

Foreword

Dear Reader,

Welcome back! Probably.

Orlando returns to the universe of the Seven Sisters series, the magnum opus of internationally bestselling author Lucinda Riley – or, as she would occasionally allow me to call her, Mum.

Now, I know what you're thinking. Didn't *Atlas: The Story of Pa Salt* tie a neat bow around the saga? Absolutely. We finally discovered exactly who Pa Salt was and why he adopted each of his girls.

This, therefore, is not Book Nine.

I promise.

Mostly.

After I had finished *Atlas*, my mother's brilliant characters continued to roam around my mind, with one in particular repeatedly emerging from the throng: Orlando Forbes, the antiquarian bookseller first introduced in *The Shadow Sister*.

Orlando is a true eccentric, from his eloquent turn of phrase to his Edwardian dress sense. As a reader, I'd always interpreted his overt quirkiness as a facade, and I was desperate to scratch beneath the surface. At its heart, *Orlando* is a character study. It's been joyful discovering what makes him tick, who he loves, what he has lost . . . and, of course, throwing him into the heart of a great big Seven Sisters dual-timeline mystery.

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As you might imagine, the decision to return to this world was not taken lightly. The D'Aplièse family are not my invention, nor do I claim any credit for their success. My mother died in 2021 before she was able to write the final book in the series, having asked me to take over should the worst happen. There was never any doubt that I would keep my promise, but I worried greatly about whether *Atlas* would be a success. After all, I would somehow have to emulate my mother's voice whilst satisfactorily solving mysteries that had kept readers guessing for a decade.

Not that I thought about any of that when I was working, of course. The book was a tribute. I wrote it for Mum.

In truth, I only began to panic the day before publication. What if loyal Lucinda Riley readers hated what I had produced? What if I had done her a disservice? Thankfully, the vast majority seemed to accept the transition between authors, and I was thrilled by the reaction – as I hope Mum would have been too. Suddenly, I found myself being asked by readers and publishers alike whether there might be more to come.

Writing a novel that was already destined for publication was one thing; actively choosing to expand the canon myself was quite another.

The debate rattled about my mind for the best part of two years before I decided to put pen to paper on *Orlando*. The thing that settled it for me was becoming a father to twin daughters in 2024. During their first few months of life, when I would spend much of the night watching over them, it dawned on me that, should they one day choose to continue something I had created, I would feel not protective of it, nor anxious that it remained untouched, but immensely proud that it had meant enough to them to carry forward.

For the first time, I began to understand the decision not only as a writer but as a parent. I could imagine how moving it would be to see my own work living on through my children,

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shaped by their imaginations while still carrying something of mine within it. And I found myself wondering whether my mother might have felt the same.

So, there we are. Decision made. *Orlando* is here!

I have promised that this isn't Book Nine, and it isn't. If you're a new reader, you can pick up this novel having never heard the word 'Pleiades' and still find plenty to entertain you.

However . . .

It is also true to say that I left a couple of threads untied at the end of *Atlas*, including one storyline seeded by Lucinda Riley thirteen years ago and left completely unresolved – until now.

I've said too much.

Of course, there would be little point in returning to this universe without revisiting the family that readers have come to adore over the past thirteen years. Rest assured, all the sisters make an appearance in *Orlando*.

No, that isn't quite true. One is noticeably absent. After all, she is busy elsewhere, caught up in something far more terrifying . . .

I've said too much. Again.

Old friends are waiting for you. Turn the page.

Harry Whittaker, 2026

Part 1

1

Tenterden, Kent, England Christmas Eve 2009

The ringing of the shop bell startled me. I had been in the process of closing up the premises until the new year, which involved fiddling around with the vastly temperamental thermostat to set the heating for the upcoming week. I never bothered with the thing; why on earth would one choose some technology that man has managed without for centuries over an open fire? Nearly all of my days were spent within these walls, and I ensured that the coal bucket was always full.

If you pushed me, I suppose I would have to admit that it was an aesthetic decision as much as anything. When a customer enters a bookshop that deals in antiques and rare editions, they expect a certain nostalgic charm. I'd worked hard to create such an atmosphere in *O. Forbes Esquire – Rare Books*. When one enters, the shop unfolds like a treasure chest. Towers of timeworn hardbacks line the walls, their spines rubbed smooth by generations of eager hands. I display some in organised chaos atop wooden tables, and keep my more valuable texts in glass cabinets. Customers must request a key and my presence to view the contents.

A narrow staircase curls towards the upper gallery at the

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rear of the shop, where Persian rugs soften each step and afternoon light illuminates rows of leather-bound classics. This is my sanctum, a place where I can often be found lingering behind my heavy walnut counter, cataloguing with the solemn devotion of a curator tending relics.

