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*My True Love
Sent To Me*



*Charlie
Cochrane*

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Cambridge, December 1907

"I've just found out that Dr. Panesar has sent Nurse Hatfield the most beautiful bunch of red roses. Out of season as well. It must be love." Jonty Stewart had just returned from St. Bride's, fairly full of the joys of winter, and wearing one of Dr. Panesar's lovely scarlet buds in his buttonhole. Not that Orlando Coppersmith was likely to notice. He didn't seem to notice anything about Jonty at the moment.

"Hmphmhm," Orlando replied, immersed in a book.

Jonty eased himself into the chair the other side of the hearth from his lover. "Is that 'Hmphmhm' as in *I think she would have preferred white* or 'Hmphmhm' as in *what a lovely gesture*?"

"It was 'Hmphmhm' as in *he should have saved his money and bought a decent jacket*. His present one is threadbare at the elbows." Orlando promptly stuck his nose back in his book.

"Everyone seems to be receiving little love tokens at the moment," Jonty went on. "Miss Peters is getting a non-stop supply of chocolates from some chap down at St. Thomas's, who has declared undying love for her. She takes them down to the orphanage and watches the little tykes eat them, so they reach the intended recipients. Are you listening?"

"Yes. Chocolates. Thomas's. Tykes." Orlando never looked up.

"Time was when you used to bring me little doo-dads. Mint Lumps. Champagne..." Jonty's voice trailed off, a sign he hoped his lover would pick up that all was not well. But Orlando was preoccupied as usual.

"Hm? I believe I may have done. Yes."

"Oh to hell with it. *Believe you may have done?* Perhaps it was another lover then, Orlando, who sent me those trifles, and I've got the two of you confused." Jonty rose from his seat, in a marked manner. "I think I'll go to my study and contemplate the nature of the relationship between the sea captain and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*. Rather appropriate to the current situation, I think."

Poor, clueless Dr. Coppersmith. He'd recently come across a new theory from a chap at Oxford, which proposed amazing things to do with the binomial theorem. Orlando was sure it was wrong, but was struggling to find the means to disprove it. The problem had occupied his thoughts for several days and nights, encroaching into areas that should by right have been reserved for his Jonty alone. This distraction had come at exactly the wrong time, as Jonty was already feeling both a bit low and distinctly taken for granted. And to his eyes, this cold-shouldering was the last straw.

Two hours later, long after Jonty had fled for his study, Orlando had a revelation, pinpointed the error in the Oxford argument, and immediately prepared to return to the non-mathematical world. "Mint Lumps did you say, Jonty?" He looked up, wondered where his friend had gone, and then vaguely remembered the word

study being mentioned. He found an envelope addressed to him pinned to Jonty's door.

I shall be taking my meals in here or in St. Bride's and will be sleeping in my own bed, on my own for the foreseeable future. Orlando read the note with growing horror, each word making him more and more conscious of his recent self-absorption and lack of empathy. *I feel that I'm being both ignored and taken for granted, like some poor wife of fifteen years' standing whose husband has found a mistress. Put that in your slide rule and calculate it.*

Immediate action was required, and soon, if Orlando wasn't to remain alone and cold in his own bed all winter.



"And I don't understand why." Orlando was sitting in the drawing room of the Master's lodge with Miss Peters, who was dispensing tea and sympathy. He'd explained about the Oxford mathematician and the problem with his theory and Jonty's paddy, and the note. And how he'd tried to make amends by offering Jonty a treat; tickets for an excellent lecture on the subject of mathematical machines that he was certain should have delighted his lover. Orlando wasn't daft and realised his first idea for a present, a translation of one of Einstein's papers on light particles, wouldn't be any temptation. But Jonty had just turned up his nose at the suggestion of an evening out. And evenings *in* remained as unexciting as they had the last few days.

"You don't understand why he showed no interest in the difference engine? No sonnets in there, I suppose," Miss Peters commented. "Perhaps a little too serious for a first gesture of reconciliation. Have you thought of anything else that might break the ice?" She poured more tea, racking her brains as to how to knock some romantic sense into her guest's head.

