

CHAPTER 1

Camden, near London, 1794

Someone had to challenge the man. The governors, the other students – none of them listened to me but Professor Coleman would have to if I could bring myself to accuse him. I couldn't prove he was corrupt, he was too clever for that, but I followed him once, I saw him put the money into his own pocket.

The wind carried my voice as I rehearsed what I would say to the man who ran this place with an iron fist. The short journey from the veterinary college to his house was made difficult by the clouds obscuring the moon and I stumbled on the uneven ground. I stopped and steadied my breathing. I walked on, with more care this time.

I turned into St Pancras Way, saw the house and knew I couldn't waver. I would have to speak my mind but how to dress it up without offence? Perhaps, it didn't matter. I had nothing to lose. Every day there were rumours of bankruptcy and I feared having to return to my brother's with no qualifications and little hope. And to think, I'd given up a promising career in surgery to be here.

My hand gripped the knocker hard but I had to clear my throat when I asked the maid for Professor Coleman. She showed me to his sitting room and I was welcomed by its overwhelming heat and his very broad smile.

He shook my hand with such warmth and yet he must have been dismayed to see me. We were hardly friends. 'Clark, my dear boy! What an unexpected pleasure,' he said with far more charm than necessary. His damp hand was withdrawn from mine with such speed that I knew he was apprehensive. 'Do come in. Such a fearful night, is it not?'

'Thank you. Indeed...indeed it is.' I joined him where he stood by the fire. He was a man of medium height but I

dwarfed him and he took a step back. 'You must have known...expected me, surely. Professor...I hope you don't mind my catching up with you in this way only you've cancelled so many appointments, I began to fear you were avoiding me.'

'Oh, tut, tut, why would I make such an effort?' he sighed, leaning on the mantel and examining his long fingers. 'I would first have to notice you, would I not? Come now, I'm teasing but of course it's an honour to see any of my students at this late hour and my door is always open. I hadn't thought to extend the privilege to my home...but why not?' His eyes took their time assessing me, taking in my disordered hair, my unpolished boots and my carelessly tied neck cloth. 'Are those top boots? For the evening?' He shook his head wearily and exhaled. 'Oh, never mind, I digress.'

'Professor! What do my boots matter...when you...? Oh, you preside over the college, sir, and you must know that today something happened that concerns me greatly.' The smile hadn't shifted and he waited as I calmed my irritation. 'Well, I was told not to order any more copper of sulphate for the dispensary. I could hardly believe it. There must be a mistake.'

He coughed to cover his amusement but I could see his look of relief that I had called about something as insignificant as a shortage of medicines.

'Really? How distressing,' he said, happily. 'Give me a note about that tomorrow and I will look into it. So diligent...but I can assure you tomorrow will be early enough.'

'It keeps happening, sir. We can't treat our patients without the medicines we need. It never used to be like this. I ran that dispensary after Monsieur St Bel died and I made sure we never ran out.'

'Indeed,' he said, one eye quivering at my mention of his predecessor, a Frenchman who was as skilled at the veterinary arts as Coleman was ignorant.

'Surely the college has enough money to buy something so essential and what if one of the horses were to die as a result of this ridiculous policy.' I stopped pacing and rejoined him by

the fire. 'These medicines are not expensive.'

'Not expensive!' he cried, then moderated his voice. 'If you had to buy them from your own pocket you would know they were and you wouldn't want students wasting them all the time. But if Mr Clark requires me to investigate he must give me a list. Tomorrow. Surely, you didn't venture out on a night like tonight just to tell me this.'

'The wind is blustery, nothing more. You will look into it, then?'

'I have said so. The dispensary will be stocked with the essentials.'

Ah, the essentials. He'd made me an empty promise and we would be fighting over the meaning of that word until I graduated but I had to let it go for now. I had something far more serious on my mind - if only I could find another word for corruption, one that didn't sound so dishonest.

'There is another thing, Professor.'

'You relieve my mind.'

No, there was no other way of saying it, so instead I asked him, 'Is it true that we are to give up the lease on the fields? Quite an extraordinary thing for a veterinary college to have no pasture for the horses in its care. It seems we are soon to be a laughing stock.'

He was brushing at specks of ash on his sleeve and paused only for a moment. I was skirting around the issue that plagued me but I surprised him and he exhaled slowly as if he was preparing to walk in tight boots.

'Where did you hear such a thing?' he asked. 'Rumours run through the college quicker than dysentery, do they not?'

'It's true, then?'

