

Aftermath

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Chapter One

“Mr. Easterby. Mr. Easterby, sir!” The porter's voice cut through the cold morning as piercingly as the creak from the college gate had done. Early March, 1920 and spring seemed to be taking forever to arrive, as though it, too, still mourned for the flowers of manhood that had been trampled into the mud of Flanders Field.

Edward Easterby turned to see Cranmer College's newest porter waving something at him. “Can I help you, Mr. Marsh?” he enquired in his usual polite tone.

One of the few engaging qualities about this young student was the way he treated everyone—porters, scouts, shopkeepers—with the same degree of respect as he would do a fellow Oxford undergraduate. It made him, if not popular with them all, at least respected—something that wouldn't have naturally occurred given his generally brooding and anti-social nature.

“I believe that this is yours, sir.” Marsh held out an engraved silver cigarette case, handsomely made but not of the very highest quality. “Someone found it by the lodge.”

Easterby smiled, a genuine, happy smile, not like the ones he produced when he had to make an effort to entertain people. “Well it is and it isn't, Mr. Marsh. It belongs to my grandfather; our initials are the same. He must have dropped it when he was visiting yesterday. I'll take it and return it to him.”

The porter smiled, too, which unsettled Easterby. The college usually discouraged such familiarity but Marsh seemed determined to make a point. “I hope he hasn't missed it. I wouldn't like the gentleman to be without something so precious.” This was more forward than was acceptable in a college employee, and Easterby grimaced at the familiarity. He didn't appreciate this boldness and suspected the inhabitants of the porters' lodge had been gossiping about the meaning of the message engraved on the case, a seemingly insignificant phrase that was full of importance to the family. Easterby would make no allowance for Marsh being relatively new and not having had all the rough edges rubbed off him yet. Like many another place, Cranmer College had lost a number of its finest men—students, fellows, scouts and porters alike—during the harsh middle years of the decade, when first war and then disease had cut through their ranks. New men had come in as replacements and the college may not yet have put her stamp on all of them, but this was intolerable.

“I'm afraid that my grandfather wouldn't wish for his private property to be interfered with.” Easterby turned on his heels and left.

If he'd known what the porters usually said about him, he'd have been even more annoyed. *Seems like an overgrown boy* was one of the more generous opinions. *All fancy thoughts and no common sense* was another view, especially among those who'd served with similar men in the war.

The few women who were allowed into Cranmer saw things differently. They found Easterby rather handsome—he had melancholy eyes that seemed full of strange emotions and dark curls that never could be restrained by brush or macassar oil. He possessed a studious face, firmly masculine in its lines, and they were sure he worked hard at his studies.

Bit of a dreamer, though.

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It wouldn't have surprised anyone to find that Easterby certainly didn't possess the common sense he'd been born with, not enough to survive happily in the maelstrom that passed for undergraduate life in Cranmer. He couldn't even avoid getting totally plastered at the hands of his so-called friends.

If asked to tell the truth, Easterby would have said he'd never really possessed a close friend in his life. He had acquaintances with whom he would work through difficult problems or discuss esoteric theories, but he had no-one whom he'd allowed to get close, not even in his childhood days. Perhaps he was destined to be one of life's recluses, a man designed only for the cloister, whether it be in a monastery or an Oxford college. Or the madhouse.

When one of the young men on his staircase invited him for drinks in his set, he'd been surprised—less so when he saw that all the occupants of the staircase were there. He'd made his best efforts to indulge in small talk, but gradually folk had drifted away and he'd been left to contemplate the bookcase, alone again, as he often found himself. Somebody suggested moving on to the college bar, most of those present agreed, and Easterby was swept along by the human current, in the flow of what seemed to be a river of drunkenness.

One of those who'd egged him on began spiking his drinks at the bar with increasing amounts of alcohol. Easterby took them in all innocence, keeping—he'd thought—to a sensible quantity, unaware of the strength of the brew. By the time he realised what was going on, it was far too late to act. His head spun, the speech and sound around him was dull, his stomach churned and all he sought was fresh air. He wanted to be outside more than he'd ever wanted anything in the world.

Easterby instantly regretted he'd ever made such a wish once he hit the cold air. The universe spun like a mad thing and the reeling that came with it made his stomach contents rise up through his throat. He leant over in the quad, hoping to find some flower bed that might hide his disgrace, but all he found were a pair of well made shoes and those he retched over without delay.

Easterby wasn't sure if it was the shock of realizing what he'd done or just getting rid of what was distressing him, but he felt immediately more sober.

Wiping his mouth on his sleeve and beginning to mumble an apology, he looked up to see a face that filled him with shame. Hugo Lamont. He had spewed up over Hugo Lamont's shoes.

The man was a legend within the college. He was twice a rugby blue; maybe not the finest mind in the History department, but at least expected to pass all

his exams with flying colours. And he was as popular with his fellow undergraduates as Easterby was out of favour. What made it so annoying was the fact that he was nice with it, not some arrogant bastard who thought himself above the rest. They held Lamont up as a shining example of all that the students of Cranmer should aspire to, and he never seemed to take advantage of that fact. There had been plenty of times when Easterby had looked at the bloke and simply hated him.

There had been other times he'd looked at the bloke and wanted to strip all the clothes off his back.

"I'm so very sorry." Easterby couldn't look Lamont in the eye. They were already a world apart; they'd hardly had any contact in the five months that Easterby had been up, he being a humble, antisocial first year and hardly aspirant to Lamont's assured position in his second year. Indeed, it was almost as if someone had designed Lamont to be the man's direct opposite. Smiling where he was surly, an old Etonian to Easterby's middle class background and schooling; even their looks were a direct contrast of dark and light. Easterby was tall, slimly built and seemed a mass of chocolate brown and ebony tones. Hugo was red gold and piercing blue, a stocky heap of muscle. Gorgeous, with it.

There had been no reason for their paths to cross directly, up until now. Easterby had only seen this man from afar and admired with envy his easy manner and popularity; it was so unfair that when they did collide it should be in so embarrassing a manner. He mumbled an apology.

"Think you've had a touch too much, young man. If you can't handle it, you shouldn't take it." Lamont's eyes flickered like sparks arcing. "Suggest you take yourself back to your room before you cause any more damage." He turned on his rather stained heels, returning five minutes later in clean shoes and socks, only to find Easterby in the place he had left him, still standing and staring into vacancy.

"Are you ever going to move, or do you propose to puke on all the shoes that pass by?"

The rising anger in his voice made Easterby flinch. "I'm sorry." It was all he could say. He didn't just feel humiliated, he burned with self-reproach at having offended the only person he'd ever found attractive.

"You've said that already—do something about it now. Just go away and leave decent people to get on with their lives." Lamont stormed off, leaving Easterby alone—a stranger in a society he failed to understand. Only one thing he was sure of; he wanted to be Hugo Lamont and not himself.

But what was the point of wanting something when there was never any chance of getting it?

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Any man at Cranmer would have told you that Easterby and Lamont were direct opposites, but the two men had much more in common than anyone could have guessed.

A student of human nature might have concluded that Easterby disliked himself and that was part of the reason he cut himself off from the world, becoming immersed in his books and experiments, unwilling to expose his weaknesses to public view. Some of those who'd been just too young to enlist had a degree of self hatred, unhappy with the good fortune which had enabled them to survive while older brothers or friends had been hung on the barbed

wire like washing on a thorn bush. No one knew whether Easterby had lost anyone close or if he would have exhibited the same character irrespective of the Great War. None of them would have guessed that part of the problem was the unnatural—he'd always heard it said it was unnatural—desire he felt for other men.

A degree of self-hatred; no one said the same of Lamont. He was a popular bon vivant, the life and soul of plenty of parties, but it was true of him, also. He kept his self-repugnance hidden below a veneer of bonhomie and heartiness, a public face that smiled while his private one wept. No one guessed, given that he often had a girl on his arm, the root of *his* unease—no one saw the girls being given a peck on the cheek and sent off with their hopes dashed. Just like Easterby, Lamont fancied men, and they both burned with shame about it.

Lamont had known this startling fact from childhood, and no amount of self-persuasion as he'd grown up had moved him. In his first year at Cranmer, wet behind the ears and with no understanding of his own ignorance, he'd even been desperate enough to pick up a hostess from a London club and take her out in his car, the novelty of a ride in such a swanky motor greatly impressing her. His sole determination had been to seduce her, or at least pay her for the privilege of letting him do so. Lamont believed it might cure him, but every kiss they shared simply made him feel sick at the whole process. He had stopped her short, when things had hardly begun, thrust money into her hand and left her to find a cab and make her own way home. The cry that followed him up the street, *You some kind of a bleedin' Nancy boy, then?* had added to his misery.

He hadn't gone home. He'd gone to a different club, one he'd heard guarded mention of. Here he'd picked up a young man and driven out to somewhere secluded. Lamont had his money's worth this time—it was the first and last occasion he'd indulged in this particular pleasure, and he remembered it with very little joy but plenty of guilt. Afterwards he took the decision just to repress all his desires, to cultivate an image of cheerfulness and laughter, papering over the cracks of his unhappiness. And he'd succeeded, living an asexual life, disgusted with any desire for contact that he might feel. He particularly disgusted himself with the feelings he nurtured for the dark haired, first year chemistry student who'd appeared in the college the previous October.

Lamont had watched Easterby from the very first time he saw him at dinner in hall. He'd admired his dignity and bearing, his shyness and solemnity, and he'd wanted to kiss him, hold him and do the sort of disgraceful things that he'd done just the once in his car in a dark lane near Hampstead Heath. It had even made him begin to hate the man, a feeling that spilled out over the shoes incident much as Easterby's stomach contents had.

The man's an idiot Lamont had thought. *Just the sort of little toad that should never be allowed through the college gates. I know that the war affected us all, but why must Cranmer let its standards drop so very low?*

Ironically, he might have detested him even more if he'd known that Easterby felt exactly the same about his own sex, except that *he'd* never given in, never put his desires into any sort of practice. Lamont would have been mortified to know Easterby had been observing him at that same college dinner and had fallen for the shining crop of hair and the dizzy laugh wafting over the table from five places down—just too far to talk, just too close to ignore. That he'd

watched Lamont often since, but had been too shy to chat, didn't dare make any sort of advance, despised himself for even thinking such things. The last thing Hugo Lamont needed was a temptation that might let itself be given into.