"Well I did think of buying him something. Like a new fountain pen—the current one blots everywhere—or a nice leather bound notebook. Ryder and Amies have some new socks in stock, too. They're made from four ply lambs' wool and look particularly warm so I wondered..."

Miss Peters worked hard to keep her temper. His suggestions weren't the type of gifts to woo a poetic soul. "Can't you think of anything a little more...romantic?"

But it was plain that, for the moment at least, Orlando had nothing more evocative in his brain. Miss Peters took pity on him, plied him with more cake, and nodded in determination. "I have an idea, or at least the germ of one. It'll need a bit of ingenuity and patience but it might just work."

"It had better," Orlando muttered, and dutifully ate his cake.



Jonty arrived home from St. Bride's to find a little note from Orlando. He wasn't surprised; there had been a string of them the last few days. They'd been

puzzled, hurt, demanding, yet none of them had borne the requisite mix of contrition and romance. He was tempted to chuck this latest one right in the bin without reading it, but decided to give Orlando one last try. *Look in the pear tree* was certainly a novel and sufficiently intriguing message.

Jonty sauntered down the garden, stopping as frequently as possible to inspect anything green he could find on the way, so as not to appear too eager. In the tree was a small foil-wrapped object. Opening it with care, Jonty found a bird-shaped thing, made of chocolate, which intrigued him more than the note had. He grinned, broke off the beak, and downed the rest before returning to his study. It was a good start but not enough yet.

Orlando—who had been watching furtively from the window—was pleased to see his gift was at least nominally accepted. He wasn't anticipating an immediate thaw in relations, but there was time. Eleven more days.

The next morning, being Saturday, Orlando went into college, while his erstwhile lover lay abed; when Jonty rose, he found an envelope pushed under his bedroom door. Inside was a picture of them arm in arm, taken by Miss Peters on her very modern and highly efficient camera the previous summer. The note with it said, *She called us her little turtle doves when she took it and requested May I visit you in your study this afternoon? I merely wish to hold your hand for one minute precisely.*

Jonty crinkled his brow, puzzling over the note, but then smiled as the penny dropped. He took up paper and pen and produced a reply. *Two o'clock. One minute only.*

Orlando arrived as the clock finished its second stroke. He didn't speak, but simply perched quietly on the desk where Jonty was marking essays. Orlando took his hand, considered it, counted to sixty (not aloud, but Jonty could almost hear the cogs turning in his mind) then smiled at him, and went. Jonty was left feeling like time had turned back to that fatal first evening in Orlando's room at St. Bride's, the night they learned of the first murder. Despite the disagreeable associations of that night, he recalled fondly the first buds of mutual affection, from which their relationship had blossomed. Buds as full of potential as any of Dr. Panesar's.

On Sunday morning, Jonty returned from chapel, this time in expectation. If his guess was correct, then he should expect a gift along the lines of a French hen, although what it could be eluded his rational processes. It was beef for lunch, he knew, as he'd seen their housekeeper Mrs. Ward doing the batter for Yorkshire pudding. On his desk, he found three tins of pâté de foie gras, which was the best alternative to a French hen Miss Peters could come up with. Orlando had wanted to keep the idea for the sixth day, but beggars couldn't be choosers. The accompanying note with them said *Please will you lunch with me in the dining room. I won't bore you with departmental talk.*

And he didn't. They conversed hesitantly, even shyly, but all topics were of mutual interest—the doings of the fellows of St. Bride's, and of Forsythia Cottage's neighbours on the Madingley Road. As the meal came to its inevitable end Jonty was dismayed when Orlando rose, offered his apologies and said he had to go down to Apostles' College, where he and Matheson were investigating a case of possible collusion and cheating over the bridge table. He didn't anticipate being back this side of ten o'clock.

The tables had turned. Jonty was left disconcerted, with the annoying feeling that Orlando had bugged off just when *he* might be ready to resume normal relations.



