MURDER AT BLETCHLEY PARK

By Christina Koning

The Blind Detective Series

The Blind Detective

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For Anna and Max

Chapter One

Cambridge was utterly silent and, he knew, as dark as it was quiet – the one condition, which was the blackout, bringing about the other. Not that the darkness made much difference to Frederick Rowlands. But it had certainly cast a spell upon the streets of this university town, as it had upon those of the capital, from which he had travelled earlier that day. There, the blackout had the effect of making sounds seem louder, as they did in thick fog, so that the roar of a motorbus or the clip-clopping of a rag-and-bone man's horse seemed to come at you unmuffled by other sounds, such as the tramp of feet, or the murmur of a rush-hour crowd. Because, after three months of continuous night-time bombing, London's streets were starting to get the deserted feel Rowlands recalled from the last war. It wasn't quite the feeling that a curfew had been imposed (it hadn't – or not officially), more that, if you didn't have anywhere particular to go, you oughtn't to be out. New sounds had also been added to the more familiar ones of traffic and people's voices. The icy

tinkle of broken glass, being swept up after a night's raid; the sudden crash, as a building collapsed. The smell of the city had changed, too: now a smoky fog composed of brick dust and smashed plaster hung in the air, sometimes overlaid with fouler smells, of broken drains, and dank cellars full of rotting things, now exposed to view.

'I think we must be nearly there,' said his companion, breaking into these thoughts. Margaret sounded as if she didn't quite believe this, however. After she'd met his train at the station, the two of them had agreed that it would be quicker to walk into the town centre, rather than to wait for a bus, which was likely to be crowded with home-going workers at this time of day. So, having turned out of Station Road, they'd set off down Hills Road and thence along Regent Street and St Andrew's Street – not in itself a great distance, but it was funny how much further it seemed in the dark, said Rowlands's daughter, adding, with a little laugh, that it was a good thing he'd only brought an overnight bag.

They turned at last along Downing Street, and reached the turning into Free School Lane.

'It's just down here to the left,' said Rowlands. 'If memory serves.' Which, in his case, it usually did – memory having to stand in for the sense of sight. Not that it would be of much help in this pitch blackness, he supposed, if one *could* see. Through the darkness to their left, he knew, loomed the magnificent late Perpendicular Gothic edifice of King's College Chapel – built by a succession of Tudor kings and eventually completed by the notorious wife-killer, for the glory of his immortal soul. Rowlands's visual memories of the chapel, and indeed of Cambridge

as a whole, went back to before the last war, when he'd come here as a representative of the publishing firm for which he'd worked at the time. He remembered wandering around the great building, marvelling at the splendours of its sixteenth-century fan-vaulting and Flemish stained glass, in the half-hour before his meeting at Heffers Bookshop in Petty Cury.

'Here we are,' he said, as they reached the junction with Bene't Street. 'I remember the cobblestones.' These belonged to the courtyard of the Eagle – that well-known Cambridge hostelry, beloved of many generations of undergraduates. It was several years since Rowlands had last visited it, in the company of his old friend, the artist Percy Loveless. When last heard of, Loveless was in Canada – stranded there for the duration – having arrived in that country just before the outbreak of hostilities, in order to carry out a portrait commission. 'This place is as cold as the ninth circle of Hell,' he had written, with uncharacteristic gloom. 'If anywhere could make me long for the dreary reaches of Notting Hill, then Toronto in midwinter is that place . . .'

Even if the feel of cobblestones underfoot hadn't alerted Rowlands to the fact that they'd reached their destination, the sound of voices would have done so: it was only just past opening time, and yet the pub was already filling up with its regular clientele of rowdy students, glad to have finished with lectures for the day, as well as some older men – whether dons or college porters wasn't always easy to determine – also taking a break from their labours.

'What'll you have?' said Rowlands to his daughter as they reached the bar. 'A nice glass of sherry?'

'Daddy!'

'Isn't that what you university types usually drink?' he said innocently.

'No, thanks,' was the reply. 'I'll have half a bitter, please.'

'Right you are.' He gave the order, and exchanged a few pleasantries with the barmaid – a friendly soul, hailed by all and sundry as Doris. 'Busy tonight,' said Rowlands, for something to say, as the young woman filled their glasses at the taps.

'Oh, it'll be busier still tonight, with all the RAF boys coming in,' she replied, in the soft accent of the region.

'I say, Doris my love, hurry up and get us some beers, will you?' said a bold young man, standing behind Rowlands.