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The morning after Easterby had ended up so slaughtered, the whole college was woken by great crashes of thunder and forks of lightning slashing through the sky. The noise drummed into Lamont's head and he couldn't return to his slumbers. He contented himself with a pot of tea, a novel and trying to forget about the day before. When the rain had subsided enough to let him venture out, he sauntered to the porters' lodge to look for his post. Marsh nodded to him, passing the time of day and regretting that the inclement weather had done the unforgivable thing of delaying the mail delivery. Despite that, a single letter was nestled in Lamont's pigeon hole. He took it back to his set, alight with curiosity.

Lamont opened the correspondence carefully—recognising neither the hand nor the style of paper. He lifted the envelope to his face and tried to detect if there was any faint hint of perfume or other odour. Defeated, he drew out the sheets and began to read. The immediate anger he felt when, as he always did, he looked at the signature first, dissolved as he read the words. They were stiff, proper, laden with regret and formality. He could imagine the younger man sitting and drawing every word out as if it were a recalcitrant tooth.

He guessed right. Easterby had indeed drafted and redrafted this letter so many times that his wastepaper basket had overflowed, his pen needed refilling time and again and his fingers had ended up a mass of black ink. Lamont was greatly touched by the strong emotion that seemed to pour out of the carefully chosen words. The letter began with profuse apologies—*I should have known better, not fit behaviour for a gentleman*—followed by gallantry—*I'd be pleased to pay for a replacement pair*. He smiled at this, well aware that Easterby couldn't have the foggiest idea of how much those brogues had cost. Then there was contrition—*I hope for forgiveness but I'd understand if this could not be found*—finally, hopelessness—*I'd understand if you wished to have no further communication. The matter of the new shoes can be negotiated by a go-between*.

Lamont put down the letter with a sigh. If it had been just about anyone else in the college, then he could have forgiven him easily enough, with a laugh and a drink. With Easterby, this seemed impossible. To approach the man, even in reply to this painful letter, would be inviting danger. Were they to be alone together, Lamont might find he couldn't control his emotions. He'd managed to do so before, in some fairly strained circumstances, with other people he'd found attractive, but the intense desire he felt for this young man, desire that was strangely ignited again by this letter, might be beyond his ability to keep in check.

His conscience pricked him; why should this Easterby have to pay for his, Lamont's, faults? Why, because of his own perverted nature, shouldn't they be able to resolve this matter like gentlemen? Easterby wouldn't ever find him attractive anyway. Lamont couldn't convince himself there'd be any chance of the other man returning his affection if he offered it, so it would be safe to invite him for tea and cakes at least. He considered the matter again, briefly,

but once he made his mind up he became precipitate. *Today—it should be today.* He found a stiff piece of card, drafted an invitation and delivered it to Easterby's pigeon hole. *All forgiven—tea and a scone at four o'clock should you wish to confirm this fact.*

He was absolutely amazed when on the stroke of four a tentative knock struck his door. He opened it to find a still shamefaced Easterby who seemed like he wanted to talk to a spot that lay beyond Lamont's right ear. "I hope I got the right time, I..."

Lamont stopped him in painful mid flow; he couldn't bear to listen to such an embarrassed introduction. "Come in, please. The kettle is boiling and it won't do to keep the brew waiting."

Easterby entered, all awkward corners and shyness. He perched on the edge of a chair and looked pained. "Your shoes, I've brought my cheque book..." he reached for his pocket.

"Oh, for goodness sake, there is absolutely no need. I managed to rescue the shoes, with help from my scout. There is no more to be said." Lamont busied himself with the rituals of tea making, trying not to look at Easterby's long, elegant fingers or his dark, feminine lashes. All the things that added to his allure. The man had turned himself out well, although his clothes had seen better days and Lamont knew he'd guessed correctly that a new pair of brogues would have made a severe strain on Easterby's bank balance. He'd expected that the gap in their social and financial standing would help him to keep his distance but it didn't—again and again his gaze drifted towards his visitor's handsome, shy face.

Lamont had put together a plan to get him through, to let him enjoy the time spent with this attractive young man without disgracing himself. In the first place he wouldn't use Christian names. He hadn't known the real name of the young man he had picked up in London.

They call me Domino, for obvious reasons. One nudge in the right direction and I'm flat on my stomach.

Lamont hadn't shared his own name at all, making the boy refer to him as "sir" throughout. It was cold and impersonal and while part of him had wanted the lack of involvement, the absolute anonymity, part of him had despised it. It kept reminding him that it had just been a sordid business transaction—no love or affection, not even friendship.

The second point was simple. He wouldn't let Easterby touch him, not even for a handshake. There had been plenty of touching in Lamont's car with Domino; he hadn't left a bit of that lad's body unexplored.

I don't mind what my gentlemen get up to—do whatever you like, sir.

But the whole thing had been curiously unmoving—fun, of course and he'd had a final burst of unbelievable pleasure, but the whole thing was just disappointing. Perhaps it was because any trust, any friendship, any love, had been missing, so Lamont found it empty of all meaning. He wasn't like other men seemed to be, he couldn't disconnect the physical sexual act from the mental experience accompanying it, and that created a stalemate. If he wouldn't let himself get close to someone—for fear of rejection, denouncement, violence—then he might never find the ultimate communion. The ultimate in pleasure.

So he and his visitor simply drank tea and talked. Easterby began to act less like a naughty boy called to the Headmaster's study to explain his conduct

and Lamont felt less like a lecherous satyr on the hunt for an innocent to debauch. They found some common ground—an interest in the stories about Sherlock Holmes, a fondness for stodgy traditional English puddings, an affection for the music of Gilbert and Sullivan. They even found things to laugh over in the exploits of an obnoxious physics student who'd come a cropper on the river in a crew of little ability but plenty of swagger. Easterby brought the laughter to a sudden end by leaping up, making a hurried apology and saying that he had to leave immediately. *Another engagement*, he pleaded, *so sorry*.

This proposed departure was so abrupt and unexpected it spurred Lamont into action. "But you'll come again? I was planning a picnic on Saturday—can't just take myself. Will you meet me here and we can go down to the river?"

"What time?" Easterby ventured, after a long pause in which he seemed to be mulling things over.

"One o'clock would be splendid." Lamont bit his lip, knowing the danger he was putting himself in. He'd held out well this afternoon; how would he fare on some secluded river bank?

"Then one o'clock it is." Easterby bowed slightly and left.

Lamont watched him go, fairly certain that the excuse had been a false one, not knowing why he'd been so rash as to extend the invitation to meet again. He went over to the still warm chair and ran his fingers along the back, where Easterby's head had at last rested while he'd been relaxed and laughing. He sat down in the same seat and entertained his old thoughts—joy combined with guilt and self loathing.

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Easterby almost ran to his room; there hadn't ever been another appointment of course, he just wanted to get out of a place in which he was feeling far too much at home. He needed to be away from company in which he was feeling uncharacteristically at ease. Separate from the temptation to touch another man.

He'd found the last half an hour to be one of the best of his life. He'd found someone he could talk to and who seemed to like talking to him, and quite unbelievably that person had been Hugo Lamont. But to have accepted an invitation to a picnic on the river—to be risking an intimately close encounter—he wasn't sure he was ready. Perhaps he'd never be ready.

Chapter Two

“Quails' eggs?” Easterby felt puzzled by the elegant little ovals, unsure whether he should eat them or merely admire them.

“Indeed, Mr. Easterby,” Lamont grinned. “I can be quite a glutton for them.” “Please, call me Edward, if that would be acceptable.” Edward was uncertain whether this was a touch too forward, but the champagne had put audacity into him that he hadn't felt since he'd first come up to Oxford. He'd never been invited to a picnic by the river in all those months, even when October had brought a splendid Indian summer and everyone else seemed to be making the most of the sunshine. He would never in a million years have expected being asked along by such a man as Hugo Lamont, who had his free choice of companions and would hardly be likely to choose an unpopular and introverted guest. But chosen he had and Edward was very grateful. He attempted a little smile.

“If I'm to call you Edward, then you must call me Hugo.” His host smiled, but Edward thought it was forced. “I absolutely insist. You can't be my guest and then not address me as my equal.”

Edward hesitated over the use of first names, happy to invite, reluctant to accept, but felt obliged to comply. “Hugo,” once he had used it, the name tasted as sweet as honey on his tongue, “I feel quite speechless at the spread you've produced for me. I've never seen half these things before, though I dare say I'd recognise the names.”

“You'll have heard of this.” Hugo dipped a little spoon into a small jar of tiny black pearls. He motioned for Edward to put out his hand and dabbed a sample of the stuff on his fingertip. “Caviar—try it.”

He did. He grimaced. “So that's what the stuff is like—seems an awful lot of fuss about nothing.”

Hugo lay back and roared with laughter. “Edward, you are such a breath of fresh air. So many people I know here are full of their own importance, want to show off about their knowledge or fine taste or exotic places they've been. But you are simply honest and decent and when I'm in your company, I don't feel that I have to make any sort of effort.” Except that he seemed to be making an effort not to touch Edward in any way. He'd kept his own fingers to the very end of the caviar-laden spoon.

Edward blushed. “You shouldn't speak like that. It's not proper.” He sounded like a parlour maid who had been given 'sauce' by a house guest, but his honour had been affronted. He fancied Hugo beyond all reckoning and was certain the man could never feel the same. Any sign that Hugo was being familiar would just raise his hopes unduly, and he didn't want to even acknowledge the possibility that it might occur.

“Oh, why ever not? It's the truth. There are very few people I just enjoy spending time with, and when they come along, I like to make it plain to them.”

Edward watched his new found friend smile and laugh, transfixed by his beauty—the red-gold hair that shimmered in the sunlight, the blue eyes that rivalled the sky for brilliance. He wondered what it would be like if Hugo let him touch that hair, how it would feel beneath his fingers, whether it would smell of lavender soap.

“Should we go and watch the cricket one day? I like nothing more than watching the lads getting themselves covered in grass stains. The sound of leather on willow, nothing like it.”