Naturally, not all of my spoils are on display for purchase. Some volumes are kept out of sight, wrapped in parchment and annotated with my looping script. Some carry old family secrets; others letters written but never sent. I guard these truths with a determined ferocity. After all, such texts are not just words. They are the very breath of the past.

Nonetheless, I have bills to pay, and that requires me to sell as many books as I possibly can. Thankfully, the shop boasts good foot traffic. It sits tucked beneath the sloping eaves of an old Victorian terrace, with thin-paned windows that show off my wares.

I used to be very protective over my books. Once upon a time, my shop was a tax-efficient way to accrue a remarkable personal library. Every time I was forced into a large sale, I would wince, wondering whether the purchaser was worthy of owning such a remarkable item.

Ah, the arrogance of youth.

However, I am glad to say that as the years have passed, I have experienced a change of heart. For that, I have my ever-faithful shop manager to thank. Employing Miss Star D'Aplière was one of my better decisions. Not only is she a first-rate staff member, but she has taken on the much harder project of a romantic relationship with my cantankerous older brother, Mouse. What *on earth* she sees in him I am not entirely sure, but her grace and patience have made him a better man.

Miss Star's humanistic philosophy has allowed me to experience the thrill of pairing a book with a new owner. No longer do I roll my eyes when I hear a customer requesting assistance, nor do I attempt to confuse them with literary babble when

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they make an enquiry. In short, I am proud to say that these days, Orlando Forbes thoroughly enjoys selling books.

Nonetheless, I was reluctantly winding down operations for seven days. Star had insisted that I join the family at High Weald for Christmas. Although I generally preferred my own company at this time of year (it is an excellent time to get some serious reading done), I had been reminded of the importance of one's kinsfolk during a memorial service for Star's adoptive father, Atlas Tanit, this summer.

There wasn't a chance of my declining her invitation.

That meant battling with the automated central heating, because the worst thing in the world for the health of books is damp. One has to nurse them through winter so that they might avoid catching the dreaded 'paper jaundice'. If the humidity levels are too high, pristine antique pages can become infected with yellowy-brown spots. Not only does this impact their financial value, but I personally feel as though I have failed them in my role as their guardian.

I was so engrossed in the digital symbols and dials of the thermostat that, when the bell above the door gave a tinkle, I jumped rather pathetically.

'Hello,' muttered the figure who stood in the doorway. 'Sorry to startle you. Are you open?' The man was tall and imposing. His shadow, created by the street lamp outside, stretched deep into the shop.

'No need to apologise, my dear fellow,' I replied, gathering my composure. 'We . . . well . . .' I checked my watch. It had just gone seven. 'I've neglected to lock the door, so I suppose we are. Or rather, *I am*. My shop manager has already gone home for Christmas.'

I drew myself away from the thermostat and ventured towards the stranger. He wore an overcoat that brushed his boots, and a trilby hat that was dipped low to hide most of his face. My eye was drawn to a small red pin attached to

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his lapel, which glinted in the light. It looked a little like a flower.

‘You’re lucky to catch me at this hour on Christmas Eve. I’m about to shut for the year. Now.’ I clapped my hands together theatrically. ‘How can I help you?’

The man took a step inside, and closed the timber-framed glass door behind him.

‘I’m looking for something.’

‘A last-minute Christmas present, perhaps? Don’t worry, old chap, I can most definitely assist in that department.’ I stood tall and rolled my shoulders back. It was time to impress my customer and earn my money. ‘Tell me everything about her.’

The stranger’s head tilted to one side. ‘I’m sorry?’

‘What does she like? Is she a reader who’ll benefit from some literary curio that will make you appear impressive?’ I indicated a cabinet to my left. ‘If she likes poetry, then may I recommend the first edition copy of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* that I have in stock?’ The stranger remained still, so I continued. ‘Whitman kept expanding the anthology throughout his life, and therefore no two editions are the same.’

‘Er . . .’ My guest was lost for words.

I raised my hands reassuringly. ‘I thought as much. This gift is a sentimental gesture for a light reader. In that case’ – I sighed, probably rather patronisingly – ‘might I direct you to this little Christmas gift table I’ve assembled?’ I crossed the shop floor. ‘There’s a first edition copy of *The Snowman* here. It’s quite sweet. I can let that go for seventy pounds.’ I glanced back at the stranger, who hadn’t moved from the doorway. I beckoned him over. ‘Please feel free to come and have a look. I’ve got a thirtieth anniversary edition of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* too. Or perhaps your lady would prefer *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*? It comes in two volumes, both bound in red leather by The Folio Society.’ I was met with silence. ‘They would look *lovely* on your partner’s bookshelf.’