'You mind your manners,' said Doris, then to Rowlands: 'That'll be one-and-ninepence, sir, if you please.'

Rowlands paid her, and then he and Margaret carried their glasses over to a table in the corner of the back bar, which was quieter than the rest of the pub.

'So,' he said, having taken an appreciative draught of his pint. 'What's all this about your giving up your studies?'

Margaret didn't say anything for a moment. Her father got the impression she was choosing her words carefully. 'I've told you – I'm simply deferring my research until the war's over. Lots of people are doing it.'

'I suppose you'll be telling me next that you want to join up?' he said.

Again, there was a slight hesitation before she replied, 'Not exactly.'

'Then what *are* you intending to do?' He kept his voice

level, but really it was exasperating – his brilliant daughter, who'd delighted them all by winning a scholarship to Cambridge to study mathematics, and then had achieved further distinction after graduation by being offered a junior research fellowship, was now proposing to give it all up, to do . . . what? He took another pull of his beer.

'I . . . I can't tell you,' said Margaret.

'But surely,' he persisted, 'research was what you wanted to do? Or have you changed your mind?'

'No . . . it's not that. I still want to do it – more than anything else in the world. It's just that I'm going to have to defer it until the war's over . . . Oh, don't ask me to explain!' she cried suddenly, sounding so miserable that Rowlands instantly resolved to drop his inquisitorial tone.

'It's all right,' he said. 'Let's talk about something else . . . How's that young man of yours, these days?'

'No, that's not fair,' she said, lowering her voice – although as far as Rowlands could tell, there was nobody sitting close enough to overhear. 'You *deserve* an explanation. At least,' she added, 'as far as I can give one. I've been offered a job. In . . . in a government department. But that's all I can say, I'm afraid.'

'All very hush-hush, eh?' said her father. '"Careless talk costs lives" and so forth?'

'Yes.'

'Then you needn't say another thing. I'll tell your mother she's not to ask you any more questions, either.'

'Thanks, Daddy.' The relief in her voice was all too apparent. 'And he's *not* my "young man", as you call him,' she added, in a lighter tone. 'We're just friends. Why, Jonty's almost like a brother.'

Rowlands wondered if Jonathan Simkins, the son of family friends, felt the same. Wisely, he said nothing.

'As a matter of fact, he's joining the RAF,' Margaret went on. 'His engineering course at Durham has finished, anyway, and so he's decided to waste no more time.'

'Very public-spirited of him,' said Rowlands, although his heart sank at the thought of all these young men and women who were so eager to join the war effort. Memories of his own youth, and the way he and his Pals had rushed to join up in 1914, to fight for what they believed was a noble cause, could not but cast a long shadow. He shrugged away the thought. 'So I take it,' he said, picking up the thread of an earlier conversation, 'that you'd rather your mother and I didn't come and meet you at the end of term?'

'Yes,' said Margaret. 'That is . . . I won't be coming home when I leave college. The . . . the job I've mentioned requires me to start straight away. I'll be going into diggings.'

'I see.' He wondered if Edith would. He foresaw that he would have his work cut out, explaining all this to her, when he got back to London the following day. It had been his wife's suggestion that the two of them should go and collect their daughter from Cambridge at the end of the Michaelmas term that had set the whole thing off. A neighbour, with a son at Downing, had offered to take them in his Austin, and to bring them back, with the two young people and their luggage, the following day. They would share the petrol costs, of course. This agreeable plan had brought forth an agitated telephone call from Margaret, in response to her mother's letter, in which she (Margaret)

had said that it wouldn't be any use, their coming to St Gertrude's, because she wasn't going to be at college more than another week; nor would she be returning after the Christmas holidays.

This had been followed – at Edith's insistence – by a telephone conversation between Rowlands and Miss Phillips, the mistress of St Gertrude's, which had left him, if anything, more mystified than he was before. They had been informed by their daughter (he said) that she would be leaving university – apparently for good – in a few days' time. He wondered what the reason for this might be. Was the college dissatisfied with her work? In which case, shouldn't the matter be discussed, to see if it might be resolved? At which point, he was interrupted by the unexpected sound of the mistress's laughter.

'No, no,' she said. 'It's nothing like that, I assure you. You and Mrs Rowlands can set your minds at rest, where Margaret is concerned. In fact,' Beryl Phillips went on, 'we at St Gertrude's are delighted with Margaret's work. She's become a real asset to the college.'

'Then why on earth . . . ?' he began, but again, she silenced him.

