

THE
Disaster OF
DRURY LANE



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*THE MASTERS OF
DRURY LANE*

THE SCANDALS AND SCOUNDRELS OF
DRURY LANE

BOOK EIGHT

MERRY FARMER

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ONE



*THE DRURY LANE THEATER, LONDON –
1817*

After all the hard work of the cast and crew, months of trial and tribulation, and a sprinkling of luck here and there, *Lady of the Scullery* might just see the light of day—or the lamplight of night—after all.

Florizel Holland was gladder than he could say that they'd made it as far as they had. He stood in the wings, poised and ready to give the cue to the stagehand who would lower the curtain, eyes pinned to Thomas and Sarah as they swept across the stage and into their final pose.

“Forevermore, my lady of the scullery, I will love you,” Thomas delivered the closing line with passion.

With a relieved half-smile, Flory gestured to the stagehand, who pulled and tugged to bring the curtain down. A smattering of applause came from the select few in the audience who had been invited to the first dress rehearsal. Lady Giselle, the intrepid author of the play and Mr. Carter Dodd, the play's director, among them.

As soon as the bottom of the curtain hit the stage, Thomas and Sarah released their pose and let out deep breaths of relief, glad that things had, at last, gone well.

“Tremendous effort, everyone,” Flory called out to the actors on the stage, and to his intrepid stage crew. “Nice work with the curtain, Alexander,” he went on, stepping onto the stage and glancing up into the space above. “Good timing with the scene changes, Robert, Will. Brilliant work with the costume changes, Mary,” he told the wardrobe girl as he reached the other side of the stage.

The actors remained on the stage, consulting with each other about a few lines that had been missed or stage directions that had been confusing. From the house, Flory heard Dodd call for the curtain to be raised again, which Alexander did.

“Capital performance Thomas, Sarah,” Flory called to his friends on the stage, giving them encouragement before Dodd could tell them all the things they might improve on over the next two dress rehearsals, before opening night.

“You have all done well,” Dodd said, as if on cue himself. “I have only a few notes.”

Flory grinned and continued his circuit through the backstage area. He loved the theater. It was so predictable, and yet utterly unique, both at the same time. He had been a part of the theater his entire life, ever since his actress mother had given birth to him out of wedlock during the middle of a performance five-and-twenty years ago. His first breaths in the world had been filled with the scent of theatrical cosmetics,

lamp oil burning in enough quantity to light a stage, and costumes that had been worn night after night to the point where they were nearly ragged and steeped in the odor of the men and women who wore them.

All of those scents, and the sights and sounds of set pieces being shifted about, lines being rehearsed by those who were not on stage at that moment, and ropes, wood, and canvas creaking above, surrounded Flory now as he strode to the very back of the backstage area to have a word with Norman, his property master.

“Everything in order?” he asked the man, even as the sound of Dodd speaking from the stage filtered through the country scene backdrop that separated the part of the stage that the audience saw from the mysterious inner workings that they would never see—which was, by far, the more interesting part of things, to Flory’s mind.

“As much as can be expected at this point,” Norman said with a wink.

Flory had known Norman for the greater part of his life. The two of them knew how these things worked. In a few more days, all of the preparations the entire cast and crew, the eclectic Lady Giselle, and all of the investors and incidental contributors to the production would see the fruits of their labor.

Flory helped Norman reset a few of the key properties, then looped around for one last check of all the stage lamps before joining the rest of the cast on the stage.

“And I am certain our audience will adore everything we have created here,” Dodd was saying. “We will be the talk of London, make no mistake about it.”

“Hear, hear!” one of the supernumeraries called out, causing everyone else to cheer and laugh.

Dodd laughed along with them, took a deep breath, then said, “And with that, you are all dismissed. I will see you back here again on the morrow for our second dress rehearsal.”

Applause broke out on the stage, then everyone began to scatter, the actors heading for their dressing rooms and the stagehands to reset the stage and put everything in order for the next day.

Flory worked right along with them. As stage manager for the production, it was his sole responsibility to ensure that the crew did their jobs, just as a Master at Arms was on a ship. He was not the Captain, not even the First Mate, really, but once the audience was in their seats and the curtain had been raised, everything that transpired that was not the speaking of lines was his sole responsibility.

And as the theater was his life, he took that responsibility seriously.

Even if he rarely took anything else seriously.

“Enjoy yourself at the pub tonight, Sarah,” he teased the show’s leading lady as he popped his head into her dressing room during his final sweep of the stage. “Do not do anything I would not do.”

Sarah laughed out loud and turned to shake her head at Flory. “I am not certain there is much you wouldn’t do, Mr. Holland,” she said.

Flory laughed in return, sparing only a moment’s glance for Sarah’s half-dressed state. The glimpse of her milky bosom rising up over her stays and the hint of ankle she displayed under her dressing table did not do a single thing for him.

He walked on to the next dressing room and found Thomas stripped to the waist and in little more than his drawers. Now there was a sight that did quite a bit for him, though for professional reasons, he ignored the tightening of his breeches and the flush that spread across his skin. Thomas was not inclined in the ways he was, so he had no intention of embarrassing either of them by making advances. He’d tried that a few times in his younger days, and it had been an unmitigated disaster.

And if there was one thing the current production did not need at the moment, it was a disaster.

“Well done, Thomas,” Flory told the man with a smile. “Keep up the quality of your performance and perhaps next time they will allow you to be in the chorus.”

Thomas laughed at Flory’s jest. He was one of the most celebrated and sought after actors in all of London.

“And if *you* continue on as efficiently as *you’ve* been doing,” he said, “they might let you work the curtain.”

Flory laughed good humoredly at the teasing, then moved on to make certain everything was as it should be. And when

his final circuit was done, he glanced cautiously around, then slipped into the costume storage room, tucked in a far corner of the theater.

He had already chosen his costume and mask for that evening's activities, and though he did not dare change into it fully before reaching the club, he hurried to don as much of it as could be covered by a greatcoat as he made his way from Covent Garden up to St. James's. The quicker he was able to change, the quicker he would be able to reach Perdition for the masquerade night everyone who frequented the gaming hell and den of sin had been looking forward to all month.

Theaters were never truly quiet or empty, even after the audience departed and the actors went home for the evening. As Flory slipped out of the costume room—dressed partially in his masquerade costume and carrying the rest of it, along with the concealing mask he would wear—Dodd was still on the stage, striding back and forth and glancing up at the settings.

“I still don't like that backdrop,” Arthur, one of the stagehands in training, said to Dodd, though a man at Arthur's level had no business criticizing anything about the production.

Flory let Arthur's insolence go for the moment as he rushed out the theater's back door and into the alley. A few hangers on were loitering in the back, perhaps hoping to catch a glimpse of their favorite performers as they left, or perhaps settling in for the night because they had nothing better to do.

Flory ignored them as well as he set a swift pace towards Perdition.

Perdition had gained a reputation in the last few years for being one of the most ribald and licentious clubs in all of London. It was part gaming hell, part brothel, and all wickedness and enjoyment. While it was well known that the club's owners, Mr. Caesar Potts, Mr. Jasper Black, and Mr. Simon Beaumont, were men of Flory's same inverted tastes—indeed, all three men had male lovers to whom they were deeply committed, and whom they all lived with, some at the club—Perdition itself catered to all sorts.

It was something of a wonder that the club had not been shut down, even though its vices were an open secret. But as raucous as activities within the club's walls were, outwardly, it was the soul of discretion and peace. As Flory approached its imposing, Georgian edifice on Jermyn Street, he grinned over how quiet and respectable everything appeared. He himself was well known at the club, but the various tough and burly men who appeared to be idling their time near the building but not in relation to it were, in fact, bouncers who would intimidate anyone who was not in the know from going anywhere near the club.

Of course, Flory thought as he nodded to one of the bouncers, Henry, and headed up the stairs to Perdition's front door, the other reason the club had not been raided by constables and brought down in disgrace likely had to do with the fact that Mr. Potts's natural father was a duke of astounding influence who adored his illegitimate son, regardless of his proclivities or activities.

“Flory!” Flory was greeted at once as he stepped through the door by Mr. Black. “We were all wondering when you would arrive this night.”

“The dress rehearsal ran a bit longer than expected,” Flory explained as he shed his coat, then walked with Black to the dressing room where many a man like him changed from the person they were outside of Perdution’s walls into the person they wished to be.

“Never mind all that,” Black said. “There’s a faro game going on in the back room that I thought you would be particularly interested in.”

“Oh?” Flory perked up at once as he hurried to change out of the remaining bits of his clothing that were suitable for walking across London and into the brightly colored silks and satins that would have marked him at once as an invert, and a bit of a margery at that. “What sort of stakes?”

“Ridiculous ones,” Black told him with a pointed look.

Flory burst into a smile as he fastened his pink silk jacket, then turned toward the room’s mirror to quickly paint his face before he donned his concealing mask. “Ridiculous stakes are my favorite,” he said with a sideways grin for Black.

“Yes, we know,” Black laughed, thumping Flory on the back and nearly making him smear the kohl he was rimming his eyes with. “And how are your fundraising efforts progressing?”

Flory smiled at him in the mirror, finished with the kohl, then held his mask up to his face, gesturing for Black to tie it

in back.

“They are...progressing,” he said. It was a bit of a lie. His efforts to raise money to fund a home for distressed theater people in dire situations had reached a standstill as his attentions had been focused on *Lady of the Scullery*. “But with any luck, I shall win spectacularly at the tables tonight.”

Black laughed. “If anyone can triumph tonight, it is you, my friend,” Black said. “Though you should have a care. There is a new fellow at the club tonight, and he appears to be quite skilled at games of chance.”

“Oh?” Flory perked up as he adjusted his mask, then swept his hands over his costume for the night, giving it one final check. When he was satisfied, he turned to Black with a smile. “You know I love a new challenge.”

“I know you love a new anything,” Black told him. The two of them headed out of the dressing room and turned their steps toward the club’s back rooms. “You won’t be able to miss the new gentleman. He’s the blond with a stick up his arse.”

Flory nearly caught his breath at that brief description. He loved a man with a stick up his arse. He himself loved a man up his arse, whether he was a stick or not, but there was something about taming the gruff ones and melting them with charm that he reveled in.

“Is he...up for playing the game?” he asked Black.

Black, of course, knew precisely what Flory was referring to. He shrugged. “Unsure as of yet. But if anyone can find out,

it is you.”

“And his name?” Flory asked.

Black laughed. “You know better than to ask things like that. There are no names at Perdition.”

“Of course not,” Flory said with a wink as they entered the back parlor.

Perdition was arranged according to vice. For the men who had come to the club for the sort of lascivious entertainment the place provided, the salons on the left side of the house and the bedrooms upstairs were where they could find all that. For those who merely wanted to gamble, as they would at any gaming hell, the front parlors on the right were where they could find every sort of high-stakes game they wished.

But the parlors at the back of the house were for games of the highest and most unusual stakes. Only a select few were even allowed to venture into those rooms. They were guarded by men who were as large as they were loyal to the club. If a man gained admittance to those most private of rooms, it was a sign that he was in true favor with Perdition’s owners.

The back rooms of Perdition were Flory’s favorite place in the entire world, aside from the theater. He was greeted in a warm and friendly manner the moment he walked through the arched doorway. And he wasted no time at all having himself dealt into the faro game.

“I feel extraordinarily lucky tonight, gentlemen,” Flory announced to the other men there with a wide smile under his

half mask. “You are all about to lose a great deal of money to me.”

The familiar, though nameless, men that Flory bided his wicked, personal time with all laughed and enfolded him at once into the game.

“Come to lose all of your hard-earned money?” one of them—a thin, middle-aged gentleman who Flory was certain was a respected judge when he was not at Perdition—asked, slapping Flory on the shoulder.

“Come to win all of yours, you mean,” Flory replied.

The judge laughed in a way that indicated to Flory he’d enjoyed too much of the club’s fine spirits already, then shifted so that Flory could have his place. “Have at,” he said.

As the cards went around for the next hand, Flory turned his attention to the only unknown gentleman at the table. He could tell at once that the man was the newcomer Black had told him about. The man was, indeed, blond, not to mention fit and gorgeous in his well-tailored suit, which looked new. He sat stiff and straight, and his mouth was set in a firm, disapproving line under his mask. That mask was fashioned of black feathers to resemble a raven, and it did a magnificent job of concealing the man’s face entirely. Flory would not have recognized the man if he’d seen him without a mask five minutes later.

“And who have we here?” he flirted with the man, knowing that he, too, was concealed to the point of being utterly unrecognizable.

“No one,” the raven replied, seeming to ignore Flory as he picked up his cards.

That, of course, would not do. Flory felt the excitement of the challenge that the man had thrown down for him through his bones and his blood. And he was not too proud to admit that his cock noticed the man as well.

He decided right then and there to make himself known to the man. Experience had taught him to get the initial revelations over with quickly to spare himself and the other pain at a later time.

“No one?” he asked. “It would appear to me rather that you are a figment of my imagination and the object of my most fervent dreams, sir.”

The raven stiffened a bit and darted his eyes from his cards to meet Flory’s eyes. As long as he had been playing the game, Flory had learned how to tell when a man was interested in him in that way. And the raven was interested.

Thank Zeus and all his randy ways.

“I am here to play cards, sir,” the raven said, his deep voice deliciously stodgy.

Flory would adore taking the man apart and making him squeal and moan.

“As are we all,” he said, picking up his own cards and sending the man a flirty wink.

He caught the slightest flinch from the man and a hint of his cheeks heating under his mask. Both reactions filled Flory with a giddy sense of conquest. He might have preferred to be

on the receiving end of sexual congress, but at the same time, he adored being the conqueror.

The game proceeded, and for the first half hour or so, Flory played conservatively, waiting and watching to gauge the skill level of the other players. He won as much as he lost, noting which of the other gentlemen at the table were freer with their purse strings and which were careful in their wagers.

To his utter delight, it appeared as though the raven was not only a good player, he was a wealthy one as well. The stack of coins in front of him was already large, but it grew as hand after hand was played. Better still, because Flory himself was far more talented at these sorts of games than he was letting on, he was able to downplay his skill and wait until such a time as he could wager for the very highest stakes of all.

“What do you say to making this next hand more interesting?” he asked the raven, ignoring the other gentlemen at the table.

The others had figured out by that point, or so Flory guessed, that Flory was playing a deeper game with the raven. They all seemed amused and ready to assist Flory in any way they could.

“What do you suggest?” the raven asked in his stiff, gruff manner.

Flory glanced to the pile of coins in front of the man, then drank in the sight of the raven’s person. Either would be a prize to him, but to be fair to his purpose for playing cards to begin with, he needed to aim for the coins, first and foremost.

But that did not mean he could not create stakes that would ensure he could not lose, even if he lost.

“On this next hand, you wager everything you have,” he said, nodding to the raven’s pile of coins.

Though Flory could not see past the man’s mask, he felt the man frown. “For what purpose?” he asked. “You do not have the coins to match my wager.”

“I do not need coins,” Flory said, as coquettishly as possible. He even extended his leg under the table, nudging what he hoped was the raven’s leg. The raven jumped, which was a good sign he’d hit the right calf. “I have something of much greater value,” he purred.

“What is that?” the raven asked shortly.

Flory grinned from ear to ear. “I will wager myself.”

FNO



It was a mistake. All of it. Oliver Penhurst should not have been considering risking the stack of guineas in front of him on a hand of cards. He should not have been tempted by the human prize that was on offer—and a dangerously fetching prize the man in the comedic mask across the table from him was. He should not have been at the gaming hell that was so aptly named *Perdition*, and he would not have been, had he not been dragged there by an acquaintance from Oxford.

But more than anything else, Oliver should not have been in London at all, and he most definitely should not have been the Earl of Headington.

“Well?” the inexplicably alluring man across the table from him asked, his shapely, expressive mouth curved up in a teasing grin.

The fellow had dark, dancing eyes as well. Oliver could not decide which he would like more, that mouth wrapped around unmentionable parts of his anatomy or those eyes gazing into his.

Of course, he could have both. Those eyes gazing lustily up at him from the region on his groin while his cock was

buried deep in the man's—

“What will it be?” the comedian asked, his warm gaze fixed on Oliver, whether lasciviously or not.

Yes, Oliver thought to himself. What *would* it be? Frankly, he had no idea. He had no idea what he was doing in a salacious club, in London, or in possession of a title. Two short months ago, he had been comfortable in his quiet life, employed as a librarian at the Bodleian Library within Oxford University, where he had graduated nearly ten years before. He had never questioned anything, had never wondered about his distant cousin, never imagined that the man would die without issue, and that an entire earldom would fall on his shoulders. He had never imagined he would have a fortune that needed investing either, or that he'd be in London to consult with a university friend about such investments.

He'd never imagined that he would ever be granted the freedom to pursue certain other *interests* that most definitely fell outside the boundaries of his quiet life of reading and contemplation either. But there he was, sitting across a card table from a masked man who was rubbing his foot against the inside of his calf and wetting his lips as though he might leap across the table and devour him at any moment.

How things changed within the space of a single season.

“Good sir, I am awaiting your answer,” the comedian said, his somewhat lower-class accent filled with teasing.

“I am considering whether you are honest, sir,” Oliver replied, though that was not truly his concern.

In fact, he had the distinct feeling that the comedian was perfectly honest about what he wanted. He could sense the man's confidence, both with himself and with the hand of cards that had just been dealt to them. Oliver noted that none of the others at the table seemed particularly keen on joining the fun of the wager.

The wager was clearly a mask, as surely as the ones the patrons of Perdition were wearing that night, to hide a flat-out invitation to sin. Oliver was a bit taken aback by how bold the invitation actually was...and by how sorely tempted he was to accept it.

When was the last time he had dared to expose himself to another of his sort and to sate the need that he was certain every man felt for satisfaction? Any other man could simply visit a brothel or catch the eye of a willing maid to fulfill his desires. It was so very much harder for men like him. And the comedian, apparently.

But it did not seem like such an impossible feat here at Perdition. Oliver had seen things already that had made the hairs on the back of his neck and his prick stand up. That sort of vice seemed to be all around him, and if he could just—

“Enough of this,” one of the other gentlemen at the table huffed with impatience. “Are the two of you going to make moon eyes at each other across the table all evening or are we going to play faro?”

Oliver cleared his throat, heating over the way he'd drawn attention to himself by failing to act, even more so than he would have if he'd just gotten on with things.

Which seemed to be the means by which his life operated.

“I accept your wager, sir,” he blurted, looking only at the comedian across from him.

The comedian smiled, then slid down in his chair just enough to bring his foot—the enigmatic man had somehow managed to remove his shoe—all the way up to the tender flesh of Oliver’s inner thigh. He teased Oliver just enough to make him jump, then the comedian straightened and reached for the hand he had been dealt.

“Play away, then,” he said, flashing those intriguing, dark eyes of his at Oliver.

At first, Oliver was convinced the man had only suggested the game to get him away from the table and up to one of the rooms he had heard about on the floors above him. But as play progressed, he discovered that the comedian was quite good at cards. It occurred to Oliver, with a bit of disappointment, that the comedian was playing to win, that he wanted Oliver’s money instead of his person, and that the flirtation had been a ruse.

Then came the dilemma of whether to play the game to win himself or to lose what amounted to a tiny sliver of the fortune he’d inherited along with his cousin’s title to spare himself the temptation of staying at the club longer than he should.

In the end, fate decided for them, as the comedian was dealt inferior cards to Oliver’s.

“The gentlemen in the raven mask is the winner, sirs,” the dealer announced as everyone else at the table erupted into applause and teasing shouts.

“And what a prize he has won,” the man who had urged them to get on with the game said. “Good show, friend,” he added to Oliver with a wink.

Heat flooded Oliver. It was a mistake, a disastrous mistake, all of it. He was not supposed to be in a gaming hell, winning a night of sin with a man he did not know. His heart was not supposed to be racing and his cock thickening as the comedian stood up gracefully, extended his arms to his sides, and grinned.

“I am at your disposal, sir,” he said in a seductive purr.

Oliver stood abruptly, intending to collect his overall winnings, but not the comedian, and make as gracious a departure as he could. He got as far as gathering up his coins and depositing them into the purse he’d brought in with him, then stepping around the table, before his courage faltered.

His courage to resist, that was.

For why should he not be allowed a night of harmless enjoyment? This was London, after all, not the wilds of Oxford. He had not been allowed to indulge without shame or attachment since his student days, when everyone did whatever they liked with their fellows and collectively forgot about it the next day, when they flew off to resume their positions as ordinary members of society.

Those were the days.

“Come now, my dear raven,” the comedian said, meeting Oliver as he walked around the table and headed for the doorway. “There is no need to look so frightened. I solemnly promise to be gentle with you.”

Oliver flinched, heating even more at the man’s teasing. “How do you know if I want you to be gentle?” he asked.

Good God, he was flirting right back with the man. Nobility had made a fool of him.