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The stranger shifted about uncomfortably. ‘I don’t have a partner actually.’

If I were a peacock, my tail feathers would have shamefully receded.

‘Ah, I apologise. I arrogantly assumed that you were here for some last-minute panic buying.’ I gave a shrug. ‘It’s been the majority of my day. Anyway, I’ve chuntered on for long enough. You mentioned you were looking for something in particular?’

The man nodded. ‘Yes. But I think it’s rather difficult to come by.’

‘Wonderful!’ I exclaimed. ‘Those are my favourite books. What is it you’re searching for?’

The man paused a moment before answering. ‘A *Christmas Carol*. A first edition copy.’

I gave a frown. ‘Hmm. Yes, that will pose a challenge.’ I took a moment to rifle through my mental catalogue. ‘I definitely don’t have anything in stock. And I couldn’t tell you the last time I saw one come up in an auction.’

‘No.’ The man gingerly removed his trilby, revealing silver hair that was thick and tousled. My gaze moved down to his face. Shadowy angles shaped his cheekbones, as if they had been eroded by the wind. He wiped his brow, and I got a glimpse of his dark, steady eyes. ‘Do you mind if I sit down? I’ve been walking for quite a while.’

‘My dear chap, of course!’ I nipped behind him and pulled forward one of the shop’s yellow velvet reading chairs.

‘Thank you.’ The man sank into it gratefully.

‘Not at all. Can I get you a beverage? Water? Tea?’

His eyes lit up at the suggestion. ‘Goodness, if it won’t put you out too much, I’d love a drop of something hot.’

‘Well, it might not be volcanic, but I’ve got some Earl Grey left in the pot. Milk and sugar?’

‘A splash and two sugars, if that’s not too much trouble.’

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‘Fine.’

I walked briskly to the little kitchenette in the rear of the premises, checking my watch again. My brother, Mouse, had given me strict instructions *not* to be late for dinner at half past seven. Apparently, Miss Star had spent the afternoon preparing a ham boiled in ginger beer, which I had been instructed to praise with every mouthful.

But a call from a mysterious stranger, late on Christmas Eve . . . how could I resist a brief conversation? I made my way back to the front of the shop with a slightly tepid mug in hand.

The man seemed to be very tired, his head resting upon his closed fist when I delivered him his tea.

‘Here we are. Have you been overindulging in the festivities?’ My guest looked confused again. ‘You seem weary to the bone.’

‘Oh.’ The man exhaled. ‘I apologise. I was rushing to get here.’ He gulped his tea, and I saw the warm liquid passing through his body and heating every inch, like water rushing into a cast-iron radiator. ‘Thank you for the tea.’

‘No need to thank me.’ I pulled up the other velvet reading chair, perched, and slapped my hands upon my knees. ‘My name is Orlando, by the way. Orlando Forbes.’

‘I know,’ he replied.

I admit that I inflated like a balloon. ‘Oh, really? Does my reputation in this universe precede me?’

The man gave a small chuckle. ‘Your name is above the door.’

‘Ah.’ It was true. I’d spent most of my adult life running *Arthur Morston Books* in London, and *O. Forbes Esquire – Rare Books* was a relatively new venture.

‘I’m pulling your leg.’ The man smiled. ‘I was told that you were the man to procure the item I’m searching for.’

‘Oh. By whom?’

The stranger cast his dark eyes downwards. ‘Do you know much about the *true* first edition of *A Christmas Carol*?’

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I sank back into my chair, tapped my fingers together, and entered the deep caves of my literary cortex. ‘Well,’ I began. ‘Chapman and Hall was the publishing house, I’m pretty certain of that.’ This seemed to please the man. I continued. ‘The binding was red.’

‘Reddish-brown,’ he interjected.

‘Very well, reddish-brown, with gilt-decorated covers.’

The man leaned forward, clearly wanting more. ‘That’s all well and good. But do you know what makes it a *true* first?’

I furrowed my brow, not wishing to admit defeat. ‘The woodcuts in the text around the illustration plates,’ I replied. This elicited no response. ‘No, how silly of me. That wouldn’t necessarily be unique to the first printing.’ My guest shook his head. ‘I, of course, should be thinking of the title page . . .’ He raised a single eyebrow. ‘Or, rather, the . . . endpapers?’ I offered.

‘Exactly right.’