On Monday afternoon, Jonty had just finished a consultation with one of his postgraduate students in his room at St. Bride's, when he became aware of footsteps and giggling on the stairs. A fierce rap on his door was followed by a nervous clearing of throats—he opened the door to find the master of the St. Bride's chapel choir and four of his best boy sopranos, who serenaded him with The Shepherd's Farewell from *L'enfance du Christ*. By the end, Jonty was moved to tears, and dispensed half-crowns all around, despite one honest little lad piping up that he "needn't bother as Dr. Coppersmith had sorted it all out already."

As soon as the singers had gone, Jonty donned his greatcoat and went in search of Orlando, but the man wasn't in any of the usual places where he went to ground. Jonty had an anxious wait, first in his room and then in his chair at dinner before he saw Orlando hurriedly come into Hall and give him that shy little smile that made Jonty's heart leap.

Coffee in the Senior Common Room was given short shrift, and their conversation was tentative and timid, as it had been when they were first courting. Jonty—even though he was insecure about their future, the barrage of presents, notes and the requests that did not quite make logical sense—was enjoying himself with Orlando once more.

"I have a bottle of port in my room here. Would you care for a nightcap before we go home?" Orlando offered. He wore the same expression as he had the night the Senior Common Room was invaded by women, and he and Jonty had to find refuge elsewhere.

"Just a small one," Jonty replied equably. Rising, they bade their goodnight to the other fellows who were attentive enough to notice. Their presence in the Senior Common Room was taken for granted, as was their being a couple, although purely a platonic one. Of everyone at St. Bride's, only Miss Peters knew the whole truth.

Orlando still kept a room at St. Bride's, in order to provide a suitable setting to torture the dunderheads. The fire burning brightly in the hearth indicated that tonight he was expecting company, although there were only the rather battered armchairs—in which he placed his victims—for he and Jonty to rest their bottoms in. The shabbiness didn't matter, however; it was warm and reasonably comfortable for them, especially when Orlando sat at Jonty's feet and rested his head against his friend's leg.

Jonty didn't need more invitation than this; he was being wooed and wooed well, and well-inclined to let bygones be bygones. He laid a hand on Orlando's head, caressing the dark curls, as he had when they were first involved, before Orlando had seemed to take it into his head that pointing to the bed and grunting was sufficient for him in the way of romance.

"Missed you." Orlando turned his face into the hand and gently kissed it.

"Missed you too. And this. Sharing a home is wonderful, but I yearn sometimes for the days when we just had those sets of rooms with the roaring fires and the little single beds," Jonty sighed.

"Times move on don't they? Yet not everything is entirely for the better." Orlando reached up and caressed his lover's throat. "I don't miss the beds, though—there was never any room for me in them once you set up residence."

"Twit." Jonty drew the hand touching his neck up to his lips to salute it. "I must express my thanks at the way you've gone about this. I've been delighted at all the little presents—it's been a long time since you were inclined to be so generous—and the notes with them. Shame I didn't hold out for the whole twelve days, but I truly couldn't." He slid onto the floor so that he would be on a level with his friend. "May I kiss you?"

Orlando grinned. "I've been waiting so long for you to say those words, or something like them. Of course you may." There was no need for words the next few minutes, the necessary equipment being put to better use. "And I'm glad you gave in now. Miss Peters and I were starting to run out of ideas."

"Miss Peters? I should have guessed that minx had got herself involved somehow. This whole thing—it wasn't her idea was it?"

"Only in part. She acted as a consultant." Orlando blushed at his slight distortion of the truth but was rewarded with several more tantalising kisses.

"I would have loved to see what she had in mind for nine maids a milking."

"Oh, that was easy—quantities of clotted cream with scones to lavish them on. It was the swans a swimming and the ladies dancing that were giving me headaches."

"Just as I suspected. And the Lords a leaping?" Jonty's counted off the days on his fingers, lips working through the list of presents in the song.

"Oh that was easy, we had one of the local Morris teams on standby. Might still get them to turn out, actually, and we can all watch them perform with a glass or two of hot punch in our hands."

"That sounds wonderful." Jonty considered for a moment, then gave a sly smile, sitting up and tipping his head towards the door. "Is it locked?"

"No, but that's easily remedied." Orlando grinned. "What did you have in mind that would need so much security?"

