

Winter, 1935

Chapter One

Dot's panic was clear, even across the telephone. "I'm coming up to Oxford to stay until this is sorted," she said.

Alarmed, Catherine replied, "You know you can share my flat. But what about your job?" Her closest friend was usually far more level-headed.

"This is Sonny! He's the nearest thing I have to a brother. And he would never have stolen that bit of ceramic. I *know* him, Cat."

Catherine tried to remain patient with Dot. Heaven knew, her friend had been patient with her more times than she could number. "Well, you're right to be concerned. It's not just any bit of ceramic, Dot. It's a *Roman artifact*! And you didn't answer my question. Are you quitting your job?"

"No. Just taking a spot of leave. It's due me. And my cousin is frantic. I'll be up from London this afternoon. Have you got a tutorial or something?"

"I don't teach on Mondays, as it happens," Catherine told her.

"But you're knee-deep in research, aren't you? I promise I won't be a bother. I told Sonny I'd meet him in Oxford at 3:00. The Eagle and Child."

"I'll do my best to help you, Dot. Plan on me accompanying you."

"Are you certain you can spare the time? What about your dissertation?" her friend asked.

"I have three years to write it. My deadline is not exactly staring me in the face."

"We could really use your help. You're such a whiz at figuring things out," Dot said.

Catherine thought of her last two endeavors at “figuring things out.” They had both been murder cases. A robbery would be a different thing entirely. She looked at the stacks of notes she had been trying to organize. “I don’t know how much good I’ll be at this, but we’ll figure it out. I’ll meet you at the pub.”

Dread descended upon Catherine like a mantle as she rang off. She had met Sonny only one or two times at Dot’s home when she had been visiting during school holidays. He had struck her as cheerful, but also very intense. He had been in his late teens at the time, and even then, he had been fascinated by archaeology. Carrying his book on Carter’s Tutankhamun dig in Egypt into tea, he read them bits as he stuffed himself with scones.

Catherine would have to handle this matter carefully. Was it truly beyond possibility that Sonny *had* taken the tile? And, of course, she couldn’t let Dot know she would even consider it for a moment. *But what if he had taken it?*

Dot would never forgive her if she exposed her beloved cousin to a stint in prison for theft.

Her maid entered the sitting room. “Is Miss Dot coming up to Oxford?” Cherry asked.

“Yes. I must see if I can find a day bed or something for her. She’s planning on staying for a while.”

“Leave it to me,” said Cherry. “My brother will know of something. He’s always getting cast-off bits at the college.”

Catherine’s maid’s brother worked as a chef at Balliol College. Coincidentally, it was the same college that Garrison “Sonny” Nichols, Dot’s cousin, attended.

“Thank you,” said Catherine. “Once more, you show yourself to be a gem. We’ll have to get in some extra provisions, as well. I don’t think Dot will like living on buns and cheese.”

“Maybe I’ll get to do a spot of real cooking for a change!” said the maid.

Catherine repressed a shudder. Whenever Cherry tried one of her brother’s recipes, it never quite worked out.

“I thought Miss Dot had a job in London. Advertising isn’t it?”

“Her cousin looks like being accused of theft. He’s a student, so she’s coming up here to sort it out.”

The more Catherine thought about it, the more she hoped Sonny was incapable of such a thing. A Roman tile would have sent him over the moon. But driving him to theft? She would like to think he had too much integrity. But she didn’t know Dot’s uncle’s family well enough to be sure of their values. She didn’t know if they were strapped for cash. Wasn’t everyone these days? But wouldn’t stealing such a thing be a little like taking a newly recovered Renaissance statue of the Madonna? From what Catherine understood, the tile proved the presence of Romans as far west as Cornwall. Unheard of until now.

“Ooh,” said Cherry. “That doesn’t sound good. What’s he supposed to have taken?”

“He’s an archaeologist, and he’s been working on a project down in Cornwall. There’s an important artifact gone missing. Now, I must go clear some space for poor Dot in my wardrobe.”

“That’s my job,” objected the maid.

“I’ll need you to go to the market,” said Catherine. “Let’s make a list.”

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The winter day was wet, chilly, and gray. Even glorious Oxford looked grim and threatening in January. Still, she'd rather be here than anyplace else in England. The University was the anchor to her better self, her happiest self.

Instead of walking, Catherine took the bus to meet Dot and her cousin at the iconic Eagle and Child pub that afternoon. Scarcely filled at this hour, the hostelry was warm and welcoming with its wood paneling and cozy inglenooks. Dot waved at her from a high table in the back. The young man beside her had the same auburn hair as her friend, but where he was tall and lean, Dot was short and curvy.

She bounced down from her chair. "Cat, you remember Garrison Nichols, my cousin Sonny?"

Catherine shook his hand. "Vividly. He used to dig up the back garden when I was visiting. Sonny, I'm Catherine Tregowyn."

He had a firm grip. There were gray circles under eyes, and the spark was missing from them. "I remember you, too. Dot says you're topping at solving people puzzles. I could really use your help."

Catherine smiled at him. "I'll be happy to do what I can."

It was good to see Dot, who went to the bar to get Catherine a hot cider. It had been nearly a month since they had returned from their Christmas holiday in the South of France. Dot had been working all hours at her London job to make up for the days she had missed, and Catherine had been busy starting Hilary term with a crop of new students. It was easy for her to remember being in their shoes since it was barely three years in the past.

Sonny seemed to be a typical Oxford undergrad with his wrinkled, baggy trousers, shapeless pullover, and scholar's gown. His face, now drawn with tension, was pleasing rather than handsome.