I was rarely reduced to the role of pupil in such matters. Clearly this gentleman had a special interest in Dickens’ work. ‘I am rather sorry to admit that, without research, I couldn’t tell you what exactly it is *about* the endpapers that indicates a true first edition. You will have to enlighten me on this occasion.’

My guest finished his mug of tea with a grand swig. ‘It’s the colour. The *very* first books to ever have been published contain green endpapers. But there are probably only a handful in existence.’

‘Define a handful,’ I pressed.

The man shrugged. ‘Perhaps four or five?’

My eyes widened. ‘Good Lord,’ I breathed.

‘Every print run that followed has yellow endpapers,’ my guest confirmed.

I scratched my head. ‘I am amazed that I am unaware of this edition.’

A slight smile crept onto his lips. ‘Very few are.’

‘Noted.’ This would certainly be a challenge. ‘Are you absolutely

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adamant that the copy you want contains green endpapers? It won't be a simple process, I'm afraid. If you might be satisfied with a first edition that wasn't *quite* the first printing, then I could probably procure something relatively quickly.'

'No.' The man pursed his lips and shook his head. 'It *has* to be the very first printing. Green endpapers. I'm not interested in anything else.'

He was unyielding on the matter. I gave my head a scratch and made a mental calculation. 'Very well, I will start making some enquiries. I assume you know that this item won't be inexpensive. I estimate that it will probably cost you the best part of fifty thousand pounds.'

The man sighed. 'I thought as much.'

Seeing his pained expression, I resolved to convince the customer that there were other options available to him. 'Clearly the green endpapers are important to you. But, if money is an issue, I could find a very nice copy that I'm sure would satisfy your—'

He raised a hand to stop me. 'No. It really must be the very first edition. Hot off the printing press in December eighteen forty-three.'

'Might I ask why this particular edition is of such importance to you?'

A faint look of worry crossed his angular face, and his reply was a little curt. 'Why do you assume that it is?'

I defused the odd tension with a hearty laugh. 'Might I be so bold as to remind you that you've come barrelling into my bookshop late on Christmas Eve and practically collapsed into a chair? One hardly needs the deductive powers of Sherlock Holmes to know that this book carries some personal significance.' I held his gaze, desperate for the inscrutable character to provide me with an answer.

'Does there need to be a reason?' he asked.

I sat forward, my elbows on my knees. 'I assure you, when

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you have been in this game as long as I have, there is *always* a reason – be it that you are a collector, or an admirer of a certain printing press . . . or that the story has been so influential in your life that you feel the need to own it in its purest, most authentic form.’

My guest eyed me for a moment. ‘Very well. The story is important to my family.’

Clearly this was all the information he was willing to provide. ‘Well, you’ve picked the right man for the task. I shall be like the proverbial hound with a bone.’

‘I hope so.’

We sat in a silence that began to feel slightly heavy. I glanced down at my wrist. Seven twenty. ‘Righto, faithful customer, I’m afraid I really must dash. I have a ham to attend to.’ My guest looked suddenly anxious, like a puppy being abandoned in the snow. I moved to allay his fears. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll take your details, and we shall stay in close touch as I embark on the search.’

I jumped to my feet, and went to retrieve my leather-bound notebook from behind the walnut cashier’s desk. ‘I don’t believe I caught your name earlier.’

The man stood up. ‘It’s Topper. Fred Topper.’

I stared at him for a moment. ‘Mr Topper. It’s been a pleasure. How might I best contact you? I’m probably slightly better on the telephone than I am on electronic mail. Does that suit?’

The man hesitated. ‘I am afraid I’m currently without a phone.’

‘The dreaded email it shall be then. What’s your address?’

He shook his head. ‘I’m without a computer too.’

‘My dear chap, you’re “off-grid” so to speak. I’m highly envious. Shall I just take a postal address then? I can write to you with any updates.’

Fred Topper was flustered. ‘I’m actually rarely at home, so I’m not sure that would work.’

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I closed my notebook, but gave him a warm and reassuring smile. 'Well, you know where to find me.'

He looked relieved. 'Exactly. I will return.' Fred looked at me imploringly. 'You'll do your best to find it, won't you? It really is hugely important to me.'

I gave him a contemplative nod. 'I will. As long as you give me your word that you *will* come back. If I do find this book, I will first need to purchase it at great expense before selling it on to you.' I folded my arms. 'You see, I'm not generally in the business of accepting promises from strangers with absolutely no contact details.' Topper shifted about awkwardly. 'But . . . it *is* Christmas. And you happen to have caught me at the tail end of an extraordinary couple of years.' I folded my arms and looked heavenwards. 'If they have taught me anything, it is that if someone requires assistance, you should give it willingly and in good faith.'