The comedian beamed, his eyes shining as he directed Oliver down the hall toward a grand staircase that led up to the first floor. “You take my breath, sir,” he said. And yes, he sounded breathless, as though he liked things a little less than gentle.

“It was not my intention to take anything,” Oliver mumbled as they headed up the stairs.

“It never is,” the comedian teased him, bumping Oliver’s shoulder with his own. “But we must grab these things with both hands when they are presented to us, must we not?” he asked as they reached the top of the stairs.

Oliver had no immediate answer, but it turned out none was needed. The comedian was more than happy to answer himself as they started down the hallway at the top of the stairs.

“As it happens, I like a bit of grabbing at whatever part of me you please,” he said, turning to walk backwards so he could face Oliver as he spoke his wicked words. “Particularly

my hips as you hold me in place for a vigorous buggering.” He winked.

Well, there was the answer to that often awkward question. And God help him, but the thought that the puckish man leading him down the upstairs halls of Perdition—and likely into a much darker perdition as well—liked the receiving role had his blood pounding through him.

After leaning toward several of the doors they passed and even peeking into a few of them, the comedian found a room that was, evidently, available for the purpose of Oliver collecting his winnings. He grabbed Oliver’s hand as he threw open the door all the way, then tugged him into the room.

As soon as they were inside, the comedian practically slammed the door shut, then turned to press his back against it. He reached for the front of Oliver’s jacket and yanked him forward into a kiss hard enough for Oliver’s brow to shoot up at the man’s strength.

It was not that Oliver did not know what he was doing. He knew full well how to kiss a man, and as the comedian molded his lips to his, kissing became as easy as the sunrise. Oliver planted his hands on the door on either side of the comedian and threw himself into their kiss, whether it was a good idea or not.

No, it was not. It was never a good idea to kiss a man he did not know, regardless of the appearance of complete safety and discretion that Perdition had.

Yes, it was a brilliant idea, and precisely what Oliver needed after the last two, tumultuous months. He was a nob

now. He could get away with the sort of wickedness that the comedian had drawn him into. Even if they were to be discovered, his title would protect him, as it had several of the gentlemen he'd been at Oxford with.

Whether it was right or wrong, it was. And as the comedian hurried through the buttons of Oliver's jacket and waistcoat, then tugged his shirt from his trousers, Oliver found himself less concerned with whether an anonymous encounter in a gaming hell was moral and more about how he could prolong the sweetness of pleasure for as long as he could.

"I've not seen you here at the club before," the comedian said between kisses as he pushed Oliver's jacket and waistcoat off his shoulders.

"I've only just arrived in London," Oliver answered, rolling his shoulders and shaking his arms to divest himself of both articles of clothing.

"I knew you were new," the comedian said with that irresistible purr back in his voice, working on the fastenings of Oliver's breeches instead.

"New at some things," Oliver said, finally starting to undress his prize. "Not at others."

He loosened the comedian's overly colorful jacket and waistcoat enough to reach his shirt and tug it free of his breeches as well. He then hurried through opening his falls and reaching in to free the comedian's already hard cock from its confinement.

The comedian gasped and sagged back against the door for a moment with a happy moan as Oliver stroked him to even greater fullness. “Yes, I can see that,” he managed to push out between increasingly urgent breaths.

Oliver leaned in to kiss the man again. That kiss was short-lived, though, as their masks prevented him from getting as close as he wanted.

He hesitated for only a moment before rocking back and reaching up to shove his mask aside. It was unlikely he would ever see the comedian again, so revealing his full face would not matter.

The comedian followed him as Oliver stepped back, moving away from the door and reaching up to peel away his own mask. Oliver caught his breath at the handsome face that was revealed. The comedian was as beautiful as an ancient statue, carved with strong but lean lines that would have made him the envy of any artist’s model.

And like many an artist’s model, the comedian didn’t seem to have any qualms at all about undressing. Oliver took another step back, conscious of the bed behind him, pulling breathlessly at his own clothes, but the comedian threw his off with abandon as they moved closer to the bed. The comedian never took his eyes off Oliver, though, as if daring him to change his mind and run, or to stop undressing.

Mad as it made him, those challenging looks only encouraged Oliver further. He was slower than the comedian, though, and by the time the backs of his legs hit the edge of

the bed, the comedian had shed the last of his clothing and dove toward Oliver fully nude.

Oliver gasped for breath, startled and aroused, his head spinning, as the comedian clasped the sides of his head and pulled him in for another kiss. It was nearly impossible to be hesitant or intimidated when the two of them were engaged in such intimacy, though. And when the comedian broke their kiss so that he might help Oliver remove the rest of his clothing, Oliver was grateful.

“So you’ve not been in London long?” the comedian asked as though they had met in the lobby of a theater as the two of them fell into the bed together.

“No,” Oliver answered, beginning to panic a little.

The comedian had landed on his back, and as Oliver pulled away slightly, the very beginning of second thoughts assailing him, he reached for him and pulled him close again.

Again, Oliver’s rising panic was steadied with a searing kiss.

“London is no different from other places,” he said, running his hands up and down Oliver’s sides. “Everyone comes to see the sights, enjoy the landscapes, and bring home stories to tell their friends on cold winter’s nights.”

Oliver hesitated. Was he talking about London?

“Consider it an enjoyable excursion now,” he said, kissing Oliver and grabbing a handful of his arse, “and a delightful memory later.”

He was not talking about London. He was absolving Oliver of any guilt he might feel over what they were doing.

That thought was confirmed as the comedian paused his kisses to stare up into Oliver's eyes. "I am completely willing in every way. You are not engaged in any wrongdoing. Let us enjoy ourselves immensely, and think of each other fondly in days and years to come."

It was rather sweet, actually. Most of the men Oliver had been with had been anxious and concerned for themselves above all else. Very few, if any, of them had continued on with these sorts of interests, like he had. Oliver truly believed it, perhaps for the first time in his life, when the comedian told him they were not doing anything wrong.

"Nothing wrong at all," he seconded, then dove in to kiss the man.

They were wicked and wanton, perhaps more so than Oliver had ever been. The comedian was open to everything. He flipped Oliver to his back and shimmied down so that he could give a wealth of wet, warm attention to his pulsing, leaking cock. Oliver made sounds he did not know he had in him.

The comedian could read his body well enough to know when to stop and switch places with him as well. Oliver was nowhere near as practiced as the comedian in the art of cock-sucking, but his memories of school days rushed back on him, and he did his very best to return pleasure for pleasure.

The comedian stopped him before things went too far, and they switched positions again, kissing and touching and simply

enjoying each other's bodies. What Oliver had expected to be a bit of quick fumbling in the dark and a speedy release turned into more than an hour of dancing with pleasure, taking each other to the edge, and drifting back so that they could do it all again. The kissing was, perhaps, the best part of it all. The way their mouths and tongues mated made it seem as though the two of them had known each other and been lovers for years instead of having just met over a game of faro.

Finally, when the two of them could hold out no longer, the comedian retrieved a jar of balm that he'd somehow known would be in the table beside the bed, and flipped to his stomach. Oliver took his time preparing both of them, then lined up and sank into the comedian in a way that had both of them sighing and crying out wildly enough to make both angels and devils rush to take notice.

Oliver pounded into his sultry comedian from behind, grasping the man's hips as he'd implied he liked earlier. That alone wasn't enough, though. He shifted the comedian to his side, entering him at an unconventional angle that had both of them near laughter. When that proved to be too much, he moved the comedian to his back and hooked his arms under the man's legs, nearly folding him double.

It was only when the two of them made eye contact that Oliver felt himself on the verge of spending. There was just something about the comedian, something free and light and wonderful, that captivated him. He felt as though he owed it to his temporary lover to give him everything, so adjusted his thrusts until he found precisely the spot within the man that had him mindless with pleasure.

Oliver was more than a little mindless himself, and when the comedian reached to stroke his own cock to take himself over the edge, he took Oliver with him. The pearly essence that spilled across the comedian's belly was an echo of what Oliver was spilling inside him. Everything about it was perfect.

With a final grunt, Oliver pulled out, then collapsed by the comedian's side, utterly sated.

"That was..." The comedian panted for a bit instead of finishing. "I did not expect..."

"Neither did I," Oliver said, laughing a little.

How had a salacious wager at a card table turned into the single best sexual experience of his life?

Oliver drifted off, that question still echoing in his mind. He was happy that the comedian drifted off with him, the two of them partially entwined as they dozed to regain the energy they would need to part ways and never see each other again.

And Oliver was quite certain they absolutely would not see each other again. As soon as he recovered, he would leave Perdicion to return to the Mayfair house he'd inherited from his cousin while the comedian would likely return to whatever shop or office he worked in. On the morrow, Oliver would meet his old Oxford friend, Thomas Manfred, Marquess of Landsbury, at the Drury Lane theater to discuss investments—and how, in God's name, to be a nobleman—and then he would leave London and return to Oxford, where astounding evenings like the one he'd just spent never happened.

THREE



It was not the first time Flory had fallen asleep at Perdition after a particularly enjoyable evening with a new friend, but it was the first when he'd been so sated that he'd slept clear through until morning. Even then, the very last thing he wanted to do was awaken to his workaday life. So he kept his eyes closed and fought off sleep, smiling as he consumed himself with memories of his delicious raven from the night before.

While Flory could not say that it was unlike him to go to bed with someone he did not know at the club, he had never awoken the next morning regretting the loss of his bedmate. Everything about his raven had been captivating—from the man's sun-kissed, golden hair to his deep, blue eyes. Those eyes had held ice while they'd stared at each other across the faro table and fire as they'd kissed and touched and moaned their way through the most enjoyable night Flory had ever experienced.

How strange, after such a sordid history as he had, was it that Flory was so certain that his raven was the best he'd ever had? It was not just the man's perfectly formed physique or his

boundless enthusiasm for bedsport. There was something endearing about the seriousness the man had exhibited, as if he did not think he had a right to be where he was. Perhaps as if he felt he did not have a right to be *who* he was.

Which, of course, begged the question of just who the man who had touched him and filled him and left him floating in ecstasy was. Flory rolled to his back, still reluctant to open his eyes and let the beautiful night go, and stretched as he contemplated it. The raven was probably a clergyman of some sort, one who needed to conceal his identity, lest his parishioners discovered his true nature and burned him at the stake.

Flory chuckled at the thought, draping his arm over his eyes as he did. Or perhaps his raven was a member of the royal family. Or, no, a servant at the palace who knew mountains of secrets, but who was sworn to utter secrecy. Or perhaps he was a—

“Are you going to laze about all day?” a light, trilling voice spoke from the bed beside Flory, causing him to jump and nearly cry out. “Because Mr. Beaumont says we need to clean and refresh this room for tonight, since some very important people are to be here.”

Flory opened his eyes and scrambled away from Sparrow, a spritely young thing of ambiguous gender who had been a feature of Perdition for as long as he had been admitted to the place.

“Sparrow,” Flory said, letting out a heavy breath as his initial shock wore off. He pushed himself to sit, careless of the

way the bedcovers dropped to bunch around his waist—and his morning tumescence—even though Sparrow was watching him with wide, interested eyes. “How long have you been perched there, watching me?”

“Not long,” Sparrow said, grinning. “You are quite interesting to watch.”

Flory laughed. “I’d wager I am.” He scrubbed a hand over his stubbly face again, forcing himself to wake up all the way, though he regretted leaving his raven in his memories only. He sighed and said, “I went to bed with a raven and awoke with a sparrow.”

Sparrow laughed. “Yes, we were all quite impressed that you snared the flighty bird.”

Flory blinked. “You were? Was the man that flighty?”

Sparrow shrugged and got off the bed as Flory threw the covers aside and rose so that he could prepare to go home at last. Sparrow gestured to fresh wash water that had been brought to the room and said, “He was a curious one, that raven. Very reserved, very unsure of himself when he first arrived.”

“Does anyone know who he is or where he came from?” Flory asked as he poured water from the pitcher into a basin and dipped a sponge in to quickly clean himself, though after the night’s activities, he needed more than a quick wash.

“Not even so much as a hint,” Sparrow said, moving gracefully from the bed to lean against a chair and ogle Flory’s naked body as he washed. Flory barely noticed the scrutiny.

When one grew up in the theater, one became used to bodies in all states of dress and undress, especially one's own. "That in itself is odd," Sparrow went on. "Generally, someone knows who everyone that shows up at Perdition is, even if they do not tell."

Flory hummed in response, then hurried through cleaning himself up enough to dress.

"More's the pity," he said as he moved away from toweling himself dry by the wash stand to gather his clothes from where someone, perhaps Sparrow, had laid them over the back of one of the room's chairs. "I should very much have liked to see the man again."

But as he dressed in last night's finery, Flory resigned himself to the fact that it was not to be. Fleeting encounters at Perdition were precisely that, fleeting.

He put himself back together, then sought out the owners of the club to both thank them and apologize for commandeering the room for the night. Fortunately, Potts and Black were understanding and forgiving. Once that was taken care of, Flory set out into the bright, London morning, whistling a tune from the comedic opera he'd stage managed the year before as he strode back to Covent Garden.

Flory had a room in an establishment down the street from the Drury Lane theater, which was where he went directly, but he had no intentions of staying in his room for long. He never did. He did not like being alone much. Theater life had instilled in him the joy of being with his fellow man, and he was eager to be back with them as swiftly as possible. Besides

which, Lord Landsbury, one of the show's major patrons, had mentioned to him a few days before that he had a friend from Oxford who had just inherited and was curious about investing in theatrical productions. Landsbury had requested that Flory be on hand to give the gentleman a tour of the theater that morning.

So after another, more thorough scrub—which, sadly, removed the last traces of the beautiful night he and his raven had had—Flory dressed in serviceable clothing that he would not mind dirtying as he helped with final bits of construction and positioning at the theater, then headed out into the world once more, a spring in his step and a smile on his face that he could not wipe away for all the world.

That smile stayed where it was as he reached the theater and checked through the set after the rehearsal of the night before. It was joined by another whistled tune as he climbed up to the fly space above the stage to make absolutely certain all of the scenic pieces were secured and that the curtain was in pristine shape for opening night in a few days. It stayed with him as he came back down and had a word with the costume mistress to make certain that everything was in order and that the adjustments that needed to be made were in process.

That smile and the merry tune in Flory's heart stopped dead when he strolled back out to the stage as Landsbury and his friend entered the theater from the back and caught him standing there, downstage center.

“Ah, Mr. Holland, there you are,” Landsbury called out to him.

It was not Landsbury's attention that arrested Flory's smile or stole the air from his lungs that was needed to whistle his tune. It was the astounding fact that the gentleman Landsbury led down the side aisle and up to the stage was none other than his sensual, serious, wonderful raven.

The raven froze where he was the moment he spotted Flory, and even in the somewhat dim light of the theater, Flory could tell that all color left the man's face. To say his raven was shocked to see him again was an understatement. The air in the theater suddenly seemed close and charged, as if a storm were raging outside.

No, Flory thought as Landsbury paused, turned back to his friend, then gestured for him to continue forward. The storm was not outside. The storm was very much inside. Inside the theater and within his own heart.

Or perhaps that was his cock. Frankly, he could not tell the difference at the moment.

"This is Mr. Florizel Holland," Landsbury went on, ushering the raven forward, completely oblivious to the current running between the two of them. "He is our stage manager, and a fine one at that."

"Hello," Flory said, softly and carefully at first. He could not stop the giddy smile that pushed at him from the inside, desperate to spread its wings and make his heart take flight.

Or, again, that might have been his cock. There was no way of telling, really.

“And this is the friend I mentioned who is curious about investing in theatrical productions,” Landsbury went on, leading the raven to the narrow set of stairs at the very side of the stage so that the two of them could climb up and join Flory. “This is Lord Headington.”

It took everything Flory had not to snort with laughter. What a title for a man who had so expertly given him head just the night before.

“It is an honor to meet you, my lord,” Flory said, barely containing his mirth, as he bowed to his raven.

The raven, Headington, bowed in return and mumbled something that was likely, “How do you do?” But the poor man was clearly mortified.

Which seemed like the wrong reaction, as far as Flory was concerned. They’d done nothing wrong. The night had been glorious. Besides which, if his raven did not learn how to conceal his feelings and reactions to things, he would find himself run out of London and rejected by the *ton* in no—

Good heavens. He’d been fucked by a nobleman!

The sudden realization stopped Flory’s thoughts abruptly. While it likely wasn’t the first time he’d had a nobleman’s spend inside him, Perdition being what it was, it was the first time he knew the truth.

“Lord Headington has just come into his inheritance,” Landsbury was explaining, though Flory was certain he’d missed a great deal of the beginning of said explanation. “He is fond of theatrical literature and the arts, and would like to

learn more about what exactly it is you all do here so that he might know whether it would be a wise investment to become a patron of endeavors such as this.”

Landsbury turned to Headington with an expectant look, so Flory did as well.

“I...er...that is...,” Headington stumbled.

Flory’s heart went out to the man as he struggled to regain his composure enough to state his business.

Headington cleared his throat, assumed an expression that was very much like the one he’d first worn when Flory met him across the faro table, then said, “I am a great admirer of Shakespeare, and since I’ve no idea what to do with my recent inheritance....”

The explanation faded to nothing as Headington gaped at Flory. His eyes flashed with a newer kind of recognition.

“Florizel?” he went on, sounding as if the name were ridiculous. “From *A Winter’s Tale*?”

“Yes?” Flory answered uncertainly.

““What you do still betters what is done,”” Headington quoted, his face going bright pink. ““When you speak, sweet, I’d have you do it ever: when you sing, I’d have you buy and sell so, so give alms. When you do dance, I wish you a wave o’ the sea, that you might ever do nothing but that.””

Flory nearly dropped his jaw in shock...as the rest of him buzzed and quivered with the romance of the old bard’s words. He could barely gather his thoughts in the face of the sentiments his raven had just expressed to him.

Headington seemed to grasp what he'd just said and done, and he all but flapped in distress at the way he'd tipped his cards. "That is...er...I may have butchered it a bit."

"No!" Flory nearly shouted, his voice coming out too high and thready. "That was perfect." He peeked to the side, where Landsbury was eyeing them with the beginning spark of suspicion, then rushed on with, "Why invest in the theater, my lord, when you could take part as a leading actor?"

"Yes...well...Er..." Headington shuffled and tugged at the hem of his jacket, looking exceedingly awkward.

Landsbury most definitely suspected something was amiss. "Have the two of you met before?" he asked, tilting his head to the side and narrowing his eyes a bit.

"No," Flory and Headington answered simultaneously.

Landsbury drew in a breath and nodded slowly, clearly guessing the truth.

Blessedly, the man was sharp enough and kind enough to dismiss the moment and move on. "I thought that perhaps Mr. Holland could give you a tour of the stage as a way to underscore what we have already spoken about," he said. "I may leave you to him, as I would like to investigate where my dear Verity has gone. Bringing my lady wife to the theater is always a perilous idea." He grinned with affection even as he arched one eyebrow.

It was clear to Flory that Headington was in no fit state to pull himself together and pretend as though nothing were out of the ordinary, so he would have to do it for both of them.

“I would be glad to give Lord Headington a tour,” he said, standing taller and smiling as though not a thing in the world were out of place. “If you would be so kind as to come with me, my lord.” He started across the stage without checking to see if his raven was following. “This is the stage, my lord, where the play is performed. As you can see, it is spacious and accommodates a good deal of scenic pieces, as well as the full complement of actors.”

The information could not have been more innocuous, but that was by design. Headington followed him as Landsbury veered off to go in search of his wife, and Flory continued in the blandest tone he was capable of...which his raven most likely considered lively and open.

“If you will direct your attention above, my lord,” Flory said once Headington had reached his side, “you will find what is commonly referred to as fly space. This is where various scenic backdrops and such are raised and lowered during the course of the performance. And I thought I would never see you again, but am most pleased that you are here now,” he said without missing a beat or altering the tone in which he spoke as he pointed above.

When he glanced down to his raven, the poor thing was red and sweating a bit—which reminded him very much of how red and sweaty they had both been the night before.

“If I had known you were employed at this theater, I would not have come,” Headington murmured.

Flory’s heart lurched a little, and he fought to keep his benign smile in place. “You do so know how to make a man

feel cherished and appreciated, my lord,” he said.

“No! That is not what I mean at all,” Headington said, then huffed out an aggravated breath through his nose. He glanced anxiously around, but the few people who were at work on or around the stage were not paying them any mind. “I am pleased to see you again as well, but it is dangerous. If anyone were to guess...if we were discovered...the disaster that would ensue if we were to be....”

Flory reached out and touched his fitful raven’s arm. “This is a theater, my lord. No one cares what anyone else gets up to because they are all engaged in sin and scandal of one sort or another anyhow. It is one of many reasons our sort make our lives here.”