"Well, this carpet is so comfortable. And there are cushions on the chairs and..."

Orlando needed no further prompting, and produced the key to secure the lock. He turned out the lamps while he was about it— what better illumination could there be than the fire's glow? "Just one thing though," he scrambled through his pocket, "I had this ready for tomorrow, in case the waits didn't break through into your icy heart." He produced a handsome gold chain and placed it in Jonty's hand.

"It's lovely, such a fine colour, but I don't see what I'm to use it for."

"Keep it till the real first day of Christmas and then you'll find out. Just in time."

Orlando leaned over and kissed his friend once more. "My love for you will last more than twelve days or twelve years or even twelve decades. And if I ever take you for granted again, you have my permission to thrash me to within an inch of my life."

"Idiot. I think I may want you to take me for granted again if it has such marvellous consequences. Come now, we'd best be about things or Mrs. Ward will be calling the police to report us missing." Jonty drew his lover closer. "You're really the only gift I want."

"And would you like to know what present I want?" The hoarseness in Orlando's voice made explanation unnecessary. "It's been a long time since we shared a mattress."

"This floor won't be as soft as a mattress, even with the carpet. I hope your bony backside is up to it."

"Why mine? Why can't it be your feather bed of a bottom?"

"Please yourself." Jonty's voice lowered to a whisper, hardly louder than the crackling murmurs from the fire. "I mean it. Make it exactly as you please, my true love."

"Ah." Orlando loosened the buttons of his trousers then worked on his lover's, his other hand occupied with caressing Jonty's face. "Then, to carry on the theme, this piper will pipe and he'll be drumming your burly buttocks onto the mat."

It took two minutes for Jonty to stop laughing. "I'm not sure I've ever heard you talk so smuttily. You've become extraordinarily bold all of a sudden." Normally he would have inched down his lover's pants and trousers, caressing and stroking, drawing out the excitement. But this time, he tugged them down. "Let's get these wretched things off, then. They always get in the way—that's why nightshirts are so much more civilised." He wasn't being civilised now, impatient for the sensation of flesh pounding against flesh.

"Jonty." It was less a use of his lover's name in affection than a statement of possession, both the imminent physical and the permanent spiritual. They'd done this so often before, but now it felt fresh again, the audacity of making love in Orlando's rooms, in such haste, heightening the thrill.

"Take me now, Orlando. I'm not sure I can wait a moment longer," Jonty murmured.

There were no more words for a while, just the sighs and whispers of love and the groans of ecstatic and long-anticipated release.



The fire was burning low; they wouldn't build it up again. They'd soon be home, getting a wiggling from Mrs. Ward, enjoying a glass of wine, maybe utilising a comfy mattress for the benefit of a muscular if slightly bony backside.

"In keeping with the theme," Jonty said as he dressed, "we should celebrate our first Christmas in our own home in style. The twelve days and all that."

"If you're suggesting I demonstrate my true love once on the first day, twice on the second and so on, I should warn you I'll be in hospital with exhaustion by the seventh." Orlando carefully wiped his hands on a towel. He hoped his students never guessed why he kept a jug of water in his room.

"Another good idea gone begging, then." The final button was done up, the last shirttail tucked. "As long as we share some seasonal cheer, I'll be happy. And what's so funny?"

"For years you've called *it* 'doing our duty'. Now I'll have to call *it* 'sharing some cheer'." Orlando drew his lover close for a final kiss before they swathed themselves in wool and tweed against the cold Cambridge air. "Merry Christmas."

"You're a week early," Jonty objected.

"I don't care. I feel like a little boy who's just opened the best present in the world."

"Idiot." One last coal fell from the fire, the flames guttering, the darkness in the room deepening. "A merry Christmas to you, too."

About The Author

Charlie Cochrane 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.

Happily married, with a house full of daughters, Charlie tries to juggle writing with the rest of a busy life. She loves reading, theatre, good food and watching sport. Her ideal day would be a morning walking along a beach, an afternoon spent watching rugby and a church service in the evening.

Website: www.charliecochrane.co.uk

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