Topper approached me and offered his hand. 'I will come back. I swear.'

'Good show. I'll start the search in January.'

He gave me a faint smile, pulled his coat tight around him, and walked towards the door.

'Oh, you never told me who it was that recommended my services!' I called after him.

As Topper gripped the doorknob, he turned slowly back to me. 'Oh. Just . . . *Our Mutual Friend*.' He winked, and exited the shop as abruptly as he had entered.

'Merry Christmas, *Fred Topper*,' I muttered under my breath.

I dashed out from behind the cashier's desk and went to the rear of the shop, where I kept a great wall of orange popular classics from the 1940s and 50s. I ran my finger along the third shelf down. 'Dante, Defoe . . . Dickens!'

Star had arranged the authors in alphabetical order and done the same for the titles. Several battered but well-loved copies of *A Christmas Carol* sat to the right of *Barnaby Rudge* and

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Bleak House. I pulled one hungrily from the shelf, and started to flick through the thin pages.

‘Now, I’m sure that . . .’ I soon found what I was looking for. ‘Aha!’

There it was, plain as day. Stave Three:

‘Well! I’m very glad to hear it,’ said Scrooge’s nephew, ‘because I haven’t great faith in these young housekeepers. What do you say, Topper?’

Topper had clearly got his eye upon one of Scrooge’s niece’s sisters, for he answered that a bachelor was a wretched outcast, who had no right to express an opinion on the subject.

‘Fred Topper indeed!’ If my conversation with the stranger had put me on the back foot, sniffing out this little reference was a spectacular return to form. There was no doubt about it, the whole interaction had invigorated me: the urgent entry, the specificity of the request, the mysterious recommendation . . . not to mention the pseudonym.

‘This is delicious,’ I breathed. In truth, life had been a little dull after the closure of the Atlas Tanit affair. I missed the enigmas, the veiled truths . . . the *adventure* of it all. Selling books was one thing. But finding oneself engrossed in a plot straight out of a work of fiction was another thing entirely.

So, even if it was a risk, I would try and sniff out the first edition. And if I was successful, I was going to find out *exactly* why ‘Fred Topper’ was so desperate to get his hands on it.

I strolled back to my velvet chair and sank down into it, wondering who had recommended my services, and why the customer would not provide their name.

My contemplation was violently interrupted by the shrill ring of my mobile telephone. Limbs flailing, I searched my lanky person and located the infernal device in the breast pocket of my waistcoat.

‘You have reached Orlando Forbes, to whom am I speaking?’

‘We’ve been through this a thousand times. If you look at

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the screen before you answer the call, you'll see it's your brother, and we won't have to start each conversation with that ridiculous greeting.'

I exhaled. 'Oh, hello, Mouse. How are things?'

'You're already ten minutes late. We said half past seven for dinner.'

'Oh, drat and nonsense.' I confirmed my tardiness with my watch. 'I promise, I really did try to make it on time. I even had intentions of being early, scout's honour!'

Mouse sighed down the line. 'Luckily we always have an "Orlando plan" in place. Assuming you *would* be late, this ham's going to be ready at eight. I trust we can pull you away from your precious friends – sorry, I mean books – for then?'

'Of course, of course. I'm leaving now.' I hopped to my feet and grabbed my Edwardian frock coat from the hat stand behind the desk. 'I really have just had the most fascinating experience, dear brother. You see, this odd gentleman came into the shop and—'

'Yes, yes, tell me all about it at dinner.' I heard my young nephew's shrill, excited voice in the background. 'And I'm sure I don't need to remind you not to drop any clangers in front of Rory. Father Christmas is very much real, he will be visiting High Weald tonight, and the way he's able to get round every child in the world is because he and his elves can pause time. All right?'

Even though Mouse was unable to see me, I gave a salute. 'Jolly good. Festive temporal manipulation. Understood.'

'See you in fifteen. Bye.'

'Hang on, hang on!' I cried. 'I meant to arrange a taxi this afternoon, but the day got away from me. Would you mind asking your good lady wife to nip and pick me up?'

'For Christ's sake, Orlando.'

I heard another muffled voice through the receiver. It was soft and clipped. 'What's the problem?' Miss Star asked.

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‘Orlando wants picking up.’

My brother’s irritation was offset by a light laugh. ‘Well, what do you expect? It’s like asking Rory to get himself organised. Don’t worry, Orlando! I’m on my way. See you outside the shop!’

‘Thank you, dearest Asterope! I—’ Before I could get any more words out of my mouth, the line clicked dead.

I pulled on my leather gloves, grabbed my holdall from behind the desk and hurried out of the door, hitting the light switch as I did so.