"So, you're a Balliol man, Dot tells me," Catherine said to Sonny. "Studying classics and archaeology?"

"Right," the young man said. "And we've had the most tremendous stroke of luck. We're digging down in Cornwall. The dig's been going on for three years, so we're finding some good stuff. Mostly the Anglo-Saxon remains of what appears to be an ancient church or some kind of hall. That hasn't been terribly exciting, but now we're getting down to the foundations and coming across carved Roman bricks." He ran a hand through his auburn hair, causing it to stick up in front. Leaning forward on his elbows, he said, "Then a little lower down, we found an actual Roman tile. Now we think that the Saxons actually repurposed the remains of a Roman site. We don't believe it was initially a Roman church, but perhaps a public hall or even a bath.

"I was disappointed not to be able to go to France last summer to work on a Roman dig, but now we have one of our own."

"It sounds jolly exciting. Where in Cornwall?" asked Catherine. "I'm Cornish."

"On an estate outside of Lostwithiel. Do you know it? It's a small but historically significant little town. You take the train from Plymouth headed toward Penzance."

Catherine was startled. "But I know Lostwithiel well. I grew up near there."

Sonny's eyes warmed a bit. "I should have recognized the name—Tregowyn. Are you related to the baron?" Sonny asked. "It's his estate we're working on. The college has leased the property."

“Goodness! Yes, I’m his daughter,” Catherine said. Dot looked at her sharply. Her friend knew she rarely spoke of her family. It was a sore subject.

“I’ve met him. He’s very interested in the dig, and he came ‘round to see it often and look over our progress. Quiet gent. Always smoking his pipe.”

“They have a ruined castle and some spectacular medieval bridges in Lostwithiel from what I recall,” said Dot. “I’ve visited there with Cat to see them.”

“Yes, there are some rather lovely ruins,” said Sonny, “But no one at college outside my department has ever heard of the place.”

“This is big news if you’ve discovered a Roman presence,” said Catherine. “To my knowledge, no one has ever thought the Romans had much to do with Cornwall.”

“Yes. This discovery could be enormous,” said Sonny. “To archaeologists, at least.”

“I hope vandals haven’t been at those carved bricks,” Catherine said. “They must be worth a fortune.”

“The site is nailed up tight, and it’s only about a hundred yards from the house. The dig is shut down until February when it’s not quite so bitter out. That’s why it’s so disappointing that this bit has disappeared.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it?” invited Catherine. The young man seemed a loyal type. Why had suspicion fallen on him? “Dot says you’ve gotten into some trouble over it.”

He put his head in his hands for a moment, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. When he looked up, his face was bleak. “I’m the custodian of the artifacts. They’re kept in a vault located in the basement of the Balliol library. The don and dig supervisor, Sir Alfred Mandersfield-Scott, and I are the only ones with keys.”

That certainly looks bad.

“Ah! Could anyone else have copied them somehow?” asked Catherine.

“I don’t see how. I keep mine on me at all times. Except when I sleep, of course. I imagine Sir Alfred does the same.”

Dot intervened, “Sir Alfred is the one who’s made the accusation, right?”

“Right. It’s very troubling,” said Sonny.

“He’s probably trying to cover up his own carelessness,” said Dot. “I’ve met the man, remember? I didn’t take to him.”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Sonny. “At the department reception last September. He was a bit under the weather as I recall.”

“Dead drunk,” said Dot. “And you’ve told me he’s a lush.”

“Hmm,” said Catherine. “That’s certainly suspicious. Does anyone know how long the relic has been missing?”

“I took it out to show a visiting scholar from the Sorbonne two weeks ago today. Monday afternoon.”

Catherine thought this over. It was easy to understand Dot’s affection for Sonny. He was an affable young man, and he did seem genuinely smitten. “Tell me about this scholar.”

Dot’s cousin sipped his cider and gave the matter some thought. “His name is Dr. Benoit. He is a specialist in Roman ceramics. He spent some time examining it through a loupe. Did I mention it’s most probably a wall tile? I’ve spent a lot of time studying it, and the design is distinctly Mediterranean. Far too sophisticated for the Anglo-Saxons. Completely outside their frame of reference. The Saxons were a primitive lot, given over to functional surroundings rather than decorative. It’s a bit faded, of course, but you can clearly see an olive branch on the surface. It looks like it’s part of a border.”

“Fascinating,” said Dot. “But you must see the professor makes a good suspect, too.”

“Sir Alfred is banking on this to cap off his career. It’s more likely to have been one of us. The ‘group.’” He paused a moment, taking another sip and seeming to marshal his thoughts with some effort. “There are five of us that go about together. As a matter of fact, we meet here for drinks every weekday afternoon around five o’clock. Then there’s also the other professor on the dig—Flash.”

Catherine laughed. “Why Flash?”

Sonny leaned forward on his elbows and lowered his voice. “He dresses like a shabby fellow, but he wears this great, square-cut emerald on his hand along with an antique gold signet ring. He was at Carter’s dig in Egypt, where they found Tutankhamun in ’22. Properly, he’s called Professor Austin.”

Catherine thought it all a mighty change from her world of modern British poetry, specifically her dissertation research into the war poet Anthony Burke. Venturing out of her own academic concentration would undoubtedly make for a change. It was clear what she needed to do first. “I think we should meet this group of yours. What do you say, Dot?”

“Absolutely. But I’m famished. There’s time for some fish and chips before they descend on the pub, isn’t there?”