'I'm afraid I can't discuss this on the telephone, Mr Rowlands. Perhaps you'd care to come and talk things over in person? Let me see . . .' She must have consulted a diary. 'I have some time available tomorrow . . . or later in the week, if you prefer?' They'd fixed an appointment for the following morning. In order to be in good time for this (given the erratic nature of the trains at present) and so that he could see his daughter beforehand, Rowlands had elected to travel up on the previous evening, and to

spend the night in one of the college guest rooms. Which was how he came to be sitting over a pint of Ruddles in the Eagle's back bar, and feeling only a little the wiser as to how his daughter would be spending her time in the months that were to follow.

'We should drink up,' she said, in the faintly anxious tone that seemed to have become habitual. 'If we want to get the bus back in time for Hall.'

Rowlands took another sip of his beer. He remembered those dinners at St Gertrude's from the last time – now five years ago – he'd been staying at the college, during what had turned out to be a murder investigation. The memory, like everything else associated with that troubling episode, wasn't an especially pleasant one – not least where the food was concerned. Female academics, unlike their male counterparts, had to put up with distinctly unexciting fare.

'I rather thought,' he said quickly, 'that we'd have dinner out. I don't very often get the chance to treat my favourite junior research fellow.' Although it occurred to him as he said it that, as of next week, he could no longer consider her as such.

To his relief, she didn't seem to notice his slip. 'That'd be awfully nice,' she said. 'If it wouldn't be too expensive, we could try the Varsity. I've heard they sometimes have roast chicken.'

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly enough. They managed to get a table at the establishment Margaret had mentioned – which was a bit of luck, she said, since otherwise the choice was between steak and kidney pudding at the Baron of Beef, or shepherd's pie at the British Empire restaurant in Petty Cury, neither of which

would have matched the culinary delights on offer here. Roast chicken, as it happened, was 'off', but steak was available – a rare treat, in the first year of the war. With it, there was mashed potato and green peas (tinned), with half a bottle of Burgundy to wash it down. At her father's insistence, Margaret had the pudding – a treacle sponge she pronounced 'almost as good as Mother's', while he himself had the cheese, and a brandy to follow. The meal, although unexceptional to his mind, was far superior to the one they'd have had in Hall – 'Watery stew, with prunes and custard for afters,' said Margaret, with a shudder. No more was said about her plans for the immediate future, which, Rowlands sensed, came as a relief to her; Edith, he knew, wouldn't have let it go quite so readily.

Instead, they talked of other things: the driving lessons Edith was taking ('Although how we'll be able to run a car, let alone afford the petrol for it, is anybody's guess,' said her husband); how Anne was getting on in Oxford, where the Slade had established temporary quarters at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art; and Joan's prowess in the school hockey team: 'Nice to have *one* sporty child, at least,' said Rowlands, savouring his brandy. Although she contributed her fair share to this conversation, Rowlands couldn't help feeling that his eldest daughter's thoughts were elsewhere. 'Promise me one thing, Meg,' he said, when he'd paid the bill and summoned a taxi to take them out to St Gertrude's. 'That if there's anything worrying you about this new arrangement of yours, you'll let me know.'

'I can't . . .'

'I know, I know. You're not supposed to talk about it.

But you can at least let your mother and me know you're all right. A postcard when you get there will do.'

'All right,' she said, after a moment. 'I'll try.'

Next morning, after breakfast, Rowlands strolled in the grounds of the college, to smoke a cigarette and think over what to say to his wife about the situation. Margaret said she had some things to see to – library books to return, and notes to leave for her supervisors. So Rowlands had time to kill before his meeting with the mistress at half past ten. Fortunately, the St Gertrude's grounds were extensive, and the weather (in late November) too cold to tempt the undergraduates outside – always supposing that any of them had leisure to stroll about the woods and meadows surrounding the college, and were not presently engrossed in study. At this thought, he felt a pang of sadness at the choice his daughter had made. What exactly that choice entailed he couldn't be sure, although his (albeit limited) encounters with the secret service in past years gave him an inkling of what Margaret's future work might involve.

He was so absorbed in these reflections that it took him a moment to realise that somebody was trying to attract his attention, by vigorously tapping on one of the first-floor windows beneath which his perambulations had brought him. A moment later, the window in question was flung up, and that somebody stuck her head out. 'Hi! Fred! Fred Rowlands! I thought it must be you.'

'Hello, Maud.'