Headington pressed his mouth shut and breathed out heavily through his nose as he frowned at Flory. “I cannot risk any sort of discovery,” he whispered. “I have only just inherited my title—”

“And what title is that?” Flory interrupted him, sensing it would be better to waylay his raven’s meandering thoughts to prevent a deeper panic.

Charmingly, his raven looked embarrassed. “Earl of Headington,” he mumbled.

Flory’s insides pulsed with curiosity. “If you will follow me this way, my lord,” he said in a louder voice, leading his raven off to the wings, where they might have a bit more privacy, “I will show you where the various properties that are used during the course of the play are stored until such a time as they are required.”

The moment his raven had followed him into the darkness of the wings, Flory grabbed his wrist and spun him around to press him against the wall by the proscenium arch.

“And why, pray tell, my raven, do you speak of your title as though it is an embarrassment?” he asked in hushed tones, trapping Headington against the wall with his body.

Even though they were both clothed, the contact between them was delicious and arousing. Flory leaned in close to his raven’s neck and breathed in the familiar scent of his skin.

But then Headington planted his palms firmly on Flory’s chest and pushed him back.

“You are reckless, sir,” Headington said.

Flory fought the hurt that prickled in him. “I am not,” he insisted, though he backed off all the same. “This is my territory, my patch, if you will. I am the master of all I survey.”

He emphasized his point by openly surveying Headington from head to toe.

Headington surprised him by letting out a breath and sagging against the wall. “I am not fit for this sort of peccancy,” he sighed, glancing down. “You might be master of your realm, but I am...a librarian.”

Flory couldn’t contain his laughter for another moment. He could not have written a plot more perfect or more theatrical than the one he found himself in.

“I thought you were an earl,” he said.

Headington peeked up at him. “I inherited the title from a distant cousin whom I barely knew,” he admitted. “Before that, I was employed at Bodleian Library.”

“At Oxford?” Flory’s brow shot up in surprise.

“You know it?” his raven asked hopefully.

“I know of it,” Flory said. “And I am impressed. More impressed than your title, to be honest. I do not ever stand a chance of being admitted to as august an institution as Bodleian Library.” He contemplated that for a moment before going on with. “And you are an earl now?”

Headington nodded. “For my sins. Which, as you well know, are many.”

The way he glanced at Flory both made his blood stir and his heart weep with pity for the man. Of course, it was not unusual to find a man like them who was ashamed of himself, but in the world that Flory inhabited, a degree of shameless pride was more common.

“And who were you when you were but a humble librarian?” he asked, sorely tempted to reach out and stroke his raven’s flushed face.

“Oliver Penhurst,” he answered.

“Oliver Penhurst,” Flory repeated reverently, as though the bard himself had named him. He grinned and added, “It suits you.”

Oliver grunted and shrugged.

“Well, Oliver Penhurst,” Flory went on in a purr. “Since the fates have conspired to reunite us after the most glorious night of my existence, perhaps once this tour is done, we could stage a repeat performance as something of an encore.”

“Absolutely not,” Headington said, standing straight. He stepped to the side, which took him away from Flory. “I can see now that this idea to invest in the theater was a bad one. It is too dangerous for me. I will find Landsbury and bid him farewell, then I will return to safer pastures.”

“Come now,” Flory said, following the man, fearful that he was about to lose him all over again. For it occurred to him that he should very much like Oliver Penhurst to remain in his life a bit longer. “Surely, you do not need to flee like this.”

“Surely, I do,” Headington said over his shoulder, trying to find his way back to the stage in the darkness, amidst the black curtains that marked the wings.

It was poignant and ironic that the man failed to find what was right next to him as he struggled through the dark.

“You are flailing needlessly,” Flory told him, striding forward and holding one of the black curtains aside so he could see the stage clearly. Though he meant it in more than one way. “Come along, and I will show you the rest of the theater. Let me at least do that.”

“No, thank you,” Headington said, striding out into the light as soon as he found his way. “Thank you for the time and attention you have given me, Mr. Holland, but I could not possibly—”

His excuse dropped as Flory stepped onto the stage as well, and Headington seemed to just look at him, drinking in the sight of him with a fair amount of regret, instead.

“I could not possibly,” Headington went on. “No.” He shook his head as if he were at war with himself. “It would be a disaster. Goodbye, Mr. Holland.”

Without another word, the man turned and marched for the stairs at the side of the stage. He stumbled a bit as he climbed down them, then fled up the aisle to the back of the house.

Flory let out a sigh, debating whether to chase after the man. He could not force himself on a gentleman who was still afraid of his own shadow, though. He had no choice but to let the man go and to return to his duties to the theater and the play.

FOUR



He had taken the coward's way out. Oliver felt like the worst sort of wretch as he tossed and turned in his bed that night. He had been startled by finding his lover from the night before at the theater, and even more startled by the rush of desire and want that he still felt for the man.

Even though the man's name was Florizel. Because, truly, despite the fact that Shakespeare himself had invented the name, what proper Englishman of the sophisticated era they now found themselves in would bear a name like *Florizel*?

Florizel. Oliver sighed the name as he rolled over and pushed himself out of bed at the first rays of dawn, no longer able to even pretend to be asleep. The man was beautiful and intriguing. Landsbury had addressed him with such respect and admiration. Oliver had observed him for just long enough to see the authority and confident bearing he had, and how others at the theater responded to that.

And yet, the man had been a perfect devil at Perdition the night before, flaunting himself like any street whore and performing acts that were...acts that were *lovely*, if Oliver were honest with himself.

Yes, he was a coward. He castigated himself with that realization as he hurried through his morning ablutions, then took himself downstairs to the overly large and much too quiet breakfast room, where servants that still felt as though they belonged to someone else served him a sumptuous repast. One he could not taste as he dutifully ate it and drank his tea.

He attempted to devote himself to his pursuits of suitable investments for his newly inherited fortune after breakfast, but his mind would not stay put on the dry financial documents the man of business he had also inherited had placed in front of him when he'd arrived in London the week before. He pushed those aside and took up the day's copy of *The Times* instead, hoping to study the concerns of the day for when he found himself taking up his rightful seat in the House of Lords. But foreign policies and domestic financial dealings were of no interest to him either.

By luncheon, he'd given up staying in the house and applying himself to useful tasks. He donned his coat and hat and strode out to Hyde Park so that, like a great deal of the rest of the *ton*, he could see and be seen. But he knew hardly any of his fellow noblemen as of yet, and those who did recognize him seemed determined to only barely acknowledge him, usurper to the upper class that he was. The story of his origins and means of inheritance had reached London before he did.

It was a sunny day, however, and though he was not particularly enjoying himself, others in the park were. Oliver caught himself watching a group of working men kicking a ball back and forth to each other, though he could discern no serious game in the play. He was more concerned with the

strong lines of their bodies, the way their muscles moved, and the laughter that they shared in the companionable game.

All those things reminded him of *Florizel*, of course. Ridiculous name. Beautiful man. Oliver could not forget the musky scent of his skin or the perfection of his kisses. His blood heated even now at the memory of everything the man's expressive mouth could do, and how it felt to be joined in passion with the man.

He remembered Florizel's dark eyes that flashed with humor and intelligence as well, the way he laughed so easily at the club, the way he seemed so much in command at the theater. He remembered the connection that had been undeniable between them, despite not truly knowing each other. He'd always thought that the sentiment of believing one had known a new acquaintance their whole life was trite and fantastical...but he felt that way about Florizel.

"Bollocks," he muttered to himself, turning and marching in the opposite direction.

He had been a coward, and there was only one way to make things right. He must return to the Drury Lane theater and apologize for rushing out without a word the day before.

Despite easily being able to hire a hack to take him to Covent Garden, Oliver felt as though the journey across London was more of a crossing of the Rubicon. He fussed and fidgeted in the carriage the whole way there, and when he arrived at the theater, his heart was beating so fast that he feared he would swoon before he could finish paying the driver and walking up the steps to the doors.

Which turned out to be locked. Oliver experienced another few, maddening moments as he tried various doors, finally finding one on the side of the building that was open, though it was guarded by a burly young man who nearly turned him away entirely. He was saved from disgrace at the last moment as Lord Lichfield, whom he'd met briefly the day before, recognized him as a friend of Landsbury and allowed him to enter.

"They're just finishing up an afternoon rehearsal," Lichfield explained, showing Oliver through a dim passage to a door that let out into the house. "Landsbury is not here today, but you are welcome to watch the remainder of the rehearsal."

"Thank you," Oliver said with a bow that was likely far too condescending. He did not know what else to do or how else to behave as a nobleman, though.

Lichfield left him as soon as he'd edged his way into one of the side seats, and Oliver was stuck watching the final scene of the final act of the play. Thomas and Sarah were more than competent in their roles, though the supporting cast looked a bit tired and disinterested in the rehearsal.

As the final speeches were made, Oliver squirmed in his chair, at a loss for what to do next. He'd made it to the theater, but he'd no idea how to contact Florizel—dammit, he should be calling the man Holland, as was proper, but the ridiculous name had etched itself on his mind, and perhaps other parts of him, now. He had half a mind to give up his mad notion of apologizing and to simply leave and forget the entire embarrassing interlude had happened.

Indeed, as the rehearsal ended and the director gave a few notes to the cast, Oliver stood and shuffled out of the row so that he might flee up the aisle.

But as soon as he reached the aisle and turned, Florizel was there.

“Lord Headington,” the beautiful man said, shining with good humor and joy. “You have returned.”

“I...er...um....” Oliver tipped toward panic. He had no idea what to do with his hands, so they flapped at his sides. His heart beat far too rapidly as he raked his eyes over Florizel’s handsome face and the easy way he stood. Even though they were plain, working man’s clothes, the shirt and breeches Florizel wore suited him tremendously and whispered of the fine physique Oliver knew the man possessed.

And then Florizel laughed, and Oliver was gone. His heart was decimated, and his good sense flew out the window.

“Come to reconsider?” Florizel asked, shifting so that he could thump Oliver’s back, as though they were old friends, and nudge him to head toward a small door that stood open near the front of the stage.

“Reconsider what?” Oliver blurted, feeling as green and hopeless as a country clod.

“Why, patronizing the theater, of course,” Florizel said, speaking far too loudly for Oliver’s liking. “And I never finished giving you the tour you were promised. We must rectify that at once.”

Florizel whisked him into a dim part of the backstage area, then up a narrow set of stairs to the level of the stage. A few turns later, and they were in the wings, heading toward what was likely an area of storage and dressing rooms.

“If you must know,” Oliver said, gaining courage from the dimness around him and the fact that Florizel was not looking directly at him, “I came to apologize for departing so abruptly yesterday. It was ungentlemanly of me.”

“Yes, it was,” Florizel said, glancing over his shoulder with a flash in his eyes and a smile that showed off his unusually straight and white teeth.

Oliver swallowed uncomfortably at the rush of admiration and lust that passed through him. “I beg your pardon?” he asked. Florizel was perfectly correct with what he said, but it seemed a bit harsh.

Unsurprisingly, Florizel laughed as they stepped out of the wings and into a well-lit, and somewhat busy, corridor. “Do not worry yourself, Lord Headington,” he said, pausing and resting a hand on Oliver’s arm. “I forgive you. How could I not?” He winked.

Oliver caught his breath.

Then he chastised himself inwardly. This would not do. It simply would not do for him to lose his head over a man who had...who had shifted the foundations of his existence in the course of one beautiful night.

He cleared his throat and said, “I was taken by surprise, you see. Where I come from, men are not so...forward as they

appear to be in London. I am not inexperienced—”

“As I well know,” Florizel interrupted in a low purr that set Oliver’s blood afire.

Oliver cleared his throat again, then said, “I am not inexperienced, but neither am I accustomed to everything being so open.”

Florizel sobered a little and took a half step back. “It is not as open as all that,” he said. “Not everywhere. Perdition is a world unto itself, and the theater has a long and storied history of wickedness. I would most definitely caution you about making yourself known in the ordinary streets of London.”

“Yes, indeed,” Oliver said with a nod. “I thank you for the advice.”

Which wasn’t at all what Oliver truly wanted to say. What he wanted to say was that he had very few friends in London as of yet, and he wished to have more. More like them. What he wished to say was that he hoped he might consider Florizel a friend of sorts.

No, if he were honest with himself, what he wished to say was that he wanted to take Florizel to bed again. But the notion was both outrageously wicked and far beyond his capability to freely express.

“Mr. Holland,” he began, shuffling, his skin prickling with nerves, his throat closing up. “Could we perhaps—”

“Flory, I have those rings you wanted to secure the curtains,” a young man interrupted them, marching toward Florizel with a wooden box in his arms.

Without so much as a flinch or a flush, Florizel straightened and turned to the man. “Thank you, Ned. If you could just put them on my stand at the front of the stage, I would be grateful.”

“Yes, sir,” the man said with a nod, then headed back the way he came. He barely acknowledged Oliver.

“Sorry,” Florizel said, turning back to him. “I’ve a bit more business to finish before I am free.” He winced, then went on with, “And then I am not free. I have an engagement of sorts to attend to this afternoon.”

Oliver’s heart sank. “Oh. I see.” Of course a man like Florizel would have others who wanted him as much as Oliver did.

A hint of pity appeared in Florizel’s eyes, but it was quickly eclipsed by inspiration. “You could come with me,” he said. “They’d probably like that.”

Oliver blinked. Who would like what?

“I...um...alright?” He had no idea what he was doing, only that he did not want to part ways with his lover of one night until he had thoroughly disabused himself of the notion that there could be another night.

“Lovely,” Florizel said, clapping him on the shoulder again, then stepping back. “You can wait right over there, by the stage door.”

Oliver followed to where Florizel had pointed, then let the man escort him halfway before Florizel veered off to settle whatever business he had.

As soon as he reached the spot he had been directed to, Oliver huffed out a breath and rolled his eyes at himself. He was an earl, for pity's sake. He should not be at a theater in the first place, let alone waiting like a green schoolboy asked to a rendezvous behind the barn to receive his first kiss. He was certain the men and women who walked past him, all of them looking as though they belonged, thought he was the worst sort of fool.

It was almost enough to prompt Oliver to give up and flee. He'd been carrying his hat in his hand and turning it in endless, nervous circles as he waited, and he'd just about reached the point of plunking it back on his head and exiting entirely, when Florizel appeared from an entirely unexpected direction.

"Are you ready?" he asked, bright humor and a clear lust for life radiating from him. He already wore his coat and had his hat in hand.

Oliver wanted to answer that he most certainly was not ready. He had no idea what he was doing or why. But he said, "Yes. Lead on."

Florizel grinned at him, then slipped a hand to the crook of his arm, as though he were a damsel that needed escorting, and whisked him out through the stage door and into a side street.

As badly as he wanted to ask where they were going, Oliver remained quiet. The way Florizel dropped his arm as they exited the side street made him feel as though they were in for a long journey to whatever business or pleasure his delightful comedian had in store.

He was astounded when they merely walked to the end of the street, then headed on to Henrietta Street, just five minutes away. Oliver had barely begun to glance around at the shabby and slightly worrying squalor of the surrounding buildings when Florizel turned to mount the steps of a building that Oliver worried could crumble down around them at any moment.

“Here we are,” he said to Oliver as he pulled open the door, then turned to hold it, like a page at the palace. “After you, my lord,” he said with a cheery and exaggerated bow.

“Please do not do that,” Oliver sighed. “And do not call me ‘my lord’.”

Florizel straightened and blinked at him in question.

Prickles of excitement and daring raced over Oliver’s skin as he took the extraordinary risk of saying, “My name is Oliver.”

“And so it is,” Florizel said, his smile growing.

Oliver’s heart raced as he stepped into the moldy, dim front hall of whatever mad place Florizel had brought him to. And, indeed, he was certain it was something of a madhouse from the moment they crossed the threshold.

“Oh, for a muse of fire, that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention! A kingdom for a stage, princes to act, and monarchs to behold the swelling scene!” someone all but shouted in a deep, booming voice from the parlor off to one side.

Whoever had spoken had a voice that might have been fit to fill a theater at one point, but was choked with age now.

“What?” a wizened female voice called out in return. “What was that?”

“Excuse me for one moment,” Florizel said to Oliver, winked, then stepped into the parlor. “Henry the Fifth!” he shouted, as if attempting to be heard by the deaf. “That was Henry the Fifth, Lottie.”

Oliver followed Florizel into the doorway of the parlor, where he found a fat old man that looked more like Falstaff than King Henry or the Chorus standing by the fireplace. The man was certainly dressed as a king, though, complete with a paper crown upon his grey, balding head.

“Oh, Henry the Fifth,” the gnarled old woman seated in a chair near the fire, some sort of threadbare knitting in her hands, quoted, “*Excusez-moi, Alice. Écoutez: d’ hand, de fîngre, de nailes, d’ arma, de bilbow,*” raising her withered hand to emphasize each word.

The aged king frowned at her. “Why are you waving your hand around like that, Lottie?”

“Eh?” Lottie frowned right back at him. “Was that my cue?”

“He doesn’t know Katherine’s part, Lottie,” Florizel shouted, walking right up to the old woman and bending over to kiss her cheek, then leaning back to straighten her shawl.

“Flory!” The old woman erupted with delight at the sight of him. “Come to visit your mother, have you?”

“I have, Lottie,” Florizel shouted back at her.

“Such a good son.” Lottie patted the side of Florizel’s smiling face.

Florizel grasped her hand for a moment and kissed it before straightening and turning to the gentleman. “Practicing your lines, then, Harry?” he asked as loudly as he’d been speaking to Lottie.

“An understudy must always be ready, sir,” the man, Harry, replied with a dignified nod. He glanced past Florizel to Oliver. “I see you’ve brought a friend with you?” The way he smiled and posed for Oliver nearly made Oliver swallow his tongue. “You always find the finest bucks.”

Oliver’s jaw dropped, and he could not for the life of him think of a thing to say.

Florizel saved him from standing there, with his mouth flapping like a fish, by saying, “Hands off, Harry. He’s mine!”

“Of course, he is,” Harry laughed.

“What? What was that?” Lottie asked.

“I’ll tell you later, dear,” Florizel shouted, leaning over to kiss the old woman again. “I’m here to see my mother. I’ll stop back before we leave, though.”

“If you must,” Lottie sighed, then went back to her knitting as Florizel headed back to Oliver.

“Pay no heed to Harry,” Florizel said with a laugh as he pulled Oliver up a rickety set of stairs to the first floor. “He was highly sought after in his day, on stage and off.” He sent

Oliver a wicked look, then continued with a sigh. “He, and the others, find it hard to accept that those days are over at times.”

“The others?” Oliver asked, though it was only one of several questions he had.

Florizel answered by saying, “Mind the top step. It’s weak and you’ll likely step right through if you put your weight on it.”

The step in question had various random objects sitting on it—two gloves that did not match, a moldy fan made of feathers, half of which were gone, a dented, brass chamber pot, and a book that looked as though it had been dipped in a river and left to dry and swell into a grotesque version of its former self—likely to remind the residents not to use that step.

The step wasn’t the only bit of the house in need of repairs. As Florizel gestured for him to follow down the hallway, they passed a window with a broken pane, a spot where the paper had peeled off the wall entirely, and a broken chair that appeared to have been set in the hall so that someone might carry it away, and a pile of something unmentionable in one corner that looked to have been left by rats.

All around him, Oliver heard people talking, half of them reciting lines of some sort, and others laughing as though they were sharing a joke at the pub. Each room they passed seemed to be occupied, perhaps over-occupied, by aged and dusty people who felt to Oliver as if they were as discarded and forgotten about as the furnishings and the house itself.

“What is this place?” Oliver asked as they turned a corner and headed up another dubious staircase.

Florizel glanced over his shoulder at Oliver, darting to the side as a determined old man who was no bigger than a child marched down the stairs past them, muttering to himself.

When Oliver caught up to him at the top of the stairs, Florizel said, “This is where actors go after their final curtain.”

There was a wistful sort of melancholy in those words that went straight to Oliver’s heart. Particularly as Florizel had told the woman downstairs that he was there to visit his mother. Oliver had never given much thought to the elderly. His own parents had died long before they reached that state, and his grandmother had been well cared for by his younger brother and his wife until her dying day. It created a gnawing sort of pain in Oliver’s heart to see so many men and women around him who had once lived glorious lives, receiving accolades and applause, for whom there would be no encore.

“Here we are,” Florizel said at last, smiling once again and sounding as jolly as if they were back in Perdition, making wicked wagers over a card table, as they stepped into a small, cramped room at the end of the second-floor hall. “Hello, Mother,” he said, marching straight to the frail woman lying in the bed. She was not half as old as the others Oliver had seen in the house, but she seemed twice as ill. “I’ve brought a friend to see you.”

“Oh?” the poor, sad woman said, moving with some difficulty toward the sound of Florizel’s voice as he sat on the bed beside her. “You have?”