Edward nodded. “I agree with you entirely—an outing to a match would be delightful.” He smiled and fell quiet, unsure of where this conversation was going, apart from an invitation to watch sport. He knew he was enjoying this time with Hugo more than anything he’d experienced in Oxford. He yearned to spend as long as possible in the man’s company, he was just not ready to admit it to him, just in case he was answered with a rebuff. *Hugo is naturally kind*, he told himself, *he’s just being pleasant*. There was no deeper meaning and there was no point in getting his own hopes up.

He couldn’t have thought more intently if he were solving a chemistry puzzle. At some point he had to know whether he was simply tolerated or if there was more to the friendship of the glorious creature beside him. Except this wasn’t a matter of science; there was no yardstick to measure his conduct against, no previous encounter to be compared with. He was a total innocent, and while he despised himself for what he felt—*unnatural* didn’t begin to cover it—he felt drawn to Hugo like a moth to a flame or a child whose determination to approach the fire is only reinforced every time it’s told not to touch. But he wasn’t ready to touch just yet.

So they ate, they drank, they chatted and Edward found the afternoon wore on pleasantly enough.

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The plates were bare, the bottle of wine empty and the two young men on the river bank were too full to attempt another morsel. Hugo lay back on the mossy bank and stared at the blue sky. “Today has certainly turned unseasonably warm for March, Edward, but we won’t complain in case someone hears and does something to rectify it.” Hugo was at last comfortable about using his friend’s Christian name. He’d worried about it all morning, aware that they couldn’t continue with *Lamont* and *Easterby*, but knowing it would mean the first level of the defences that he’d constructed for that first meeting would be breached. There were other walls, other ditches and towers, but the curtain had been broken. He wasn’t sure if he was pleased or not; this was unknown territory.

He looked up. “Come here...no, right next to me so I can see both you and the sky at the same time.” It was as if he’d spoken his innermost thoughts and he was cross at himself for making so bold a suggestion. Words once spoken can’t be recalled and he shivered as his guest moved closer. Hugo had been very careful, when offering the caviar, not to allow even a cat’s whisker of contact. It had been his next line of defence, along with not mentioning anything personal or too close to the heart. If he could keep this as friendship, then he’d be fine—at least that’s what he kept telling himself.

It would have been terribly easy to simply reach up and draw a line down Edward’s spine. That would have been an undeniable invitation, a statement of intent. Yet Hugo still had no idea whether he wanted to go so far or whether he would want Edward to accept the invitation if he did. This situation was unique—for once in Hugo’s life desire and friendship had coincided. Perhaps this was even the budding of love, a precious bud that could easily be nipped by the frosts of a rejected pass. The risk of making a move and having it

turned down, of then losing a precious acquaintance, was far too great a one for him to take it lightly.

He'd been aware all afternoon that he was being scrutinised, in the same way that he'd been casting glances at his companion. Surely he couldn't expect Edward to be having the same fantasies that he was trying so hard not to indulge; fantasies about reaching out and touching another man? Hugo shivered at the thought that Edward wouldn't necessarily reject a pass. That could be even worse, being able to kiss Edward, to touch him. Would Hugo end up hating the man as much as he hated himself, just for letting him exercise his unnatural desires? Would a kiss ever be enough? Could they leave it there—wouldn't it logically end up with them moving towards a bed or the back seat of a car or any one of a dozen squalid places that his mind could run to? And then they would both loathe each other and curse themselves.

Hugo stared at the sky, stared at his friend's back, tried very hard not to look at him, failed and got angry with himself. Quite unexpectedly, Edward moved even closer, sitting so near that Hugo could feel the warmth of the man's body through his shirt. He realised he was being given a clear signal that he was liked—more than liked. It was beyond all his hopes and filled him with fear that he'd give in and disgrace himself. He could reach out and pull Edward to him—that's how it would start, and it would end in tears.

Very slowly, Edward leaned down and nestled against Hugo, laying his dark head on the man's chest. Hugo didn't reject the movement, although he felt himself become noticeably tenser and his breathing wasn't as relaxed as it had been. He relished the warmth created by muscle and flesh meeting and as he felt Edward tentatively nuzzle against the open buttons of his shirt, he enjoyed the way the hairs on his chest brushed against his friend's smooth cheeks. Guilty pleasures, all of them; Hugo felt as if he'd ceased breathing altogether, but still he didn't push Edward away.

"This is idyllic, Hugo, I wouldn't be anywhere else or doing any other thing at this time. You have no concept of how rare it is for me to find myself so content. Like being a child again."

Hugo couldn't speak. His second line of defence had come down and he had no idea of either what to do or what he really wanted. The whole situation was impossible. Slowly he put his arm around Edward's shoulders and held him lightly. All he could concentrate on was to keep his face, his lips, away from any part of this beautiful young man. It would be terribly easy to just move slightly, rest his chin on Edward's head, smell his hair, kiss his brow. There had been no tenderness like this with Domino, things had been wild and frenzied that night.

You seem like you're in a proper hurry, sir. I like to meet a gentleman that knows what he wants and sets his store by getting it.

Every time Hugo thought of what he'd said and done, he hated himself even more for having sullied himself so readily with an unknown man. Especially when he found it so hard to find intimacy with someone he knew and liked. They lay together, Edward trying hard to get closer and Hugo keeping him at a distance, until the unseasonably warm day started to cool and they had to leave the riverside and go back to college.

They parted at the porters' lodge, having barely said a word during their return. Edward had been too enraptured and Hugo too scared that he would invite his friend to meet again.

"Will you take coffee with me tomorrow after chapel? I can't produce a picnic like you managed today, but I pride myself on the quality of the coffee I make." Edward's eyes held such a pleading look, like a child desperate for another piece of cake, that all Hugo's resolve disappeared, like the heat had totally vanished from the day.

"I will. Most kind, Thank you." And not trusting himself to utter another word, Hugo turned and lugged the hamper and rug back to his room.

As the evening drew on, he was glad he'd had the foresight to fill a bottle to warm his bed, despite the turmoil his mind was in. It was going to be hard enough slipping into cold sheets, ready for a night of nothing but thinking, without being cold as well. That afternoon he'd broken all the rules he'd made. He'd called Edward by name, they'd touched and held each other close—and while they hadn't kissed, if they met again it was merely a matter of time.

If they met again. He suddenly decided that he should write Edward a note, push it under his door, say the afternoon had all been an awful mistake, call off the meeting for coffee and prevent any other occasion of meeting. He should do just that. He couldn't.

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Clear skies that had been a blue banner all day, letting the sun warm the air, had left a cloudless night that threatened to be cold enough to even produce a sharp frost. Edward lay in bed unsleeping, shivering slightly as his body met the cold sheets, feeling a strange mixture of excitement and dread. Hugo had let him touch him, had allowed him to lie with his head on his chest, hadn't rejected or teased him. It was a gift beyond price. But Edward had no idea whether this was right or wrong. He couldn't tell one from the other any more, being too blinded by the brightness of a golden smile. He had been told often enough that to love another man in anything other than a fraternal way was immoral. He'd heard awful stories of what had gone on between some officers and their batmen in the trenches, when the strain of conflict had led to what the tellers of the tales referred to as *sins almost beyond forgiveness*.

This had always puzzled him. Edward knew they were always told in chapel to value loving kindness above all other virtues, and he'd naturally concluded this meant that any unnatural affection between men had to be full of cruelty and animal lust, emotions that soiled and marred any spark of true love. But he'd felt no such thing that afternoon with Hugo—just a tender affection for each other, a delight in their mutual company and a need for gentle contact. Such things hardly seemed sinful.

He couldn't stop thinking about the day ahead. They would meet again and who could tell what joys the meeting would bring. Perhaps a kiss? He couldn't tell whether that would feel as wonderful as lying in Hugo's arms had done. He'd no experience of kissing, and the thought of it both intrigued and disturbed him. And after making such intimate contact, would he feel as confused as he felt now? His thoughts churned full of Hugo Lamont until he fell into a fitful sleep and then the man invaded his dreams as well.

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Edward opened the door to his friend's knock, wearing the broadest smile that Hugo had ever seen displayed on his handsome face. In the room there was

coffee waiting, with little biscuits and cakes which looked like Edward had arranged and rearranged fifty times for perfection of display. Hugo took a seat, picked up his cup and a tiny sweetmeat, but said very little. The careless conversation of their first meetings had dissipated, leaving a hollow awkwardness that came mainly from the older man this time, not the younger. Edward looked like he could stand the tension no longer. "You don't want to be here, do you? You want to say this is all an awful mistake; that we should never meet again. I know what I did yesterday stepped outside the bounds of decency. I'm sorry, I've made a terrible error." Tears began to well in his eyes and he wiped them on his sleeve like a little boy.

Hugo could have borne shouting, he'd half expected insults or argument, but to see his friend cry unmanned him completely. The sight of such a striking face wracked by pain and tears was overwhelming. "No, no. It's not like that at all." He left his chair, moved across to Edward, took the man's face in his hands, let the last walls of defence go down. He gently kissed Edward's brow again and again, working down his face, cheeks. The skin felt softer than he'd expected when he'd only kissed it in his imagination. "I didn't mind a bit what happened yesterday, but you don't understand what all this is about, truly." He had reached his friend's lips and their mouths met.

The intimacy of the act shattered them both. Moist, soft, tender, frightened lips meeting for a fleeting moment and then again for a longer congress. Neither had ever known so profound an act. The sweet taste of their mouths, the darting tongues that pushed against lips and made them lose all ability to think clearly. Hugo had done this just the once before, kissing that nameless boy in the back of a car, but kissing Edward was more stimulating, more thrilling, than anything he had done with Domino. Now he was close to someone for whom he had great affection mingled with desire, and now he was more frightened than words could possibly describe.

Hugo pulled away from the by now frenzied kissing, holding Edward's face between his hands and breathing hard. "You have no idea where this might lead. I swear I didn't hear a word of the sermon in chapel this morning. I just spent the whole time praying not to be led into temptation this day, and in your room temptation comes in droves. If I kiss you again, I'll want to touch you, and if I touch you, I'll want to take you to my bed. Do you understand that? Do you understand what would happen there? And afterwards there wouldn't be any happiness left, just hatred of each other and what we let happen here. I don't ever want to hate you, Edward." Hugo shook with emotion.

"But couldn't we stay with this?" Edward's fingers traced the lines of his friend's mouth—Hugo shut his eyes and breathed in the smells of coffee and cake that arose from those hands. "I'd be content with kisses, with lying in your arms."