'Come up to my office, will you? No, on second thoughts, wait there. I'll come and get you.' As he waited,

stamping his feet to keep himself warm, Rowlands groaned inwardly. Fond as he was of Maud Rickards, she was the last person he'd wanted to run into on this particular visit. Quite how much she knew of his reasons for being here – or of his daughter's predicament – he could only surmise. One thing was certain: he didn't feel like discussing it with her – not least because she was Edith's oldest friend. If he was going to find it difficult to persuade his wife to be discreet on this matter of Margaret's new role, it would become doubly so if Maud added fuel to the fire.

But, not for the first time, it appeared that he had misjudged her. 'Do come in out of the cold,' she said. 'I wonder that you can stand it. Such a raw morning! I've a nice fire in my office, you'll be glad to know. You've time for a cup of coffee before your meeting with the mistress.'

So she knew about that, then? thought Rowlands. Well, that was hardly surprising. As college bursar, it was Miss Rickards's business to know everything about the running of the college – including, no doubt, the fact that one of its brightest research students was shortly to leave, to take up an unspecified post at an unnamed destination. Yes, Maud Rickards must have known all this, but you wouldn't have guessed it, as, having ushered him into her room ('Take the armchair next to the fire – it's the most comfortable . . .'), she busied herself with brewing a fresh pot of her famously good coffee.

'How's Edith?' she asked, setting out cups and saucers on a tray and placing this, with the stainless-steel percolator that was her pride and joy, on the low table in front of the fire.

'She's very well,' he replied – at which Maud laughed.

'Silly question. Edie's always well. And how's Anne? Enjoying Oxford?'

'Very much, from what she says in her letters,' replied Rowlands.

'That's good,' said the bursar vaguely. 'Although I still think it's a pity that she didn't try for St Gertrude's. She could always have carried on with her drawing in her spare time.'

To which Rowlands diplomatically said nothing, although this was far from being Anne's own view of the situation. Ever since the visit to Paris she had made, aged sixteen, and what it had revealed to her of the bohemian life, she had been determined to become a painter – or, failing that, a best-selling novelist. Academic life played no part in this vision.

The conversation turned to other things – Miss Rickards's walking tour of the Scottish Highlands the previous July ('It was supposed to have been Italy, but I don't suppose I'll be visiting *that* country again for a while.') and the conversion of the new St Dunstan's building at Ovingdean, opened only two years before, into a hospital and training centre for newly blinded casualties of the war.

'So where are you going to put the existing residents?' enquired Miss Rickards, refilling her own cup and that of her guest. 'It must be rather hard on the long-term men, to have to turn out so soon after moving into that nice new accommodation.'

'Oh, we'll find places for them, never fear,' he said. 'There's a building at Church Stretton we're in the process of adapting. And most of our chaps understand perfectly

well that priority has to be given to the new cases. Why, some of 'em have got sons in the forces, and so . . .' He didn't need to finish the sentence.

'Quite,' said Maud Rickards drily. 'I think everyone knows that sacrifices have to be made.'

This oblique reference to what was uppermost in Rowlands's mind – his daughter's decision to leave St Gertrude's – was all that was said on the subject, until, a few minutes before eleven, he made a move to go.

'I'll walk as far as the mistress's office with you,' said the bursar. 'I know it isn't the first time you've been here, but finding one's way in college can be confusing.' Rowlands, recalling the seemingly endless corridors that were a feature of the place, was grateful for her offer. She gave him her arm.

'It'll be all right,' she said – and he guessed it wasn't only the forthcoming interview to which she referred. 'You'll see.'

The mistress's rooms were to be found at the end of a corridor on the first floor of the old wing. Rowlands and his companion were a few paces away, when the door opened, and someone came out – perhaps 'swept out' was a better description, thought Rowlands, feeling the brush of the man's voluminous doctor's gown, as the latter passed him.

'Good morning to you!' sang out this individual, to which Miss Rickards returned a suitably cordial reply. Footsteps tapped briskly away along the corridor.

'Now, what's the famous Aubrey Blake doing here, I wonder?' said the bursar, *sotto voce*. 'He doesn't often venture out of Trinity – let alone as far as St Gertrude's.'

'Blake?' said Rowlands. 'I don't think I . . .'

'Oh, you won't have heard of him!' said Maud Rickards. 'Although he fancies himself a bit of a star in his own field. Modern languages. His *real* interest is in art history, but of course we don't consider that a subject here. I gather his lectures on French painting are much admired by the aesthetic element in Cambridge. All young men, of course,' she added with a sniff. 'I can't imagine what brings him to *this* college . . . Well, here we are,' she went on, as they reached the mistress's door. 'Good to see you, Fred. Give my love to Edie, won't you?'