“Yes,” Florizel said, bending to kiss her forehead. “This is Oliver.”

Oliver's heart squeezed in his chest, as if it were completely out of its depth as the frail woman turned to smile at him. He might not have known where he was or what he was meant to do, in the largest sense of the word, but in that moment, he knew who he loved. Because everything Oliver had observed about Florizel in the last five minutes made it clear that the man was perhaps the very best man Oliver had ever met.

FAZE



It never failed to move Flory how he could feel such love and such sorrow, all at the same time every time he set foot in his mother's home. It was not lost on him how clearly he displayed those emotions for his dear raven to see.

“Do you have everything you need, Mama?” He ignored Oliver for the moment as he fussed over his mother, plumping the pillows behind her and helping her to sit.

“Gin would be nice,” his mother said, still cheeky, even with the wasting disease that was taking her one inch at a time, while Flory could do nothing but sit by and watch.

Flory laughed, pretending he did not have a care in the world, and reached for the cup sitting on the table by her bedside. “It appears weak ale will have to do,” he said, handing the cup into her shaking hands, then guiding them to her mouth.

The way his mother drank the stale liquid, as though it were nectar from heaven, was a clear sign that the physician who was supposed to come administer medicines to the inhabitants of the house had not been. At least his mother's bedding and nightshirt were clean, indicating the maid who he

paid to tidy what she could and carry his mother to the chamber pot had been.

“You are a dear boy,” his mother said, a bit too breathlessly for Flory’s liking, when she was finished with the cup. Her eyes moved past him to take in the sight of Oliver, still standing nervously in the doorway. “You’ve brought me a gift, I see,” she said, sending Oliver an overly warm smile.

Flory laughed. “You cannot have him, Mama,” he said. “He’s mine.”

Oliver flushed and shuffled on his spot, seemingly caught between the awkwardness of the sickroom and anger over the way that Flory had, for the second time in nearly as many minutes, revealed him for the sort of man he was. But if ever there were a safe place to do so, it was in his mother’s house.

“Are you certain?” his mother teased them both, glancing between the two. “I’ve been able to turn ’em before, and no doubt I could do it again.”

She smiled fetchingly at Oliver, batting her eyelashes the way she used to while playing some of the great comical roles on the stage years ago. And the way she had while celebrating her theatrical triumphs with patrons of the theater after her theatrical triumphs.

“I...oh...well, I do not think—”

“Come closer, young man,” Flory’s mother took charge of the situation, beckoning for Oliver to approach the bed. “My eyes are weak in my infirmity. Come near so that I might see you properly.”

Flory's mother's eyes were in no way weak, but the woman was a consummate actress who had always known how to get precisely what she wanted.

Sure enough, spinning the brim of his hat in his hands, Oliver inched forward. The way he attempted to smile, despite his anxiousness, had Flory fighting to keep his laughter inside. He thought his heart might burst at the sheer loveliness of the man.

"Yes, closer still, young man, closer," his mother said, altering her voice to sound weaker as Oliver made it to the very edge of the bed and peered down at her. "A bit more," she pleaded. "These eyes, you see, I cannot quite—"

As Oliver leaned over and made the tactical error of positioning himself within Flory's mother's arm's reach, she reached up and grabbed his face, then pulled him close so that she could plant a long, deep kiss on his mouth.

Flory burst into laughter as Oliver flailed, dropping his hat in the process.

His mother let him go as she too laughed. "I like him," she pronounced, beaming up at a flushed and flustered Oliver. "He's so much sweeter than your usual sort."

"Mama," Flory scolded her. He'd intended the scolding and the sheepish look that accompanied it to be pretend, but he found that he had no wish for Oliver to dwell too much on the number or sort of his former conquests.

"I...I do not...that is, I cannot..." Oliver was completely at a loss as he touched a hand to his mouth, then bent to

retrieve his hat, then decided against that and snapped straight, knocking a small bottle of pills from the table beside the bed. He then bent in the other direction to fetch that, only to send a pillow sliding off the side of the bed.

“Stop, stop, young man,” Flory’s mother laughed. “You’ll do yourself and the rest of us a harm. I did not mean to shock nor offend you, I was merely playing as we players do.”

Oliver squirmed and shuffled a bit more before letting out a heavy breath, as if he’d completely lost track of what he was meant to do, and stood there, shoulders dropped slightly. “I beg your pardon, madam,” he said at last, though there was a sense of helplessness in his voice.

“Florizel, do something,” his mother said, still laughing, sending him a teasing look.

“I am uncertain whether anything can be done,” Flory said with a quick shrug. “I am afraid Oliver is hopelessly embarrassed at this point, though he has no need to be.”

He stood and shuffled to the side, freeing up the space on his mother’s bed.

“Here,” he said, taking Oliver’s arm and gesturing to the spot. “Perhaps you should sit until your nerves have settled.”

Oliver moved as if he might sit, then seemed to think better of it and shook his head. “I will stand,” he said in a bit of a growl, frowning at Flory.

“Oh, dear,” Flory’s mother said. “We meant no harm, really,” she said, gesturing for Oliver to sit. “I have so few visitors that I simply could not resist.”

“The physician should be visiting you,” Flory said in a slightly harder tone, both to steer the conversation away from Oliver and to make the inquiries he feared he needed to make. “When was the last time the man was here?”

His mother frowned at him. “Flory, I have told you any number of times that you do not need to concern yourself with the physician.”

“I do,” he insisted. “The man takes my coins and is supposed to have a care for you and all the others for it.”

Oliver jerked to look at him. Whatever he was thinking, it was enough to convince him to sit on his mother’s bed at last. “Should there be a physician in this house?” he asked.

“There should be a great many things in this house,” Flory’s mother answered with a sharp laugh.

She took Oliver’s hand, which caused the man to flinch just a bit, then went on.

“My darling son gives the lion’s share of his income to those of us who live in this forsaken house,” she explained. “He is young and handsome, and he should be gadding about London, tumbling with men like you, or whomever else he wishes.”

“I’ve enough of that to suit me in addition to caring for the lot of you,” Flory said, leaning against the wall by the head of his mother’s bed and crossing his arms.

His mother sent him a knowing look, then smiled at Oliver again. “Few people ever give a thought to what happens after the final curtain falls,” she said in reflection of what Flory

himself had said earlier. “When the applause stops and the box office closes, when there are no further auditions or invitations to pour out our life and our blood upon the stage, we come here, to rot and to die.”

“Mother, that is a bit dramatic,” Flory said, though his heart squeezed with the truth of her sentiments.

His mother shook her head, stroking Oliver’s hand. “Our lives are but drama, my boy,” she said, speaking more to Oliver than to Flory. “Our parts are brief and extinguish too soon.”

Flory was about to protest when Oliver leapt in with an impassioned, “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time, and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death.”

Flory’s mother’s face lit up as though the sun had burst through the clouds, and she finished the Macbeth soliloquy with, “Out, out, brief candle! Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” She then rushed to say, “You know The Bard?”

Oliver smiled, squeezing her hand tighter. “Until late, I was employed in the Bodleian Library. The Bard has kept me company through many a long, cold afternoon.”

Flory’s mother beamed up to Flory. “I like him. You can keep this one.”

Flory laughed. He was thinking the same thing, but with the realization that he liked Oliver far more than he'd ever liked any of the men he'd tumbled through a night with came a fear of doing or saying something that might make the skittish man flee again.

"You just want him to stay so you can woo him for yourself," he said instead.

His mother looked comically abashed, which she had been quite good at in her heyday and was still good at. Then she shifted her expression to one of delightful wickedness and said, "You know me too well, my boy." She glanced mischievously at Oliver and said, "His father was a sodomite as well, you know. It carried through in his blood."

"Mama, that is not true," Flory said, rolling his eyes. "You've no idea who my father is."

"Well, he could have been," she protested. "I told you I've turned 'em before."

Oliver's eyes went wide, and he seemed completely flabbergasted by the conversation. Flory rather liked keeping the fussy nobleman on his toes.

"There are no rules in the theater, my lord," he teased him. "I believe I already told you that."

"My lord?" His mother glanced excitedly between the two of them before asking Flory, "Have you snared yourself a noble patron?"

"I believe we've snared each other," he said. And because Oliver was beginning to get the look of a rabbit who had,

indeed, been snared and was moments away from gnawing its own leg off to be free, he rushed on with, “Shall we go downstairs, Mama? Harry seemed to be starting *Henry the Fifth* when we passed through the parlor earlier.”

“Oh, no, not again.” His mother flopped back dramatically and rolled her eyes. She then gestured for Oliver to move so that Flory could help her up. “Besides, it is not *Henry the Fifth* today, it is *The Way of the World*.”

“Ah, Congreve,” Oliver said, standing with a smile.

“You know the comedy of the Restoration as well?” Flory’s mother asked, looking more delighted than ever.

“But say what you will, ‘tis better to be left than never to have been loved. To pass our youth in dull indifference, to refuse the sweets of life because they once must leave us, is as preposterous as to wish to have been born old, because we one day must be old,” Oliver quoted.

He sent Flory a quick look as he did, blushing bright red, as if he suddenly understood the meaning of those famous lines.

Flory’s heart beat hard, and his breeches went far too tight for a man in the presence of his mother. If he had not already been leaning toward falling disastrously in love with the man, he would have tumbled head over heels there now.

“Come along,” he said, his voice croaking a bit as he moved in to wrap his arms around his mother and lift her to her feet. “I’m sure the others are waiting for us.”

“Can I fetch you a cloak or a shawl or some such?” Oliver asked, fidgeting as he waited to be put to work.

“There is a warm, wool shawl draped over that chair.” His mother pointed to the small chair with ripped upholstery that sat under the window. As Oliver scampered to fetch it, she leaned closer to Flory and whispered, “For Venus’s sake, do not let this one go.”

Flory laughed and kissed his mother’s cheek. When Oliver returned to them with the shawl, the two of them put it around her shoulders together.

His mother was not completely bedridden, but the mysterious disease that seemed to be slowly eating her made movement difficult for her. She was a strong, proud woman, though, and insisted on walking as much as she could. Which ended up being to the top of the stairs. From there, Flory carried her all the way down to the large dining room on the ground floor, careful to step over the broken stair as he did.

They had arrived in time for whatever theatrics were a daily part of the lives of the residents of the house. The dining table had been turned on its side and pushed against the wall, and the chairs had been arranged as something of an audience for the narrow area at the front of the room, where performances would take place.

“We may have been cast off by the theater,” Flory’s mother explained to Oliver as Flory settled her in a chair, “but the theater will never be cast off by us.”

“Certainly not,” his mother’s friend, Barbara, who had been one of the foremost ingenues of the London stage fifty

years ago, agreed with a nod. The woman had lost a leg in a carriage accident and was as thin as a post now, but she still carried herself as though she were a queen.

Most, if not all, of the residents of the house clung to similar demeanors, as if the applause they had once received still rang in their ears and the scent of the flowers that had been thrown at them by adoring admirers was still fresh in their noses. Flory loved them all for it, but they still made his heart ache.

“Do you, perhaps, have a cushion, young man?” Clayton—an old man who had once been one of the finest singers in London and who still had the sparkle of sweetness in his eyes—asked Oliver with a wince as he took a seat on Barbara’s other side. “My back, you see.”

“Yes, er, I think so,” Oliver said, practically vibrating with the urge to move and fetch and accommodate the faded wonders around him. He glanced to Flory and asked, “Do we have cushions?”

“In the other room,” Flory said, nodding to the hall, then moving that way. “I’ll bring some as well.”

The two of them ducked and dodged around other hunched, shuffling members of the household as they made their way to the dining room, all smiles and expectation.

As soon as they were alone in one of the back parlors, gathering up cushions, Oliver asked, “Who runs this establishment?” By the way he curled his lip a bit as he glanced around at the dusty and torn furnishings, the fireplace

in need of scrubbing and blacking, and the dirty walls and windows, he did not think much of them.

Flory laughed without humor. “No one runs it, and it is not an establishment. It is a home where those who have none live.”

“Yes, but who *owns* it?” Oliver asked, filling his arms with cushions and frowning. “Whose responsibility is it to provide the coal and the food, or to pay the maids?”

Flory tried to remain lighthearted about it, but the truth dampened his spirits every time he gave it too much thought. “The house was given to Lottie by an admirer when she was still something to be admired,” he said. “She was the mistress of a wealthy merchant as well as an actress. She was savvy enough to keep the house by charging a small fee for others to live here with her. As she and her friends aged, she stopped charging. Everyone gives what they can when they can, but as you can see, it is not nearly enough.”

Oliver sent him a pointed look as they headed back to the dining room. “And was your mother correct when she said you give the lion’s share of your income?”

Flory sent a sad smile over his shoulder as they headed down the hall. “If I had won that hand of cards the other night, every farthing of those winnings would have ended up here.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Flory could see as much in an instant. Guilt pinched Oliver’s face. Flory could practically hear the man castigating himself for indulging in a night of pleasure as the winner of that hand instead of easing the lives of the residents of the home by losing.

“Never mind,” Flory told him as they reached the dining room once more. “Something always appears in the final act that resolves every problem and gives those who deserve it their happy ending.”

That would have been the end of that and all would have been well, if the front door had not opened just then, just as Flory and Oliver were walking past, to admit a certain Lord Palgrave—whose late father’s mistress, Madeline, was a resident of the house, and very likely Palgrave’s natural mother. Palgrave seemed to be in a hurry and nearly walked right into Oliver in his haste.

“Good heavens, I am sorry,” he said, stooping to help Oliver gather up the cushions he’d dropped.

As soon as they’d both stood, Palgrave and Oliver blinked at each other in recognition. Oliver blanched.

But it was Palgrave who spoke first, with, “I say, Headington? Is that you?”

“Lord Palgrave,” Oliver said, his voice coming out in a tight squeak, as if he’d been caught with his hand down Flory’s trousers.

“What the devil brings you to a place like this?” Palgrave asked.

There was humor and good cheer in the man’s eyes, but Oliver balked and froze and clearly could not bring himself to speak in any way.

“Lord Headington is here to assess the home for a possible charitable donation,” Flory stepped in, grabbing the cushions

from Oliver's arms so that he might look less like a footman and more like the gentleman he was.

Palgrave studied Oliver for a moment, then smiled. "An excellent idea," he said. "I give what I can myself, since the residents do not seem able. Times being what they are, though...." He left his sentence hanging and tapped the side of his nose.

Flory knew, perhaps more than the rest of the *ton*, how hard up for cash Palgrave was, despite his title.

"How did you learn about this place?" Palgrave asked as one of the residents stepped out of the dining room with an impatient frown to take the cushions from them.

Oliver continued to flap and flail, though, thank heavens, not outwardly. "I learned about it...."

"At the Drury Lane Theater," Flory answered for him once again. "While he was inquiring after investment opportunities. Lord Landsbury charged me with giving Lord Headington a tour of the theater, and when he asked about the fate of actors no longer on the stage, it led naturally to a discussion of this place."

It was a lie, but close enough to the truth that Palgrave would believe it.

Palgrave smiled again. "I hope you have been impressed with all you have seen," he said. "Or, no, perhaps moved to pity would be a better way to state it."

"I have," Oliver said, dragging the simple words out. A moment later, he cleared his throat, glanced briefly to Flory,

then said, "I must go."

Flory let out a breath, but really, he wanted to growl in frustration. Just like that, he had lost Oliver again. "You do not have to go," he said, gesturing for Palgrave to continue on to the dining room, where it sounded as though the night's performance had already started.

"Yes, I do," Oliver said, marching toward the door without bothering to fetch his hat from where it still rested in Flory's mother's room upstairs.

Flory managed to catch him before he threw open the door. He blocked the way, lowering his voice as he said, "You cannot flinch every time you see someone you might know somewhere they do not expect you to be."

"I am new to London," Oliver argued, "and new to the aristocracy. They already distrust me and take me for a country rube. If anyone were to discover—" He finished the sentence with his eyes, looking at Flory pleadingly.

"If they were to discover our association," Flory finished for him, "which is so new as to not quite exist, yet, then what? You are an earl. Earls have their faults and flaws forgiven by right of birth."

"You cannot guarantee that," Oliver said.

"No, I cannot," Flory said. "But is the alternative what you truly want?" He daringly raised a hand and placed it over Oliver's thudding heart. "Do you want to forever live in costume, behind a mask? Or would you wish to discover

where this road we have taken the first few steps along might lead us?”

Oliver went as stiff as a board, his lips pressed together, his eyes filled with longing and fear. “How do I know—” he began, then stopped and huffed out through his nose. He tried again. “I fear I am not as bold as you, Florizel. I admire you more than words can say, and I...I cannot stop thinking about....” His eyes darted to the dining room, where the aged audience was already engaged with whatever entertainments were being presented, then back to Flory. “I wish I were stronger,” he said, sagging as though losing all hope.

Flory’s heart broke for the man. “I cannot force you to stay,” he said, leaning close and whispering against Oliver’s ear. “But I do wish you would.”

“I...cannot,” Oliver said, nearly sobbing.

Flory nodded, inching back. He met Oliver’s eyes, throwing everything he had into communicating more than mere words could. “If you change your mind, you know where to find me. You will be welcomed back with open arms.”

Oliver made a small, strangled sound, then wriggled out from where Flory had pinned him against the door without truly trying. He fumbled for the door handle, then squeezed out and into the dimming evening.

In the dining room, his beloved family laughed over something that had been said. Flory could not laugh, though. He turned and slumped against the door, feeling the coldness of the world outside against his back. It was a cruel world that punished men for the crime of love and that neglected those it

once celebrated because they'd grown old. As much as he hoped and dreamed and tried, there was nothing Flory could truly do about it.



Oliver had been told that if he wanted to fully take his place as an earl and a member of the *ton*, he should go to Almack's assembly rooms for an evening of entertainment, and so that he might see and be seen. And while the very idea of being seen by London high society froze the marrow in his bones, Oliver felt that if he had any chance of succeeding in the greatness that had been thrust upon him—because he most certainly had not been born great or achieved greatness—then he should at least make the attempt to fit in.

There was nothing at all encouraging about the edifice that housed Almack's. Indeed, Oliver eyed it askance as he stepped down from the carriage he'd also inherited, along with its groom, to join the queue awaiting entrance. He'd secured the voucher for entrance that he carried through one of the few connections he had to the established aristocracy, but frankly, he was still shocked when he was allowed admittance.

But as he stepped through the door into the unknown, he glanced longingly over his shoulder toward the northwest, marveling that Perdition was only a few streets away, across St. James's Square. That two such disparate places of

gathering were present so close to each other, likely without the inhabitants of the one Oliver found himself entering knowing the first thing about the other, was baffling to him.

Just as baffling were the activities inside Almack's. The place was a wash of noise and color, scent and sound, as he headed through throngs of people he did not know to search for some whom he might in the large room that made up the heart of the establishment.

All around him, men and women were enjoying themselves immensely, or so it seemed. Gentlemen of the finest caliber stood around with their fellows, discussing the politics of the day and sending covert glances to the young ladies, whose mothers were on the prowl as keenly as any lioness in the savannah, searching for marriageable young men.

Oliver steered as clear of those ladies as he could. He felt as though he had a mark upon his head that read "In want of a wife", though the truth could not have been farther from that supposition. Some men of his sort were resigned to the fate of marrying for appearance and inheritance, but seeing as Oliver had never expected nor intended to inherit in the first place, he was more than happy to let the title fall to his brother and his nephew after him once he had shuffled off his mortal coil.

"Headington, I did not expect to see you here."

Oliver nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of Landsbury hailing him from a group of his fellows. After cursing himself for reacting as though he were a dressed-up street thief on the verge of discovery who had been brought

into the assembly for entertainment, he plastered on a smile and went to join Landsbury.

“Landsbury,” he said with a nod. “It is good to see you this evening.”

“And you,” Landsbury said with a kind and genuine smile. He then turned to introduce Oliver to his friends, who gazed at him with a different sort of scrutiny. “This is Lord Headington,” he said, “who has, of late, inherited the earldom from his cousin and has come to London to claim his place.”

“How do you do,” one of the three other men said, relaxing as Oliver’s status was made known. “Viscount Castlereagh,” he introduced himself with a bow.

“Baron Perth,” one of the others identified himself, bowing and smiling.

“Lord Willoughby,” the third one said, but with more suspicion than acceptance in his eyes.

Oliver’s smile faltered, and he had to fight with everything had to resist tugging nervously at the hem of his jacket.

“Lord Headington, you say?” Castlereagh asked, his expression turning curious. “We had heard that the old earl died without any issue. There was some great debate about who would inherit the title or whether it would go extinct.”

“Such situations generally produce...curious results,” Willoughby said, looking down his nose at Oliver, as if bearing the title alone was not reason enough for approval and acceptance.

“The late earl was my father’s cousin,” Oliver said with a smile. “I can assure you that the inheritance came as a surprise to me and my line.”