"You might be, but I can't trust myself, Edward. Not to stop at just a kiss."

"Then what are we to do?" Edward's fingers left Hugo's mouth, moved down over chin and neck, rested over his heart. "I can't lose you, not now."

Hugo shook his head, ruefully. "Could you be content with just my friendship? Would you come to that cricket match and just drink champagne and talk with me? If all kissing were forbidden, would you still want not to lose me?"

Edward thought for a long while, his face etched with pain and worry and looking ten years older than it had by the river. "If the choice was that or not to

have you at all, I would settle for it.” He tightened his grip on Hugo’s jacket, as if he would never let it go.

“And would you still be saying that in a year’s time? In five years?” He lightly caressed Edward’s hand, trying to memorise how it felt, in case he was never able to repeat the experience.

Edward moved his hand up from Hugo’s chest, found his face again and looked into his eyes for what seemed an eternity. “I don’t know, but then I can’t predict whether in a year’s time we would still even like each other. Maybe by then we’ll have ceased all contact, or perhaps you might even be in my bed and happy with it. I’ve only known you for a few days Hugo, that’s all, and if it takes another year to reach another kiss, then so be it. I’ve waited all my life, I have patience enough.”

Edward smiled, a real smile this time, a surge of relief filling his heart. “You might need all that patience. I have no idea when or even if I’ll lose these feelings.”

Edward took his hand, squeezed it gently, let it fall. “All I ask is to have the chance of being with you when you do.” They sat together, hardly touching and didn’t speak again until the college clock struck one, although all thoughts of lunch had flown away. Hugo took his leave—he really did have work to do—with a fond ruffle of Edward’s dark locks and a promise to meet at Hall that evening.

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Edward closed the door behind him, then rested his brow against the cool wood, pretending it was resting against Hugo’s head. At last he understood. His family bred dogs and he’d known all the mechanics of the breeding process since he was a lad, but the whining of the bitches in heat, the near uncontrollable behaviour of the dogs who came to serve them, had been an absolute mystery. Now he knew what it all meant. He burned with desire for Hugo, and it was too cruel, to have found such a fondness within his grasp and then have it snatched away. He’d have to wait what seemed an age until the man would let him come near again. Assuming he was ever given another chance.

Chapter Three

The Easter vacation was looming on the horizon, horribly near for Edward, who preferred even his lonely life in college to the tense and repressive atmosphere of home. He met Hugo every day between the time they'd sat down to coffee, cakes and guilty kisses, and the end of the Easter term. Sometimes they walked, or sat together in hall—it was just friendship on the surface, but all the time the undercurrent of attraction wouldn't go away. On the last but one day of term, Edward stood in Hugo's rooms, watching the man pack, desperately keeping his hands pinned behind his back so he couldn't reach out and touch him. "I suppose you'll be having a big family gathering to welcome you home?"

"I guess so." Hugo didn't look up from his packing. Edward wondered why he should look so uncomfortable; he hoped it was at the thought of their being apart for weeks on end. "I dare say all the family will turn up in Hampshire at some point, they usually do, although it won't be as mad as when I was a boy. Not so many Lamonts now—what the war didn't take, the flu did, but Mama will make sure we keep up the traditional family festivities."

Edward always felt jealous of Hugo's family—not just because they had first claim on him. "I don't suppose we'll be particularly festive, we've never been great ones for partying." He swallowed hard. "I'm dreading going home, really."

Hugo put down a book he was putting in the box and looked straight at his friend for the first time that morning. "I'm sorry, truly. If I could do anything..." He tailed off. There was no point in even beginning the conversation. "You'll write?"

"I will." Edward felt the tears welling, turned on his heels and returned to his own rooms, where he started drafting what would be the first letter.

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It arrived in Hampshire only a couple of days into the break, a very stiff and proper letter full of formality, but awash, to Hugo's eyes, with a million hidden meanings. He pored over it time and again, wondering whether *last term was a very interesting and instructive one* referred simply to the chemistry lectures Edward had sat through or if *I look forward very much to my return to Cranmer* meant that he was as desperate as Hugo was for them to meet again.

Hugo wished he'd had the nerve to ask Edward to come and visit, but he didn't have the moral courage for it yet. His mother would have been delighted that one of his friends was paying them a call as her son rarely invited any of his acquaintances home. But it wasn't any inconvenience to his parents which was the important issue; it was the temptation his hands and lips would be feeling that was crucial. Having Edward Easterby half way across the college, sleeping in his little bed, breathing softly into the night, was a clear and present danger. Having the same man three doors away, down a carpeted

and quiet corridor, in a large and warm guest bed, would have been the height of peril.

His letter of reply was slightly less cautious, although still within the strictest bounds of decency, and the to and froing of letters continued to the brink of their return to college and the chance of saying aloud what they'd only been able to write for the previous month. By the time the last letter appeared at Edward's breakfast table, Hugo's style of writing had become like his conversation that day by the river—light and full of laughter, warm and generous, speaking of a love that was burgeoning without ever using the word itself. Whatever Lamont had said over coffee and cakes, the day he had both awakened Edward's soul and almost broken his heart, the words he used on paper told a very different tale. Perhaps their separation was making the man's heart grow fonder, as the old saying had it.

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"Mr. Easterby. Mr. Easterby, sir!" Edward turned around, half expecting to see Marsh again, only to see Hugo, who was grinning to himself at his impersonation of the porter's fierce voice.

"Hugo! Did you have a good Easter?" Edward resisted the temptation to embrace his friend, settling for a handshake.

"We did indeed."

Edward noted the "we" and felt a pang of jealousy at the other man's obvious delight at time spent with his nearest and dearest. "You look well."

"Did you expect me to be a mass of spots or something, like my poor nephew with German measles?" Hugo cuffed his friend's arm. "And you look as if the break has done you the power of good."

It was a lie. Edward knew that. He was paler than he'd been, as if he'd hardly ventured out the last four weeks and when he caught himself in the mirror, a tired face looked out. "It did," Edward lied in return, "but I'm pleased to be back here. More than pleased." He held Hugo's eye for a just a moment too long, then immediately regretted it. It had been so very easy to write long letters that were filled with hidden meaning, spending happy hours in his bedroom carefully constructing them line by line, filling each word and phrase with veiled allusions. It had been an intellectual as well as a romantic exercise, satisfying on many levels. And it had been safe. With seventy miles between them, he couldn't lead Hugo astray, there could be no touches to regret, no kisses to feel guilty about.

Now a yard of courtyard separated them and the danger of the situation became clear again. Edward had made extravagant promises to Hugo in good faith—*I'll wait a year for another kiss*—like he was some poor hero in a storybook, and these had all been easy to keep during the back end of the previous term. Now a combination of separation and correspondence had made both hearts grow fonder and they couldn't bear the thought of being no more than friends. The hero's promise seemed like some miraculous quest now, hardly to be attempted, let alone achievable.

"Will you be in Hall later?" Hugo broke the awkward silence with a stupid question. Of course every member of Cranmer would be expected to come to Hall tonight unless he was in the sick bay. The Warden of Cranmer would be addressing the college and would as usual be reflecting on the sacrifices made by the students of past years, a favourite theme and one which had become increasingly poignant in the last few years.

“Indeed. Would you...?” Edward left the question unfinished, suddenly unsure of his words, wanting simply to say *sit next to me* but feeling too shy to utter the phrase.

“Join you at table?” Hugo seemed to be struggling to wrest his words out. “I would. If the Warden is going to wax lyrical, I would appreciate your comments on his speech afterwards.”

Edward looked keenly at his friend, as if he was expecting some sign that Hugo was making fun of him, but the remark seemed genuine enough.

“Perhaps we could have a drink beforehand? I have a bottle or two in my room.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t. Time’s on short commons today. We’ll meet at dinner.” He held out his hand for it to be shaken, to agree the arrangements, turned and departed, leaving Edward wondering whether he’d ever have to open the bottle of sherry and port he’d lugged up to his rooms. He heaved a huge sigh and set off for his desk and a book about inorganic chemistry he would find comfort in until dinner time.

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Hugo almost ran back to his rooms, a great gobbet of guilt stuck in his throat. It was plain that the time Edward had spent with his family hadn’t benefited him. He’d have been far better off spending the holiday, or at least part of it, in Hampshire. He cursed, again, the moral cowardice that wrapped him up in such chains of guilt and fear that he couldn’t have offered this friend some simple hospitality. And now he couldn’t even accept an invitation to a drink because it brought such danger. They hadn’t been alone in a private place together, after dark, since they’d kissed, and Hugo didn’t feel confident enough in his own powers of self-control to risk it now.

He knew Edward would have seen his blatant lie about lack of time for what it was and suspected he would guess the reason behind it. It was all a bloody mess and if he had to be at hall then perhaps the best he could do was to avoid his friend entirely.

When the time came he dressed for dinner and reluctantly wandered over to hall, where the Warden of Cranmer was preparing to speak. Doctor Phillip De Banzie was a handsome man, erect, silver haired and with a patrician air. His students admired and feared him in equal measure, as did the members of his Senior Common Room. He began each term by addressing the entire college after dinner, and the theme, whatever its nominal title, always veered in the direction of sacrifice. The recent events in Europe had added enormously to his scope for elaborating on this. He had good right: he’d lost a nephew at Ypres and a young cousin a mile further along the line. For him the crushing of the flower of English manhood was a real and present tragedy.

Hugo and Edward sat side by side, not intentionally, their having ended up among a crowd of Hugo’s friends who had swept them into hall and given them no choice of seat. They listened intently to the head of their college, even though they had heard much the same stuff before.

De Banzie mentioned those who had sacrificed their social life in the pursuit of pure academic excellence, *giving up the chance of wife and family so they could make great strides in medical or scientific research that would benefit many people*. The Warden then turned to men who had given their lives in many a conflict down the years *so that England could remain free and unsullied from the foreign touch. Cranmer men have always done their duty—*

they sailed with Collingwood's squadron into the French line at Trafalgar one hundred and twenty years ago and they were trodden into the mud of Picardy within the last few.

