Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Tom-All-Alone's

Written by Lynn Shepherd

Published by Corsair

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Constable & Robinson Ltd
55-56 Russell Square
London
WC1B 4HP
www.constablerobinson.com

First published in the UK by Corsair,
an imprint of Constable & Robinson, 2012

Copyright © Lynn Shepherd 2012

The right of Lynn Shepherd to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs & Patents Act 1988

An extract from *The French Lieutenant's Woman* © 1969 J. R. Fowles Ltd,
reprinted by permission of Aitken Alexander Associates Ltd

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are
either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously,
and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual
events or locales is entirely coincidental

All rights reserved. This book is sold subject to the condition
that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold,
hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover
other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in Publication
Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-78033-166-9

Printed and bound in the UK

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Cover design: www.leonickolls.co.uk

For Stephen

Prologue

London. Michaelmas term lately begun, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets as in a Flanders field, and almost as little hope, at least for some. It is the greatest city in the world – quite possibly the greatest ever known – but on this dark early winter day in 1850 you might be forgiven for thinking you've been transported, on a sudden, to a circle of hell even the devil has given up for lost. If a single man can ever be said to stand for a city, then it is this city, in this year, and the name of that man is Charles Dickens. But if that name conjures up colour and carol singers and jolly old gentlemen, then think again. These streets are no cause for comedy, and know no tones but grim and grey. More than two million souls, and as many as a third of them sunk in a permanent and repellent destitution that will turn your stomach long before it touches your heart. Night and day London moves and sweats and bawls, as riddled with life as a corpse with maggots.

From where we stand, the air is so deadened with a greasy yellow fog that you can barely see three paces ahead, and risk stumbling in the street over milk-cans, broken bottles, and what look at first like rat-ridden heaps of rags, until they stare back at you with gin-hollowed eyes, and hold out their

blackened hands for hard cash. The shops are lit two hours before their time, but the gas gutters, and the windows are sallow and unappealing, the merchandise filmed with the same sticky brindling of soot that will coat your clothes and line your lungs by the time we're done.

But enough. This is not what you came here for. Muffle your face, if you can, against the stink of human and animal filth, and try not to look too closely at what it is that's caking your boots, and sucking at your tread. And keep your pocketbook close as we go – this part of town is as silent with thieves as it is strident with drunks. We have a way to go yet and the day is darkening. We must find him soon, or risk losing him altogether.

Chapter One

The Young Man

The young man at the desk puts down his pen and sits back in his chair. The fog has been thickening all afternoon, and whatever sun might once have shone is now sinking fast. The window before him is as blank as if it has been papered over. For all he can see outside, the room might give on the flat expanses of the Essex marshes, or command the ancient forests of the Kentish heights. Or it might – as indeed it is – be on the first floor of a London lodging-house, in a narrow street not far from the British Museum. That fact is significant in itself, as we shall see, and it is not necessary to be a detective (as this young man is) to make a number of other useful deductions about the character of the person who inhabits this space. He is a single man, this Charles Maddox, since the bed is narrow, the room small, and neither is very clean. He is careless of his appearance, to judge by the waistcoat hanging on the wardrobe door and the tangle of shirts spilling from the chest, but there are other things he does care about, for a large black cat has appropriated the best and warmest chair, which looks to have been placed next the fire for precisely that purpose. He is a sentimental young man then, but more than anything else he is a curious one. For by his possessions shall ye know him, and this room is a mirror of Charles Maddox's mind. He has little interest in languages, so has never come across the word