'No, the governors have to look at all the options and it won't be up to me in any event. But why should a young man like you worry about some fields? Why can't you be like the others and find distraction in the nearest tavern?'

He was laughing in that indulgent way he had but there was nothing kind about the suggestion. The college was run like a monastery and the hours and the rules were so strict that

two students had already been thrown out. Doubtless he hoped I would obligingly get myself drunk and then expelled.

With his short, dark hair and pale face, the Professor looked older than his years but he was in his prime, young to take charge of the college. I was twenty three but the gulf between us was greater than years. I knew little of his background beyond his medical training but the luxury of the room only confirmed my suspicions. Goodness, we were cut from different cloth.

The carpet beneath my feet was thick and luxurious - deep enough to hide a thousand lies. From the dim light of the candles I could see the room was elegant. No draught ruffled the sweeping velvet drapes, no chill hung about the room which was such a contrast to our Spartan conditions at the college. A fine painting of a race horse hung above the fireplace and reminded me of the reason for my visit. How pathetic I was. How far short I had fallen from the challenge of my imaginings. The lines I had rehearsed lodged in my throat and the pause was awkward. He wouldn't tolerate me in his sitting room for long and I had to keep him talking. About anything. Until the moment was right. Oh, if only I had proof.

'I have no interest in the tavern and you know it.' I closed my eyes. I couldn't get angry. 'Sir, we shouldn't be in this mess, facing closure. Not with so many new students. You say it's only rumours but, if we are thinking of giving up the fields, it appears to be true.'

'Nonsense,' he bit out, still restrained. 'The college won't close. The government will back us; they have to.'

My hands clenched. 'We shouldn't have to grovel to the politicians not when we have such an income. It's shameful. We have hundreds of subscribers paying us to treat their horses and all your new recruits. Damn it, where are the fees going to, Professor?'

There! I'd said it. And now I only needed to look at his face to find the truth. And yet he was smiling. Not a happy smile, of course, more the weary look you'd give an irritating child you weren't ready to smack. There was a vein on one of

his temples that stood out in moments of tension and even in this light I could see it.

‘What are you implying?’ he hissed, before glancing over his shoulder. ‘The fees are not your concern. Stick to your studies, Clark. I gave you all an essay on the respiratory system to write and it won’t do to get behind, you know.’

‘It’s written.’

I wouldn’t be diverted and waited, watching him. He knew what I was suggesting even though I’d stopped short of accusing him.

‘How dare you ask me about the fees in this way?’ he said quietly. Had I not been standing so close, I wouldn’t have heard.

‘It’s my duty to do so.’

‘Your duty is to pass your exams and get the hell out of this college. Something you should do with ease. From the moment I was appointed, you’ve been trouble.’

He was remembering the time he examined the wrong leg on a lame horse. It’s more easily done than you might think but I pointed it out in front of the others and he’s never forgiven me.

‘Professor, I know I irritate you but I demand that you give me some explanation for the plight this college is in. You owe me that at least.’

‘You demand?’ he said, staring at me. ‘An interesting choice of words.’

‘I apologise,’ I said, meeting his gaze but knowing it would be unwise to antagonise him further. There were months of studying with the man ahead of me and he was very powerfully connected. ‘I would be grateful if you could explain. I gave up a lot to be here, as you know.’

‘Very well,’ he said, coldly taking his time, assessing whether I was worth the effort.. ‘It’s simple enough, after all. Have you never before realised that the founders and your very dear Frenchman didn’t raise enough money? They were lamentably short if they were to build a college worthy of the name.’

‘The new infirmary was devilishly expensive and there was no way the student fees would pay for it. Fortunately, our income has increased considerably. So, Mr Clark, you should be thanking me for saving the place but instead you dare to come here making snide accusations.’

For a minute he made me doubt myself. Was I so influenced by my distaste of him that I saw wrongdoing where there was none? Perhaps I was being foolish but I knew in my heart how false he was. That pulse on his right temple told me how anxious I was making him and there was something else bothering me. His avaricious look every time he made a new recruit.

‘If you have saved the college I would indeed thank you. But the rumours haven’t ceased and we all know you are appealing to the Prime Minister for funds. I am only asking what any member of the government might query.’

A sudden rustling sound and a slight cough drew my attention to the other side of the room which was swathed in shadows. The noise came from somewhere beyond a small sofa where the Professor must have been looking at some papers, now forgotten.

It seemed we were not alone. All this time someone had been listening. No wonder the Professor was speaking in whispers but she must have heard me accuse him. For God’s sake, I’d been loud enough.

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