Suddenly a new theme emerged, one Hugo had heard in his first year but that first year students like Edward had yet to encounter. It concerned the sacrifice of desire and self-will, the sublimation of the cravings of the flesh in order to allow for the perfection of study or the living of a perfect life. Of course, the main target of these barbed words was the small number of undergraduates who were heavy drinkers or clients of the painted ladies of Oxford and who were on a final warning as to their conduct. But Hugo felt them pierce him to the soul, as if De Banzie had a telescope which could peer into the heart of a man and pinpoint all the sinful inclinations.

He sneaked a sidelong glance at Edward, but the man's face told nothing. Perhaps he felt the words as keenly as Hugo did but could hide his emotions more successfully. Perhaps the only thing they meant to him was that he mustn't overindulge in port or loose women if he wished to graduate with a shining first. Hugo couldn't even begin to guess which of his guesses was nearer the truth.

The speech ended, the listeners all applauded, and the fellows of the college took their leave to enjoy port and fruit in their common room. Edward turned, a hopeful look on his handsome face. "Will you take a glass of port with me, Hugo? I can't offer you sweetmeats such as our betters no doubt will be enjoying," there was an unfamiliar air of light-heartedness in the man's voice, "but I think the vintage is acceptable. Dr. De Banzie would have been proud of the sacrifices I made to obtain it."

Hugo stammered, for once entirely uncertain in front of his peers. It should have been the easiest thing to say either *yes* or *no*, the sort of social decision that was taken every day, but now he was paralyzed by his guilt. His desperate longing to see Edward again, the worm which had eaten at him all the holidays and been communicated in every line of his letters, was counteracted by the harsh words the Warden had spoken—*set not your desires above the demands of your college*—and the lingering disgust he felt at his own nature.

One of his more hearty rowing friends took the decision out of his hands, slapping him on the back with a vigorous, "See you tomorrow, then, Hugo. We're back off to Alistair's set for a game of bridge. I know that pastime bores you rigid," and then leaving the man, still dumbstruck, alongside Edward. "Is that a yes then?" It seemed like the wine and candlelight had made Edward bolder.

Hugo, tortured on the rack of his own indecision, merely shook his head, looked at his friend with an entirely hopeless expression, turned and made his way out into the dark quad.

"Hugo!" Edward's deep voice split the still sharp air of the April evening. Hugo didn't turn, nor was he steering a course for his own rooms. Edward kept up a pursuit, eventually abandoning words and grabbing his friend's arm. "I only asked you to come and take a glass with me. Can't we do that, like any two civilised human beings?"

Hugo turned, hot tears welling in his eyes. "But we're not civilised human beings, are we? I told you before that a lost legion of temptations lies in your

room and I haven't the armour to fight any of them. Don't tempt me, Edward. Please."

Edward looked stunned. "I never meant to tempt you. I..."

Hugo laid a hand on his friend's arm, equally quickly removing it. "I know, you're innocence itself, honestly. But can't you see that I'm burning?"

"But your letters...I thought that you were perhaps warming to the thought of being *close friends*. There was so very much affection in each line. Or so I thought. Perhaps I simply imagined it all—wishful thinking on my part again." Edward turned away, gulping as though swallowed pride had stuck in his craw.

"Letters were safe, Edward. It was easy to pour myself into them, and like a fool I succumbed to the temptation to do so. I could kiss your letters and not be tainted. Having the same feelings while being so close to you is agony." He reached out again, merely brushed the wool of his friend's jacket and shook his head sadly.

"Will you meet me tomorrow, then?" Edward's voice was full of defeat and sadness. "Not in my room if you can't bear it. At a café or in the bar. Anywhere. I need to talk to you." He raised his hand, let it stop within a hair's breadth of Hugo's face. "I've missed you so much."

Hugo nodded. He didn't dare say anything—his treacherous tongue would betray him. He gently grazed his own hand along Edward's, resisting clasping the fingers.

"At *The Bath Bun*, then? At eleven?" It was unlike Edward to be so forceful. Even with such a close friend.

Hugo nodded again, shook Edward's hand and made off for his rooms, mind whirring and confused.

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Edward half expected Hugo not to come. He'd been having second thoughts himself, tossing and turning in his bed, mind full of guilt—not for his feelings for Hugo, he believed they were above reproach—but for the obvious strains their affection was putting on his friend. He'd gone through in his mind every conversation they'd ever had but the more he analyzed, the more he was puzzled; this wasn't some compound that would give up its secrets to solvent or litmus paper. All he could really make out was that Hugo felt shame at being attracted to another man, that was understood, but there was something else, something deeper and more painful that he couldn't even guess at. Something that was eating into Hugo's heart like a worm in an apple and making the centre rotten.

But Hugo did come to *The Bath Bun* that next morning. On the dot of eleven he appeared at the café door, gave Edward a sheepish smile and made his way to the table where he ordered coffee and cakes.

"I was afraid..."

"That I wouldn't come?" Hugo grinned, obviously not fully at ease. "I couldn't be so rude. Again." He looked Easterby in the eye for the first time since before the Warden had started speaking the night before. "I'm sorry about last evening. I feel you deserve a full explanation, and I've screwed my courage to the sticking place in order to deliver it. Only not here."

Edward felt puzzled but nodded his agreement. They ate and drank in almost total silence, passing stilted pleasantries but unable to really communicate until they'd cleared the air between them. They'd paid their bill and walked

half the length of the street before Hugo began to speak in earnest. "Edward, you must think I am the most inconsistent of creatures and I apologise for it profusely. All that I told you in your room the day we..." he cast a quick glance around to ensure they wouldn't be overheard, "...kissed was true. I can't trust myself when I'm alone with you."

"We're alone now," Edward said and immediately regretted it.

"I mean in circumstances where we could do what we liked. I don't think that we could kiss here and now, walking along the main road." Hugo grinned and part of his old spark of mischief, sadly missing since last term, flared again.

"What you don't understand, because I've never told you, is the intense regret I feel about something I did. Something that happened before I met you." He suddenly found the pavement to be enormously interesting.

Edward couldn't begin to guess what thoughts were going through his friend's mind. "Do you want to tell me what it was? Is it so bad that I would turn on my heel and leave?"

Hugo looked up, then along his shoulder at his friend, his face a picture of uncertainty. "I honestly don't know. Tell me," He stopped, looked Edward uneasily in the eye, "was there ever anyone before me? Some lucky man or girl who stole your heart?"

The words seemed light, almost frivolous. But Edward recognised they hid a wealth of feeling. He drew a long breath. "There's never been anyone who's even looked at me twice, until you invited me to that picnic. So the answer is a resounding *no*."

"It's not the same for me, I'm afraid." If Hugo saw the brief look of distress that appeared on Edward's face and was quickly hidden, he didn't acknowledge it. "I know you're going to be disappointed in me, but we've got to thrash this out. I have to tell you the truth." He sighed. "I went to a club in London. Picked up this girl and took her out in my car."

"Girl..." Edward couldn't stop the word from escaping his lips, nor the obvious surprise in his voice.

Hugo seemed deliberately to ignore the remark, as if he'd started his confession now and was afraid any distraction might make it impossible to finish. "I wanted to prove to myself that I was normal, that I could feel and do as other men did. I suspect I hoped that if I tried *it* the accepted way, that it might make me want to carry on doing the same. Stop wanting to do *it* any other way." He looked by turns embarrassed or on the verge of laughter.

Even Edward saw the comical side; Hugo sounded like a convent girl trying to discuss intimate matters without ever letting a dirty word pass her lips. "And did it?" Edward's training in analytical chemistry might not have been a great preparation for life, but it had given him the skill of cutting through to the crux of any matter.

"I never found out. Trying to embrace her was bad enough. Have you ever tried to kiss anyone while the act made you feel physically sick?"

Edward shook his head. He'd known no such thing, but he thought again of their own first meeting, because of the association with being sick. Strange how the memory of that time was full of happiness for both of them, although it had been such an unpleasant experience.

"I had to get rid of her with a handful of cash and a lift to a cab rank. It wasn't something I would ever want to repeat." Hugo's cheeks burned as he spoke.

Edward waited for the story to continue, wondering what could have happened to make his friend so flushed. When they'd gone a good hundred yards and Hugo was still silent, he knew he had to speak. "So why do you feel guilty about that? You seemed to act like a gentleman, in the end."

"There's more to tell, Edward, I just needed to find the right words to make it appear less tawdry than it was. I know I behaved like a gentleman but it didn't stop her calling me *A bleedin' Nancy boy*. That was all too close to the truth. You see, I went off to another club straightaway afterwards. It wasn't the sort of place that respectable men, certainly those who wish to keep their reputations, visit." He cast a sideways glance at his friend. "I picked someone else up there—a young man, not yet twenty I'd have said. I took him out in my car, as well."

"What did he look like?" Edward kept his questions clinical. He was a man used to analysis, taking and sifting facts to form theories about them and he had to apply those skills now. It was the only way he could cope with such painful revelations.

Hugo considered the query. "He was pretty enough, although not really handsome like you, and I suspect that within a few years his looks will be long gone, especially if he keeps to his present way of living."

"What was his name?"

"I never knew. They called him Domino, because..." Hugo seemed reluctant to explain further and Edward guessed there was some dim-witted joke behind the name, "... of some stupid thing or other. That's what he wanted me to call him and so I did." They'd reached the road along to the river, so kept walking in the direction of the bridge.

"Where did you take him?" It was surprisingly easy just to ask simple questions, to ease the story along. Edward expected a candid answer and Hugo was obliging him.

"Out to the back of Hampstead Heath. You can see the lights of the city there but it feels like the deepest countryside to me. I used to go flying my kite on the Heath with my nanny. I think I'll never go there again."

"Was what happened there so bad? Why has it ruined the place for you forever?"

They'd reached the bridge and Hugo stopped to lean on the balustrade. "I think it's ruined everything." He looked down into the swiftly running water. "I wish that somehow this river would carry my sins away as easily as it takes the silt from the fields. Take them down to the sea and lose them."

"What on earth did you do?" Easterby was stunned at his friend's words. What could they have done, Hugo and this strange boy, to have left such a legacy of guilt? "Did you couple with him? Is that it?"

They stared down at the river again. Ducks were dabbling, their tails sticking up and looking ridiculous and a little grebe was diving into the fast running current and hunting for fish. This was all evidence that life was going on, even if their hearts had frozen in the telling of this tale.

Edward lightly touched his friend's arm, indicating that he'd stayed silent too long. "Tell me, Hugo. Please."