Wunderkammer, but he has created one nevertheless – a small but perfect 'cabinet of wonders'. Every level place carries its prize – mantelpiece, bookcase, desk, even the wash-stand. An ostrich egg, and a piece of pale grey stone, slightly granular to the touch, printed with the whorl of a perfect ammonite; the blank face of an African mask, bearded with woven fibre, and next to it something black and shrivelled and eyeless that looks disconcertingly like a human head; a wooden box of old coins, and a blue jar filled with shells and pieces of coral; a case of stuffed birds feathered in primary colours that cannot be native to these drab shores, and a scimitar blade with a worn and battered handle that clearly once boasted jewels. There are maps, and prints, and charts of the voyages of the great explorers. And one whole wall is lined with bookshelves, many not quite straight, so that the volumes lean against the slope like dinghies in a wind. We are beginning to form a picture of this young man, but before you smile indulgently at the hopeless clutter, and dismiss him as a mere dilettante, remember that this is the age of the gifted amateur. Remember too, that in 1850 it is still possible – just – for an intelligent man to span the sciences and still attain a respectable proficiency in them all. If, of course, he has money enough, and time. If, in short, he is a gentleman. It is the right question to ask about Charles Maddox, but it does not come with an easy answer.

Nor, it appears, does the task he is presently embarked upon. There is nothing scientific about this, it seems. He stirs, then sighs. London is full of noises, but today even the barrel-organ on the corner of the street is stifled and indistinct, as if being played underwater. It's hardly the afternoon for such an unpromising task, but it can be postponed no longer. He picks up his pen with renewed determination, and begins again. So engrossed is he – so concerned to find words that will keep

hope in check but keep it, nonetheless, alive – that he does not hear the knock at the door the first time it comes. Nor the second. It is only when a handful of grit patters against the glass that Charles pushes back his chair and goes to the window. He can barely make out the features of the man standing on the steps, but he does not need to know the name, to know the uniform. He pulls up the sash.

'What is it?' he calls, frowning. What business has Bow Street here?

The man steps back and looks up, and Charles finds he recognizes him after all.

'Batten – is that you? What do you want?'

'Message for you, Mr Maddox. From Inspector Field.'

'Wait there – I'm coming down.'

The message, when he gets it, is no more than two scrawled lines, but such brevity is only to be expected from such a man, and in such circumstances.

'The inspector thought you'd like to see for y'self, sir,' says Batten, stamping his feet against the cold, his breath coming in gusts and merging into the fog. 'Before we do the necessary. Seeing as you're taking an interest in the Chadwick case.'

'Tell Inspector Field that I am indebted to him. I will be there directly.'

'You know where it is? I'd take you m'self, only I'm on my way home and it's the opposite way.'

'Don't worry – I'll find it.'

Charles gives the man a shilling for his trouble, and returns to his room for his coat and muffler. The former is over the back of the chair, the latter – it turns out – under the cat. There is the customary tussle, which ends in its customary way, and when Charles leaves the house ten minutes later, the muffler remains behind. There is probably nothing for it but to buy

another one; when he can afford it. He turns his collar up against the chill, and disappears from sight into the coaly fog.

There's no lamp at the corner of the street, just the little charcoal-furnace of the chestnut-seller, which throws a red glow up at her face, and on to the drawn features of four dirty little children clustered around her skirts. Not for the first time, the woman has a swollen black bruise around one eye. As he steps off the kerb, Charles only just avoids being trampled under an omnibus heaving with people that veers huge out of the dense brown haze into the path of an unlit brewer's dray. He springs back just in time, but not fast enough to avoid a spatter of wet dung from hip to knee. It's not an auspicious start, and he hurls a few well-honed insults at both 'bus driver and crossing-sweeper before dodging through the traffic to the other side and heading south down an almost deserted Tottenham Court Road. No street-sellers tonight, and the only shop still open is Hine the butcher, who runs no risk of thieving raids in the lurid glare of his dozen jets of gas. A couple of old tramps are warming their faces against the glass, but paying customers are sparse. The afternoon seems suspended between day and dark, and the circles of milky light cast by the gas-lamps dispel the gloom no more than a few feet around. A gaggle of raggedy link-boys follow him hopefully for a while, tugging at his coat-tails and offering him their torches: 'Light you home for sixpence!' 'Darn't listen to 'im – I'll do it for a joey – whatcha say, mister? Can't say fairer than that.' Charles eventually shakes them off – literally, in one case – and smiles to himself when one lad calls after him asking if he can see in the dark, ''cause yer going to need ta'. Even in daylight, the city changes character every dozen yards, and a fog like this plays tricks with the senses, blanking out familiar landmarks and shrinking distances to no further than the eye can see.