“Do you have a line?” Perth asked with a saucy grin. “Or are you present this evening to search out ways to continue it? I could recommend some fine young fillies for you to examine, if that is how you are inclined.”

Heat stretched up Oliver’s face. That was absolutely not how he was inclined, but if he had any chance of acceptance and inclusion of any sort, he had better at least pretend.

“I would be in your debt, sir,” he said with a gracious nod.

“And who were you before you were an earl?” Willoughby asked before the conversation could turn to ladies.

Oliver had no idea whether to be grateful or wary. “A graduate of Pembroke College, Oxford, my lord,” he replied, hoping the man would be impressed.

Whether Willoughby was or not, his alma mater seemed to be enough to gain the approval of the other gentlemen.

“Headington shares my interest in patronizing the theater,” Landsbury said with a kind smile. “I trust you enjoyed your tour the other day.”

Before Oliver could stammer his way into an awkward answer that would likely expose his feelings for Florizel, Castlereagh laughed. “The theater? It is all well and good to attend performances. I daresay attendance there is as important as presentation here. But to actually give those wicked wastrels money?”

Oliver's back was up in an instant. Those wastrels were fine and beautiful people. Florizel was one of the most generous souls he'd ever met, and the inhabitants of the house where his mother resided were the liveliest and most accepting company he had been in of late.

Before he could form any sort of indignant reply, Landsbury said, "Come now, Castlereagh. One must support these sorts of endeavors or risk losing them entirely."

"The world would be a much holier place without the theater," Willoughby said, narrowing his eyes.

"But a far less enjoyable one," Perth laughed. He must have seen Oliver's discomfiture, because he stepped forward, nodding to one side, and said, "Lord Headington, would you allow me to introduce you to some fetching young friends of mine?"

And that was how it all began. For the next hour, Oliver found himself whisked around the ballroom, introduced to every young lady whose mother had dreams of having a countess for a daughter. There was not a damn thing Oliver could do to stop it either, or to stop himself from being tricked into asking one of the young would-be brides to dance. And he was a terrible dancer.

"I am dreadfully sorry," he apologized to a Miss Wightwick after stepping on her toes for a third time as the dance they'd been forced to suffer through had ended. "Dancing is not one of my strong points."

"No," Miss Wightwick said with a disappointed, sideways glance as Oliver took her back to her party.

As it happened, said party was in the midst of discussing Florizel's production at the Drury Lane Theater as they joined them.

"The entire thing is ill-advised," a middle-aged woman wearing a plume of garish feathers atop her tight hair said with a sniff. She leaned in and whispered, "They say the playwright of the current work is a woman."

"Impossible," a portly gentleman barked in response. "It could never happen. It would be a disaster."

"From what I've been told, the entire thing will be a disaster," a second, older woman, whose bodice was as tight as if she were on the hunt for a husband, said. "I heard they have not sold out the subscriptions, and that the theater will be empty on opening night."

"And I heard that they could not convince performers to join the production," the plumed woman said.

"It is bound to fail, of course," Miss Wightwick said, seemingly happier to be a part of the conversation than to dance with Oliver. "And won't that be a lark?"

The others laughed, even as Oliver frowned at their catty discussion.

"We must all attend on opening night to witness the downfall," the tight bodice woman said, her eyes alight with excitement. "And then we can tell everyone we knew it would happen."

"I love witnessing a good fall," the gentleman laughed.

“If you will all excuse me,” Oliver said as graciously as he could. “I see a friend I have not yet greeted.”

The gossiping ninnies paid very little mind as Oliver stormed away from them. He had not seen someone he had yet to greet, but he had had more than enough of the company he was keeping. It rankled him that those who would consider themselves the pinnacle of society would be so eager to laugh at the downfall of people who had poured their hearts and souls into entertaining them. The very reason he had sought to invest in the theater in the first place was to support and champion creativity. To hear it laughed at was intolerable.

Not even Landsbury noticed as Oliver wedged his way through the crowd that was still attempting to gain admittance to Almack’s and stumbled out onto the street. Despite the stale quality of the city air, he breathed a sigh of relief once he was away from the *ton*, then, almost without thinking, directed his footsteps to the northeast.

He walked to the end of King Street and then around St. James’s Square, feeling as though some inner force were pulling him toward Perdition, where he truly belonged. Though he was not entirely certain he did belong there. All he knew was that he would rather hear the ribald laughter of people indulging in vice and sin rather than the tittering and snorts of those who were intent on making fun of others. That was the true sin, as far as he was concerned.

And Oliver hoped, though he felt he had no right after running out on the man a second time, that Florizel might be in attendance at Perdition that night.

He was granted admission to Perdition far more easily than he had been at Almack's. The guards at the door recognized him from his previous visit and let him in. But once he was safely in the halls of the salacious house, shedding his coat and hat and handing them off to the attendant in charge of such things, he had no idea what to do.

So he wandered, as rudderless as a skiff at sea. He had no more acquaintances at Perdition than he'd had at Almack's, and gentlemen did not precisely introduce themselves in the gaming hell. Oliver found he rather liked that, though. He could feel a part of things while remaining anonymous. And for him, anonymity meant no questions about how he had become who he was and whether he deserved to be.

He hovered over one of the gaming tables, watching as four excitable, red-faced gentlemen risked staggering amounts over the game of whist. The amount of coins stacked on the table was as astounding as the number of empty gin glasses, or the young ladies who sat on the laps of the men who were playing. Everyone at the table was jolly and carefree, though, and though the women were clearly whores, they had a sort of lightness and tenderness about them as they encouraged their gentlemen that was a far cry from the way Miss Wightwick had curled her lip at Oliver as he'd struggled to dance.

The game ended with a shout and applause, and Oliver moved on to the long parlor at the back, where the most dangerous and illicit games took place. There was much to see there, so he wedged himself into a corner—after being handed a glass of wine by a sweet-faced young man whose expression

was as open and inviting as any of the young women at the card tables—so that he could observe more.

It was a gathering of a vastly different sort, but the air of acceptance all around him put Oliver at ease far more than the wine. No one was primping or preening or trying to snag a spouse that would position them higher on the invisible mountain of society. Everyone spread out before him was simply trying to enjoy themselves and bring enjoyment to the others. There was no artifice about it. Everyone in attendance was simply who they were, as unacceptable and wicked as that was. No one teetered on the verge of losing everything socially if they put a foot wrong.

Oliver had nearly finished his wine and was warming up nicely as he observed the company—as if those around him were the latest Covent Garden production—when he heard Florizel’s rich, happy tenor calling out from the hallway, “It will be the finest event of the season and the talk of the town, come Monday!”

“What will be the talk of the town?” one of the gentlemen playing faro asked as he sat straighter.

Oliver’s breath caught as Florizel swept into the room, like a conquering hero or a knight returned from the Crusades with tales of valor and daring. The man was so bloody handsome with his dark hair and flashing smile that Oliver felt as though he were turned inside out by his presence.

“Why, *Lady of the Scullery*,” Florizel answered the man, speaking to the entire room as he did. “We go up in two days,

and if I do say so, this will be the finest production that the Drury Lane Theater has ever mounted.”

“You’re the finest production I’ve ever mounted,” someone called out in return, earning a hearty laugh from everyone in the room.

Oliver flushed with jealousy, but joined in with the laughter a moment later as Florizel laughed and made a rude gesture to whomever had called out. It was all in good fun, whether it was true or not.

“I’ve heard grand things about this play,” a gentleman who had unbuttoned both his jacket and his blue waistcoat said as Florizel drew near to the table where he was playing to take a look at the game. “I cannot wait to attend.”

“Yes, who wouldn’t be interested in a play that is whispered to have been penned by a woman?” another gentleman seated at that table added.

“Our playwrightress,” Florizel said, making a confused face at the word he’d just invented, “is talented beyond anything you’ve seen before. And the cast is second to none.”

“I adore Sarah,” one of the fresh-faced young whores watching the faro game said with a sigh. “I would give anything to see her up close.”

“So you shall, Henny,” Florizel said, crossing to the young woman and giving her a quick, chaste kiss. “If you wish to attend the opening night performance, I will ensure that you are given a seat.”

“That’s very generous of you, Mr. Holland,” the young woman beamed up at him.

“We should all go,” the gentleman with the blue waistcoat said. “We should all go and cheer Florizel and his intrepid company on.”

“Hear, hear,” someone else in the room called out.

“To Mr. Holland and *Lady of the Scullery*,” another shouted.

Moments later, everyone’s glasses were raised to accept the toast. Once everyone had sipped from their cups, the room fell into excited conversations about how delightful the play would be and how everyone would be talking about it.

Taken as a whole, the entire scene was such an acute reflection of the conversations Oliver had been a part of at Almack’s, and yet so much the opposite of what he had heard there, that he could do nothing but shake his head and wonder. It seemed as though the wicked men and women around him blossomed with hope and good wishes for their fellow, unacceptable man, whereas the members of the *ton* were so busy feeling themselves to be superior that they did not care who they disparaged to make themselves so. And while Oliver was certain he had been in the wrong company at Almack’s and that there most likely were a great deal of good members of the *ton*, he felt the contrast in the two companies as if he had been on foreign shores, but in coming to Perdition, he had returned to where his heart—

The thought froze mid-flow as Florizel turned in Oliver’s direction and caught sight of him. For a moment, Florizel

looked as startled as Oliver felt. But within another heartbeat, a smile spread across the beautiful man's face that had Oliver flushing and standing straighter...and that had his head spinning with hope.

Florizel had every right to be furious with him, but if the man would give him half a chance, he would beg forgiveness in a way that neither of them would soon forget.

SEVEN



Thank God. Thank all the gods. Flory was certain they were all out there, and that they were grinning and elbowing each other as they pointed down to Perdition and said, “Look, he returned to Flory *again*. The man simply cannot stay away from him.”

Flory was gladder than he had ever been to see Oliver tucked into a discreet corner at Perdition, watching the action without being a part of it. The delicious, skittish, aggravating man had not given him, or Palgrave, for that matter, a chance to explain that there was no harm in being known as a patron of the poor, and that Palgrave was as unlikely to blab about who Oliver was spending his time with, because the man was notoriously bent himself.

Uncertainty about one’s own character caused every sort of bad behavior, though. Flory understood Oliver’s flight and forgave him...but he fully intended to give the man hell before laughing the whole thing off together with him.

“Well, well,” he said, stalking closer to Oliver with a devilish grin. “Who is this prodigal rogue before me? Who is

this Odysseus, returned from lengthy adventures from which he might never have returned?”

Oliver—who had looked near to petrified when Flory had noticed him—let out a breath and dropped his shoulders with a guilty look. “I am sorry for leaving the other day as I did,” he said. “I seem to have made a habit of dashing off when threatened.”

Flory’s heart swelled and danced and bled for Oliver all at once. “It is the habit of a rabbit,” he said, using the words to tease as he reached Oliver, then kept going until he had the man pinned to the wall behind him. “And here I thought you were a raven.”

“I am neither,” Oliver insisted, stiffening as Flory pressed his body to Oliver’s in a number of delightful places and planted one hand on the wall. “I am merely a man, and a flawed man at that.” His eyes darted behind Flory’s shoulder, likely to see if anyone was watching them.

“Oh, I doubt that.” Flory lowered his voice and brushed his fingers through Oliver’s hair, confident no one observed them, and if they did, it was nothing they had not seen every night at Perdition. “I think you are an extraordinary man who has been thrust into odd circumstances.” He jerked his hips just enough to underscore the word “thrust”, then leaned back to watch the charming way Oliver pinked at the gesture.

“Are you very angry with me?” Oliver asked, a catch in his breath as he peered nervously at Flory.

A flash of desire whipped through Flory. If Oliver had been any other playmate, the suggestion of anger would have

been an invitation to a particular sort of evening, full of discipline and delectation. But Oliver was sweet and likely innocent of those things, and tonight was not the night to change all that.

But he could still tease.

“Yes,” he lied, unable to scowl like he’d intended to. He was certain his expression was one of ardor instead. He leaned closer, until his lips were mere inches from Oliver’s ear and said, “I am deeply displeased, and you must put your every effort into appeasing me.”

He lowered his hand to brush lightly over the front of Oliver’s breeches.

Oliver huffed out a breath, surprising Flory by breaking the spell. “You are toying with me,” he said, stating fact with a flat look.

Flory inched back, loving it. Oliver had not turned skittish and dashed off again. In fact, the way he frowned at Flory now was as sure a sign that his teasing and games were acceptable, as if Oliver had thrown his arms around him and smacked a wet kiss on his lips.

“I am,” Flory laughed, taking a full step back. He felt less bereft about breaking contact with Oliver’s person at the sight of the bulge that had formed in the man’s breeches. “I will never grow tired of toying with you either, my dear rabbit-raven. But you should not have run out on me yet again the other day. At the very least, you missed out on a supremely diverting recitation of *The Way of the World*.”

Oliver looked suddenly repentant. “Were they terribly disappointed, your mother and her friends?” he asked.

“Terribly,” Flory replied, as deadpan as he could. “They rarely have a fresh audience, and every one of them was so desirous to make your acquaintance.”

“I am sorry,” Oliver sighed, sagging more than Flory wanted to see.

He decided then and there that he forgave Oliver, and that he wanted the man to wear the comedian’s mask instead of the tragedian’s whenever the two of them were together.

“Never mind all that now,” he said, reaching for Oliver’s hand and leading him out of the corner. He plucked the empty wine glass Oliver held from his hand and plunked it on a small table as he went. “You’re here, we have been blissfully reunited, and the third act is poised to begin. You know,” he said, glancing back at Oliver over his shoulder as he walked across the parlor to the archway that would take him into the front parlors. “The one where everyone who deserves their ending to be happy receives it?”

“I am familiar with the concept of a comedy, sir,” Oliver said, his brow flat but his eyes sparkling.

Flory paused for a moment to simply look at him. Dear gods—whichever ones were still gazing down at them and who had not lost interest and gone on to other pursuits—the man was pure delight. Flory had let him get away twice before, and he would be damned if he’d let Oliver go a third time.

“I should wish that you were familiar with a great many other things as well,” he purred, sliding closer to Oliver for a moment and placing Oliver’s hand that he held on the curve of his backside. He surged in as if he would kiss Oliver, and just as the man began to soften, as if he might accept the kiss, Flory yanked back, took his hand again, and pressed on. “But we have theatrical business to attend to,” he continued. “We need to invite everyone in Perdition to come to the opening of *Lady of the Scullery* tomorrow night!” he shouted to everyone in the gaming room they walked through.

“Is she opening her legs?” a red-faced gentleman who appeared to be winning at whichever game he played asked. “Because if so, I will most definitely *come*.”

He laughed raucously at his own joke, and crude as it was, Flory laughed with him. Even Oliver seemed to titter a little, unable to resist the jollity in the air.

Flory was not the only one from the Drury Lane Theater at Perdition to drum up business for the show. As they continued through to the next gaming room, they met up with Robert and Will, the stage hands, who were handing out fliers announcing the performance.

“Here,” Flory told Oliver, taking a small handful of fliers for the two of them to distribute and winking at Will for his part in advertising the show. “Hand some of these around, then we will go out into the world to find more people to give them to.”

Oliver nearly dropped the pages that Flory handed to him. “You cannot possibly suggest that we would wander the

streets, like beggars, thrusting advertisements at men we do not know,” he said.

Flory grinned from ear to ear. Oliver’s fussy ways were so deliciously endearing. Although he supposed Oliver was perfectly correct to suggest that an earl should not behave like a common carnival barker. But at no point had Oliver truly felt like a nobleman to him, and Flory suspected that the man did not feel like one to himself either. He also suspected that Oliver needed a rest from trying to pretend.

“You wish to be a patron of the theater, sir,” he teased as he gestured for Oliver to follow him through to the parlors on the other side of the house. “I cannot think of a single action that would benefit the theater more than encouraging people to attend the latest performance.”

His reasoning was ridiculous, but Oliver stammered a bit before saying, “I...I suppose you are right.”

Once again, Flory’s insides danced a jig of affection for the enigmatic earl-in-name-only. It was heaven to have stumbled across a man who was so ill-prepared for the world he’d found himself in, but who was equally as open to be led in a direction that would make him happy, whether it was the right direction or not.

They made a circuit through Perdicion, then gathered their coats and hats and headed out into the misty night to continue their mission closer to Covent Garden, where they were more likely to find people who would be receptive to their endeavors.

“Truly, you do not have to assist me in this if you do not want to,” Flory said as he and Oliver walked side by side across Orange Street and up St. Martin’s Lane. The traffic on St. Martin’s was bustling at that time of night, and Flory estimated they would be through with their errand in a matter of minutes. “I am merely fulfilling the last of my duties before the play opens.”

“It is not as if I had anything of greater importance to do,” Oliver said in a strange tone of voice.

He handed a flier to a hurried, middle-class gentleman, who took it and nodded to him without really seeing him. Flory smiled at the ease with which Oliver had fallen into his task, but he burned with curiosity about his lover—and damned if he didn’t intend for Oliver to be his lover again, that very night—and the resignation that had befallen him.

“How long had you been at Perdicion before I discovered you?” Flory asked.

Oliver glanced to Flory, handed out his final flier, then thrust his hands into the pockets of his coat with a sigh. “Not long. I’d been in attendance at Almack’s assembly rooms earlier.”

Flory’s eyes went wide. “I am impressed,” he said, passing out a flier to a pair of young ladies who appeared to be waiting for their gentlemen to flag down a hack to take them home for the evening. “How did you obtain a voucher to Almack’s?”

Oliver looked vaguely surprised. “Is it difficult to do?”

Flory laughed loud enough to startle a distracted young miss who looked to be running a late errand of some sort. “You truly are innocent of London life, aren’t you.”

“Disastrously so,” Oliver sighed. “I am ignorant of the ways of the nobility in general.”

“You did not expect to find yourself one of the nobs,” Flory said with a half-shrug of understanding. “Almack’s is as good a place as any to begin your initiation.” He had another, sour thought and added, “It is a good place to find a suitable wife and countess as well.”

Oliver made an ugly snorting sound, but it turned out to be the sweetest music Flory had ever heard when he said, “I will not marry. I am not the sort who could follow through with that.” He glanced to Flory, knowing that Flory would catch his meaning completely.

“Who will inherit this rogue title of yours next, then?” Flory asked.

“My brother, James, or his son,” Oliver answered with a sigh, as if it was of no consequence to him. “And truly, that makes me wonder if I should even bother ingratiating myself with the *ton*. I found them all to be full of themselves and blind to the possibility that there are other people in the world with other concerns who do not give a fig about them.”

Flory smiled from the depths of his heart. “I love you,” he said.

Oliver stopped dead and whipped to face him. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me,” Flory stopped as well, turning back to him with a grin. “Would you like me to repeat myself, perhaps a bit louder?” He raised his voice and drew the attention of some of the people rushing about them.

“No!” Oliver said, his eyes wide with alarm. “Keep your voice down, man.” He strode forward, catching Flory’s arm and pulling him onto Mays Court and out of the heavier traffic. “Are you intent on having us arrested?” he hissed.

“No,” Flory laughed. “That would quite defeat the purpose of my declaration.”

He shifted to take the lead, striding quickly down Mays Court and across Bedfordbury to Bedford Court, where he had his rooms.

“But how can you say that?” Oliver said, striding fast to keep up with him. “You do not know me. We have barely met.”

Flory wanted to make some sort of quip about how when you’d had a man’s prick up your arse, you came to know him quickly, but that seemed far too crass for the feelings that had budded and were blooming inside him.

“I have seen you at your best and worst within the last week,” he said as he peeked around, then grasped for Oliver’s hand as they reached the door to the house where his rooms were. “That is all I need to jump happily to the conclusion that you are the dearest and finest man of my acquaintance.”

Oliver frowned the way a child might when an adult spoke things just out of their understanding...which only endeared

him to Flory more. He waited until they were inside the building and proceeding up the stairs before saying, “Jumping to conclusions is by no means the wisest way to reach them.”

“No,” Flory said, glancing back at Oliver as he turned the corner in the darkened staircase, “but it can be the most diverting means to get there.”

Oliver huffed, and even in the darkness, Flory was certain he’d rolled his eyes.

It wasn’t until they made their way down the hall and Flory reached into the pocket of his coat to pull out the key to his rooms that Oliver blinked and asked, “Where are we?”

“We are home, my sweet hero,” he said, unlocking the door, then pushing it open.

Oliver hesitated for the briefest of moments before allowing Flory to grab the sleeve of his coat and tug him into the room.

Flory’s rooms were nothing much to look at. He did well enough at the theater to afford a flat with a bedroom and a parlor, which had a small stove in one corner. The room was decorated with mismatched furniture, most of which had served its turn as stage dressing until it was deemed unwanted, but it was of a good enough quality. There was a table with two chairs by the parlor’s single window, and Flory was lucky to be in possession of a small bookshelf that was laden mostly with various folios of plays he had participated in through past years.