"I paid him to... I want to say *perform certain acts*, but that's just a euphemism and it's not fair to you to be less than honest. We had sex. There was no affection in it, not as you and I shared when we kissed. For him it was just a matter of making a profit, a handful of money earned to spend on who knows

what. It's the only time in my life I have done such...*things*, and I'm angry I did them there and with him. There are times I feel I never want to do anything like that again."

"Even if it were with someone you loved?"

Hugo rubbed his hand over his face. "It was pleasant, Edward, I can't deny it was the most exhilarating thing. To go the rest of my life and not know that ecstasy again would be hard. But I'd rather that than pile another burden of guilt on my back. What I did was wrong, and wanting to do it with you is wrong, too." He slapped his hands on the stone of the balustrade, not seeming to notice the sting the action must have caused his palms.

"Even if it wasn't about money? Even if you loved me and I loved you?"

"Edward, my dearest Edward." Hugo spoke as if addressing a child. "You're so wonderfully innocent, it's breathtaking. You sound as if you believe all those storybooks where love makes everything right."

"Perhaps it does..."

"What about guilt, though? What about remorse? I know you can't find them in your books on inorganic chemistry, but they're real and they consume you."

Hugo looked sidelong at his friend, who was still studying the Isis. "I've fallen in love with you, Edward; I knew it from the moment you laid your *precious head* on my *manly chest* or however the writers of romance would put it, that day by this same river. And I'm guessing, from the letters we exchanged and the flush on your cheeks now, that you're quite possibly in love with me. I'm not sure if that fact makes things better or fifty times worse."

Edward didn't know the answer to that, of course he didn't. Hugo had been right to say he'd no knowledge of feelings. He was in uncharted territory, and he wanted to be guided through it step by step. The only man who could do it was standing next to him. "You've still not answered my question. About love making all things right."

"I'm sorry. That's because I have no answer. I told you once that if we slept together, we would end up hating ourselves and each other. As I hate both that boy and myself for having used him. I simply can't see any other outcome. The ruin of a life, two lives, for the sake of a few minutes pleasure." Tears came welling up in Hugo's eyes. He wiped his face on his sleeve, like a schoolboy might, and for the first time Edward saw not the great Hugo Lamont of Cranmer College, but someone young, vulnerable and, as always, beyond adorable.

Edward laid his hand on Hugo's shoulder, not knowing any words he could share. He felt he should be making some wise pronouncement either to offer comfort or to persuade his friend that all his guilt and distaste was stupid, but he'd no idea what would work in either case. By accident he hit upon exactly what Hugo required; not gabbling words or advice, pious or otherwise, but a quiet companionship. All the comfort that Hugo needed, he found in that light touch upon his back; all the counsel that he sought was in the gentle breath playing upon his cheek.

After a moment or two, he looked up at Edward and smiled wanly as if he was broken in heart and spirit. "I know it's a simple choice, but it's one I can't make. Part of me says I should say farewell here and now, taking myself away from you and all the temptation you bring. And the other half says you're the thing I treasure most in all the world and I should just stay with you and

risk everything.” He shrugged and merely patted Edward’s back. “I’m sorry. It’s me. I’m hopeless and that’s all there is to it.”

Edward remembered all the college stories about Hugo that he’d heard when he first came up to Cranmer—his being held up as the shining example, the man that all other men should aspire to. Seeing him so distraught, so lacking in any confidence in his own powers, was untenable. “You’re not hopeless. Far from it.” He tried to catch Hugo’s eye. “It’ll be all right. It will.” The words sounded so vapid, so utterly useless, but somehow they sparked a slightly happier smile from his friend.

“Whoever would have thought, when you so kindly christened my shoes with the contents of your stomach, that you would have been the one giving me the pep talk a few months down the line? You’re too good to be wasting your time on an idiot like me. Go and find yourself some nice chap who’s pure and unsullied and would make love to you without a second thought. You can discover the pleasures of the flesh together.” Hugo laid his hand on Edward’s shoulder, trembling with emotion.

“You are a bloody idiot if you think that’s what I want. I’ve never felt the slightest inclination towards anything approximating romantic activity...”

Hugo was clearly repressing a smile and Edward realised that long words were beginning to pepper his speech again. It was a sure sign he was becoming emotional, he knew that his letters had been full of them, but he couldn’t stop himself.

“... and therefore I wouldn’t be liable to be going off with anyone else.”

Edward’s face flushed and he looked so pompous that Hugo’s urge to kiss him was almost irresistible.

Hugo began to laugh, a sound that Easterby had been sure he would never hear again. “I said I was hopeless, and I am. I’ve been standing here racked with torment these last few minutes, telling myself to be brave and good and *repress the desires of the flesh* like my dear old nanny used to tell me. Then you make a pompous speech and I lose all my resolve. Don’t you dare go and find yourself anyone, do you hear? We’ll grow old together like two monks from some order that encourages laughter and happiness rather than silence and solemnity. Perhaps I’ll embrace chastity and be happy. All it needs is for you to smile and it’ll seem possible.” He tapped Edward’s shoulder, then linked his arm and they set off back to Cranmer, Hugo suddenly talkative, full of ridicule at the ridiculous ducks on the Isis and the even more ridiculous people in rowboats.

Edward was happy to see his friend suddenly in his proper spirits again, but deeply concerned about the words spoken about chastity and references to monasteries. If Hugo really did intend to remain chaste all his life, he wasn’t sure he’d survive.

Chapter Four

Hugo had lugged his picnic blanket and basket to the first cricket match of the season at The Parks and there wasn't a speck of caviar in it. He'd refused to touch the stuff since Edward had been so scathing about it. There was champagne, though, and a fine veal and ham pie, salad, cakes and tiny tomatoes that were as sweet as a kiss. Edward had contributed a box of candied fruits, sharp and succulent, making the fingers of the diners even stickier than the cakes had made them

"He needs to watch that spinner," Hugo licked his fingers and pointed airily in the direction of the batsman who was about to face. "There's a fair amount of rough at this end and he'll be turning them through ninety degrees in no time." Edward nodded, but not in a convincing manner.

Hugo studied him closely. "Shall I say that all again in English?"

Edward grinned sheepishly. "I can't help it, we were never a great cricketing family. Golf, that's what the Easterbys play, summer or winter. I could wax lyrical about mashie niblicks and spoons, but the art of the off spinner is beyond me. You might as well be spouting Russian for all that it means to me."

"Then we'll need to attend lots of matches and you'll have to listen very carefully. I shall ask questions afterwards to make sure you were paying attention." A tender smile lit up Hugo's face. He adored exchanging banter with his friend, just as he loved the man himself. There could be no denying it now. For all he was never more than arm in arm or lying side by side with Edward as they were now, their association had passed beyond friendship. They both knew it, although nothing had been said outright—looks and nuances of speech spoke much more loudly than declarations of undying affection might ever have done. They were inseparable at Hall, they went to concerts and watched the oafs in eights flailing down the river. Everyone at Cranmer recognised that Hugo and Edward went together like lamb and mint sauce.

Even the porters had recognised the blossoming alliance, although they firmly believed it was no more than platonic, the sort of thing they'd seen in the trenches where lifelong friendships had been forged and withstood the fire of conflict. Most of them had served in France or Belgium, most of them had known many an officer come close to a fellow combatant who'd ended up meaning more to him than the wife or sweetheart left at home. Comradeship in the face of adversity, perhaps. It was no wonder that some men had come home from the war almost as strangers to their families, feeling lost in a world they'd once known but which now had no colour or depth for them.

There were some old soldiers at the cricket match, swapping stories, delighting in being able to relive the past. Perhaps regretting the way their lives had turned out. Edward watched and listened to them, deep in thought. In the end he began to clear lunch away. "Let's go back to my rooms, Hugo.

There's something rather special I want to show you." They strolled back to Cranmer, where they'd barely been in Edward's room a moment before he thrust a silver object into his friend's grasp.

"I didn't know you smoked." Hugo admired the handsome cigarette case as he turned it over in his hands.

"I don't, that case was my grandfather's. He's given up the things as being bad for his lungs and left it with me, in case I took up the filthy habit." Edward smiled ruefully. "This nearly fell into the hands of those ogres down at the porters' lodge. I had to tell a lie or two to get it back."

Hugo had noted the strange tone in his friend's voice. "I don't understand."

"The old gentleman was visiting last term. As he left he presented it to me and then held me in a huge embrace. It was the first time I can ever remember him showing such affection. I was so overcome I didn't realise we'd dropped this," he fingered the case lovingly, "until Marsh caught me the next day to return it. I was rather abrupt with him."

"Why? Surely he was just doing his duty? The initials on the outside would guide him to you." Hugo traced the outline of the E. "Is your grandfather an Edward, as well?"

"No, he's an Edwin. The name suits him much more than it would me. Anyway it wasn't so much the snapping up of lost trifles I minded, I trust them not to try to steal things, it was the thought that they may have been snooping around." He opened the case to reveal an inscription. "Grandfather was very particular about pointing this out to me."

Hugo took the case and inspected the handsome copperplate writing. *To thine own self be true.* "It's from Hamlet, isn't it?"

"Indeed. Polonius' advice to his son, I believe. I didn't want Marsh and his colleagues speculating about its meaning." Edward fell quiet, still considering the case. "It was given to him—my grandfather, I mean—when he was twenty one, by a maiden aunt. He says that she was particularly perceptive." He turned the thing over again.

"There's a story here, isn't there? Don't feel obliged to share it with me if you feel it would break your grandfather's confidence."

"No, I believe it's important that you know. We should have no secrets."

Edward looked deadly serious, an expression that always melted his friend's heart. Just like a schoolboy explaining something to a teacher or making a report to the Headmaster about why a window had been broken, Edward seemed very young and vulnerable. "When he was younger, Edwin Easterby fell in love with a girl. His parents felt the match was totally unsuitable; she being only a servant and him the son of the house. They intervened, sending grandfather away to join the army and her to service with a family in Scotland."

Hugo shook his head. "I know it goes against the grain, that there are norms of society and unspoken rules that everyone expects to be obeyed, but this seems ridiculous. I can't understand why two people who love each other shouldn't be allowed to do so." If he appreciated the irony in what he said, he didn't show it.