'I will,' he said, waiting until she had walked away before announcing his presence with a soft double-knock.

'Mr Rowlands. How very nice to see you again!' said the mistress, as she opened the door of her office – if that was the right word for what he recalled from previous visits to be a large and well-appointed sitting room. 'Do come in.' She guided him to a chair opposite her own in front of the fire. 'Can I offer you something? A cup of coffee, perhaps?' He explained that he had just come from Miss Rickards's room. 'Ah, so you'll have had some of her splendid Italian brew? In which case, how about a cigarette? I've Turkish or Virginian.' He accepted one of the latter, and she lit it for him, and then lit one for herself. 'I hope you and Mrs Rowlands are keeping well?' she said, when this little ceremony had been performed. 'It was so nice to see you both at the graduation ceremony in June. Although,' she added apologetically, 'one of the disadvantages of this job is that one never does get to talk to people for very long.'

'No,' he said. The meeting to which she referred had occurred during his last visit to St Gertrude's – one of the few occasions he'd been to the college, in fact, since that

previous, ill-fated, time five years before, when he and Edith had come as guests of Maud Rickards to an end-of-term garden party. Of course, at that time, Margaret hadn't yet applied to the college; it had been the mistress herself who'd suggested that Rowlands's eldest daughter, then only fifteen, should apply for a scholarship when the time came. With the school's encouragement, she had done just that. And just look where all that hard work had ended up, sighed Rowlands.

As if she guessed something of what was passing through his mind, Miss Phillips said, 'You wanted to talk to me about Margaret?'

'Yes. That is . . .' He hesitated. 'I gather from talking to my daughter earlier that I'm not supposed to ask questions about . . . well, whatever it is she's made up her mind to do.'

'She's told you that much, has she?'

'And no more than that,' he said. 'In fact, I can honestly say that I'm almost as much in the dark as I was before . . . which is saying something,' he added with a smile.

If she got the joke, it wasn't obvious from the gravity with which she replied. 'One thing I *can* tell you is that your Margaret is a very clever young woman. As I mentioned when we spoke on the telephone, she's set to become one of our most outstanding alumnae. We've high hopes that she'll eventually come back to us.'

'"Eventually" being the key word,' he said.

'Well, yes . . .' He couldn't see the shrug with which Beryl Phillips accompanied the words, but it was implicit in her tone. 'This war,' she said, 'has thrown everything out of kilter.'

'Wars do,' he replied. 'And I know you can't tell me any more about what Margaret will be doing. Although I think the very fact that it's such a secret tells its own story.'

'It's work of national importance on which she'll be engaged,' said Miss Phillips. 'You – and your wife – have a right to know that much.'

'Thank you,' he said. 'It's rather what I thought.'

So that, it seemed, was that. Rowlands took his leave of his daughter ('At any rate, we'll be seeing you at Christmas, won't we?' – 'I don't know, Daddy. I hope so.') and got his taxi to the station. In spite of Miss Phillips's words of reassurance, it was with a heavy heart that he left the university town. What depressed him wasn't just the thought of how he'd explain things to Edith, as the fact that he now had a pretty good idea of the kind of world to which their daughter would now belong. The little experience he'd had of the secret service had been acquired through his relations with one member of it in particular: the woman who called herself Iris Barnes, and with whose path his had crossed on several occasions since their first meeting in London more than ten years before. From her, he had learnt as much, if not more, than he wanted to know about the workings of the world of espionage.

He wondered now, as he stood in the corridor of the packed train, whether it might make sense to try to get in touch with Miss Barnes again, then realised that he had no idea how to do this. Besides which, he thought wryly, Margaret would never forgive him if he went behind her back to find out what exactly it was that constituted the 'work of national importance' on which she'd be engaged.

As the train rattled over the points outside Bishop's Stortford, he puzzled it out: what in Heaven's name could the spies want with his gentle Margaret? She was only twenty-one – and hardly cast in the same worldly-wise mould as Iris Barnes. The latter, to Rowlands's certain knowledge, was fluent in several languages, as well as being a dab hand with a .38, whereas Meg . . . 'One of our most outstanding alumnae,' Miss Phillips had called her. So was *that* the reason she'd been chosen for this particular kind of work? He found it hard to imagine how a superior knowledge of mathematics might be an asset to the war effort.