“Is this...your home?” Oliver asked, turning a small circle as Flory removed his hat and coat, then stopped Oliver’s perusal of the place so that he could remove his as well.

“Yes, it is,” Flory said. “And through there is my bedroom, which is where we will be going so that I can prove my love to you.”

Oliver snapped his eyes to Flory with a look that was a mishmash of startled, aroused, and suspicious. “That is not love,” he said as if he finally understood. “That is lust, pure and simple.”

“And are not the pure and simple things of life the very best?” Flory asked, pushing Oliver’s coat off his shoulders and letting it drop to the floor. He plucked Oliver’s hat from his head and tossed it aside as well.

“Have a care for my things,” Oliver scolded him, glancing off to where Flory had tossed his hat.

“That is what I am attempting to do,” Flory murmured, flickering one eyebrow mischievously.

Before Oliver could protest, Flory caught the front of his jacket and pulled him in for a searing kiss. He did not care that he was being abrupt and overly forward, he wanted to get the man into his bed as quickly as possible so that they could exhaust themselves with pleasure, then lay awake for the remainder of the night, talking and teasing and coming to know each other in the ways that truly mattered.

He half expected Oliver to growl and fuss, to push him off and to march out of his life for the third time, but Oliver

surprised him. Yes, he growled, but with passion as he clasped Flory in return and gave himself over to their kiss with heat and enthusiasm.

“I will not be ridiculous by saying I love you,” he said, between kisses, working fervently to undo all of the buttons on Flory’s person that he could find, “but I will admit to being unable to resist your charms.”

“My charms are irresistible,” Flory said, returning the favor by plucking loose Oliver’s buttons as well and leading him back toward the bedroom. “You are welcome to fail to resist them whenever you please.”

Oliver made another sound that might have been amusement, or might have been desire. Either way, it did not matter. They crossed the threshold into Flory’s room and began to peel each other out of their clothing in earnest.

It was all a delicious blur, and soon enough, Flory had tugged Oliver down into his bed. The sheets had never felt so cool and the mattress had never been so soft as it was as the two of them shifted and writhed over each other, grasping and kissing as they sought to find the best ways to give each other everything. And like their first time together, the bliss and wonder went on far longer than Flory had hoped for. The two of them were perfectly matched in appetite and intent, and each time they skated close to completion, they would pull back and simply bask in each other’s heat for a moment until they could continue on to a higher fulfillment.

That sort of sweetness could not last indefinitely, and with a few quick words and a reach under the bed to retrieve a jar

of balm, Flory found himself exactly where he wanted to be—underneath Oliver, bent nearly double, as Oliver thrust vigorously into him with sighs and cries that made Flory want to weep with their possessive sweetness.

And then, with a few helpful strokes of his hand and some particularly deft placement on Oliver's part, Flory was coming apart and spilling his seed in a messy oblation to the gods of love and pleasure as Oliver threw his head back in his own climax.

It was pure bliss and the sweetest sort of communion that Flory could have hoped for. And as the whirlwind settled, Oliver sank softly into his arms. Flory kissed him and petted him, and was kissed and petted in return as the two of them settled in for a night in each other's arms. All of it was more than Flory had hoped for that evening, and he would be damned if he would let Oliver escape from him this time.

EPH



Oliver was not tucked into the large, soft bed in the opulent bedchamber that he'd inherited from his cousin when he awoke to the first rays of dawn and the murmur of dustmen and deliveries somewhere outside. Neither was he in his cozy room at Oxford, where he could hear the gentle burble of the River Cherwell as it meandered past his residence, or the song of the dawn chorus.

He did not know where he was for a few, startling seconds as sleep left him and he snuggled into the warmth that seemed to envelop him. But then, he had felt lost and adrift for weeks now anyhow.

When a wriggling movement and a long yawn sounded beside him, Oliver remembered where he was all in an instant, and he smiled. He was in Florizel's bed, settled between his lover's sheets, on his side with his enigmatic comedian tucked behind him, one arm tossed over Oliver's body, one of his legs wedged between Oliver's. And if he wasn't mistaken, Florizel's morning wood was pressed firmly against his backside, making his own waking state that much more exciting.

He'd spent the night in another man's bed. Despite his previous experience, it was the first time Oliver had found himself still with his lover in the morning. It was the first time he'd *wanted* to find himself still with a lover. More profound still, he discovered upon brief examination of his thoughts that he had no wish to be anywhere else but where he was.

"Are you awake?" Florizel asked in a voice still thick with sleep after Oliver had simply lain there, basking in the gentle joy of it all.

Oliver merely hummed in answer and spread his hand over Florizel's as it rested on his chest.

Florizel, in turn, pressed a happy smile into the back of Oliver's neck, breathing in the scent of his skin.

"I consider this a resounding success," he said, undulating his body so that they touched completely, and stirring Oliver into a passion in the process.

"A success?" Oliver asked, turning his head slightly to get a look at his lover.

Florizel propped himself up enough to grin down at Oliver. "You are still here," he said. "You have not turned tail and fled for whatever home and harbor rabbit-ravens seek out when they are scandalized by themselves."

Oliver's heart shivered with pleasure in his chest. He tried to scowl at Florizel for his joking, but found he could only manage a satisfied smile.

"How could I even think about fleeing now?" he asked, turning to his back and gathering Florizel into his arms—

which was something of a feat, since Florizel was a few inches taller than him, though leaner. “After two nights of exquisite passion, the likes of which I have never known before, how could I even dream of leaving your bed?”

Florizel laughed and sagged against Oliver for a moment before sliding himself up Oliver’s body so that his face hovered just above Oliver’s. “I would be deeply pleased to remind you every night, and some of the days as well.”

Oliver smiled. He spread his hands across Florizel’s lithe back, sweeping down to caress the tight mounds of his backside—which caused Florizel to flinch and draw in a breath of expectation—before drawing one hand up so that he could grasp Florizel behind his head and pull him down for a kiss.

Florizel made the most delicious sound of acceptance as he kissed Oliver in return. The flame of desire that had existed between the two of them from the start was so invigorating that Oliver didn’t even mind that neither of them were as fresh as they might be. He had never felt so alive, so randy, and so ready to embrace everything about his inner nature that he’d ignored or pushed aside in the past.

“Oh?” Florizel teased between kisses. “Are you the sort who likes to greet the morning with the sweet song of pleasure shared? Will your cries rival the cock’s crow, or is your cock hoping for something else?”

Oliver laughed deep in his throat and pulled Florizel back to him for another kiss. With his other hand, he reached

between the two of them, gathering their pricks together to stroke with long, easy movements.

He knew he had Florizel completely when the man stopped talking and threw his all into kissing. He truly was a master of the art, and he knew how to employ his mouth in other, astounding pursuits as well. In fact, if it was not too rude of him, he would nudge Florizel's shoulders and encourage him to inch down so that—

A sudden banging on the outer door of Florizel's flat startled both of them to the point where Florizel bit Oliver's tongue before yanking away.

"Flory!" a distressed young voice came from the hallway outside Florizel's rooms. "Flory, wake up! Wake up! You must come now!"

Oliver's momentary fear that the two of them had been discovered together and that they would be dragged straight from their bed to the gallows at Newgate Prison disappeared, but a different sort of alarm followed.

"What the bloody hell?" Florizel muttered, extracting himself from Oliver with some difficulty and a great deal of regret, which Oliver felt as well.

The young man in the hall continued to bang on the door, calling for Flory. Oliver was treated to the brief, beautiful sight of Florizel's body, naked and aroused, as he threw back the bedcovers and stumbled to stand. The man truly was a work of art that would have made the sculptors of Ancient Rome jealous with his perfection. The sight was equally as satisfying

as Florizel turned away to head into the other room, giving Oliver a healthy sight of his pert arse.

For two seconds, Oliver grasped his cock, ready to finish what they'd started with that sight still fresh in his mind. He gave up the idea as ridiculous a moment later as the drama in the other room unfolded.

“What is it, Ned?” Florizel asked moments before Oliver heard the sound of a lock being turned and a door opening. He prayed to God that Florizel had covered himself with something before opening the door.

Judging by the lack of shock in the young man's voice as he burst into the flat, he had.

“You must come to the theater at once,” the young fellow said, gasping. “Only, someone's gone and painted over all the scenes in the night, and we open tonight.”

“Painted over all the scenes?” Florizel demanded, then changed his tone to something more dire as he went on with, “It was that bastard, Arthur, wasn't it. He's been complaining to Dodd for weeks about how he doesn't like the sets.”

“It might be him at that,” the young man said. “So you must come. Miss Suzannah is beside herself this morning, and she's going to need help to fix things.”

“Right,” Florizel said, sounding determined. “I'll be there as soon as I can. Go and gather the rest of the stage crew to see if they can help.”

“Yes, sir,” the young man said. “But everyone was out late last night at the Coach and Horse. They might not be feeling

up to it just yet.”

“Call as many as you can, then,” Florizel said.

Oliver had risen from bed as the conversation took place, and was at the washstand, hastily bathing when he heard the door shut. A moment later, Florizel swept into the room—wearing a concealing banyan, thankfully—a concerned look on his face.

“Someone painted over the scenery?” Oliver asked with a frown as he splashed himself with water to rinse.

Florizel frowned. “I know no more about it than you do, but I have a terrible feeling about it.”

Oliver could only grunt in reply and do what he could to help Florizel bathe and change as quickly as possible. He rushed through donning his own clothes again, feeling a bit bereft at the way such a special time seemed to be ending.

Until Florizel was dressed and putting on his coat and said, “If we hurry, we can make it to the theater before the streets become too crowded.”

“We?” Oliver asked, freezing as he lifted his hat to put it on.

Florizel turned to him with a smile as he reached the door. “You’re coming with me,” he said. “I refuse to let you slip through my fingers a third time, which means I am not letting you out of my sight. Besides, something tells me I will need your help to set things right.”

Oliver could only stand there and gape at him for a moment.

Florizel's smile dropped, and he said, "Unless you have other engagements you need to attend to."

Oliver snapped his mouth shut. The only other engagement he had was to sit around in a house where he did not feel as though he fit, being frowned at by servants who he did not know, at a loss for how he was supposed to live in his new role.

"I have no previous engagements," he said, allowing himself to smile, then follow Florizel out the door.

London in the early morning was an entirely different world from the one Oliver had experienced so far. It had a sort of calm and freshness to it, along with a low hum of potential as merchants set up their shops for the day, young people rushed off to whatever employment they were engaged in, and a few stragglers who had been out all night tucked their tired faces into their coats and hurried home to rest at last. None of the people Oliver saw around him were of the same social class as him, but they all seemed to be more his brothers than any of the titled gentlemen he'd been thrown into company with of late.

Oliver was surprised to find the Drury Lane Theater already alive and buzzing with activity as Florizel showed them in through the stage door. Oliver hadn't known what to expect, but he could feel the air of panic from the moment he stepped into the backstage area.

"It's a disaster," a young man who was dressed in common clothes, but had a colorful demeanor, said, grasping Florizel's arm the moment he stepped through the door. "Suzannah is

livid, and she's working as fast as she can to repair the damage. Will is helping her."

Florizel nodded, as commanding as any lord, as he shed his coat and hat, handing them off to the anxious stagehand. Oliver removed his outer things and handed them over as well, pleased and amazed that the young man did not so much as bat an eyelash at his presence with Florizel.

Once that was done, the two of them marched out to the stage area proper...where they were struck with precisely what it was that had everyone wringing their hands. Someone had, indeed, painted over the beautiful backdrop of a country scene that Oliver had noted in passing when he had visited the theater before. Gone were the soft colors and intricate landscapes. In its place were broad, false colors made with clumsy brush strokes, and details that could best be described as lubberly.

"Florizel!" The distressed young woman who stood on a stool, her gown covered by a paint smock, nearly wept with relief and frustration as she caught sight of him. Oliver noted a gentleman of apparent distinction working alongside her, paint already splattered in his hair. "Thank God you've arrived. Do you see what that bastard did? Kit is trying to help me repair the damage, but the scene is nearly ruined."

"And the devil had already begun painting over the villa scene before he was caught and stopped, so that needs to be redone too," Lord Hollingsworth said.

Florizel nodded, taking on the mien of a general about to go to war. "Do you think you can fix it before the house opens

this evening?” he asked.

Suzannah pinched her face anxiously and looked to her gentleman. “If we put our all into it. And perhaps if someone could help us with the underpainting?”

“I’ll see who I can spare,” Florizel said. He turned to Oliver and opened his mouth as though he would speak, but a crash from behind the scenic drop stopped him before the words had a chance to be uttered.

“Bloody shite!” someone shouted in the direction of the crash.

Florizel sent a wary look to Oliver and said, “Welcome to the theater, my lord.”

It was a jest, but Oliver could only manage a small, twitching smile for it. He set into motion, following Florizel into the wings, only to find that a crate containing oil for the footlights had fallen over and spilled across a wide area. The acrid stench of it quickly spread, but Oliver knew enough to know the smell was by far not the worst consequence of the spill, considering the troubles they’d already had with the floorboards.

“If you show me where to find what I need, I can help clean it up,” he said as a way of offering himself to his lover. It was a far more useful offering than gifts or money, or even his body.

Florizel nodded. “Will can show you.”

From there, Oliver was well and truly drawn into the hive of activity that was the Drury Lane Theater on opening night.

He and Roger scattered sawdust over the spilled lamp oil, and Oliver was reasonably certain they'd cleaned it up within an hour, but without the ability to light another lamp to check—at least, not without risking igniting a conflagration if they had missed spots—it was impossible to know.

From there, Oliver was pulled into another drama, as it was discovered that some of the costumes had been tainted with the lamp oil. Rather than risk the actors suddenly igniting in the middle of the performance, it was necessary for the seamstress to either find or construct new costumes with hardly any time at all in which to do so while the soiled ones were sent out for cleaning. Oliver spent more than an hour climbing to high shelves in the wardrobe room to fetch bolts of fabric and gowns that were old enough to have sired him.

They were given a bit of a reprieve at midday, when Florizel sent one of the theater's dogsbodies out to a nearby pub and the lad returned with an entire box filled with meat pies and a small keg of beer.

“Enjoy it while you can,” Florizel said, handing the feast around to the perhaps alarmingly small number of people who had arrived at the theater through the morning to help prepare for that night's opening. “We might not have time to eat anything else until after the curtain comes down.”

“As long as that doesn't come from the Coach and Horse, we'll be right as rain,” a burly stage hand said in a thick voice.

Oliver squinted to get a better look at the man across the dim area of the stage. The fellow seemed a bit washed out and sallow to his eyes.

Florizel must have noticed as well. “What the devil is wrong with you, Wat?” he asked.

Wat pressed a hand to his stomach and looked like he might vomit. “Bad eels, I expect,” he said. His look turned downright grim as he went on with, “We all had ’em last night. The Coach and Horse was practically giving ’em away, and now we know why. I was up half the night as the eels made their return appearance. Bess was too. She’s still at home, abed. Or on the chamber pot is more like it.”

Florizel’s eyes went wide. “What are you telling me, Wat? Where is everyone else?”

“Home, I would imagine,” Wat said. “Sick as dogs, the lot of us.”

“But we need all hands on deck,” the young stage hand who had met them at the door said, his eyes wide with panic. “It’s opening night.”

“I could round them all up and get them back here,” Wat said to Florizel. “But chances are you’d be cleaning up sick and shite all night as they worked the curtains and changed the scenes. Not sure the audience would like that.”

Oliver might have been tempted to laugh, if the situation was not so dire.

Florizel swore under his breath and ran a hand through his hair. “What about the cast?” he asked Wat. “Were any of them at the pub with you last night?”

“Not Thomas or Sarah, of course,” Wat answered. “A few of the smaller players were. Bevan was praying for death last

time I saw him. Evelyn was cursing her mother's name for giving birth to her."

"Shite," Florizel hissed.

For a moment, complete silence reigned on the stage. Everyone glanced to Florizel for instructions. Oliver, too, felt as though he were a part of something and as if Florizel needed his complete support.

Finally, Florizel let out a breath and seemed to gain strength and courage. "Right," he said. "I have to wait for Dodd to get here to know what to do about Mr. Bevan and Miss Evelyn, but until then, we'll all have to work together to change the scenes and make certain lamps are lit, sounds are sounded, and the curtain rises when it should. Which means, Oliver," he turned to Oliver, "you are officially an assistant stage manager now."

Oliver swallowed thickly. "I will do whatever you require of me," he said, his voice hoarse.

He just hoped he would not regret the offer.

MFE



It was the most extraordinary chaos Oliver had experienced in his life, and it did not let up for a single moment. He knew about the theater, of course. At least in theory. But as the afternoon wore on, it became apparent that there was so much more to the mounting of a production than reading a few lines from a script.

“My lady, the carriage is...um...er...here?” Mr. Damien DeWitt read the line from the script Flory had thrust into the man’s hand when he’d arrived at the theater to make certain he and his lady love had tickets for the opening night performance.

DeWitt squinted at the line, glanced up at Will, the stagehand—who stood across from him, wearing one of the tattered, old costumes they’d brought out of storage earlier. He let his shoulders drop, and his free hand, which held a gilded riding crop that the properties master had thrust at him before shoving him on stage. It was supposed to represent a walking stick until a better prop was constructed, but until then, it stood out as the wicked plaything that it was.

“I beg your pardon,” DeWitt said, eyes a bit wide, “but is this young man going to play the part of Priscilla during the performance? I’m not certain that would be quite... presentable.”

“You got a problem with a bloke in a dress?” Will challenged DeWitt with a comically peevish grimace.

“Well, er, no,” DeWitt stammered, going more than a little pink.

Oliver had almost laughed. Will was by far the better actor of the two men, but *Lady of the Scullery* was not the sort of production where a man could get away with playing a female part.

“No,” Mr. Dodd growled as he marched across the stage. “He’s not going to play Priscilla.”

“Oh,” Will sighed in disappointment, looking like a wilted flower.

Dodd didn’t pause as he crossed the stage to just behind the proscenium, where Flory was instructing Viscount Wade as to how to raise and lower the curtain, since the man who usually did the job was one of the fish pie casualties.

“Flory, have you heard anything from Kate about understudying Priscilla yet?” he boomed, startling one of the dogsbodies—who was still trying to scrub lantern oil out of the floorboards in the wings.

From his perch atop a ladder, where he was finishing the last of the repainting on the backdrop, Oliver watched Flory leave Viscount Wade to meet Dodd on the front of the stage.

“Jane said she refuses to do it,” he reported with a sigh. “She’s still sore about Robert throwing her over for that milliner’s assistant on Oxford Street.”

“It’s not my fault if Bessie was able to lift up her skirts when Jane wasn’t,” Robert called from some unseen place in the fly space above the stage.

From his perspective, Oliver could see the man retying several of the set pieces that had been taken down to be repainted. The man seemed to be working in a hurry, which Oliver thought was never a good idea.

Down on the stage, Dodd sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. “We’ll have to find someone else.”

“Find anyone else,” Flory said, touching Dodd’s elbow as the two of them headed diagonally across the stage.

“I could do it,” Will insisted. “Really, I wouldn’t mind.”

“Find anyone female,” Flory restated with a smirk.

Oliver’s heart swelled as he watched his lover take command of the bizarre situation. His gut tightened with longing as well...and if he was honest with himself, he was a tad jealous of the way Flory touched Dodd, and the way he patted the boy who dashed across the stage at that moment with an armful of what looked like rolled up parchments.

“Good boy, Isaac,” he said. “Make certain those notices are placed on every chair. Start with the boxes.”

The painting was done, so Oliver scrambled down from his ladder, noticing without time for distress that his shirt and breeches were ruined with paint, and over to Flory.

“What are the parchments?” he asked.

Flory didn't so much as bat an eyelash before looping an arm around Oliver's waist and tugging him close for a quick hug. “They're notices we've had printed up announcing that several members of the cast and crew have been taken ill, and that their roles this evening will be performed by understudies.”

“Which understudies remains to be seen,” Dodd grumbled.

“You're not printing my name and putting it out there in public, are you?” DeWitt asked in a panic. “I am more than willing to stand in for one night as a favor, but I would rather the public, and more importantly, my family, does not learn about this.”

“No names were included,” Flory reassured the man with a smile.

“Mostly because we don't know who they all are,” Dodd said.

“What about Suzannah?” Flory asked, brightening with inspiration. “It looks as though the sets are finished. She might be able to play Priscilla.”

“I'll ask her,” Dodd said, then walked off.

“Is Priscilla an important role?” Oliver asked.

Flory laughed humorlessly. “She's the comedic second lead,” he said. “And she's key to the plot.”

“Oh, I see,” Oliver said. “Hopefully Miss Townsend will be able to take the role, then.”