Having patrolled these streets for the best part of a year, Charles should know them, if anyone does, but there is something else at work here – an ability he has to render the map in his head to the ground under his feet, which explains the pace of his stride, and the assurance of his step. A modern neurologist would say he had unusually well-developed spatial cognition combined with almost photographic memory function. Charles has more than a passing interest in the new advances in daguerreotyping, so he might well understand the meaning of those last words even if not the science behind them, but he would most certainly smile at the pretension. As far as he's concerned, he's been doing this since he was a little boy, and thinks of it – in so far as he thinks of it at all – as little more than a lucky and very useful knack.

Once past St Giles Circus, the line of shops peters out and the road narrows. A few minutes later Charles stops under a street-lamp before turning, rather less confidently this time, down a dingy side lane. It's unlit, with alleys branching off left and right. He stands for a moment, allowing his eyes to adjust to the dark, and wonders if he should have hired one of those boys after all. He rates his chances well enough against a lone footpad, but for a year or more this part of London has been notorious for a spate of garrotting attacks, and the men who use these miserable backwaters for cover, ply that trade in threes and fours. No one but a fool or a foreigner would venture willingly into such a maze of dilapidated houses, seeming blind and yet teeming behind, as Charles well knows, with a desperate human detritus that has no choice but to call this vile place home. Even the fog seems more malevolent here, funnelling down from the main thoroughfare, and eddying ghostily into archways and casements. Charles takes a deep breath and starts off again, his ears suddenly attentive to

the whispers and creakings of the crumbling tenements on either side. Half a dozen times in as many months the ground round here has been shaken by a sudden crash as one of these structures has subsided, throwing a tower of dust into the dirty London sky. The last was barely three weeks before, and when the scavengers moved in to rake the wreckage, they found more than two dozen bodies – men, women and children – huddled together for warmth half-naked, in a room less than fifteen feet square.

The further Charles goes, the thicker the fog becomes, and once or twice he thinks he sees darker shapes and shadows loom and then retreat before him – if they are men they do not show themselves, leaving his agitated imagination oppressed by phantasms. But only too horribly real is the sound of the fever cart, creaking its own slow way through the narrow alleys somewhere nearby, the cries of warning smothered in the dead air. He's more relieved than he'll admit to turn a bend in the alley and see the entrance to a low covered way, with a solitary lamp looming at the farther end. He ducks his head and starts along the tunnel, though not without at least one anxious glance behind; if ever there was a place precisely adapted for thieves to waylay the unwary, then this is surely it. The walls are running with moisture that drips into pools on the floor and slides in runnels down the back of his neck, and he wishes, not for the first time, that he'd been firmer with the cat. He quickens his step, but the further he goes, the more he becomes aware of an all-too-familiar sickly reek. When he comes out into the open, it's to an iron railing and a choked and ruined burial ground, crowded in on all sides by half-derelict buildings, the gravestones all but level with the first-floor windows, where here and there a dim light still shows through the cracked and patched-up panes. The gate is standing open, and there are

bull-dog lanterns on the far left side, close by what looks like the twisted stump of a stunted yew tree.

The police.

He can't make out how many there are, but they're expecting him, and one calls across in a voice he recognizes. It's Sam Wheeler – Cockney chipper and as quick as ginger. They worked together for six months out of St Giles Station House. It was Wheeler who'd taught him the ways of the London underworld, and Wheeler who'd been at his side the night Field first took him to Rats' Castle and the rookeries.

'Hey, Chas!' he cries. 'We're over 'ere. Mind where you're walkin' though, or you'll find your body being committed to the ground rather sooner than you bargained for.'