"My family wouldn't hold with that point of view. As far as they're concerned, one has to do one's duty in terms of finding a suitable partner. So my grandfather married a pleasant young lady of his own standing. There was no great love between them, but an agreeable friendship—and my father was

produced. He was an only child, against a family tradition on both sides of large families." Edward looked shrewdly, surprisingly shrewdly, at Hugo. "I think that speaks volumes, doesn't it?"

"It appears to. Is your grandmother still alive?" Hugo sat down next to his friend, closer than they'd been since the morning they'd kissed.

"No, she died two years ago. What I never realised, as he'd never told any of us, was that my grandfather immediately set out to locate his old love. He traced her via the family she had been sent to. Their identity had never been divulged to him by his parents, but he found an old servant who'd kept in touch." Edward didn't look at his friend. "Hugo, I've never believed that I could really open my heart to anyone before now, but I've kept this secret too long."

"And did he find her? Is there a happy ending to this?" Hugo kept his eyes fixed on Edward's face, even though the man couldn't seem to tear his gaze from the cigarette case. His friend was unbelievably beautiful and when he was solemn, as now, it added greatly to his allure. Hugo couldn't, in all conscience, resist touching his hand.

"He did, or rather he found her grave. She, too, had married, been mother to five children and had died in childbed with the sixth." Edward acknowledged the touch with a movement of his fingers. "Grandfather met her husband, and the man was happy to talk about his *bonny Rosie* as he called her. My grandfather said it was obvious that this chap had loved her very much and that their marriage had been extremely happy. Much more so than his own had turned out to be."

"And his aunt had known? That the family hadn't let him to be true to himself?" Hugo was beginning to understand why Edward was sharing this tale with him. He caressed his friend's hand again.

Edward nodded. "I was very surprised he chose to tell me this story, of all the family, but perhaps he shared that lady's insight." He began to study his shoes, a signal that meant he was talking about things which mattered very deeply to him. But he kept a grip on Hugo's hand. "I don't want to have the same misgivings as he has. He told me very plainly he regretted that he'd not simply defied his family, followed the girl and married her himself. Perhaps I wouldn't be here, then, it's an interesting philosophical point, but I sympathise with him entirely. To live your whole life wishing that events had gone otherwise must be mortal hard."

"It's a feeling many folk must share after these last few years."

"But that's different, entirely. Serving one's country is a question of duty, and it would override personal considerations. That would be a question of protecting the innocent, seeing that the aggressor doesn't go unopposed. But no one was at risk in my grandfather's case—all that was at stake was our family's sense of their honour, their ridiculous concept of the importance of their name." Edward was becoming heated, this whole affair having touched on a raw nerve.

"Not so different to the war, then." Hugo understood for the first time why his friend hadn't wanted the porters to touch the cigarette case. It was as if they would be touching the man's heart. "Families do protect their honour. In England there is a ridiculous amount of importance put on a man's surname, his family history. The Lord alone knows that I've had to live with it all my life." Hugo's voice began to falter. "I'm not the eldest son, so there's not the pressure that there is on Gordon to marry and produce an heir. But they still

try to put me in the vicinity of eligible girls and drop subtle, and in my mother's case unsubtle, hints about me settling down once I'm finished here and starting to make my way in the world."

"Do they have any idea?" Edward raised his head, looking at Hugo face to face once more. He clasped his hands tightly, as if he was trying to stop them reaching up and touching Hugo's face.

"No, there's no one in my family of your grandfather's discernment or common sense. Or if there is, they've not informed me. It's part of what makes the whole thing so very hopeless." Tears began to well in Hugo's eyes. They were exposing the deepest recesses of their souls, and it felt wonderfully liberating. "It's hard enough to live with the disapproval of the church and the world in general, but to be letting one's family down as well is just about unbearable." Edward gently offered his handkerchief but didn't offer either advice or platitude. He squeezed his friend's hand once more.

Hugo accepted both the linen and the kind-heartedness it represented. He knew that at times like this, listening and companionship were what counted, however much he wished that Edward would take him in his arms and smother him with affection. He shook his head and tried to compose himself. "Sorry." It was the only word he could manage and he couldn't trust himself to say more.

"You need never apologise to me. I won't have you debasing yourself."

Hugo began to laugh, tears turning into giggles, especially when Edward looked so solemn and puzzled at what had caused the transition. "You are absolutely priceless. There are times you resemble nothing more closely than a hero from a romantic novel."

"Am I that funny?" A few months before, Edward might have been offended at such a remark, but now they were used to teasing each other. Although they'd never been so bold as to hold hands while doing the teasing.

"No, you're absolutely wonderful. The lady who would write about you in that novel—it would be a lady, no doubt of great virtue and the highest morals—would fall in love with her creation and portray you as the absolute pinnacle of what women desire." Hugo shook his head ruefully. "I suspect you're the pinnacle of what I desire as well, and I should just damn well kiss you here and now. If I only had the moral bravery to say that the opinion of the world and my family didn't matter a jot."

Edward studied him carefully, still stroking his friend's hand. "I've already made that decision, back when we walked down to the bridge and you told me about that boy. I won't marry just to please my parents, nor will I turn my back on my true nature just to satisfy the expectations of my peers. I'm not a popular man; I can cope with being rejected."

"Even by your very nearest and dearest?"

"I only hold two people dear. One is my grandfather, and I believe he's given me as clear a sign as he could that he would want me to live my life as honestly as possible. The other person is you. No one else counts."

"And you would give it all up for me? Your good name in the eyes of your parents?" Hugo was finding a glimmer of hope. Somewhere in all this mess of emotions and expectations, there was a possibility that things could be all right.

"I'd rather that than lose touch with you. I've tried to imagine myself in my grandfather's place, taking a wife he didn't love just to satisfy someone else.

Losing the one thing he cherished because others thought it wrong. It makes me furious on his behalf. I won't have some grandchild of mine, the product of the unwanted offspring of a loveless marriage, thinking the same of me. I'd rather go to that monastery of yours." Edward clung to his friend's hands still, and Hugo wondered whether he was trying to make sure he'd never let go of them. In case losing touch with the hands meant losing the man.

Hugo shook his head affectionately. "To offer all that...it's like a pearl beyond price and you're casting it before a swine like me."

Edward reached up, stroked Hugo's cheek. "You are not, never have been, a swine. You're the first friend I ever had, the only person here who had sought to be truly kind to me and not take any opportunity to gull me. You're kindness itself, young man, and I will not hear you degrading yourself."

Hugo chuckled, letting all his hurt and nervousness dissipate into further laughter. "You sound like my great uncle giving me a lecture on losing my temper on the golf course. *Young man*, indeed." He caressed Edward's face, savouring the feel of the smooth skin beneath his trembling fingers. "You're the pearl beyond price yourself, or the nearest equivalent I'll ever meet walking the cloisters of this college, if not the face of the entire earth."

Edward leant forwards and gently kissed his friend's brow before the man had a chance to pull back or react. "I can't believe this is wrong, Hugo, any of it. It doesn't hurt anyone. For goodness sake, we're pulling ourselves to pieces trying to deny it. I find it so hard to keep my hands from holding yours or my arms from enfolding you."

Hugo knew the pompous and embarrassed tone of his friend's conversation reflected his mood and felt strangely touched by the haughty words. The sweetest murmurs of affection or dripping praise couldn't have had such an effect. He tilted his face upwards, inching his nose along Edward's jaw and cheek. His lips grazed the smooth skin of his friend's temples, kissing his brow in return for the salute he'd received. It all felt wonderful. "I wish that life could be simple. I wish it could just be you and me and no one to judge us or condemn."

Edward snuggled his head down onto Hugo's shoulder, sighing deeply. "We could remain here, you know. There's no reason you couldn't stay on to take a doctorate. You're bright and popular with everyone, and just think of the influence your father could bring to bear on the college. I'd work hard and make sure I could do the same. There are plenty of old bachelors within the university, it wouldn't be looked on as out of place." He held Hugo tight, as if by clinging to him like some talisman, he could make all their wishes come true in an instant.

"Perhaps. It would certainly be easier to keep each other's company if we were colleagues here." Hugo laughed, making Edward's head bounce up and down against his chest. "You might end up as Warden and you could give *the talk* every term. You'd change the subject, of course, from self-sacrifice to being true to one's lights. I could end up as the sort of crusty old fellow who scares the living daylight out of the first year students but who is adored by them by the time they leave." Maybe this was the light at the end of their tunnel, the means that they could be together, but the idea did have its ludicrous aspects.

Edward lifted his head, his eyes bright with tears that might be of laughter but could equally be relief at seeing a possible way out of their impasse.

“Everyone would adore you. It’s me they’d be frightened of, quite rightly, as I’m scared of De Banzie.” He focused his eyes on his friend’s lips. “Hugo, please...”

Edward didn’t need to elaborate. Hugo knew what he wanted from the direction of his gaze, his flushed cheeks, the plaintive note in his voice, and he no longer had it in him to resist. He leaned down and kissed his friend, very lightly at first and then more firmly, once for friendship, once for love. Edward responded in kind with warm and affectionate, tender and shy kisses, the sort he’d been desperate to share since those first coffee flavoured ones had both shattered him and shown him a world of possibilities.

Hugo ran his tongue along the gentle contours of Edward’s lips, tasting the lingering sweetness from lunch. “I love you, Edward, you big sappy idiot,” Hugo’s voice was hoarse with emotion, “and I promise I won’t let myself be separated from you just to suit someone else’s convenience. We could only ever part of our free will.” He kissed Easterby powerfully, letting his tongue plunder the other man’s mouth. He expected to feel tensing of muscle but not the unexpected relaxation that came as Edward must have realised this wasn’t just normal, it was charming, and began to respond in the same way. “I love you as well, Hugo, beyond all logic or reason. It would have to be love for us to want to risk all the disapproval, wouldn’t it?” Edward looked at his friend with eyes that appeared awash with a strange mixture of fear and delight, then reached towards him for another kiss or three, the pair of them making up for all the months of unrequited desire.

“It could only be love or folly, and I don’t think either of us is stupid. Nor precipitate; we’ve had a long while to mull this over.” Hugo drew his hand down his friend’s neck, enjoying the texture of smooth, delicate flesh that barely felt like it saw a razor. And for the first time, he felt no self-loathing at touching another man, just a simple joy and wonder at the marvels of love—how it could take all one’s fears and doubts and transform them. No wonder he’d never felt this happy previously; he’d never been in love before.