Miss Townsend was not able to take the role. Miss Townsend was nowhere to be found, after having been a nearly constant presence on the stage all morning. By four in the afternoon, Flory and Dodd had half of the remaining stage crew searching for her, but she had disappeared entirely. So had Mr. Hollingsworth.

There was no time to investigate their absence, though. The set had been repaired and the costumes replaced, Thomas and Sarah had arrived to run through the play with the replacement actors that had been found—though both of them looked a little green around the gills in Oliver’s estimation—but as a crowd began to form in the lobby of the theater, growing steadily louder until their excited chatter could be heard through the closed doors to the house, no one had yet been found to play the role of Priscilla.

“We have to do something,” Dodd said, pacing the stage in an increasing panic as the ushers swept through the house, preparing the seats and boxes for the buzzing audience and the cast members applied their make-up.

“Please, let me play the part,” Will begged in his low-born accent, all but dropping to his knees and clasping his hands together in appeal to Dodd and Flory. “I’ve been waiting my whole life for this moment, I have.”

Oliver shared a knowing look with Flory. Will looked a little too natural in his feminine stage make-up. He made a sweet woman, in all honesty, but Dodd had been right earlier. It wasn’t that sort of production.

Flory sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. “There’s no one else,” he told Dodd with a pinched look.

Dodd looked like he might call off the entire production. “I suppose—”

He stopped a moment later as Miss Samantha Billings—or rather, Mrs. Chow, as she was now, who had been introduced to Oliver as the production’s head carpentress—stomped onto the stage.

“I’ve rebuilt the trellis, and yes, it will hold this time, but I cannot—”

She stopped as both Dodd and Flory burst into smiles at the sight of her.

“Why are you both staring at me in such a manner?” she asked.

“Because today, Fortune has smiled upon you,” Flory said, dashing across the stage to her.

He glanced to Dodd, who had followed him, and who said, “Today is the day you make your debut on the stage, Mrs. Chow.”

Mrs. Chow’s eyes went wide. “No!” she shouted. “No. Absolutely not. I have no ambitions on this side of the stage. I refuse.”

“If you do not understudy the role of Priscilla, the production cannot proceed,” Dodd explained to her.

“We’d have to close the whole thing down, turn everyone away,” Flory said. “All our hard work would be for naught.”

Are you prepared for your work to be for naught?”

Mrs. Chow opened her mouth, but no words came out. She stared between the two men with an increasingly forlorn look. She flailed, wrung her hands, and both pleaded with them and panicked with her expression alone. And in the end, she let out a heavy breath and said, “Alright. I’ll do it. For the good of the production.”

“Excellent,” Flory said, clapping his hands together. “That’s all our problems solved.”

That was most certainly not all their problems solved.

Mrs. Chow was whisked off to be stuffed into a costume and to have her face painted. She was handed a script as well, and Oliver ran through her lines with her, DeWitt sitting with them and commiserating with her, as the stage crew set everything for the first act.

Oliver could tell the moment the audience was allowed into the house. The faint buzz of excitement turned into a roar that could be heard through the curtain, which Lord Wade had lowered expertly.

“That’s it, then,” Flory announced as he came into the dressing room. His color was high and his eyes were alight with excitement. “The audience is taking their seats. Fifteen minutes to curtain.”

“Thank you, fifteen,” the rotund woman who was finishing up Mrs. Chow’s makeup said as if by rote.

The call and response startled Oliver far more than it should have. He leapt up from his seat and followed Flory into

the backstage area as he left the room.

“Are we going to be alright?” he asked as he caught up to Flory.

Flory turned to him, brimming with everything jolly and triumphant. “We are most certainly going to be alright, my darling. We have each other, and I have no intention of ever letting you go again.”

He scooped Oliver into his arms and kissed him with far more passion than was decent for even the backstage area of a theater. His hands seemed to fly immediately to all the most inappropriate places on Oliver’s body, and he made a vocal sound of appreciation as he devoured Oliver’s mouth.

Oliver couldn’t decide whether he was shocked by the gesture or whether he adored it. He was both. He stiffened so much he thought his bones would break at first, and then he softened and melted into Flory’s arms with a sigh of his own.

That moment of surrender lasted only a few seconds before he pulled back, ending their kiss. “No, I meant will the production be alright,” he panted, lips throbbing with the desire for more kisses.

Flory laughed loudly, and a little madly. “No, my dear boy, the production will not be alright. It will be an utter disaster.” He cupped the side of Oliver’s face, then said, “But it will be a spectacular disaster.”

Oliver believed him. On both counts. He’d never felt so sure of his feelings for another person in his life. He and Flory had already been through the best and the worst together. He

had a sense that if they survived that evening, they could survive anything together.

Because the production was absolutely going to be a complete disaster.

“Lord Wade, are you prepared to raise the curtain?” Flory asked fifteen minutes later, once everyone was in place to begin the play.

“As prepared as I can be,” Lord Wade replied.

“Actors in place?” Flory asked walking across the stage one final time.

“Yes,” Oliver reported from his assigned spot in the wings, where he would be serving as a stagehand for the length of the show.

“Do you suppose the audience will notice that I’m reading from a script?” DeWitt asked as Flory passed him.

Mrs. Chow laughed ironically. “They’ll be too busy noticing how wretched I am as an actress to note anything else.”

“All will be well,” Lady Giselle, the authoress of the play, who had been called upon to play a minor role at the very last minute, reassured her.

As if to contradict those words, Thomas staggered a bit where he waited in the wings to make his first entrance and said, “Do you know, I think those damnable pies are affecting me after all.”

That was the last thing Oliver heard before the roar of applause from the crowd as Flory gave the signal and Lord Wade raised the curtain.

It was as if someone had fired the first shot in a war. The flicker of the footlights illuminated the stage, the few actors who actually knew their parts threw themselves into character, and the terrified band of understudies did their best not to fall apart completely, now that several hundred people were staring at them, many of them luminaries of the *ton*.

Mrs. Chow had the opening line of the play, and Oliver watched with morbid fascination as she clutched her script in both hands, hard that she would rip the entire thing in two if she so much as sneezed, and said in the most wooden voice that Oliver had ever heard, “My lady, you cannot proceed with this farce.”

She paused, dropped her shoulders, sent Sarah an out of character, ironic look, and added in her usual voice, “If those are not the truest words ever spoken, I do not know what are.”

Whether she’d intended to or not, Mrs. Chow had spoken loud enough for the audience to hear. To Oliver’s amazement, that same audience burst into laughter, as though they were either a part of the madness of the production, or as if they thought the line was scripted.

Sarah smiled tightly, playing along like a professional and continuing to her line. The rest of the cast moved through their blocking as if the entire stage were shifting under their feet.

In the wings on the other side of the stage from Oliver, Flory clapped a hand over his mouth as if to stifle laughter,

and Dodd covered his eyes with one hand.

Beside Oliver, Thomas turned and proceeded to vomit, splashing Oliver's shoes as he did. But then he pulled himself together, straightened and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his costume and tugged on the hem of his jacket, then walked boldly onto the stage to deliver his opening line, as if nothing at all were amiss.

Oliver had never experienced anything like the next hour of his life, and he prayed that he never would again. Thomas was sick several more times, once while on stage. DeWitt—whose character was Thomas's character's servant—might have been ham-fisted with his lines, but he was brilliant when it came to sensing the needs of his fellow thespians. He thought quickly enough to swipe the hat from his head and to hold it out for Thomas to cast up his accounts into.

The result was riotous laughter from the audience, who must have thought the action was part of the story, even though it didn't make a lick of sense. They laughed even more when DeWitt grimaced into the contents of his hat before gingerly carrying it off into the wings while Thomas delivered an heroic monologue.

If only a bit of ill-timed vomit was the only interruption the first act saw. Problems abounded, however.

At one point, Lady Giselle backed up too far during a scene at a market and brushed the canvas backdrop. That would have been uneventful for any other performance, but the paint was still wet. It smeared all over the back of her costume and her hair. As soon as she noticed, she leapt away,

which caused her to knock into a prop cart, toppling it and sending its contents of fruit spilling across the stage.

That would have been uneventful, but Flory had chosen to employ actual fruit for the production. The fruit in question had been purchased a few days before and was overripe, which meant that as soon as Mrs. Chow accidentally trod on a plum, the entire thing burst, sending juicy, slippery pulp across the stage around her. The poor woman yelped as if someone had goosed her as she was nearly sent sprawling. She threw her script in the process, and it hit Sarah square in the nose.

Poor Sarah was forced to continue on with the scene with her nose dripping blood. Lady Giselle thought quickly and rushed forward to hand her a handkerchief, but doing so caused her to kick the escaped fruits across the stage, much to the chagrin of the stagehands who were already scrambling around, attempting to collect them.

The audience, of course, found the entire thing to be hilarious. They laughed so hard that Sarah had to pause before half of her lines so that she could be heard above the din. And if the play had been a comedy, the laughter would have marked it as an enormous success.

“I cannot decide if we should count this as a surprise victory or as a stunning defeat,” Dodd growled to Flory during intermission, once the curtain was down.

The stage was in a state of near pandemonium as Robert and Will—who was still in his gown and makeup—rushed to mop up the squashed fruit, blood, and vomit, as Mrs. Chow and DeWitt ran through their scripts in preparation for the

scene the two of them would have in the second act, and as the backdrops and set pieces were changed.

“This is not precisely the play I wrote,” Lady Giselle said, shaking her head. Oliver couldn’t tell if she was miserable over how things were unfolding or if she appreciated what had the potential to be an unlikely success.

“There’s still one more act to go,” Flory reminded her, and everyone else. “There’s no telling what might happen next.”

“Dear God! Do not say that,” Dodd said, glaring at him.

Flory merely laughed in reply and called, “Five minutes until the curtain rises for the second act!”

If possible, the action on the stage increased as everyone rushed to prepare.

Flory grabbed Oliver’s arm and dragged him back into the wings. “So, my lord,” he said with a teasing smile. “Are you ready to invest the lion’s share of your inheritance into mad capped theatrical productions such as this?”

Oliver laughed before he could stop himself. “I don’t think even all the money in England could salvage this production now.”

“Oh, you might be surprised,” Flory said, still sunshine and excitement, despite the disaster around them. “Just wait and watch what happens next.”

Oliver didn’t have to wait. Just at that moment, there was a crack, and when he and Flory turned to face the stage, they spotted one corner of the backdrop sagging dangerously.

“The estate drop is broken,” someone called from the fly space. “It’s unsafe to use.”

“But the next scene takes place in the duke’s drawing room,” Dodd called out, marching across the stage as if he could bully the set into behaving.

“Could we proceed as though it were in the back garden and use the same drop from the countryside scene?” someone else asked.

“We’ll have to,” Dodd said.

Ten minutes later, the curtain rose again on a scene containing parlor furniture and a few potted ferns that the stagehands had found nearby with a pastoral backdrop. It would have been passable, but for the fact that a large bit of the action and dialogue revolved around Sarah’s character sweeping out a fireplace.

Sarah adapted brilliantly to the change, though. She had the audience in stitches as she swept and cleaned the ferns while engaging in the flirtatious dialogue with Thomas—who was still green, but had little left in his stomach to be concerned about. The only problem was that much of the scene involved innuendo and double entendres about fire and passion, which clearly needed a fireplace to make sense.

Although, as it turned out, they ended up with an alternative.

“Why do I smell lantern oil?” Oliver muttered about halfway through the scene, scenting the air.

“Because of the spill earlier?” Will asked from right beside him.

“Yes, but I thought that was cleaned up,” Oliver said.

“Yeah, it was,” Will said. “Cleaned up, and the rags and mops taken out to—”

Oliver waited for Will to finish, but instead, he was treated to the sight of Will’s eyes going wide.

Will glanced at something in the dark corner of the wings behind them, then back onto the stage again. He glanced from side to side, and then out onto the stage, where Thomas, as part of the action of the scene, had struck a match and was about to light a pipe.

“Fuck,” Will hissed. “I think I used the mop that was used on the oil to mop up the fruit.”

“So?” Oliver asked with a shrug.

A moment later, Thomas shook his hand as if to extinguish the match, then tossed the match over his shoulder.

But the match had not gone out, and as it hit the floor, a large patch burst into flames.

TEA



As long as he lived, Flory would never forget *Lady of the Scullery*...the comedic farce. His heart ached for Lady Giselle, because this was not what her brilliant and insightful play was meant to be. It was a work of art, not a piece to be laughed at.

And yet, the audience was enjoying their frantic, valiant efforts to bring the story and its joy to life. Flory had been keeping one eye on the audience and one on the stage for the entire performance so far, and despite knowing that a large percentage of the lords, ladies, and common folk in attendance that evening had purchased a ticket in the hope of seeing a female playwright brought low, every face he saw was filled with delight and engagement.

One way or another, Lady Giselle's work would be a success. One way or another, she and everyone else involved in the production would be able to claim victory. One way or another—

Flory's thoughts were cut short by a sudden whoosh of flame from the center of the stage, followed by a deep gasp from the audience. He had no idea how, but on top of

everything else they'd dealt with since Lord Wade had raised the curtain, now the stage itself was on fire.

"Fire blanket!" Flory hissed to Will, who stood beside him in the wings. "And fetch the sand bucket too!"

"Yes, sir!" Will leapt into action, grabbing the heavy, quilted blanket that was kept backstage for just such a purpose and rushing out onto the stage with it.

Flory's heart was in this throat as he glanced across to Oliver in the other wings. Fires in crowded theaters were a serious thing. Between the lantern oil and the paint that was still wet on the canvases around them, there was a very real chance that their unlikely triumph could turn into a tragedy of the highest order. The entire Drury Lane Theater could ignite in an instant, transforming into an inferno that would be talked about in hushed, dire tones for a hundred years to come.

Oliver seemed to know it as well. Across the distance, their eyes met. Flory's heart swelled with sentiment for the enigmatic man, who had come so far in such a short time, and who he very much wished to continue on down the path of life with for years to come. It would be a tragedy indeed if the gods of fire and folly should hold the two of them apart now.

But even as Flory thought that, the audience burst into laughter.

Flory blinked and focused his attention on the action of the stage. Thomas had said something that had earned a laugh from the fascinated crowd, despite the flames licking at the stage. Better still, before the flames could spread more than a foot or so in every direction, Will had thrown not only the fire

blanket but himself in his costume gown across the blaze, putting most of it out.

“Oh, my lord,” Will wailed with comedic perfection as he continued to spread himself and slap at the remaining bits of flame, actually managing to put the bloody thing out. “It is I, Esmerelda Blott, come to rescue you from the fires of Hell that have attempted to rise up and keep you separate from your lady love!”

“What the bloody hell is he doing?” Dodd hissed, dashing up to Flory’s side and staring out at the unraveling action on the stage.

Flory barely heard the question. The audience had roared with laughter at Will’s appearance. They continued to laugh as the improvised scene lumbered on.

“What does all this signify?” Thomas battled to stay in the scene. He gestured for Sarah to come take his hand. “Who is Esmerelda Blott?”

“Why, I have been sent by Queen Mab to reveal all and to make merry,” Will went on, scrambling to stand in his now dirty and scorched gown. “For there is a secret that you do not know which shall be revealed soon.”

“Secret? There is no secret,” Sarah said with pretend surprise, then growled, “Not for another three scenes.”

Laughter swelled from the audience, and Flory spotted more than a few members of the audience who were so beside themselves they were at risk of splitting their breeches.

“Enough of this,” Dodd said, clearly furious. “I refuse to see Lady Giselle dishonored in such a way. This is her play, not Will’s.”

Dodd marched out onto the stage, despite the din of the audience, grabbed Will’s arm, leaned in to say something to Sarah and Thomas, then yanked Will back into the wings.

“That was exhilarating,” Will sighed once Dodd had him tucked away in the darkness of the wings.

“I hope you enjoyed it, because I’ll see to it that you never work in this theater again,” Dodd snapped.

“He put out the fire,” Flory pointed out as Sarah and Thomas repositioned themselves on the stage and continued with the scene as scripted. “If he hadn’t rushed to do so, we’d all be cinders right now. Surely, he deserves to keep his place because of that.”

Dodd grumbled, then threw Will away from him. He then stomped off to where Lady Giselle had been watching the whole thing from farther back in the wings.

“You’d better mind yourself now, Will,” Flory told Will with a smile. “I don’t think Esmerelda Blott has made any friends today.”

“It was glorious,” Will said with a sigh, sagging back against the wall.

Flory laughed and shook his head, then glanced across the stage to Oliver again. Oliver looked as though someone had hit him over the head with a cudgel. His eyes were wide and shone, even in the dark of the wings. And yet, when he met

Flory's eyes again, he burst into a smile. That smile grew larger, and then turned into a laugh. The joy of that laugh went straight to Flory's heart, making him wish he could fly across the stage to enclose Oliver in his arms then and there.

They still had the rest of the play to go, though. Sarah and Thomas seemed to be back in form, which was a blessing, since there were still more follies to be had. DeWitt and Mrs. Chow were hilariously awful in their important scene together, but the audience loved it. Another bit of the set tumbled during the final revelation scene near the end of the play, but Lady Giselle managed to catch it. She was forced to stand where she was, keeping that bit of the set up, for the rest of the play.

At last, with more of a sense of relief than passion, Thomas spoke the final lines of the play. "Forevermore, my lady of the scullery, I will love you."

He and Sarah embraced, DeWitt tossed his script into the air and Mrs. Chow threw hers into the wings before stomping off, and the audience reacted with such astounding approval and delight that Flory could hardly believe what he was hearing or seeing.

Somehow, even with every disaster known to man befalling them all at once, *Lady of the Scullery* had turned into a resounding success. Of course, they wouldn't know for certain how much of a success it was until the papers had their say, or until the tickets for future performances were sold, but by the look of things, the audience had thoroughly enjoyed it.

"My deepest apologies that this was not the production you might have wished for, my lady," Flory said to Lady Giselle

after the cast had taken their bows and the curtain was closed.

“It was different to what I expected,” Lady Giselle said breathlessly, one hand pressed to her chest. “I can say that much for certain.”

“We’ll close the production for a few days and make repairs to the set,” Dodd insisted. “Next week, we’ll perform everything as it is meant to be performed and call it another opening night.”

“Feel free to call this performance a joke or a spectacle, if you’d like,” Flory told Lady Giselle.

“We shall see, Mr. Holland,” Lady Giselle said. “But thank you for everything you have done.”

Flory shook Dodd’s hand, then made his way across the stage, shaking more hands, thumping backs, and giving a few hugs where they were needed. He cared about his cast and crew, but even more than them, he cared about Oliver, and he was desperate to see how his lover was getting on.

“Well?” Flory asked him when they finally reached each other off to one side of the stage. “Have I convinced you to run off with me and join the theater for good?”

Oliver barked a laugh. “Not at all,” he said. “You may enjoy this side of the stage, but from henceforth, I wish to only ever be in the audience.”

“After tonight’s events, I think that is a wise decision,” Flory laughed.

He then did what he knew would embarrass and alarm his darling rabbit-raven by sweeping him into his arms and

embracing him with all the relief and exhaustion that he felt. It was a gesture of simple affection, though. He didn't even try for a kiss or grab a pleasing handful of Oliver's arse. He simply needed the man's arms around him, his solid, sturdy body to hold him up, and the good nature that radiated from him to reassure him that now everything would really and truly be alright.

"What are the two of you standing there like posts for?" Thomas asked as he walked past the two of them. "We're all going out to celebrate!"

Oliver stiffened, and even though Flory pulled away a bit and stood on his own power, he didn't let go of his lover. They were at the theater. They were safe. The only place safer for the two of them to show how they felt about each other was Perdition. Oliver would have to learn that he could not flee Flory ever again.

"Feeling well again, Thommo?" Flory asked with a broad smile.

"My insides feel as though they have been twisted and squeezed and expelled through every orifice of my body," Thomas said with a smile that contradicted his words. "But I refuse to let that stop me from celebrating after what we've endured this night."

He thumped Flory on the shoulder, then marched off, singing a country tune at the top of his lungs.

"We will join the rest of you shortly," Flory called after him.

There were things to do before Flory and Oliver could follow the rest of the cast and crew to the pub around the corner. Messes still needed to be cleaned up, set pieces repaired enough to be stored so that they could be repaired further in the morning, and just as they were heading out the stage door so that they could join the revels, Lord Palgrave, of all people, met them at the street corner.

“There you are,” he said, all good cheer and affability, despite Oliver’s immediately reticent reaction to him. “I’ve been sent to fetch you.”

“By whom?” Flory asked, glancing to Oliver, as if he might know.

“By your mother,” Palgrave said. “She wishes to know how tonight’s performance went. There are already rumors that it was the most unusual, most eventful, and strangely, the most successful opening a play has ever had.”

Flory laughed and gestured for Palgrave and Oliver to walk on, though he steered them toward Henrietta Street now instead of to the pub. “I can honestly say that I have never been part of a performance quite like that before,” he said, shaking his head.