Charles looks around. Humidity hangs like contagion in the atmosphere, staining the mouldering bricks and catching at the back of his throat. He knows all about the risk of infection in a place like this, and finds himself wishing to God he'd never come – never taken a case that has been doomed from the start and can only end in failure. But then he reminds himself that it isn't just a case, it's *the* case – the only one he has, and the only one he's ever likely to have, if he gets himself a reputation for letting people down. He starts to pick his way slowly towards Wheeler, but the spongy earth sinks and sighs unnervingly under his weight. He swallows his scruples and steps on to one of the mossy half-buried stones, but his foot slips from under him on the slimy surface and he loses his balance and lurches forward, landing heavily on his side. He swears under his breath, but as he shifts his weight to get back up, his fingers push down through the mud into something else – something cold and viscid and putrid that comes away in his hand. He jerks his arm away and gets quickly to his feet, feeling the delayed prickle of cold adrenalin as he breathes through his

mouth and feels in his pocket for a handkerchief, willing himself not to retch like a woman. He glances across at Wheeler, wondering if he saw, but thankfully the constable's attention is engaged elsewhere.

'Look at that rat!' Sam cries, pointing. 'Did you see it? What a monster! Almost as big as a dog! Ho – there he goes – there – straight under that stone!'

Charles wipes his hands hurriedly and throws the handkerchief from him in disgust. No amount of laundering will persuade him to use that thing again. Then he steadies himself and sets off again, and as he comes closer to the light, he can see that the ground about the tree stump has been disturbed. He edges closer and squats down, telling himself to forget the stench and the squalor and concentrate on looking carefully and thinking clearly. That's what he's good at: using his eyes and applying his mind – just as he was taught by his great-uncle Maddox, the celebrated thief-taker. His parents had named him Charles in Maddox's honour, though not without some misgivings: Maddox might have made a lot of money out of his chosen profession, but it was not one well regarded by the middle classes. Not then, when Maddox was practising, in the early years of the century, and certainly not now. But then again, the Victorian bourgeoisie can rely on a properly constituted police force, which is a luxury their grandparents never had. Thief-taking may never have been a particularly respectable occupation, but it was an essential one, nevertheless, and all too often the only bulwark between order and anarchy. 'Charles Maddox' he is then, the second of that name, but his parents could hardly have expected he would want to emulate his predecessor in a far more significant way, and take up the same base calling. When he turned seventeen, Charles reluctantly agreed to follow his father into medicine in

a last forlorn attempt to salvage their relationship, but he lasted less than a year before giving it up and beginning the world again where his heart really lay – with the Detective.

The second officer comes up now and stands behind him, watchful but silent. Charles thinks he's seen him before, but can't remember his name. Clough, is it, or Cuss? Something like that, anyway. His face is as sharp as a hatchet and his skin as dry as an autumn leaf.

'So what do you make of it?' the man says eventually, in the same level tone he might use to buy a brisket or order a beer. Is it indifference – or just an appropriate and commendable detachment? Charles can't be sure.

'Can you tell me who found it?' he asks.

'Couple of lads, playing where they shouldn't. I doubt they'll be back here in a hurry.'

'And it was like this?'

'Nothing's been moved. Not yet.'

Charles bends down and looks more closely, straining his eyes in the low light. Without a word, the man brings the bull-dog lower, and Charles feels its warmth on his skin. It's clear to him now what must have happened. Judging by the exposed knots of red yew root, the last week's rain has washed at least an inch of mud from the surface of the soil. And what it's revealed is the tiny body of a newborn baby, still wrapped in a dirty blue woollen blanket, a scrap of white cotton tangled about the neck. He may never have completed his medical training, but Charles knows enough to make a pretty shrewd guess how long these bones have been here. In this waterlogged London clay, probably three weeks; certainly no more than four. The eyes are long gone, but wisps of pale hair are still pasted to the skull, and the flesh is largely intact, though almost black with putrefaction and scored with the marks of

teeth and claws. Indeed, the rats seem to have done an unusually efficient job with this one. One hand is completely gone below the wrist, but the fingers of the other are curled as if to a mother's touch. When Charles lifts the edge of the sodden blanket, the gaping belly is swarming with larvae. But that isn't the worst of it. Underneath the body he can already see the buried blue of another coverlet, and the broken ribcage of another small child. He glances up at the officer. 'Do you want to, or shall I?'

'Be my guest. It's not a job I particularly relish.'

