lips, but Ian brought his hand up to tangle at last in those curls and pinned Nicky tight, an upward thrust of hips to feel the harder, wetter kiss of Nicky's cock on Ian's belly.

Nicky wrenched free and reared up, hands working to finish his duty as substitute valet, shoving away Ian's breeches and small clothes until at last their pricks slapped together. Ian thought he had exorcised it from his memory, but there was no forgetting that sensation, the silky heat of Nicky's cock against his.

Adding his spit to slick the way, Nicky held them together, rubbing the thick ridges against each other, washing the whole shaft with heat and pressure. Sweet enough to die from but not enough. God, not enough.

Don't talk to strangers, young man—especially the dead ones.

The Dark Farewell

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It's the Roaring Twenties. Skirts are short, crime is rampant and booze is in short supply. Prohibition has hit Little Egypt, where newspaperman David Flynn has come to do a follow-up story on the Herren Massacre. The massacre isn't the only news in town though. Spiritualist medium Julian Devereux claims to speak to the dead—and he charges a pretty penny for it.

Flynn knows a phoney when he sees one, and he's convinced Devereux is as fake as a cigar store Indian. But the reluctant attraction he feels for the deceptively soft, not-his-type Julian is as real as it gets.

Suddenly Julian begins to have authentic, bloodstained visions of a serial killer, and the cynical Mr. Flynn finds himself willing to defend Julian with not only his life, but his body.

Warning: This novella contains phony spiritualists, cynical newspapermen, labor disputes, illicit love affairs, high-calorie southern cooking, and more than fifty-percent humidity!

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Dark Farewell:

On the way back to the boarding house, Flynn stopped and bought an electric fan at the hardware store. He parked the Model T in the garage and carried the fan inside the house. In the parlor he could hear Mrs. Hoyt complaining; he didn't catch the words, but he knew the tone. Her daughter's voice murmured in acquiescence.

Farther down the hall, in the study where Gus had typed his Pulitzer prize-winning series of articles on the national coal strike in 1919, he could hear Dr. Pearson and Mr. Devereux bickering, but it sounded mostly amiable.

"David," Amy called.

Flynn glanced around. Amy was coming his way, a fair-haired, broad-shouldered man in tow. The man carried a suitcase in each hand. For one shocked instant, Flynn thought the man was Paul. Then reality reasserted itself. Aside from the light hair and the broad shoulders, the man didn't resemble Paul at all.

"David, this is Mr. Lee. He works for the Queen of Egypt Medical Supply Company and stays with us regularly." To Mr. Lee, she said, "Mr. Flynn is an old family friend."

Mr. Lee's tilted green eyes met Flynn's briefly. He looked away then his gaze returned and locked. He shifted his samples bag and offered his hand and a smile. David shifted the fan he was carrying and shook hands. He smiled back. Mr. Lee was blond and boyishly handsome.

"Casey."

"David."

“Well now, I’ll leave you two to get acquainted. Mrs. Greer helps me out in the kitchen, but her daughter is ill and she had to leave this morning.” Amy was already turning. “I need to get back to work.” She hurried away, and Flynn and Casey Lee were left to climb the stairs to the second level on their own.

“Medical supplies?” Flynn asked. He thought he recognized a fellow veteran. It was the way Casey held himself and the quick, no-nonsense way he’d sized Flynn up. During the war there hadn’t been time to waste.

Casey laughed. “Yep. I’m the original snake oil salesman. We sell everything from elixirs to remedies for warts and asthma.” He gave Flynn a sideways smile.

“You must travel around quite a bit.”

“I’m on the road pretty much all the time these days. I was in Marion yesterday.” He grimaced. “Day before that I was in Murphysboro.”

“Yes?”

“The whole of Jackson County is talking about those murders. People are pretty worked up.”

“I bet.”

They reached the second level. Casey said, “Amy lays a mighty fine table. I always eat too much. I was thinking of going out for a walk after supper.”

“I have the same problem,” Flynn said. “Maybe I’ll join you.”

Casey smiled. He turned left to go down the hall to his room and Flynn turned right.

He was still smiling as he opened the door to his room. The smile vanished at the sight of Julian Devereux lying on his bed.

Julian wore a sumptuous plum-colored dressing gown. At the squeak of the door hinges, he turned his head and looked up under his lashes, smiling with deliberate seduction. “I knew you were back.”

Flynn closed the door and leaned back against it. “What the hell are you doing in here?” he asked, keeping his voice down.

“Waiting for you.”

“You’re wasting your time.”

“It’s my time to waste.” Julian sat up, the purple robe falling open to reveal a sleek, honey-colored body. “Although I shouldn’t want to waste much more of it.”

Flynn shook his head in disbelief. “You must be insane.” He truly didn’t know what to make of this young maniac. He had neither scruples nor morals. Worse, he didn’t appear to have any commonsense. He added deliberately, “Or stupid.”

As it slowly sunk in on him that Flynn was serious, Julian’s smile faded, lost its confident curve. His bold gaze darkened with something like hurt. “Why would you say that? The moment I saw you I saw that you were just like me. That you wanted this too.”

“I’m *nothing* like you,” Flynn said with quiet intensity. “Now get out of my room.”

Julian continued to stare at him with those wide, dark eyes. "I'm not wrong." He spoke with a stubborn sort of dignity. It was almost disarming.

Flynn, however, had no intention of being disarmed. "You damned fool. You're going to get us both arrested. Or killed."

Julian shook his head. "People don't notice unless you bring attention to yourself. They see what they expect to see."

He said it quite seriously, and Flynn had to laugh. "*The Magnificent Belloc*? I hate to break it to you, Devereux, but you have a way of bringing attention to yourself." He tipped his head toward the doorway. "Get the hell out. I won't ask you nicely again."

"Fisticuffs would draw the attention you're trying to avoid," Julian pointed out, but he rose from the bed, straightening his dressing gown without haste. Flynn had to hand it to him; he wore his own skin with a panache most men only managed when fully and expensively clothed.

Flynn stepped away from the door, intending to open it. Instead, he found his arms full of Julian. He pressed his slender, taut body to Flynn's and wound his arms around Flynn's neck. Flynn could feel the other man's sizable erection poking through the silk of his dressing gown, and his own body automatically responded.

That was biology. It was pointless to argue with it. He tried, though, opening his mouth to blast Julian. The sound that escaped him was surprisingly without force, and then Julian's lips, soft and honey-sweet, touched Flynn's. It was a delicate kiss, skilful but subtle. The body in Flynn's arms felt slight and almost feminine, but the aggression, the hunger, was all male.

Flynn's own body tingled with uncomfortable awareness. It was all he could do not to respond to that kiss with a blaze of hunger. Instead, he grabbed Julian's wrists, forced his arms from about his neck, and thrust him away none too gently.

Julian staggered, but caught himself. He glared at Flynn. His chiseled nostrils actually flared.

"I don't understand you, David."

"I'm making it as clear as I can. I'm not interested."

"No one will know—"

"I'm not interested in *you*," Flynn cut in. "I don't even like you."

Julian considered this, blinking, puzzled. Flynn opened the door, glanced down the empty hallway. "The coast is clear. Go."

Face averted, Julian went without another word.

Flynn closed the door. He was tempted to lock it, but that would be ridiculous. He made room for the new fan on the dresser top, plugged it in and waited for the sparks to fly. But the fan came on smooth and quiet, the metal propellers flying fast enough to chop an unwary finger off, and a wonderful breeze washed through the warm room, erasing the faint spicy scent of Julian's cologne.



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