The entire complement of his mother’s home was waiting for them in the parlor—and the dining room, since there were so many of the dear, old souls—by the time they arrived.

“Well?” Harry asked in his booming voice. “Was it a comedy or a tragedy?”

“Was there a fire?” Lottie asked in a loud voice. “I was informed there was a fire?”

“No, there couldn’t have been a fire,” Flory’s mother said, dragging herself forward from the cluster of her friends, using a cane. “If there had been a fire, my dear boy would be scorched, and he’s looking as fit as ever.”

Flory’s heart lifted at the sight of his mother out of bed and downstairs with everyone else. He rushed toward her, swept her into his arms, and spun her around. His mother shouted and laughed before he set her on her feet again.

“There was a fire,” he told her, told all of the wrinkled, happy, sallow faces around him. “Right in the middle of Act Two. But Will managed to put it out before any harm was done.” Before anyone could ask another question, he rushed on with, “Dear Mama, you’re out of bed. Has the doctor come at last?”

“He paid a call this morning,” Barbara answered the question with a paradoxically grumpy expression. “Dolled out medicines and tinctures for one and all—”

“And then told us we should all be in an asylum and that he would send the constable at his earliest convenience,” Harry finished her sentence with a growl.

“The constable?” Oliver asked. It warmed Flory’s heart that he seemed so deeply concerned for everyone.

“Has there been any sign of the constable?” Flory asked, more anxious than he wanted to be.

“No sign of anyone yet,” his mother answered, leaning heavily on him.

“But you never know when those curs who wish us harm might arrive on our doorstep,” Harry said with dramatic flourish. “They may appear in the dead of night. They may come with the first light of dawn. They may even come as we are all kneeling down to our Sunday prayers.”

“You haven’t said a prayer since you were in short trousers,” Clayton teased Harry.

“Did the fire burn everything to the ground?” Lottie asked from slightly behind the others. “Is that why we’re praying?”

“No, Lottie, there was a fire on the stage at the theater,” Flory explained, shifting from his mother to his old friend. “Along with a dozen other disasters. But everything turned out alright in the end.”

“All’s well that ends well,” Oliver agreed sagely, then smiled when the others applauded like they’d reached the end of the play.

“If everything turned out as well as you say, then why are you here and not celebrating with the others?” Flory’s mother asked. She’d been part of the theater for long enough to know all the opening night traditions.

“We were told you wished to speak with us first,” Oliver answered.

Flory’s mother smiled at him, then shifted from Flory’s hold to lean against Oliver’s side. “Ah, yes. The young bucks

never could resist my siren's call," she said, resting a hand on Oliver's chest.

Oliver turned a bright shade of red and glanced desperately to Flory for help. Flory merely laughed and touched his hand to his heart at the beauty of the sight of the man he loved playing along with the silliness of the woman to whom he owed his life.

"Never mind the opening night celebrations," Flory said. "I want to know more about what this doctor said and about the possibility of the constable coming."

His mother made a scoffing sound. "Another time, my boy. Another time."

"No, Mama, not another time," Flory said, losing a bit of his patience. "If trouble is coming, we must face it."

"Perhaps we could all face it better, and hide from the constable while we're at it, at the pub?" Oliver suggested.

"Yes!" Clayton perked up and pushed his way to the front of the cluster of beautiful old souls. "It's been ever so long since any of us have been to an opening night party at a pub. We would enjoy it so."

Flory was instantly taken with the idea of bundling up the lot of the elderly thespians and bringing them to the celebrations. He glanced to Oliver before making any decisions or pronouncements, though.

"Are you prepared to be responsible for this rabble?" he asked.

Oliver met his question with a bright smile. “Why, yes, I believe I am.”

Twenty minutes later, Flory and Oliver, with the help of Palgrave and those of the old people who were in fine enough shape to assist the more feeble amongst them, found themselves escorting a loud, wandering, mischievous pack of former actors and actresses through the streets of Covent Garden and on to The Crooked Mask. They were met at the already noisy pub by the remaining members of the cast and crew of *Lady of the Scullery* who still had enough energy to be awake and celebratory.

As Flory expected, the new, young actors and actresses embraced the older ones completely. The family of the theater had always embraced their own in such a way, and they always enjoyed themselves thoroughly when they were together.

“It’s just a shame that actors rarely have enough money to support themselves, let alone their elderly counterparts,” Flory told Oliver once the two of them were settled into places standing at the very end of the establishment’s long bar, where they would be able to converse and actually hear each other. “I know they would help if they could.”

“Yes, about that,” Oliver said, using the excuse of being heard to press intimately against Flory and speak almost directly into his ear. “It has occurred to me that I might have found a worthy cause to support with my newfound wealth.”

“Oh?” Flory asked, smiling at him and adoring the sight of his lover in such close quarters.

Oliver looked downright sheepish for a moment. His cheeks were pink, and not solely with heat. “I would like to become the patron of your mother’s house,” he said. “I would like to have it repaired and restocked with everything that your mother and her friends might need. And I should like to employ nurses and a doctor to see to their needs.”

Flory’s eyes went wide. He stood a bit straighter, and when he realized that he would never be able to say all the things he suddenly needed to say to Oliver in the riot of the pub, he grabbed Oliver’s hand and tugged him toward the door.

Once they made it outside, Flory’s ears continued to ring from the noise. He searched up and down the street for anyone who might interfere with them, and then for a quiet corner, which turned out to be the recessed doorway of a house several doors down from the pub.

“You wish to patronize my mother’s house?” he asked, keeping his voice quiet enough not to wake anyone in the area around them or draw attention.

“Yes,” Oliver said. “They need me.”

“But I thought you wished to invest your money,” Flory said, head spinning with surprise and affection.

Oliver shrugged. “The title comes with a prosperous estate. I cannot imagine your mother and her friends requiring all that much of an investment. Perhaps I could purchase the house from Lottie and treat that as the investment. Anything to make certain that those lovely people continue to have a roof over their heads, and adequate care, for as long as they need it.”

Flory's heart felt as though it would swell and burst right out of his chest. Giving a man a night or two of pleasure he would never forget was one thing, but providing for his mother for the rest of her life was the greatest show of affection that Flory could imagine.

"I love you, my beautiful bird," he sighed. He then risked everything by clapping his hands on the sides of Oliver's face and pulling him close for a kiss. "I love you for your goodness and your sweetness." He kissed Oliver again. "I love you because you are skittish and prone to flight." He kissed Oliver a third time. "And I love you because you are the most thoughtful man I have ever known."

Oliver went completely sheepish in Flory's embrace, lowering his eyes and smiling with a tender sort of modesty. "I simply cannot abide seeing the people you care about suffer," he said, then glanced up into Flory's eyes. "You will not be fully happy unless they are cared for, and I wish for you to be even a fraction as happy as you have made me."

Flory made a sound of sentimental wonder. "Ever the poet, my love," he said.

He then kissed Oliver a fourth time, letting go of his face and embracing him fully. Their mouths melded together in sensual fullness. So much so that Oliver seemed to forget they were out in the open and not ensconced in Flory's bed.

Flory broke away from his beloved at that thought. His bed was where he wanted Oliver, and he wanted him there as swiftly as possible.

“Say you’ll be mine,” he said, feeling the words down to the marrow of his bones. “I do not know how we will accomplish it, where we will stay, or how we will be together, I just know that I need to be with you. Now and always. Say that the two of us will build a life together, and I will accept this offer of yours in its fullness.”

“Wait.” Oliver blinked. “Are you saying that you will refuse to take my money unless I take you?”

“That is precisely what I’m saying,” Flory answered with a grin. “You won me fair and square, after all. You cannot throw me over now.”

Oliver burst into a smile. “Then I accept,” he said, his arms tightening around Flory. “Because, to be quite honest, I don’t think I could possibly let you go at this point. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me, Florizel Holland. Far better than inheriting a title and fortune. Even if every night of our lives turns out to be as mad as the one we’ve just been through, I would want to stay with you. You have taken me out of my shadowed existence and brought me to life. I have no life without you in it.”

“Good,” Flory said. “It would have been terribly inconvenient for me to keep you against your will, because I have no intention of ever giving you up either.”

He leaned in and kissed Oliver one more time, but it was no longer enough. He needed more than kisses and sweet words in a dark alley. He needed to go to bed with Oliver and wake up with him every day, until the two of them were as old as the others and needed caring for themselves.

“Come on,” he said, taking Oliver’s hand and tugging him out of the doorway. “It’s time for us to go home and begin the life we’ve both been looking for. It’s time for us to celebrate the opening night of our own, lifelong comedy.”

“I hope it will be a comedy and not a drama,” Oliver said as he hurried by Flory’s side, still grasping his hand.

“Of course it will be,” Flory said with a laugh. “Have you seen the two of us together? We are the stuff that fine comedies are made of. We are joy and perfection itself.”

And if he had his way, they would remain that way for all time.



I hope you’ve enjoyed Flory and Oliver’s story! It was so much fun to draw on my theater background to write this story. For the record, having someone sneak into the theater to repaint the sets the day before opening night is something that actually happened in the community theater where I used to direct! Yes, it was that much of a nightmare. I’ve also been part of productions where half the cast got sick the week of performances (although that was swine flu, not food poisoning), and I’ve been in shows where someone had to step in at the very absolute complete last minute to play a relatively large part! Theater really is stranger than fiction!

If you enjoyed this MM Regency romance and would like to read other Regency stories of men who love other men, be

sure to check out my *After the War* series! Set just after the Napoleonic Wars, the series tells the tales of a group of friends and decommissioned naval officers convalescing in coastal Yorkshire. The men deal with loss, love, deciding on their futures, and discovering who they are. The series begins with [Between His Lover and the Deep Blue Sea...](#)

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THE PRINCE OF DRURY LANE

And if you're just joining *The Scandals and Scoundrels of Drury Lane* here, why not go back and start at the beginning with [*The Duke of Drury Lane*](#), by Tammy Andresen? Here's Chapter One to get you started...

Chapter One

Lily tugged at her pelisse as she stared up at the freshly bricked façade of the Drury Lane Theater. She needed to think confident thoughts before she walked through the door.

She'd been hired a fortnight before, and this had become a daily ritual. Stop before she entered, put on her best face, like the actresses within, and pretend she knew what she was doing.

When it came to keeping the books, she excelled at her job. Tallying columns, entering expenses, these were tasks she could easily accomplish, hence why the theater had hired her.

She'd done the job for her father toward the end of his life when he couldn't anymore, which was why she'd seen her own doom coming.

A vicar, he'd run out of parish funds before his death and drank away his worries. Lily had watched it all happen, what she hadn't known was the dark and terrible places a poor woman might end up without a protector.

She shivered in the January cold, hugging her arms about her as she remembered some of the events that had brought her here and now. She'd never allow herself in such a place again.

Which was why this position was so important. And why she needed to tell the director the truth.

The theater had run out of funds.

Already.

And if they did not correct the problem quickly, the Drury Lane Theater would never see its doors opened again. A fire had shut it down and the rebuild had cost nearly every penny the company had. How could they put on the next production without funds for sets, costumes, and pay for the actors?

And Lily would be back where she started. Jobless and alone. Well, not completely on her own. She'd made friends, and they were wonderful. Lord Griswold Smith had helped her secure this job and while he'd likely help her find another, she'd not beg him for more favors. He was busy with his new wife and baby, and he'd already done more for her than a person had a right to ask.

Notching her chin to a confident angle, she stepped inside and made her way to Mr. Dodd's office. The director was a good man and she liked him a great deal, but she quietly

worried how he might take the news. No one liked the messenger when they brought ill tidings.

His door was open, and he sat behind his desk, reviewing several sheets. She cleared her throat, softly knocking on the frame of the door.

His gaze flicked up to her and then he eased back in his chair, a welcoming smile on his lips. There was no denying Mr. Dodd was handsome. Tall, dark-haired, but with kind brown eyes, he might make most ladies flutter with excitement. But not Lily.

Life had taught her to be immune to a man's charms. Even ones as handsome as Mr. Dodd.

“Missus Grey.” He smiled warmly. “Come in.”

She gave a quick nod, drawing in a deep breath and stepping over the threshold. But she left the door open. Another lesson life had handed out.

“Thank you, Mister Dodd. How is your morning?”

“Better than yours?” He leaned forward, his gaze searching hers. “You look troubled.”

So much for her acting. “I am. A bit. I’ve been reviewing the books.”

He winced. “Is it that bad? Have we run out of money already?”

The fact that he wasn't angry with her had her wilting into her chair in relief. “It's pretty bad.”

He nodded, frowning as he raked a hand through his wavy hair. “Thank you for coming to me. The fact that you’ve caught this so quickly, and that you’ve come to me, makes me more certain than ever that I made the right decision in hiring you.”

Her heart jumped into her throat as gratitude washed through her. This job was a dream come true. A chance for her to live on her own and never be in the position she’d found herself in last year. She’d been so vulnerable and truly under the heel of the world. “I’m so glad you think so.”

“But we are going to need money and we’ll need it soon.”

She nodded sympathetically, worry and empathy fluttering in her chest. She needed this theater to be a success as did most of the employees here. “What can I do?”

Mr. Dodd cocked his head to the side, studying her for a moment before he gave her a charming smile. Another life lesson. When men smiled at a woman like that, they wanted something that she likely didn’t wish to give. “There is something.”

No. no. no. Her hand tightened on the arm of the chair as worry fluttered in her stomach. “What?” she asked breathlessly, knowing that there wasn’t much of a choice.

“There is a person of power and position who might be persuaded to invest in our first production.” Mr. Dodd tapped on the scandal sheets from the *London Times* which sat on the corner of his desk. “He’s not a known supporter of the arts, but his reputation could use a boost. And we might be able to use that piece of information to our advantage.”

Him? Bad reputation? The words beat in her chest like an ominous drum, sounding through her ears. “Boost,” she repeated weakly.

“That’s right,” Mr. Dodd nodded, his eyes narrowing as he looked at the far wall, clearly forming a plan. Then his gaze snapped to hers, scanning over her face. “You’re very pretty.”

“Mister Dodd,” she started, her chin lifting up and the air freezing in her chest. “I thank you kindly, but I am not interested in anything other than a job.”

His eyes widened for a moment and then he laughed, a deep chuckle that was pleasing to the ear. “I only meant, Missus Grey, that between your fine accent, your exceptional manners, your direct nature, and your understanding of the finances, you might be the person to approach the Duke of Ducat on behalf of our theater.”

Her mouth tightened. “Pretty compliments do not work on me, Mister Dodd.”

That made him laugh again. “A credit to your character.”

“Thank you.”

“But I still think you’re the right person to speak with the duke.”

She shook her head. “Surely, there are actresses employed here that more suited than me to persuasion.” Prettier, better spoken, bolder. More interested in talking with the male species.

Mr. Dodd shook his head. “I don’t think so. He’s not the friendliest man...”

She rolled her eyes. *Just great.*

“Your direct nature will appeal to him.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Mister Dodd.”

“Missus Grey.” He leaned forward, his eyes meeting hers. “I do not know what circumstances pulled you from the upper crust and dropped you here, but no one mistakes you for anything other than the lady you are. Trust me when I say that will work in our favor. I must insist that you contact the duke for the sake of all of us and our continued employment and the improvements to our theater. We need renovations like gas lights to insure there isn’t another fire. Three is enough, I think.” His mouth turned down into a grim line. “For all those reasons and more, there is no other choice.”

Those words rang with a finality that made her inwardly wince. She sat up in the chair wanting to argue but knowing she had no choice. If she wanted to continue to be employed at the Drury Lane theater, she was going to have to speak with the duke.

As a woman who attempted to avoid almost all men, she didn’t see how this could possibly be any worse.



Drake Ducat sat in his study, swirling a glass of bourbon despite the early morning hour. He didn’t intend to drink it, most likely. He just liked the color of the liquid in the crystal glass, the way it caught the light. He’d always been particular in this way.

His mother had claimed he had a fine eye and a discerning palate, which might be true.

But many around him found him...difficult.

He needed his shoes lined up just so, his food arranged precisely on his plate, his chair placed at exactly the right angle.

It was a problem.

Likely less of a concern as he was a duke than if he were a regular man, but even for him, his insistence on order had given him trouble.

He'd had a few public episodes of late that that had managed to be featured in the gossip columns. The Difficult Duke, they'd dubbed him.

It shouldn't matter. But where he was approaching the ripe age of two and thirty, he needed to marry and create an heir. He'd put it off for too long. It was just that other people in his life created chaos, and children...they'd make a great deal more.

He set the glass down, directly on the article about himself he'd just been reading even as a knock sounded at the door.

His butler entered, his uniform perfectly crisp. "Your appointment has arrived."

He gave a terse nod by way of answer as the man disappeared again.

Rather than pick up the glass, he lifted the letter he'd received the day prior. The neat handwriting was perfectly

balanced in size and form, the wording crisp and concise. He appreciated that, which is why he'd taken the meeting at all.

He did not, as a general rule, finance theaters or artists of any kind. But there was something refreshing in the appeal laid out by the author. It wasn't dramatic or overly...theatrical. It didn't beg or plead, it just stated facts.

Which he greatly appreciated. Prior to the fire a few years back, the Drury Lane Theater had a healthy profit margin. They could again, provided they could receive an infusion of funds. The appeal had...appealed to him.

He cleared his throat at the repetition in his last line. Clearly, he'd never been much of a writer. And the author of the letter wasn't either. Whoever he was, this L. Grey, he was clearly more mathematically inclined than he was literary.

Fine by Drake.

The butler returned, giving a quick bow before he stepped out of the way. "May I introduce Missus Lily Grey."

Mrs. Lily Grey? He rose, his brows lifting as well. L. Grey was a woman? Or was she the wife of the man who'd written the letter?

He opened his mouth to greet her, but the words died in his throat. Mrs. Grey appeared in the doorway a vision if he'd ever seen one.

Perhaps not every man would think so, but he did. She wore a simple grey skirt of wool and a crisp pelisse that hugged her figure without being overly adorned. For whatever reason, large amounts of ruffles irritated him.

Her thick blonde hair was pulled back in a coif that was simple and clean and yet still highlighted the mass of silky hair.

And her eyes...clear blue and perfectly symmetrical, they were capped with lovely arched brows and thick dark lashes.

Her nose was small and sweet, her lips full, despite the frown that tugged at them. Which made him snap out of whatever trance into which he'd fallen. Was he being rude? Again?

"L. Grey?" he asked, his voice sounding husky even to his own ears.

"That's right," she answered, notching her heart-shaped chin at a jaunty angle.

"I didn't realize that you were a..."

Her frown deepened. "A woman? Would you have seen me if you'd known?"

His brows drew together. "I am seeing you because your request was based in good, sound business."

Her gaze widened in surprise and the frown disappeared from her lips. "Thank you."

He gave a quick nod as he gestured toward a chair near the fire. "Please sit." Then he came around the desk and joined her in the chair opposite the grate. It was angled to both view the fire and the person from which he sat across. A formation he required in every room in his home.

Mrs. Grey perched delicately in the chair, folding her legs at the ankles to emphasize the lines of her body. He narrowed his gaze. Did she know she presented herself in such a pleasing manner? As a man obsessed with lines, she was a delight to his senses.

Which was why he needed to look away. He was going to make her uncomfortable again. But the moment his eyes left her, they landed on the tools hanging next to the grate. They ought to be ordered by size, largest to smallest. He stood to quickly rearranged them before joining her again. He knew it was odd, but the lack of order would distract him completely if he didn't attend to them before their conversation.

Her eyes watched him, wordlessly observing his actions. Inwardly, he winced and then refrained from straightening the clock on the mantel. He always grew more fidgety when new people were about.

"Thank you for seeing me," she murmured, her eyes meeting his.

He gave a quick nod, eager to finish this meeting. While she was lovely to look at, she'd disconcerted him more than most. "You're welcome. Now tell me. How much?"

"How much?"

"Does the theater need? How much?"

She stared at him silently, not answering for several seconds. But he'd seen that look before. She tried to hide it, of course, but she thought him as difficult as reputation implied.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I hope you have enjoyed *The Disaster of Drury Lane*. If you'd like to be the first to learn about when new books in the series come out and more, please sign up for my newsletter here: <http://eepurl.com/cbaVMH> And remember, Read it, Review it, Share it! For a complete list of works by Merry Farmer with links, please visit <http://wp.me/P5ttjb-14E>.

USA Today Bestselling Author Merry Farmer is an award-winning novelist who lives in suburban Philadelphia with her cats, Peter and Justine. She has been writing since she was ten years old and realized one day that she didn't have to wait for the teacher to assign a creative writing project to write something. It was the best day of her life. She then went on to earn not one but two degrees in History so that she would always have something to write about. Her books have reached the Top 100 at Amazon, iBooks, and Barnes & Noble, and have been named finalists in the prestigious RONE and Rom Com Reader's Crown awards.



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