Charles takes a pair of gloves from his pocket, and the officer hands him a small trowel. Five minutes' careful digging reveals three bodies buried under the first, one next to the other, exactly aligned. Indeed, they look for all the world like infants in a cradle. Sleeping soundly side by side, carefully swaddled against the night air. Charles sits back on his heels. 'So what do we think? Are we assuming it's a woman?'

The other man considers. 'Most likely, in my experience.'

'And the same one each time?'

'Hard to tell for sure. Could be two of them. The body on the top's a lot more recent, but the other three are like peas in a pod. Probably all went in together.'

Charles is silent a moment, then shakes his head. 'I disagree. The earth here's been turned over more than just once or twice. And surely even in this light you can see the difference in the bones.'

Not just the bones, in fact, but the flesh. One baby's face is smoothed almost doll-like – unnerving the first time, but Charles has seen many times what grave wax can do. The other two underneath are withering one after the other into parched cages of separating bones, their mummified flesh dried in tight leathery tendons, the closed lids stretched paper-thin.

Charles glances up. 'Whoever this woman was, she seems to have been trying to give them a decent burial – or the nearest she could manage. This last one looks like it even had a handkerchief or something put over its face – as if she couldn't bear to look at it. And yet she kept coming back – kept reopening the same grave.'

He stares at the open pit, struggling for a word to help make sense of it, and comes up only with 'tenderness'. It jars horribly with the evidence of his own senses – not just the sight of decomposing flesh, but the reek of decay eating into his skin and clothes – but the idea has caught his mind, and it will not go away.

The other man is dismissive; he's clearly had enough of this wild goose chase. 'Come on, it's no big mystery. She'd have needed time, even for a shallow grave, and this is the only part of the cemetery where you're not much overlooked. It's just common sense. Nothing more sinister than that.'

Charles nods; the man has a point – he should have thought of that himself. 'All the same, think about what that actually *meant*. Imagine digging over the same piece of earth time and time again, knowing full well what you were going to find. What kind of woman could do that? It goes against every idea we have of the sanctity of motherhood.'

The man laughs. 'Sanctity of motherhood, my arse. I thought they told me you'd been in the police? Most of the women round here have already got too many mouths to feed. Baby farms cost money; a pillow over the face is free gratis, and you know as well as I do that unless they're either very careless, or very unlucky, there's virtually no chance of getting caught. I've lost count of the number of dead babies I've seen fished out of the Thames, or found rotting in the street, but I can number the women we've prosecuted for infanticide on the fingers of

one hand. The courts have better things to do with their time. As have we.'

He turns and waves at Wheeler, beckoning him over.

'Come on,' he calls. 'There's nothing for us here. Just another routine child-killing.'

Charles sticks the trowel into the ground and stands up, his eyes glinting. 'So if dumping them in the river is so easy, why go to all the trouble of bringing them here? Not to mention the risk. It's because this place is consecrated ground – that's the only explanation that makes any sense. And that alone means this is a very long way from being *just another routine child-killing*.'

There's a snort, and Charles looks round to see Wheeler staring down into the gaping grave, a half-eaten apple in his hand.

'Jesus,' he says, taking another bite, 'if this is your definition of consecrated, give me hellfire any day. Looks like the last one they put in over yonder had to be stamped on to get 'im in. The coffin's rearin' up out of the ground like the Last Trump's already blastin'. Though at least 'e did *have* a coffin. Unlike these poor little buggers. Any use to you, Chas?'

Charles sees the other man's cool and quizzical eye; he's clearly been wondering all this time what right Charles has to be there, but has decided to say nothing. Charles shakes his head. 'I doubt it. The last anyone heard of the child I'm looking for was sixteen years ago, when it was taken to an orphanage at three months old. These bodies haven't been in the ground anything like that long.'

'You ain't got a lot to go on, if you don't mind me sayin' so,' says Wheeler, his mouth full. 'What's the chance of findin' one solitary kid in a town this size – dead or alive? You might pass it in the street this very evenin' and never know.'

Charles shrugs. 'I have a picture of the mother, and my client hopes the child may take after her.'