Quite against all Hugo anticipated, Edward began to take the lead, kissing and caressing—all innocence and wonder and not showing a trace of animal lust or desire. It was everything that Hugo needed to feel at ease with the situation. If there had been overt passion, he might well have felt brimful of doubts again, but the purity of Edward’s approach reassured him that things wouldn’t get out of hand. Edward must have been thinking they had all the time in the world and all the world of love to discover in that time.

Hugo broke from a passionate kiss and nestled down into his friend’s arms, burying his face in the folds of the man’s jacket. “Did we decide that quote was from Hamlet? The one on your grandfather’s case?”

“We did, indeed.” If Edward was puzzled at the sudden change of tack he didn’t show it.

Hugo wondered whether his friend found him infuriating at times, but if Edward couldn’t help being pompous, *he* couldn’t help being wordy. “Then I can match it with another, if you’ll excuse the adaptation. *I shall I wear you in my heart of hearts*, as long as you’re willing to have a place there.” Hugo rubbed his fingers along his friend’s jacket, caressing the material as if it were the man’s skin.

“I would never ask to be removed from there. It would take a Somme or Flanders Field to wrench me from you.” Edward held Hugo close as if they

really were about to be separated by bugle call or order to march. He seemed determined now that he'd never let this man go or turn his back on such pleasure as he found in his arms.

"Then we should pray God that we truly have seen the war to end them all." Hugo lifted his head, found Edward's lips once more. As they touched, he was filled with joy, more than he'd ever felt in his life and the source of that elation was the man he'd got wrapped in his arms. Edward's fingers started to explore underneath his friend's coat. Hugo was taken aback by how bold the man was turning out to be, but Edward's whole demeanour had changed now. Perhaps once they'd taken the final step over the threshold from friendship to love, he'd discovered within himself an audacity that had long been kept hidden. Hugo waited for the expected frisson of guilt to strike him now that he was lost in the pleasures of kissing and caressing. But it didn't come, and he was thankful for being spared it at last.

"Shall I take this coat off? It's mild enough." When Hugo had carelessly stripped off with Domino, it had cost him more than money. It was as if he'd bared part of his soul with each item discarded and he'd kept his losses to a minimum. It had been wrong then, that fact did not and would not change, but it felt absolutely right at this moment. Hugo regretfully pulled out of their embrace, slid off his dinner jacket and was pleased to see Edward perform the same manoeuvre. Their freshly laundered shirts were no longer as crisp as when they'd first been put on, and Edward's bore a patch of perspiration where his friend's head had lain. Hugo gently drew his fingers down it, savouring the slick feel of the moist material in his hands.

"Can you stay a little while longer? People will think we're chatting over a cup of tea. I'll lock the door so we needn't worry." Edward rubbed his face in Hugo's hair, enjoying the smell and taste of it.

"Leave the door—it'll only make folk suspicious. We'll hear them soon enough on the stairs." Hugo's fingers began to ease themselves into the folds of his friend's shirt, inching nearer to a spot where they might get under the material and find Edward's skin. "I'll stay as long as common sense and our reputations will allow." Hugo could feel Edward's hands tugging at the tail of *his* shirt, seeking to find some flesh to caress. His fingers just touching the small of Hugo's back felt so much more exciting than anything that Domino had done for him. Perhaps he could only find true ecstasy if love were at the heart of it.

"Will you stop thinking and kiss me again, or must I wait another two months?" Edward tried to look serious, but the twinkle in his eye belied the stern voice. "I will kiss you as often as you deserve and you may take that answer as you wish." Hugo was as good as his word, kissing his lover frantically and letting his hands work on buttons and waistbands until they were both short of breath and neither of them had a shirt on their backs.

Hugo lightly caressed his friend's chest, drawing circles, tracing ribs, noting each line and curve and freckle until he'd memorised it entirely. Edward in his turn scanned every fraction of Hugo's back with his fingertips, mapping each square inch and defining its properties. Only the unknown could be truly fearful—making your lover's flesh as familiar as your own eliminated all apprehension. They placed tender kisses on each other's skin and hair, Edward exploring the rough acres of Hugo's mane of a chest, both enjoying the novelty of smooth flesh under fingers and tongue.

"I must go soon." Hugo bent to kiss the tender inward of Edward's hand, returning to kiss his mouth once more via his collarbone and neck, each touch of skin to lips being savoured anew. "This is just the beginning, the start of many such afternoons and evenings, should that be what you want." He sealed the invitation with a kiss so passionate it left the answer in no doubt. Edward nodded, and Hugo suspected he was too overcome to speak. He watched as Lamont slowly drew his shirt back on, secured the buttons, sought for his cufflinks. "No, let me." Edward gently inserted the little gold fastenings through their holes.

Hugo found as much delight in being dressed by his friend as he had in being undressed by him, being especially pleased when Edward remembered to take the tie and make it up neatly. He was bound to be spotted on his way back to his rooms to change for hall and they couldn't risk giving anyone the slightest cause for suspicion, not now.

Hugo slowly slipped on his jacket, held Edward close once more and revelled in the sensation of the man's bare skin nestling against his clothing. He felt warm, secure and ridiculously alive, willing the minutes to crawl by while Edward was next to him, fly when they were apart. "Tomorrow? After hall?" Edward nodded again, head against head. "Every evening after hall. All the rest of this term. Forever." The last word was little more than a shared exhalation—they both knew better than to tempt fate.

"Every evening it will be, then. For as long as we're granted." Hugo breathed into his friend's neck, drank in once more the sweet scent of sweat and exhilaration to better remember it once he was alone. "Kiss me once more, then common sense shall have to prevail." A huge smile lit up his face, one that Edward mirrored.

The lingering sense of that final embrace of the day stayed alive for them both well into the night.

Epilogue

Men of a certain persuasion have to learn quickly, or face the consequences. Discretion, common sense and the ability to keep one's head down are as effective in everyday life as in war.

Edward learned quickly.

By the time his undergraduate years had come to an end he'd have called himself an old hand, ready to face a hostile world with as much grace as he could muster, on the occasions he stepped outside the security of Oxford's male dominated world. Shared encounters with Hugo in sparse sets of rooms designed for students gave way to shared encounters in the more comfortably furnished rooms suitable for fellows of the college. Making frantic notes listening to lectures was succeeded by making frantic notes to deliver them. Strawberries and cream were still shared by the river, even if the bodies sharing them were less lithe than in the past—but those bodies had shared each other on numerous occasions and were willing to forgive the predations of time.

They'd first coupled a matter of days after that first kiss. They kept on coupling any and every time they could, being young and in love, until the fierce flame of first love steadied itself into a constant fire that time and familiarity could not put out.

What time did bring was another war and, unexpectedly, another chance to serve. If Edward and Hugo had been frustrated at being too young to serve in the last they were concerned at being a touch long in the tooth to serve in this. They'd not counted on their brains being as useful as their ability to wield a rifle.

Bletchley was a strange place, such a contrast to the ivy clad, biscuit coloured stone of Cranmer, but the output of the minds gathered there far exceeded that of the college. There were Cambridge men here, too—and those from other places—proving that ingenuity and academic excellence wasn't just the prerogative of Oxford. And the presence of women showed that intellect wasn't solely lodged in one gender.

Some of the men were old enough to have served in the war that Edward and Hugo so narrowly missed and no doubt those men thought they'd not serve their country again. Two of them struck a chord, a pair presenting an older version of themselves, contrasting personalities yet sharing a deep friendship. Loquacious Stewart and reserved Coppersmith could be seen sitting over pints in the bar, arguing some abstruse point or other, whether it be about decryption or the turning ball on a wet cricket pitch.

Hugo had said from the start the two men were lovers and had been for a long time, although Edward had initially been more circumspect in his judgement.

As he'd remarked, how could you tell by looking?

"It's obvious," Hugo insisted, one evening as they sat over cocoa in their shared digs. "As plain as the nose on Coppersmith's face."

"Is it?" Edward shrugged. "I see plenty of men here talking as they do. They're not all lovers, surely?"

"I refuse to treat that remark with any respect as you've clearly made it in order to be vexatious." Hugo swirled his drink in its cup. "They're subtle, I grant you that, but they'll have had to learn to be if they go back as far as we do."

"They don't. They met when they were best part of thirty."

"Oh, so you've taken an interest in them, then?" Hugo smirked.

"I have a pair of ears. And one mouth." Edward sniffed, haughtily. "I use them in that ratio, something from which you might benefit."

"Nobody would ever accuse you of being at risk of careless talk." Hugo drained his cup, plonked it on the table, rose, then plonked himself in Edward's lap. He flicked at some crumbs on Edward's shoulder, smiling.

"*Keep mum...*"

"*She's not so dumb.*" Edward chuckled. "Well, you're certainly right that I've never spoken carelessly in front of any woman."

"Have you spoken *to* any woman? Apart from 'tea, thank you' or 'can you type this, please?'"

Edward didn't honour the quip with a reply. "Anyway, I'm not so green as I'm grass looking. I know what they mean to each other."

"Oh, you've seen."

"It was obvious, once one took time to observe them properly. Not many men bother to pick a scrap of thread from their friend's lapel." He laid his hand over Hugo's, which still lay on his shoulder. "So mind when and where you tidy me up. Careless tidies cost lives."

"Very true, oh king." Hugo favoured his lover with a rueful smile and a kiss.

"I'm not sure whether it would be more dangerous for us up in a Lancaster on a raid than it is on the home front."

"And they're the glory boys, whereas perhaps nobody will ever appreciate what we've done. Not any time soon."

"One can achieve a great deal," Hugo said, resting his head on Edward's shoulder, "if one isn't bothered about who gets the credit."

"Excellent maxim. Yours?"

"No. Somebody wiser than me."

"Not Turing?"

"Turing?" Hugo laughed, uproariously. "He's jolly clever, but he's not wise. And he'd benefit from your advice, too. About being discreet."

"Him as well?" Edward shook his head. "I can't imagine he'd be one for flicking cotton off anybody's jacket. What's wrong? You're shivering."

"Not sure. Perhaps somebody walked over my grave. Or somebody else's."

"Whose?"

"Somebody who indulges in careless talk." Hugo ran his hand along Edward's chin. "Don't let it be you."